

The Landmark Trust

KINGSWEAR CASTLE, NR. DARTMOUTH, DEVON

The building of Kingswear Castle was started by the Corporation of Dartmouth in 1491 and completed in 1502. It is thus slightly later than Dartmouth Castle, which was begun in 1481 and completed by 1495. The two castles are very similar in design, however, and formed part of a single defensive plan for the river mouth and haven; and together they share the distinction of being the first fortifications to be designed specifically for artillery, with a main gun platform on the ground floor. As examples of advanced military engineering they were the Exocet missiles of their day.

In another fifty years Kingswear was redundant. This was partly due to further advances in military engineering, which had produced guns powerful enough to cover the whole river from Dartmouth Castle alone. Another reason must have been that Kingswear was always difficult to maintain, being more exposed to the weather - quite early on it was recorded that iron guns could not be kept there because they rusted so quickly. The advice was to use brass cannon instead.

After the end of the 16th century it seems that Kingswear was only manned in times of emergency, such as the Civil War. According to a survey carried out in 1661, the main gun platform had moved to the top of the castle, but had then been destroyed by fire - apparently by accident. At this time responsibility for maintenance was transferred from the Corporation of Dartmouth to a governor appointed by the Crown, and certain improvements and repairs were recommended. Some of these were apparently carried out, since another survey in 1717, although declaring the castle ruinous and useless, lists 12-, 9- and 8-pound guns as surviving there, and these are unlikely to date from before the 1680s. Two guns of this size have been seen on the sea bed below the castle.

Kingswear stood in a ruinous state for the next 130 years, and drawings exist showing it in this condition. Then in 1855 it was rescued by Charles Seale Hayne, a wealthy bachelor of 22, who transformed it into a summer residence. To carry out the work he employed Thomas Lidstone, a builder from Dartmouth. The castle has remained a private residence since then, with a brief defensive interlude during the Second World War, when it was occupied by the Marines, and a concrete blockhouse was built close to it. In 1987 the property was bought by the Landmark Trust, which restored the castle and now lets it for holidays.

The restoration of the castle was carried out 1988-90. The guiding principle for the work was the wish to reconcile a Tudor fortification with a Victorian bachelor's residence, in such a way as to leave both clearly visible.

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TOUR OF THE BUILDING

The approach

The original garrison probably came by boat from Dartmouth, to a landing place near the castle; or perhaps along a path above the shore from Kingswear village. When Seale Hayne restored the castle in 1855 he made a new drive down from an existing lane further up the hill. As you stand outside the main entrance you can see above you the shutes of the machicolations, down which water could be poured on fires lit by attackers against the door.

The ground floor

Immediately inside the door, steps descend into the gun battery. In the 19th century, a landing was made here by taking down a wall on the right, to give access directly to the stairs. This we blocked up again, to recreate the original access. In 1987 we found the ground floor divided into a kitchen and pantry. We stripped these out to recover its appearance in 1502. The floor itself, which had been considerably lowered, is now back at its original height, level with the cills of the gun embrasures. Guns of the period were normally mounted on wooden beds, without wheels, so they had to be slid forward into position. In the cills of each embrasure there was once an oak plate, with a socket in its centre. This, it seems, was for fixing the guns and preventing recoil. One section of the first bedrock floor was found to act as a guide for the level and gradient of the new floor, which slopes to allow water to flow out. The new paving is of Lundy slate.

The rectangular gunports with their splayed embrasures were a great advance on anything that had gone before, allowing as they did a wider field of fire - although still very restricted. When not in use they were sealed with shutters. Three old, 17th or 18th-century, shutters survived. These have been repaired, and new oak ones made to the same pattern, closed by a chain and cleat. Above the gunports are openings which run right through the wall, which might have been smoke vents, or spyholes. The magnificent oak beams support a new first floor. Because of their size they had to be worked outside the castle, before being manoeuvred into place in the original beam pockets. These were found to be several inches higher than those used for the Victorian ceiling beams.

The stairs

We thought to begin with that the stair had been altered, because at its top, the steps and newel post are of one piece of stone, while lower down the steps are of rubble masonry, and the newel post shows the stumps of other steps, cut off. Then, when taking away a concrete stair leading up from the ground floor, the bottom of the spiral was found, running right down to ground level, and built well into the castle wall. It seems that any interference - now or at a previous date - would result in the stair's total collapse, so it must always have been as it is now. The stone for the newel may have been reused from another building.

The first floor

The first floor contains a mixture of Tudor and Victorian work. Since this was probably the guardroom, where the soldiers of the garrison spent most of their time, they were allowed a fire at which to warm themselves. Another convenience was discovered in 1989. The large east window had only been inserted quite recently. Before that, there was a recessed cupboard there, used as a wine store by Seale Hayne. When investigating its cill, the original seat and shute of a garderobe were found, with a small window beside it.

In times of war the room also served as a gun platform. In the lower embrasures, the rare oak plates survive intact. Smaller guns would have been lifted onto trestles, and then slid forward into position. The upper ports would have been for siting, and possibly for small arms. The gunports have all been provided with new oak window surrounds. The floor, which like the ground floor had been lowered by several inches, is once again at its original level, but the oak boards seen from below are not in fact visible here. Insulation was laid on top of these, and then the Victorian elm boards laid down again, to keep the warmth in. When plasterboard was removed, the beams of the Victorian ceiling were discovered above. These were repaired and a new boarded ceiling fitted.

The second floor

This room enjoys the finest views in the castle. That it was also used for fighting is proved by the existence of several gunloops, most of which have been blocked up. The present, larger windows cut through these, but date from before 1855; whether they are the gunports for the large guns of the late 17th century is uncertain. If they are, the guns must have been mounted on a platform. In the 19th century this floor was divided into bedrooms and dressing rooms, which we have removed to recreate a single large room.

The roof

The Tudor roof was at a substantially lower level than the present one, and according to the survey of 1661 was made of calked timber, like the deck of a ship. Water ran off through scuppers, which could be seen in the walls of the second floor. It is likely that a new, higher, roof was put on in the late 17th century, but this was lost in 1855. We removed the Victorian pitched roof, which was leaking badly, and have replaced it with a paved platform.

The parapet round the three seaward sides of the castle dates from 1855, but at the back the higher parapet and the little turret are original. In this wall are the sockets for a covered platform built out over the main wall walk, allowing defenders to fire over the top of the parapet. The new bathroom occupies a similar position.

The round tower

At the foot of the stairs, a narrow passage leads to the small round tower. For some time this tower puzzled the experts, who thought that it seemed earlier than 1855, and suggested that it might have been a powder magazine - a very large and damp one if so. It is now agreed that it is entirely Victorian, and that Thomas Lidstone was very good at copying the earlier work. It has been given a new roof and floor.

The architects for the restoration were Messrs Caroe & Partners, of Wells; the interior work was carried out by St Cuthbert Builders, of Porlock, and the exterior work by Exeter Cathedral Workshops.

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. Kingswear Castle sleeps up to 6 people. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please contact us.