

CASTLE CORNET

St Peter Port, Guernsey GY1 6JN

8th June 2014

It was our first full day at Guernsey and our feet seemed to take us along in bright sunshine to the harbour front. It was apparent that some sort of al fresco fair or festival was taking place, as the smell of frying doughnuts pervaded the air, in amongst various stalls selling numerous items. There were already large numbers of people wandering around, so we decided to walk beyond the front and out past the side of the marina and harbour to Castle Cornet on Castle Rock, a former tidal island connected in 1859 to mainland Guernsey by a breakwater.



Castle Cornet brooding on the rocks (photo by Alan Santillo)

We didn't know what to expect from this castle that sprawled on its bed of rocks, looking impregnable with its huge grey outer walls. We didn't even know if it would be open – but it was and it was brilliant! We arrived at 10:50 and didn't leave until 15:15, so the £10 admission price gave good value for money. As well as life-sized models displaying scenes from various times during the castle's history (which I love because my visual imagination is pitiful), there were information boards throughout and no less than five separate museums.

We first visited the Story of Castle Cornet Museum, which was time well spent, as it traced 800 years of historic turbulence. At the time of the Norman Conquest in 1066, the Channel Islands became possessions of the English Crown. However, King John lost control of Normandy in 1204 and because the Channel Islands remained an English possession, the need arose to defend them against the French. Construction of Castle Cornet soon commenced on a small island less than a mile off the shore of Guernsey.

Archaeological evidence has suggested that the small island had been used since Neolithic times. By Roman times, St Peter Port with its natural harbour was a busy town on the trade route between France and England. The island was naturally positioned to defend St Peter Port, being surrounded by sea and only accessible on foot at very low tides.

The English pronunciation of Cornet as in ice cream cone had sprung to mind, but with Guernsey closer to France than England, French names dominate. French was Guernsey's official language until 1948, still used in administration, although English is now the official language. Guernésiais, on the other hand, is Guernsey's traditional language, being a variety of Norman similar to Norman dialects spoken on mainland Normandy. So it's Cornet as in Cornay. The name Cornet may refer to a Guernsey merchant family when the castle was built.

Work on the castle had begun by about 1250 on the highest part of the island. The fortifications would have included a large square tower to the south and a half-round tower to the west, using timber and lead sent from England to Guernsey and Jersey for castle building. The gatehouse had a chapel alongside it and would have been reached from the north by a rocky path from the shore.

Throughout the 14th century, the French frequently attacked the Channel Islands and the castle sustained much damage over the years. In 1338, a French force besieged and captured Castle Cornet, massacring its garrison of 11 men at arms and 50 archers. They held the castle for seven years, but during that time improved the defences. Not enough, though, as the castle was re-taken by Godfrey d'Harcourt, who'd been sent with a small force to reclaim it for England.

The castle then had some proper investment, the result of which meant some serious building. A large keep was added in the 15th century, as well as a great hall and a barbican. In 1435, a gunner's tower was built – the first tower specifically built to take cannon – with a curtain wall running between it and the barbican. It was intended that history didn't repeat itself.

With the increased use of cannon, gunpowder and artillery, the castle's defences were strengthened in the 16th century, during the reigns of King Henry VIII and Queen Elizabeth I. Successive island governors supervised the building of massive new outer walls and formidable bastions and bulwarks around the castle, resulting in the basic outline of the castle as it stands today. Artillery was installed around the walls to provide substantial protection.



Cannons, balls and massive walls

In 1627, King Charles I reduced the Crown's running costs of Castle Cornet by granting additional rights to Guernsey, in return for which Guernsey became responsible for supplying victuals to the castle, including a significant amount of beer, butter, bacon, fish, cheese, tallow, wood and coal per annum. A shrewd move by the king perhaps, but did it later have anything to do with Guernsey supporting the Parliamentarians during the English Civil War (1642-1651)?

However, the island governor at the time, Sir Peter Osborne, remained loyal to the king. After a Parliamentary order in early 1643 to apprehend him, seize all fortresses and claim Guernsey for Parliament, Sir Peter fled to Castle Cornet, his official residence. With a handful of troops, he prepared to hold the castle and managed to do so, even after a half-hearted attack saw at least six English soldiers and one Guernsey man killed. In retaliation, Osborne gave the order for a few guns to be fired at St Peter Port and many residents left the town.

Parliament naturally wanted the strategic castle intact, so decided to starve out its residents rather than bombarding it. This might have worked, except for supplies continuing to be delivered to the castle by sea, particularly from Royalist Jersey. Despite some minor scuffles, no serious attempt was made to take the castle, although the castle walls suffered some damage by gunfire from St Peter Port. The town, however, suffered heavily from the castle's guns.

Sir Peter Osborne was replaced by two further governors, but after King Charles I's defeat in September 1651, the Royalist strongholds began surrendering. Eventually only Castle Cornet held out, but because the Parliamentary Navy had command of the sea, supplies were cut off. On 19th December 1651, 50 or so defenders were permitted to march out as the castle finally surrendered.

After the Parliamentary success, Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658) had played a leading role as Lord Protector of the Commonwealth. However, when the monarchy was restored in 1660, Castle Cornet continued to play its part by acting as a prison to Sir John Lambert (1619-1684), who was considered by many to be a potential successor to Cromwell and therefore a threat to the monarchy. Guernsey was remote from England and therefore a good location. We were to learn more of John Lambert later!



Daniel Adkins, Royalist Musketeer

The Story of Castle Cornet Museum did an excellent job of setting 800 years of history in context. The life-sized models displaying scenes from various turbulent times during the castle's existence brought past events of Castle Cornet to life.



Captain Thomas Guille, Guernsey Parliamentarian

The castle was the official residence of the Guernsey governors until December 1672, when lightning struck and destroyed the keep, which was being used at the time as a gunpowder store. The ensuing blast threw the governor, Lord Hatton (still alive and in his bed) onto an outer wall. Unfortunately, his wife and her maidservant, his mother and other staff members were killed, although his two young children miraculously survived. The chapel and the governor's residence were destroyed, so it was hardly surprising that after that, governors chose to live in St Peter Port itself.

As international tension increased in the 18th century, the castle was still a strategic fortress, armed with 70+ guns and a garrison of around 300 men. During this period, the castle was upgraded with additional barracks. The lower barracks was built around 1745 and housed artillery men who manned the castle guns, while the upper barracks was built between 1745-1750 and housed four companies of infantrymen.

Although built in 1746, the hospital building wasn't used as such until 1789, but by 1800 the castle was deemed inadequate as a garrison stronghold and Fort George, completed in 1812, replaced the castle as the main island barracks. By 1855, the hospital was being used as a canteen.

During the 1860s, the harbour was extended and a wooden bridge was built to allow easier access to Castle Cornet. This wooden bridge was replaced by a more permanent concrete structure following World War II.

As we eventually emerged from the Story of Castle Cornet Museum, I realised I was in slight history overload, so we took some time to stroll around the castle, looking at the surrounding views in clear morning air. It was a beautiful, calm day, with the coastal scenery stretching for miles.



A view from the castle

It then dawned on us that the noonday gun – the Napoleonic cannon (a 1799 32-pounder of Blomefield pattern, to be precise) – was due to be fired. I'm not into guns in the slightest, but the ceremony of a man in Guernsey Militia uniform of scarlet tunic and blue trousers loading the muzzle of this beast and hoping that at 12 noon precisely there were no pigeons at the end, was an interesting spectacle even to me. It was worth waiting for and the resulting boom definitely released some local turbulence if that doesn't sound too odd.

This tradition of firing a gun at noon dates at least from the start of the 19th century, when a second gun would also have been fired in the evening to recall troops to the barracks. This stopped in 1923, but no doubt with tourists in mind, the noonday gun was re-introduced in 1974. A saluting charge is detonated electronically and I can vouch for the gun's use at timekeeping, as on other days we were alerted to the fact it was midday by hearing the noonday gun!



Boom! (Photo by Alan Santillo)

Since we were close to the refectory, we went in for lunch, choosing soup of the day with bread and Guernsey butter. It was home-made and delicious, but also creamy and filling, so I felt I needed to walk it down a bit afterwards. Maybe I shouldn't have had a cappuccino made with Guernsey milk as well...

Our next visit was to the Maritime Museum, housed in the upper barracks and telling the story of St Peter Port's relationship with the sea, from Roman times to the current high-speed catamarans. There were also lots of exhibits from wrecks (of the marine variety) and a gallery of paintings (of the oil variety). It was comfortably cool in the museum, after which we became comfortably warm during an hour's stroll around the outside areas.

These included the Prisoners' Walk, the site of the medieval castle, the sally port steps and the gunners' tower, along with some great views of St Peter Port and the sea. There were also four small gardens planted according to various styles from the 16th century to the 19th century. However, what really caught my imagination was a concrete bunker from World War II.

During the German Occupation of Guernsey, Castle Cornet was known as Stutzpunkt Hafenschloss (Strongpoint Harbour Castle) and housed Luftwaffe anti-aircraft units, forming part of the air defence cover for St Peter Port. In order for the castle to be ready for 20th century warfare, concrete gun turrets and anti-aircraft gun emplacements were built on its walls, as well as reinforced concrete bunkers and shelters throughout. German personnel would often carve the name of a girl back home above the entrance and this particular bunker still had the name Ursel for all to see:



Ursel

The next museum of the five on offer that we investigated was the 201 Squadron RAF Museum. The 201 Squadron had begun as No 1 Squadron in the Royal Naval Air Service until the formation of the Royal Air Force in 1918 (when it was renumbered as 201). From the late 1920s to modern times, 201 Squadron specialised in maritime reconnaissance and during World War II, pilots flew Sunderland flying boats to attack German U-boats.

A special link existed between Guernsey and the squadron known as 'Guernsey's Own', with the ancient military honour of The Privilege of Guernsey being granted in 1994. 201 Squadron was disbanded in 2011, an unfortunate casualty of the UK tackling its debt problems by questionable and regrettable cutbacks.

We were the only people in the museum and ensconced in the exhibits, when a man in some sort of costume walked in and told us there was about to be a talk if we were interested. We found a handful of people seated facing the hospital building with a large open space in between, where two men re-enacted scenes from Civil War times. One man played a gardener and the other man played Major-General Sir John Lambert, imprisoned in the castle from 1662 to 1670.

For a re-cap, Guernsey sided with Parliament when England's civil wars began in 1642, while Guernsey's governor sided with the king and fled to Castle Cornet. Yorkshireman John Lambert was a Parliamentarian and did very well for himself, being promoted to Major-General and considered to be Cromwell's successor.

However, following the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, he was considered a threat. In October 1661, he was exiled to Guernsey and allowed to take a house, but the following summer he stood trial in London and was found guilty of high treason. King Charles II intervened and instead of being executed, he returned to Guernsey for a prolonged stay at Castle Cornet. He was allowed 'liberty and indulgence' within the castle precincts – so not a bad outcome at all.

Lambert occupied himself with painting, needlework and the cultivation of plants and flowers. He is believed to have introduced the Guernsey lily (*nerine sarniensis*) to the island and his castle garden is alive and well today:



Simple but effective

Lambert was indeed a keen gardener – unlike his co-actor in the re-enactment, who played the part of a reluctant gardener at Castle Cornet. This man had volunteered for the army during the wars to escape his unfavoured occupation, but discovered that life in the army wasn't as glamorous as imagined. He returned to Castle Cornet and although he didn't dig gardening, he ended up digging for John Lambert, who he came to respect.

However, the clandestine marriage of Lambert's daughter Mary with the governor's son Charles couldn't have gone down all that well. In 1667, Lambert was removed to St Nicholas Island (nowadays known as Drake's Island) in Plymouth Sound and died there in 1684, still a prisoner. The Guernsey gardener, meanwhile, was presumably left digging the dirt.



Lambert on the left, reluctant gardener on the right

After a brave attempt at some audience participation singing that only semi-succeeded, the dramatic interlude was over and people dispersed. I headed back towards the nearby 201 Squadron RAF Museum that we hadn't finished viewing, but looked back to see happily garrulous Alan chatting with the gardener actor. I discovered afterwards that he'd asked permission to put a photo of the actors online (in this intended amateur travelogue no less) and for that, thank you for your permission, David Richards as Caleb Colsterdale and Andy McCutcheon as John Lambert ☺

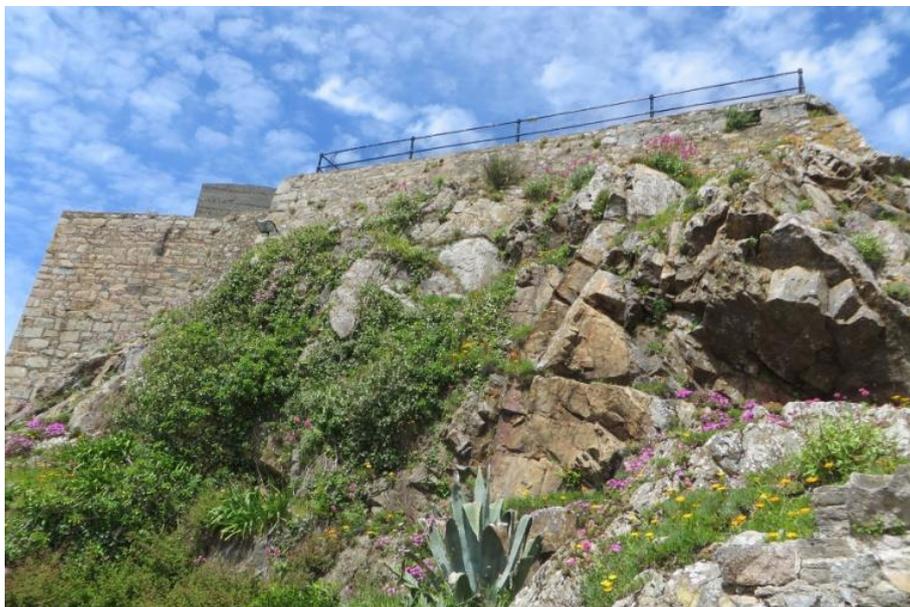
Once we had finally done justice to the 201 Squadron RAF Museum, we went into the hospital building upstairs to do similar justice to the Royal Guernsey Militia Museum, opened in 2011. This featured its development (first mentioned in 1331, although it's thought that an armed body existed for Guernsey's defence before this date) and its history through to 1939, when the Royal Guernsey Light Infantry was formed.

In the same building downstairs was the Royal Guernsey Light Infantry Museum with many displays of uniforms, medals, weapons and much more, including an excellent diorama of the part played by the regiment in the Battle of Cambrai in 1917, augmented to good effect with audio recordings of soldiers' diaries.

It was all great stuff and I mean that most sincerely. We were reluctant to leave and went for a final walk around outside for half an hour or so, before we felt we'd seen just about all of what there was on offer at this splendid castle.

Finally, we exited through the shop (where I wrote a positive comment in the visitors' book, not only because Alan had politely declined, but also because it really was *that* good) and we emerged once again into the 21st century.

I was quietly astounded at how enjoyable a visit to this slightly disordered castle, secure on its own original island, had been. I'd actually found it easy to imagine the earlier defenders within the barbican, bombarding their attackers below with missiles and liquids, such as quick lime and liquid lead. Conversely, it had felt peaceful within the walls, sheltered from the sea breeze. The four historic gardens inside had been a pleasant surprise too, as well as flower beds and areas of natural planting amongst the rocks.



Natural planting amongst the rocks

In 1947, King George V gave Castle Cornet to the people of Guernsey, in recognition of their loyalty to Britain during the two World Wars. It's a worthy gift and I'm glad it's being looked after so well – I'm sure the people of Guernsey are proud of their enduring island fortress. This definitely ranks as one of my favourite castle visits ever 😊