

DEAL CASTLE

Castles of The Downs

King Henry VIII's decision to break from the Roman Catholic Church and establish the Church of England in 1534 created a massive fall-out, with the Pope encouraging the Catholic countries of France and Spain to invade England to punish Henry and re-establish the Catholic religion.

As a consequence of this invasion threat, Henry carried out an extensive building programme around the coast from Hull to Wales. This was a hugely expensive undertaking and much of the funding and materials came from the proceeds of the Dissolution of the country's abbeys and monasteries.

As part of the programme, in 1539-40, Henry established the three 'Castles of The Downs' at Deal, Sandown and Walmer on the vulnerable open beaches of East Kent. These were built to protect the important anchorage of The Downs, between the Goodwin Sands and Deal beach, where enemy soldiers could easily be landed. Deal Castle was the largest of the castles. Walmer Castle stands about 2km (1.2 miles) to the south, and the ruins of Sandown Castle are the same distance north.

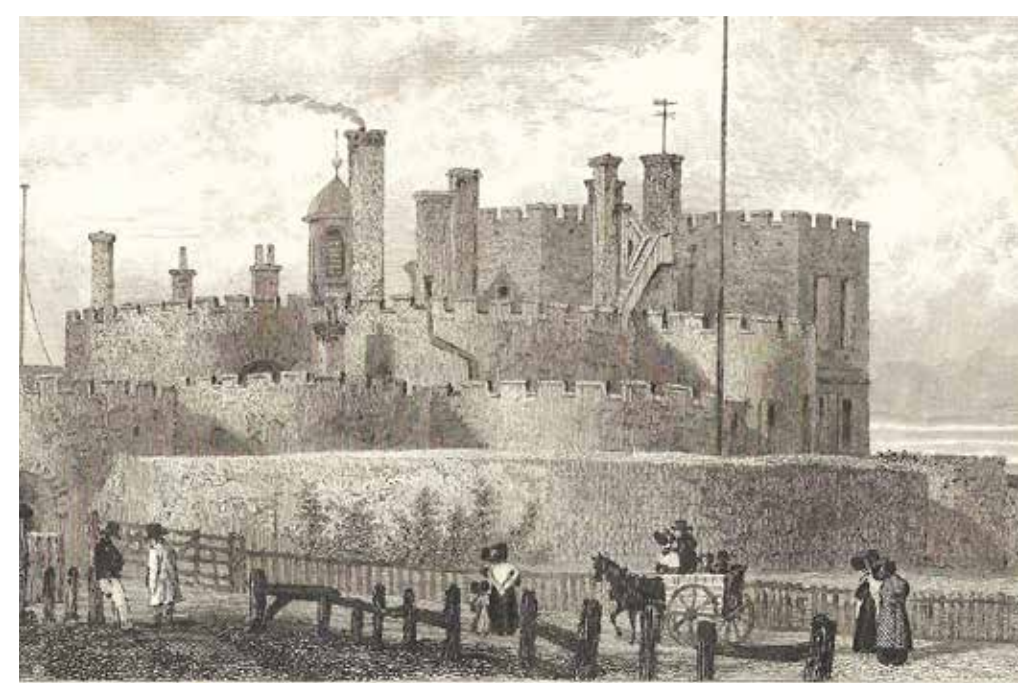


d00037 Credit: © Historic England Archive

A painting, dated to before 1732, showing the three 'Castles in The Downs' with a fleet of ships at anchor off Deal.

The latest design

The castles were mainly built of Kentish ragstone as well as other materials taken from the dissolved Catholic monastic buildings of Kent. The new design was intended to engage in short, violent action against an invading enemy. The structures were built low to provide the minimum target for ships' guns while offering a clear view for their own guns and they were characterised by the use of circular bastions and multi-tiered defences. They had no flat or angular surfaces, as rounded walls would deflect most cannon balls without damage.



Credit: Colin Vorrall

Lithograph showing the toll gate at the end of the turnpike road from Dover, outside the main entrance to Deal Castle, produced in 1830.

The castles were linked by a defensive ditch and bank with intermediate bulwarks but virtually no trace of these remains today. Each castle had different arrangements for living accommodation. Deal had purpose-built living quarters for high-ranking officials.

Six semi-circular bastions, or lunettes, were arranged around the keep of Deal Castle. These, in turn, were surrounded by six larger semi-circular bastions forming an outer curtain to the castle, encompassed by a moat that was usually dry.



Credit: Colin Vorrall

A view looking northwards to Deal Castle, showing the Captain's House which was struck by a bomb during the Second World War.

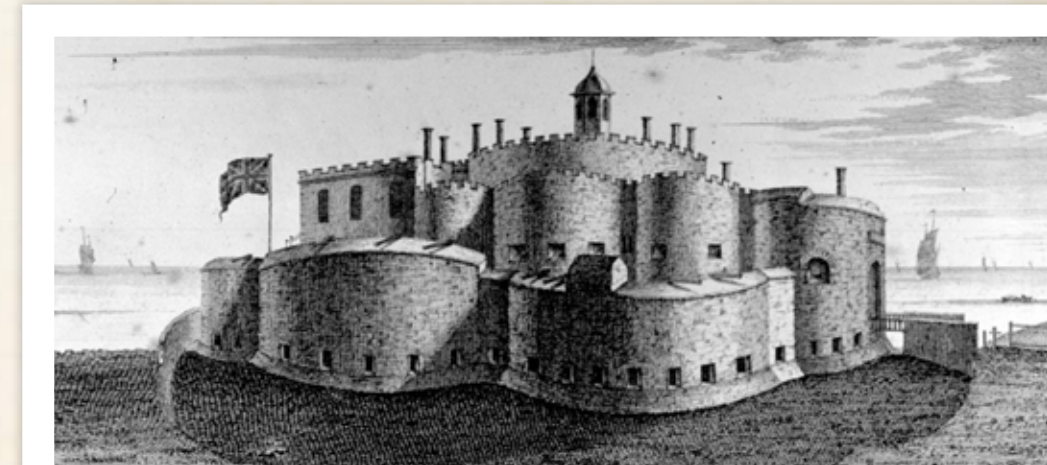
The gatehouse was incorporated into one of the castle's outer bastions on the west side with the entrance via a drawbridge and portcullis. The entrance door at Deal Castle is studded with 1200 bolts to deflect the axes of any invader with 'murder holes' above it from which quicklime or missiles could be dropped onto attackers and any fires from the gate extinguished.

The castle originally had four tiers of artillery, with a total of 66 firing positions and 53 gun-loops in the basement. The canons could fire a maximum range of 500 metres – 1km.

The development of Deal is closely intertwined with the construction of the castle. Before the castle was built, the area was essentially an unoccupied open beach, with the main settlement located further inland, where Upper Deal is today.

Usage

Each of the Castles of The Downs was manned by a captain and a garrison. The captain of Deal was senior to, and in charge of, the captains at Walmer and Sandown. All three were responsible to the Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports, who was also Governor of Dover Castle.



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A 1735 engraving of Deal Castle by Samuel and Nathaniel Buck.

Although mainly built as a defence against French and Spanish threats, Deal Castle saw little direct action but it often kept peace in The Downs. It was attacked and captured by Royalist troops, landed by Charles, the Prince of Wales, during the Civil War in 1648, and was besieged by Parliamentarians for three months. It was garrisoned and modified during the Napoleonic Wars, when invasion again threatened. However, from the 18th century, the castle was more of a residence than a fortress, and a large mansion was built on the east side of the Keep. During the First World War, local residents were allowed to use the basement of the castle to shelter from Zeppelins. In the Second World War, the Captain of Deal Castle, Colonel Birdwood, allowed officers to billet in the mansion and the gardens were used to grow fruit and vegetables.

The Captain's Garden with the stables on the opposite side of the road, featured prominently on local maps from 1769, and has recently been refurbished as a community garden.

Deal Castle is open to the public. It came under the care of the government in 1904 and is now managed by English Heritage.



Credit: Dover Museum, d31845

Deal Castle, looking towards Walmer. This watercolour was by J.L. Roget.

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