

## WALMER CASTLE

Kingsdown Road, Deal, Kent CT14 7LJ

### **Monday 15<sup>th</sup> July**

Walmer Castle and Deal Castle are a mere 1.3 miles apart along the seafront, although we had to journey for about 60 miles from our holiday accommodation, along a more rural route, chosen deliberately to avoid motorway driving. It was an interesting drive, along some fast roads and some of the bumpy, bendy variety, with creatively named lanes. We had once lived at Walmer for about a month, but had never made it as far as the castles.

We'd been primed before our visit that each of the two castles had a very different feel, with Walmer Castle being the more modified, furnished and well-presented one, whereas Deal Castle was basic and empty in comparison. As each castle we've visited feels intrinsically different anyway, we were still raring to go, having made the decision to visit Walmer Castle first.



**Walmer Castle** (photo by Alan Santillo)

The castle was remarkably devoid of visitors when we arrived, but we could tell it was one of English Heritage's better castles, with a proper tearoom, where we enjoyed a cappuccino and a piece of cappuccino cake (just to be consistent).

Joy of joys, there was also an audio guide that led us from room to room in an easy to follow way. It was an excellent audio guide and free with the entry price. We already knew that Walmer Castle was a Henrician-style castle, typically squat with extremely thick walls and low parapets. From a central keep, curved concentric bastions spread out from the centre.

The Henrician castles were a result of King Henry VIII's rejection of Catholicism, stemming from his desire to divorce Catherine of Aragon, followed by the threat of invasion from King Francis I of France and Charles V (the Holy Roman Emperor). Although some of the fortifications Henry VIII (1491-1547, reign from 1509) had built to defend the south coast were called castles, there were also additional blockhouses. Some historians prefer to name the so-called castles Device Forts.

It's easy to see how earlier medieval castles were important private dwellings as well as being constructed for defence, thus differing from these later state-inspired fortifications placed in key sites for a specific military purpose. The latter tended to be far more basic and utilitarian, whereas the medieval castles were built and added to over the centuries in order to impress.

Henry had ordered artillery castles to be built at Walmer, Deal and Sandown, in order to protect the offshore anchorage known as the Downs. These three defences were backed up by a line of four earthwork forts and a 2.5 mile/4 kilometre long defensive ditch and bank, positioned to defend the anchorages and harbours along the coast. They were equipped with guns to sink enemy ships, to protect the gunnery teams from attack by those ships and also to fire on troops landing on the nearby beaches. Henry certainly had it covered.



**Fire! Guns facing seaward**

As it happened there was no invasion, although a small garrison commanded by a captain continued to guard the coast through the Tudor and Stuart reigns. Despite the lack of invasion, though, the castle's guns protected the Downs well, since the offshore anchorage was used by a great number of warships and merchant vessels seeking refuge, being particularly vulnerable to enemy warships and pirates whilst at anchor. There were further invasion alerts in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, including the famous thwarted Spanish Armada attacks of 1587-8 and 1596-7.

Apart from these preventative measures, Walmer Castle saw some action in 1648, during the English Civil War (1642-51). At that time, King Charles I (1600-49, reign from 1625) was a prisoner of Parliament, but a rebellion broke out in Kent in favour of the king, whereupon sailors from the English navy captured the castles at Walmer, Deal and Sandown. There was fierce fighting when a Parliamentary force arrived to re-take the castles, resulting in each one coming under siege.

Despite attempts to relieve them by royalist troops landing from the sea, each castle was on its own. The soldiers at Walmer Castle came under heavy mortar bombardment and decided to surrender, realising they were no contest against such power. The other two castles followed and were recaptured within weeks.

There were more battles in the later 17<sup>th</sup> century and beyond. The Dutch had become a powerful seafaring nation, invested in trade. Their navy clashed with the English navy in three major wars, and although the battles were mainly epic sea fights, the English homeland was threatened and its fleet necessarily active around the east and south-east coasts.

In the second Dutch war of 1665-7, extra soldiers were brought in to Walmer Castle to repel a Dutch landing. In June 1667, with the Dutch fleet only a few miles away, local men and boys from Deal went to Walmer Castle to help prepare defences. They dug up turf and piled it on the ramparts, with the aim of lessening the impact of incoming cannon shot.



**Guarding the coast**

When an attack did come, it was further along the River Medway near Chatham, but from that time until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was a great deal of war and conflict. The main adversaries were with the old enemy Spain and increasingly with France. Walmer Castle was therefore required to continue with its strategic military role in watching over the Downs, where the anchorage became increasingly important. To this end, it benefited from some modernisation, including nine new 18-pounder guns and the building of an armoury.

Up until the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, the garrison usually comprised 19 men, with more during times of conflict. Becoming a garrison member depended on an endorsement from an influential person and all posts were awarded by the Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports (more about Lord Wardens and Cinque Ports later).

Members of the garrison often had other jobs and were not always at the castle, some of them not even living there. They were assigned other roles besides military ones, one being to assist the Lord Warden in the area of maritime law. This included pilotage and salvage, as a competent pilot was of great importance in the hazardous seas around the Goodwin Sands. In the case of salvage, wrecked ships and their cargoes had to be recovered and guarded until claimed, a duty for which the Lord Warden and his officers were paid fees. If the cargoes failed to be legally claimed, they were retained by the Lord Warden – perks of the job?



**Another angle of Walmer Castle** (photo by Alan Santillo)

Now for the Cinque Ports! It has been suggested that they may have originated from a chain of coastal forts established by Emperor Constantine I in the early 4<sup>th</sup> century. These were designed to defend the southern and eastern coasts of Roman Britain from raids by the barbarian tribes of Picts, Saxons and Franks (a Germanic tribe that migrated to the fertile lands of Gaul).

As an aside, it has always annoyed me that Cinque Ports is meant to be pronounced 'sink ports' when the pronunciation of the French 'cinq' for five springs most readily to my mind. Although 'cinque' is Italian for five, it is also five in Norman French, which makes more sense. Or does it? I'm confusing myself.

However, back to the narrative and the five major ports on England's south-east coast were Sandwich, Dover, Hythe, New Romney and Hastings. These ports were declining by the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but still held rights and privileges until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Along the way, other towns and villages became considered as limbs of the main towns, forming the Confederation of Cinque Ports – for instance, Deal and Walmer were limbs of Sandwich. Nowadays the Cinque Ports are a ceremonial organisation, complete with an official Lord Warden.

The first Lord Warden was appointed by King Edward I (1239-1307, reign from 1272) in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, to allow Crown control of the ports. The Lord Warden was also Admiral of the Cinque Ports and from 1267, Constable of Dover Castle. Today it's a sinecure (an office or position with little or no duties) with an honorary title, but with a certain amount of prestige. In fact, when checking out the English Heritage handbook to plan our visit, there'd been a note to say the castle was closed from 12<sup>th</sup> July to 14<sup>th</sup> July because the Lord Warden would be in residence.

Since the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, Walmer Castle has been the official residence of the Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports, as we discovered when we were talked around so well by the audio guide. At that time, the Lord Warden was Lionel Cranfield Sackville, 1<sup>st</sup> Duke of Dorset, whose main residence was Knole, near Sevenoaks in Kent. He improved the captain's apartments and had an extension built that overlooked the sea, with stylish drawing and dining rooms.

Unfortunately, the poor captain had been forced to relinquish his rooms for the Lord Warden's personal use! By that time, the garrison consisted of a porter, a master gunner and two assistants. The porter had accommodation in the gatehouse, while the gunners occupied a new building situated in the south-west bastion, appropriately named the Gunners' Cabins.

The transformation of the castle from a basic fortification into a more desirable residence was furthered by the construction of a walled and hedged kitchen garden, along with some new stables. By 1750, the castle was still used for coastal defence, but had a definite dual role as the well-equipped official residence of the Lord Warden. It was also often used as a seaside retreat.



**Castle and garden look good together** (photo by Alan Santillo)

This set-up continued throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century, with prime minister William Pitt (1759-1806) becoming Lord Warden in 1792. For a decade, he visited occasionally in the same way as his predecessors (usually in the summer), but decided in 1802 to make Walmer his main residence. His official duties, of course, meant he still travelled widely and often had to be in London.

With the help of his niece, Lady Hester Stanhope, he contributed significantly to Walmer Castle by creating larger grounds around it, occupying the area of today's gardens and meadows and framed by extensive woodland.

The making of these 'pleasure grounds' was by no means easy, situated as they were on exposed chalky soil that was prey to winds and salt spray from the Channel. With fears of a French invasion at that time, Pitt found the new gardens to be a welcome distraction from his responsible position in the ongoing hostilities.

The scheme was almost finished when Pitt died in 1806, but was completed and elaborated by his successor, Lord Hawkesbury (later to become Lord Liverpool). He purchased the land on which the grounds had been created and gifted it to the castle in perpetuity. Lord Liverpool was Lord Warden from 1806-1828 and was the last to be paid for his position – a profitable £3,000 per annum. Afterwards, the position was regarded as an honour and reward for public service.

Another famous Lord Warden who took office in 1829, was Arthur Wellesley (1769-1852), known as the Duke of Wellington. He was fond of Walmer Castle and loaned it to Queen Victoria (1819-1901, reign from 1837) and Prince Albert for four weeks. During our tour, apart from seeing a pair of his famous Wellington boots, the most moving part was viewing his bedroom, looking as it had done when he was there, with the same campaign bed and the chair in which he had died.

His body was kept under guard at Walmer for two months, before transferral to Chelsea Hospital in London. Here it lay in state for a week prior to his state funeral at St Paul's Cathedral. There was much on display at the castle from his lifetime and also from after his lifetime, including his death mask.

The Lord Warden from 1865-1891 was the grandly named Granville Leveson-Gower, 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl Granville. He was a politician who served in the governments of four prime ministers, but he also had quite an impact on Walmer Castle when it became the main residence for him and his family. He commissioned another storey to be built on the gatehouse, containing rooms for his five children, as well as improving the gardens and building new stables and kennels.

William Henry Smith, the son of the well-known W H Smith & Son (originally sellers of newspapers and books), was Lord Warden for a very brief period of two months before his death in 1891. The success of the family business had enabled him to enter politics and from 1877, he served as First Lord of the Admiralty, Secretary of State for War and First Lord of the Treasury.

A rather more notorious figure was William Lygon, 7<sup>th</sup> Earl Beauchamp, who was Lord Warden from 1913-34. He was a diplomat and politician who served in Liberal governments until 1915 and during the first two years of World War I, hosted war conferences at Walmer Castle with the prime minister, Herbert Henry Asquith. He was also Commissioner of the Office of Works, a grand name for a new government department that looked after historic buildings.

While Lord Warden, he spent many summers at Walmer with his wife and seven children, making improvements to the grounds, such as tennis courts and croquet courts. He also hosted some dubious sounding parties.

It must have been during this time that the famous poet Rupert Brooke stayed at Walmer, where it's widely believed he finished his sonnet *The Soldier* with its haunting lines: "If I should die, think only this of me: That there's some corner of a foreign field, that is forever England." Rupert sadly died from an infected mosquito bite a few months later, on his way to Gallipoli, and was actually buried in an olive grove on the Greek island of Skyros.

A scandal in 1930 brought disaster to the career and personal life of William Lygon when he was in Australia, where it was spotted that his valet was living with him as his lover. It was reported in the Australian Star newspaper, whereupon Lygon's brother-in-law, the Duke of Westminster, set about his ruin.

He publicly denounced Lygon as a homosexual to King George V (1865-1936, reign from 1910), resulting in the call for Lygon's arrest. However, Lygon fled to Germany and spent his time in exile, until King George VI (1895-1952, reign from 1936) came to the throne in 1936 and the warrant for Lygon's arrest was lifted.

The misfortunes of William Lygon apparently gave the author Evelyn Waugh inspiration for the character of Lord Marchmain in his 1945 novel *Brideshead Revisited*. I well remember reading the book and was interested that the character of Sebastian Flyte was inspired by Lygon's son.

I was also intrigued to learn that the Queen Mother, Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon (1900-2002), had been Lord Warden from 1978 to 2002 and the only woman to hold the office. She loved Walmer and often stayed for a short holiday in July, accompanied by at least one of the royal corgis.

Such a surprising amount of life, death and hands-on history in one of Henry VIII's original Device Forts! By the time our audio tour had ended (during which no photography had been allowed), we noticed that it was almost midday and time to fortify ourselves with some food.



**South bastion and bridge over the moat** (photo by Alan Santillo)

Having exited the castle, we joined a number of people already heading back towards the tearoom. Despite Walmer Castle being quite small, the tearoom is highly esteemed, but we found a table easily enough and splashed out on an excellent brie and tomato quiche with salad and coleslaw, accompanied by home-made (or castle-made?) lemonade.

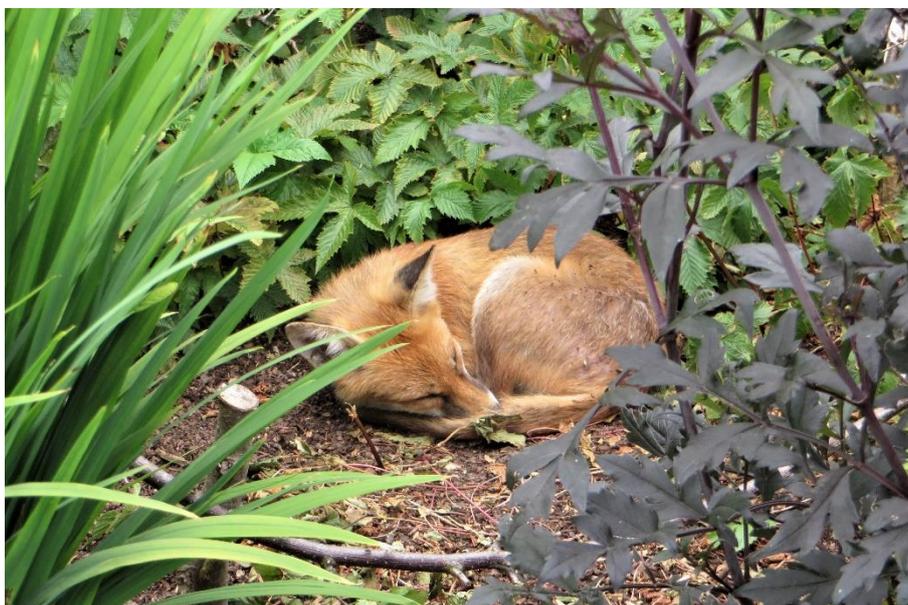
As far as the castle itself was concerned, despite more improvements having been made between 1865 and 1891, Walmer Castle was basically a very old building by the early 1900s, prone to cold and damp in the winter months. Its fighting days had disappeared by 1860, although the War Office kept the castle for potential wartime use until 1905. Having finally conceded that the castle was redundant in a military capacity, they transferred responsibility for it to the Office of Works, after its official listing as an ancient monument.

In the summer of 1905, the castle and grounds were open to the public whenever the Lord Warden was not in residence. The former porters and gardeners thus became custodians, warders and park keepers, as well as continuing to carry out gardening duties in the grounds. I think they would have been happy with this.

After lunch, we went to explore the different garden areas. The Broadwalk Garden was particularly pleasing, having been unveiled in 2016 with replanted borders. There were plenty of colourful, summer flowers and an undulating yew cloud hedge made an unusual and striking backdrop. It was here that we unexpectedly came across a fox, slumbering peacefully amongst the plants.



**The yew cloud hedge one side...**



**...and sleeping fox the other side**

Walking further, there were more beds of very colourful flowers and we could happily have wandered on even further, but were aware of time passing and our forthcoming second visit of the day to Deal Castle, a few minutes' drive away.

We therefore headed back towards the kitchen garden, where fruit and vegetables are grown for the tearoom. This 'Governor's Garden' appeared on a plan of the castle dated 1725, making it the earliest documented garden at the castle, growing produce for the castle for almost 300 years.

Our final garden visit of the day was to where William Pitt's walled garden had been redesigned to mark the Queen Mother's 95<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1995. The designer, Penelope Hobhouse, had worked with classical lines that reflected her interest in Islamic gardens. The result was tranquil, with deep-coloured planting schemes, still water and cool shade. It felt somehow a fitting tribute for the only female to have ever held the office of Lord Warden.

An arched pavilion created an air of elegance and some pleasing reflections in the large central rectangular pool. This was surrounded by lawn, topiary bushes and borders filled with sculptural plants. My favourite agapanthus flowers were there, with scented roses and mauve alliums, when in season. In spring, large terracotta pots are filled with bright tulips.



**The Queen Mother's Garden** (photo by Alan Santillo)

A great deal of work had recently been carried out to the original landscaping begun by William Pitt in 1802, with areas restored and reopened to the public after years of being lost to decay and wilderness. Although no plans from William Pitt's time had been available, letters from 1805 had been found with details of plans to plant fir trees, evergreens, broom and creepers, as well as a plan from later on in 1859. Researchers were therefore confident how the pleasure grounds would have looked and in 2018, the £2.3 million project was underway.

The planted former chalk quarry called The Glen had been severely overgrown with head-high brambles and fallen trees, thus being extremely difficult to gain entry. It took about a year to clear before restoration could actually begin, working with minimal soil due to the chalk of the quarry itself. Amazingly, some of the original yew trees were still growing there. In the wildflower meadow known as The Paddock, open areas had become filled with self-set trees that were pushing out the grassland, flora and fauna, while poor path surfaces had restricted access.

Had the gardens deteriorated beyond repair, the complete story of Walmer Castle and its inhabitants would have been lost. We would have loved to explore the whole area had time allowed, but as we drove away, I remained astonished at the fullness of Walmer Castle's history. It had been a brilliant visit indeed.