

A Pocket-book Story of Dover Castle

by IVAN GREEN

Many volumes have been written about the long story of Dover castle and even more words have been spoken. This is an endeavour to put not a quart but many galleons into a pint pot.

Our story must start with the early Iron Age fort on the hill now occupied by the massive stone fortress. Like many other Iron Age forts in Kent, it would have been built of earthen banks reinforced with wood, in about 100 BC, as an unsuccessful defence against the threat of invasion by continental Belgic tribes and strengthened by them against an equally fruitless Roman invasion.

Besides their great forts and harbour in the valley, the Romans erected two great beacon towers at Dover, one on each side of the harbour entrance, as they did at all their important harbours. A few remains of the westward one, the Bredenstone, survives on the Western Heights, but the Pharos, said to be the most complete Roman building in England, survives almost complete within the present castle area. Here the Romans must have established a community additional to that in the valley but little of it now survives.

In Saxon times there was certainly an important community in the valley, largely based on the remains of the old Roman forts, harbour and occupational area. This community, which became a fortified burgh, grew up around the old Pharos. Of this community, little evidence, except the fine Saxon church, survives but it must have been quite considerable in size and prosperity to have built the church there, probably in

the first two decades of the eleventh century. The church survives as one of the finest Saxon churches in the country.

When William of Normandy defeated Harold at Battle in 1066 he marched his men straight to Dover, pausing only to wreak vengeance on the folk of Romney. At Dover his undisciplined hoard burnt the town and robbed and murdered many of the inhabitants before attacking the burgh established round the Roman Pharos. He overran it in a few days and evicted the inhabitants, pausing only to repair the damage his attack had caused before he continued his march towards Canterbury.

Odo, William's half brother, was so rapacious that he provoked a rebellion of the people of Kent and they invited the Earl of Boulogne to support them. They attacked the castle in 1067 but failed to take it.

With Odo disgraced, William introduced the system of Castle Guard tenure, granting manors all over the country to his most trusted followers in exchange for regular periods of guard at the castle. This produced 171 Knights fees which provided a guard of 5 knights with their men at all times throughout the year.

Little was done to the defences until the reign of Henry the Second, the great castle builder. His work at Dover started with preliminary works between 1168

and 1174. In these years work took place on the great keep, the last of the great square keeps built in England, and on the walls of the inner bailey, under the control of Maurice the Engineer, the King's master mason. Much major building was done between 1183 and 1185 and work continued on the building of the outer walls. These works are now recognised by the rectangular mural towers. All these works were completed in about 1190.

When King John lost Normandy in 1204 he was forced to improve his coastal defences and Dover Castle was in special danger. He built the curtain wall round its west and north sides, together with their mural towers, which are principally D shaped in plan.

And none too soon, since in 1216 the son of the French king, Louis, invaded Kent and attacked Dover Castle, concentrating on the North Gate, taking its defensive barbican. Unable to either defeat the tiny garrison by arms or by starving them out, the French mined the great North Gate, bringing down its eastern tower, but still the defenders held out. King John died, the French withdrew and the great castle defender, Hubert de Burgh, set to work to repair the damage and eliminate shortcomings. Until 1256 the then enormous sum of £7,000 was spent in permanently closing the damaged North Gate, building St. John's Tower and the outworks there, building the FitzWilliam Towers, extending the curtain wall to the edge of the cliff and building the Constable's Tower to form the new entrance gate, which was completed in 1227.

King Edward the Fourth modernised the great keep at a cost of more than £10,000, which included much detail work. Henry the Fifth used the castle as his base for his operations against France. Henry the Eighth used the castle to assemble his party for the great Field of

Cloth of Gold meeting and he also built the Tudor Bulwark and Moat's Bulwark in the cliff below.

The Stuart kings were remarkably careless of the castle's defensive importance, so much so that in 1642, during the civil war, a handful of Dover civilians were able to capture and hold it until Parliamentary troops took it over and held it for the Parliamentary cause in spite of abortive Royalist attacks in 1642 and 1648.

In Charles the Second's reign the castle, its armaments and its garrison troops became run down and useless, the king spending his money on personal pleasures and his court favourites.

From the middle of the eighteenth century onwards, much damage was done to the castle to make it suitable for modern warfare against the French, principally to provide gun platforms, for which many of the old towers were modified, particularly to provide clear fields of fire for the guns. In addition, walls were banked up with earth to absorb the impact of ball ammunition then in use. During this and the Napoleonic periods enormous alterations, both to the castle itself and to its outworks, destroyed so very much of the older work, much of which we regret today. But, of course, the castle was primarily an important defensive work and it had to be altered to suit newer methods of warfare.

The castle survived almost unscathed through two great world wars in the hands of the military, but after 1945 it was largely under the Ministry of Public Buildings and Works, whose highly skilled and professional work force brought it up to its present fine condition. Now in the hands of English Heritage, it has finally passed from its time of military importance and is a leading attraction for visitors both from home and abroad.