

THE MARTELLO TOWERS OP PITT'S POTS

Do you seek a solid period dwelling, ripe for conversion into a "des. res." of character and with little risk of being damp ? You could have bid in May 1988 for Martello Tower No.28 at Rye Harbour

"Martello" may be a perverse transposition or vowels of Mortella in Corsica where a fortress defied the British Navy in 1794. Perhaps it comes from "torri del martello" after small Italian forts where warning was given by striking a bell with a hammer. Napoleon's threat of invasion was very real after the short-lived Peace of Amiens of 1802. As part of a cheap defensive strategy a proposal for "Towers as Sea-fortresses" was put forward a few weeks after hostilities were renewed in 1803. There was still no design by April 1804; the coast from Beachy Head to Dover was surveyed in the summer of 1804 and in November proposals for a bomb proof tower" were drawn up and work started in the spring of 1805. By September of 1805 Napoleon abandoned plans for invasion and turned to the Danube.

74 towers were built on the south coast between 1805 and 1808; 27 in Kent and 47 in Sussex. There were 46 between Rye and Eastbourne and one at Seaford. There were 11 towers between Rye and Cliff End.

They were not truly circular, but elliptical and were designed to present the greatest strength on the seaward side. The thickness of the walls tapered gradually from 13' at the base on the seaward side to 6' at the sides and 5' facing inland. Stores were on the ground; a garrison of 1 officer and 24 men on the middle floor and an entrance 10' above ground on the landward side, and on top one 24 pounder gun and 2 carronades, all mounted in traversing platforms. The strength of the walls was formidable; the bricks were set in a mixture of lime, ash and hot tallow known as hot lime mortar.

No.28 was the first Tower in Sussex, built on the west bank of the Rother in a "picturesque position on a small shingle knoll" It was given the name of The Enchantress Tower and commanded the then entrance to the Harbour. No.29 Tower was built a 450 hundred yards to the west and was abandoned in 1809 when it was undermined by the sea. Tower No. 30 still stands opposite the turning to Rye Harbour from New Winchelsea Road. It protected the sluices of the Brede and the Tillingham rivers. There was no tower between 29 near Rye Harbour and no. 31 at Dog's Hill. Winchelsea Beach. The area between was an expanse of undrained marsh and contained "great Morasses" so that towers were considered unnecessary. In 1804 the beach on which the reserve is sited was scarcely formed. The stretch of farmland now lying on the seaward side of The Ridge and the Watch Houses, the Nook on the OS maps, was in 1804 a tidal inlet and an outlet from the "new" Rye Harbour at Winchelsea Beach which had been abandoned in 1787. You have to imagine a shingle spit forming over the years and driving down from the west enclosing this inlet more firmly until sections of it could be "inned" by the transverse banks or walls that now carry footpaths.

Towers Nos. 31 to 38 were built 600 yards apart from Dog's Hill to Cliff End. Sea erosion or demolition by the Royal Engineers has removed them all. The towers are clearly shown on sheets 46 and 47 of the reproduction (in early state of The Old Series OS Maps of England and Wales published by Harry Margary of Lympne Castle. The positions of Towers Nos. 31 - 38 are well below the present Mean High Water Level.

After the Napoleonic Wars the towers were occupied by personnel of the Coastal Blockade established to combat smuggling. The Coast Guards succeeded them in 1831, "a set of regularly appointed men of respectable character under the command and direction of able and intelligent naval officers". The 1841 and 1851 Census returns show that Towers Nos. 31-38 were occupied by Coast Guards and their families. In 1851 in Tower No. 32 there were two families with a total of 13 children. Yet, in 1861, no tower had any Coast Guards in it; Towers 28, 31, 37 and 38 accommodated men of the Royal Artillery Coastal Battery, and Towers 32 and 34-36 were uninhabited. At the time of the 1871 Census Tower 28 still housed six men of the Royal Artillery and No.33 a Greenwich pensioner; in No.38 was a Sergeant of the Royal Artillery. By 1881, Coast Guards were housed in their own buildings.

Tower No.37 was used in 1886 for experiments with "protected" gunpowder which were fully reported with a picture in the Illustrated London News of 30th June. In 1872 Towers Nos. 39 and 38 were used for experiments on the stability of gun-cotton, experiments which the Hastings and St. Leonards News of 26th April 1872 reported as showing that "gun-cotton could not be relied on.... and must be treated with proper and due caution". After the experiments the two towers were blown up with 800lbs. of gunpowder in No.39 and 200lbs. of gun-cotton in No.38, a scene witnessed by hundreds of on-lookers "in delightful weather", and one "which they could not fail to regard as interesting".

The Martello Towers were built after the threat of invasion had passed; too many and too late. Sir Walter Scott says that they were built as an Irishman said, "for the sole purpose of puzzling posterity". On 5th August 1939 The Times with ponderous honour wrote that "like all fearful objects which have had their fangs drawn, a faint atmosphere of ridicule surrounds them". Yet, in the 1939-49 War No.28 had its moment of value, if not glory; it was used as an observation post.

Come to think of it, any purchaser of No.28 could observe the reserve and be able to report on whether the Warden was up and about, and whether the tern-watchers were doing their duty.

MV has drawn upon, and acknowledges his debt to the following;

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by M.V. Saville, from 1988 Annual Report of Rye Harbour Nature Reserve