

The Landmark Trust

FORT CLONQUE

Fort Clonque was built between 1853 and 1855, at the height of the war scare that followed the rise of French naval power, and the accompanying fortification of the French port of Cherbourg – relatively speaking, a stone's throw from the Channel Islands. The British navy roamed the seas in the 19th century, taking an active and often interventionist role in the disputes and internal unrest of other nations across Europe and beyond - the phrase 'gunboat diplomacy' originates with Lord Palmerston, or 'Lord Pumicestone' as he was nicknamed. When Napoleon Bonaparte's nephew declared himself Emperor Napoleon III 1852, there was real fear of French expansionism, with memories of Bonaparte's rampages across the Continent still fresh.

The British government began to look to defences. Lord Palmerston proposed, among other measures, the immediate construction of defences for the Channel Islands. Alderney, the nearest of the group, was already especially significant, both strategically for its location just off the northwest point of Brittany and as a re-fuelling point near the maximum range of the new steam-powered war ships. Its harbour had already been fortified from 1847, but more was needed.

In 1852, a chain of eighteen forts and batteries was proposed, and a company of Royal Sappers and Miners was despatched to survey the sites and prepare the plans under the command of a brilliant young captain and engineer named William Jervois, A man of great physical energy and considerable resourcefulness, Jervois designed works on a massive scale, using vast quantities of the local granite, and devoting great attention to detail.

Clonque Rock, off a narrow peninsular frequently cut off at high tide, was selected as the site for a battery of guns to protect Hannaine and Clonque Bays, supported by another, much larger fortification, Fort Tourgis (1855), to the east. The Clonque site was a challenging one: two prominent outcrops joined to an outlying rock by a natural arch. It took Jervois several designs, but permission was finally given for four batteries and a barrack block to hold two officers and 55 men. Construction started early in 1853, and the fort was completed in 1855, costing nearly double Jervois' initial estimate of £5,000. Fort Clonque housed 55 men with two officers, in charge of a battery of ten guns.

Within a few years of its completion, however, Alderney's fortifications were rendered collectively obsolete by the coming of the steam-powered 'ironclads'. The superior speed and range of these warships meant that they could in an emergency reach the ports on the south coast of England, and no longer needed the shelter and defence offered by Alderney. In addition, despite their combined firepower of 222 guns, all Alderney's fortifications were vulnerable to fire from the sea. Jervois returned to assess them in 1871, and reported the magazines were unsafe, and that 'there is so much exposed masonry in most of the works that they would be difficult to fight, even if their armament were not obsolete.' Remodelling works to the sum of £75,000 were recommended although 'since there is now nothing much to defend at Alderney, it may probably be taken for granted that no such sum will ever be spent.'

By 1890 Fort Clonque was disarmed, not so far having fired a gun in action, and by 1900 it had become a private residence. Lt. Col. Jervois went on to serve successively as Governor of the Straits Settlements in South East Asia, South Australia and New Zealand.

In 1930 Fort Clonque was bought at auction by an island businessman, Ralph Duplain, as a place to go fishing and picnicking at weekends, perhaps with a view to camping out there in summer. The buildings were ruinous and derelict, and an immense amount of work was required before they could be used in any way. Sunday tea-parties for

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anything up to 14 guests from the town became a regular event at the fort, and many of the guests volunteered to help in the reconstruction. There was even a never-to-be-forgotten fancy dress party. After much labour the buildings were sufficiently restored to allow the family to stay overnight, and in due course the Duplains were able to let them out as holiday flats.

However, the time came when Fort Clonque was finally pressed into military use, ironically for hostilities against British shipping. Invaded in June 1940, the Channel Islands were the only British territories to be occupied by the Germans during World War 2, as part of Hitler's 'Atlantic Wall.' Fort Clonque was turned into a stronghold, codenamed 'Steinfeste' (rock fortress). From 1942, the Third Reich's civil engineering Organization Todt carried out a programme of intensive fortification, using thousands of forced labourers. The causeway was concreted and a casemate or bunker was constructed in the barracks to house the artillery.

After the war, the Duplains returned to the island, and the fort was again put to happier uses. In 1953 it was used as a location for the film *Crest of the Wave* starring Gene Kelly. However, much of the damage suffered during the war had not been made good. The fort deteriorated steadily through the 1960s despite the Duplains' best efforts, and was still cased in German barbed wire, asphalt and concrete.

In 1966, the Landmark Trust, founded only in the previous year by John and Christain Smith, bought Fort Clonque at a time when most other Channel forts were abandoned and falling into ruin. Smith brought in architect Philip Jebb with the aim of reinstating the exterior of the fort to its original Victorian appearance – except for the German bunker, which was anyway pretty well indestructible, and which now serves as a bedroom with fine sea views. All materials and equipment had to be specially transported to the fort by sea. For many years water came from a spring on the shore, to be stored in a large tank, the fort was only connected to the island's electricity supply in 1990, candles and gas having previously supplied all light and heat.

While considering how to achieve the restoration Landmark was incredibly lucky to stumble upon islander Arthur Markell, in 1967 newly retired from his post as supervisor of the Admiralty Breakwater. In the event, Arthur and an assistant carried out the restoration almost singlehandedly with the greatest resilience and good humour, clearing up the fort, rebuilding parapets and repointing walls, renewing windows and doors, fitting new bathrooms and kitchens, and painting walls. Extra help was called on only when needed, for tasks such as clearing unwanted concrete, and renewing the drawbridge, the ramp and the roofs of the barrack buildings (for which the original formula of lime cement poured over brick vaults to form a flat surface was reproduced) and repairing some of the vertiginous outer walls.

A further significant campaign of repair and refurbishment followed in 1999, and maintenance of the causeway to the fort is an ongoing preoccupation. In 2013 new, energy efficient heating was installed. With Landmark its latest custodian, Fort Clonque is one of its best loved buildings, and has been enjoyed by many thousands of people since it was first offered as a Landmark in 1969.

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. Fort Clonque sleeps up to 13 people. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please visit www.landmarktrust.org.uk