

APRIL MEETING

The Lords Warden & Lady Hester Lucy Stanhope

A talk by Terry Sutton reported by Alan Lee

Starting with a brief overview of the Appointment of Lords Warden, Terry likened them to a kind of ancient liaison officer between the monarch and the Portsmen of the Cinque Ports. Many Royals have held the post, and many have come to a sticky end. He then described some of the characters who have occupied the dual post of Lord Warden, Constable of Dover Castle and in earlier times the Admiral of the Cinque Ports fleet.

During the time of Edward the Confessor the highest appointment in this area was Constable of Dover Castle, which as sea power increased, would eventually encompass the role of Lord Warden. During this time, the Portsmen provided the ships to defend this coast against invaders, mostly French out on a day's rape and pillage.

It is unclear who the first Lord Warden was, but early Constables of Dover Castle included Godwyn, Earl of Kent, and his son Harold (of the Battle of Hastings 1066). While Harold was away fighting, Bertram Ashburton acted as Constable. He held out against the troops of William of Normandy, which so upset William that when he eventually captured the castle he had Ashburton and his deputy beheaded.

William de Peverell held the post briefly until William's half-brother Bishop Odo replaced him. A thoroughly odious man Odo made his own laws and punished those who offended, his aim being to amass a fortune and then buy himself the job of Pope. William, worried about Odo's growing power and greediness, banished him from England.

The Constable in 1190, Matthew de Clera, was deprived of his office for breaking into Dover Priory Church to arrest the new Archbishop of York, the illegitimate son of Henry II. One of the great Constables, Hubert de Burgh, held the post irregularly between 1202 and 1232. He also built Dover's Maison Dieu Hall. In 1226 William de Averanch, Lord of Folkestone, was recognised as being the first Constable of Dover Castle to hold the post of Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports also. Sir Stephen de Pencestre held the appointments from 1265 to 1298 and had Pencester Gardens in Dover named after him.

Not all Lords Warden were well behaved. Sir Bartholomew Badlesmere, 1st Baron de Badlesmere was notorious. He would select some poor virgin from the local community, and regardless of her wishes, have his wicked way with her. He obviously believed in the tradition of *Droit de Seigneur*, *The right of a lord to have sexual intercourse with a vassal's bride on her wedding night. (French, literally translated means: the right of the lord)*. Bartholomew joined the enemies of King Edward II and in October 1321 when his wife refused Queen Isabella entry to Leeds Castle the king captured the castle and imprisoned Lady Badlesmere in the Tower of London. At the Battle of Boroughbridge, the Earl of Lancaster was defeated and Badlesmere captured. He was hanged and beheaded at Blean on 14th April 1322 and his head displayed on the Burgh Gate at Canterbury. The next two met the same fate for alleged traitorous activities. After three beheadings, there was no great rush for the role of Lord Warden.

By 1381 Sir Robert Ashetton, or Asheton, Ashton, Ashtone, buried in the church of St Mary-in-Castro, was in charge at Dover Castle and was kept busy suppressing Wat Tyler's Peasant's Revolt about the poll tax. Then there was Sir Simon Burley, accused of trying to sell Dover Castle to the French. He was imprisoned in the castle, then taken to London in 1388 and executed for treason.

Henry V of Agincourt fame, when still the Prince of Wales was Lord Warden, as was his brother Humphrey Duke of Gloucester in 1415. The king being jealous threw Humphrey into prison where he died, possibly murdered. Being Lord Warden was clearly a dangerous occupation with, in 1447, Lord Saye beheaded at Cheapside in London and the next two killed in the Wars of the Roses.

From 1493 to 1509 Prince Henry, later Henry VIII, held the post. One of three in 1534 was George Boleyn Lord Rochford, brother of Anne. By 1535 he had lost his job. By 1536 he had lost his head. George Villiers the Duke of Buckingham was assassinated

during a visit to Portsmouth by John Felton, an insane army officer. Sir Algernon Sydney, 1648 to 1651, resigned and was later executed for his involvement in the Whig Rye House plot to assassinate Charles II.

Lionel Sackville, the 7th Duke of Dorset, appointed in 1708, was first Lord Warden to live at Walmer Castle. During his tenure, he gave a piece of land at East Cliff to Captain John Smith who built his strange folly house there. Sackville resigned in 1713 but as the 1st Earl of Dorset was reappointed in 1727. Frederick North, 2nd Earl of Guilford and Lord Warden from 1778 to 1782, whose estate was at Waldershare Park, planted the slopes of the castle facing Dover with the trees that we enjoy today.

Many important leaders have spent time as Lord Warden in the official residence at Walmer Castle. These have included William Pitt the Younger and Arthur Wellesley, the 1st Duke of Wellington. George Nathaniel Curzen, Baron Curzon of Kedleston, the Viceroy of India, resigned, claiming the smell from the drains there was killing his



Walmer Castle

wife. King Edward VII travelled secretly to Walmer to sniff out the drains himself. Presumably, he found little wrong as he then appointed his son, the Prince of Wales who had to follow tradition and spend some time there, or perhaps it was punishment for some minor misbehaviour.

Since the Second World War we have had as Lords Warden Sir Winston Churchill, Sir Robert Menzies the Prime Minister of Australia, H.M. Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother in 1978 and now Admiral Michael Cecil Boyce, Baron Boyce of Pimlico, installed in April 2005.

Terry then devoted the remainder of his talk to one of the most interesting people who lived at Walmer Castle Lady Hester Lucy Stanhope although she was not a Lord Warden. Born in 1776 she was a haughty and sometimes cruel, aristocrat, later known as the Queen of the East. The niece of the Prime Minister Pitt the Younger Hester accepted his invitation to be his hostess for his many official receptions. An attractive woman, she became one of London's leading socialites. When appointed Lord Warden Pitt moved into Walmer Castle. Hester moved in with him and used her influence to upgrade the castle gardens, still admired by guests today.

Dover was full of troops who expected an invasion by Napoleon any day. Portsmen all along the coast enlisted with the Volunteers, the 19th century Home Guard, ready to defend England. Hester, dressed as, a Colonel in the Volunteers, rode most days along the cliffs to Dover to inspect the troops. She loved it and this aristocrat in a tight-fitting uniform gave the old boys a boost. Once she marched the troops to Waldershare Park, near Dover, and with the Lord of Guilford's permission, uprooted some small trees and replanted them at Walmer Castle where they still grow today.

Lady Hester Lucy Stanhope



Her brother, stationed at Dover Castle, and Hester received an invitation to Shorncliffe Barracks where she met, and fell in love with, General Sir John Moore. Soon he and Hester's step brother, who was on his staff, sailed for Spain to fight Emperor Napoleon's troops. With both killed in the 1808 Retreat from Corunna Hester went into prolonged mourning.

With Pitt also dead (in 1806) and plagued by scandal from an unhappy love affair her influence waned and so, in 1810, she set off to tour Europe and never returned. Hester had sailed from Portsmouth but been shipwrecked on Rhodes. She had lost all of her clothes and refused to wear a veil so dressed as a Turkish male in robe, turban and slippers. On arrival at Cairo she bought a more elaborate version with a purple velvet robe, embroidered trousers, waistcoat and jacket as well as a saddle and sabre. From there she went overland to Jerusalem and Damascus.

In Europe, free from wagging tongues, Hester enjoyed several short love affairs. She met Lord Byron who, when he was fleeing England immersed in sexual scandal, stayed the night in one of our dockside inns. Some of the leading ladies of Dover dressed up as servant girls in order to get into the inn just to have a look at our hero.

Warned that Europeans were not welcome in the fabled city of Palmyra this fearless woman, dressed in male Bedouin attire, rode her horse into the city and became the first European woman to enter the Forbidden City. Locals, impressed with her courage, crowned her in a celebration and she became known as *Queen Hester*.

Her fame soon spread throughout the Middle East and she was often called upon to settle disputes among the local tribes. She was able to join the local women in their harems but was not impressed with the way the women entertained themselves with dances of a sexual nature. Despite her love of dressing up as a man she abhorred the inherent lesbianism of the harems. She wrote home about it and said, *Sexual arousal between two women is an aberration and passion should only be excited by that which God created for the purpose - a man*.

She enjoyed her status among the Arabs and set up home in the hills of Lebanon where she began taking in Arab and Christian refugees. She lived first at *Mar Elias*, a disused monastery at Abra, then at the monastery of *Deir Mashmousheh* southwest of the Casa of Jezzine. She became a political force in the Lebanon, defying the despotic war lords. Later she and her remaining servants moved into a former convent at Joun (also known as Joon or Djoun) a village on seven hills above the Mediterranean. Her residence, *Dahr El Sitt*, on top of one of the hills, shaped like *half an orange*, became a fortress with its high walls and a focus of both gossip and awe.

She mounted an expedition in search of treasure at the city of Ascalon which was unsuccessful so she asked the British Government to pay, but they refused. Now deep in debt in Syria Vicomte Palmerston, then Foreign Secretary, ordered that her creditors were to be paid from her pension of £1,200 per year, which she had been awarded from 1810.

Hester had love affairs with at least two of her visitors - one the young son of a captain who had served in Napoleon's Imperial Guard. The second with a much younger Englishman, wealthy Granville Leveson Gower whom she had hoped to marry. He left her when his father threatened to disinherit him and the French guardsman died. No luck there Hester! Incidentally, Gower was another interesting character who had affairs all over Europe. One arrangement was with the wife of Napoleon's general Nye, later executed by Louis XVIII's government. Once Gower organised the escape of a French aristocrat and for this he was imprisoned by the French, accused of being a traitor.

Miss Williams, Hester's cherished companion, had died in 1828 and Dr Charles Meryon finally left her in 1838. Alone, with only thirty servants for company, in her walled up derelict property she died a year later. Thus the life of this remarkable woman ended. Once the talk of London her influence had reached from Downing Street to an isolated village in Lebanon. All we now have to remind us of this unusual woman are the trees she had planted at Walmer Castle.

Lady Hester Lucy Stanhope was born on 12th March 1776 to relative riches, the eldest child of Charles Stanhope, 3rd Earl of Stanhope and Lady Hester Pitt. This strange, brave woman died aged 63 on 23rd June 1839, in rags - unloved and unwanted.