

The Landmark Trust

PLEASE HOLD ON PRINTING THIS TILL WE SEE WHETHER WE CAN FIND A VOLUNTEER TO ALLOW WEEKLY ACCESS.

THE MARTELLO TOWER, ALDEBURGH, SUFFOLK

The Martello Tower was built between 1808 and 1812. It is the most northerly of a chain of defensive towers built along the South and East coasts of England at that time, in response to the very real threat of invasion by the French, led by Napoleon. When they were built, the towers were called heavy gun batteries. They soon came to be known by the name Martello, however, from the tower that provided the idea for their design. This stood on Mortella Point in Corsica. It was circular, of solid construction, about forty feet in diameter and the same in height. In 1796, with a garrison of 38 men and three not very large guns, it had withstood attack from two warships of the British Navy, one with 74 guns, and one with 32. The Board of Ordnance were so impressed by the tower's resistance to fire-power, that they adopted the design for their own towers. These too were round, or oval, and in their construction used up to a million bricks, most of which came from near London. The Aldeburgh Martello Tower is the exception, because instead of being round, it is quatrefoil in shape: in effect four towers fused into one. The reason for this is not recorded. It might have been a piece of lateral thinking resulting from the quatrefoil arrangement of a platform for four guns; or it might have been an earlier design proposed for the Dymchurch Wall in Kent in 1804 but never built.

The tower was designed for four guns, although in 1815 it was noted that there were only two 24-pounders there. These were fired over the parapet, off timber gun carriages shackled to ring mounts which still hang from their stone blocks. In the late nineteenth century, new guns were provided, with rifled barrels for more effective fire. The old guns, of which there were by then four, were sunk into the roof to act as pivots. The tower would have been garrisoned by the local Volunteer Artillery. On the main barrack room floor, there were double berths for eight soldiers, and single berths for five NCOs. The northern bay was partitioned off with a canvas screen, to provide a private room for the officer in charge. There were two fireplaces for cooking. The lower floor was used for storage - coal, water, food and ordnance. The powder magazine was placed on the landward side, for safety and reached by a separate stair, lit by a window from the main store.

The tower did not originally stand on its own as it does today. It was once part of the village of Slaughden, of which the last houses survived into this century, but finally vanished due to erosion before the last War. The sea has also swept away part of the moat surrounding the tower itself, until stopped by the building of coastal defences of a different kind in the 1950s. In 1931 the tower, by then abandoned and derelict, was sold by the Ministry of Defence to a Mr Walter Wenham. Over the next few years it was occasionally used by the Mitford family for camping holidays. Then in 1936, it was sold to Miss Debenham, who commissioned the architect Justin Vulliamy to convert it into a studio. This was done very carefully by adding to its top an elegant penthouse, hardly affecting the interior or original structure of the tower at all.

By 1971, the Thirties penthouse had in turn become derelict, and the tower itself was badly in decay. This time it was acquired by the Landmark Trust. Extensive repairs were carried out, and the tower itself converted to provide holiday accommodation available to everyone.

THE RESTORATION OF THE TOWER

When the Landmark Trust acquired the Martello Tower in 1971, it was in a very dangerous state. Vandals and the elements had between them done their best to destroy it. A whole section of the moat had been washed away, allowing the sea to reach the base of the tower. Large coping stones had been dislodged from the parapet, allowing water to penetrate the wall, and loosen the outer brick skin which had fallen off in a large area. The main floor inside the building had been ripped out, and the concrete penthouse was cracked and derelict.

The most urgent task was to put the tower back in a stable condition, and compared with this the decision whether or not to reinstate the superstructure seemed less important. In the end

The Landmark Trust Shottesbrooke Maidenhead Berkshire SL6 3SW
Charity registered in England & Wales 243312 and Scotland SC039205

Bookings 01628 825925 Office 01628 825920 Facsimile 01628 825417 Website www.landmarktrust.org.uk

we decided that, clever and amusing though it was, the tower was better off without it. One additional benefit we were given by the tower's original designers. Orthodox Martello towers have a brick pier in their centre, to give greater stability. The Aldeburgh tower dispensed with this, allowing a central vaulted chamber, which we provided with a top light in a ventilation shaft, through which ammunition could be winched up to the gun terrace. Additional borrowed light comes from the windows and over the top of the partitions. The missing main floor was replaced with that from the basement, raised up by block and tackle onto a new system of supports.

The Martello tower is built of brick - more than a million were used in the original construction, and many thousands more in its repair. For extra strength the towers were built with "hot lime", a mixture of lime, sand and hot tallow. However for the renewal and securing of the brick skin an ordinary lime and cement mortar was used, mixed with a waterproof sealant. In general, too, the towers were given a protective coat of lime render. There is no evidence that the Aldeburgh tower ever had such a coat, and was therefore perhaps left unfinished.

On the roof, the missing coping stones were replaced in concrete mixed with a granite aggregate and have done their job very well. The barrels we see upended today would have been used as pintle supports for the gun carriages (one such pintle remains today). The runnels made by the pivoting gun carriages can be made out in the flagstones and careful inspection reveals two such circular tracks, perhaps reflecting a change in firepower. The recesses which served so successfully as fireplaces in the 1930s were used for storing powder and shot, and one still bears the pintle holes for a pair of crude shutters.

Layers of concrete and asphalt had been laid on top of the original York paving stones on the roof in the 1930s. These were all removed, and in the initial restoration in the 1970s, the stones were pointed with a special sealant intended to keep out water. This did not prove successful, however, and by 2001 water penetration had gradually worsened to the point where we decided that a comprehensive overhaul was needed to address the problem. The sealant was scraped out and the roof flags repointed with a breathable lime mortar. Drainage, ventilation and heating were improved inside the tower and the internal walls were stripped of their plastic paint and repainted with limewash, which allows water to evaporate.

We are fairly confident these measures allowing the building to breathe will solve the problem in the longer term. Meanwhile, we are left with a huge mass of saturated masonry that will take a long time to dry out and it seems that some drips will continue at least for a while. So the current canopy was specially designed and made by Dave Tomlinson Structures Ltd from Bristol to catch the drips until the masonry dries out. The drips flow down the canvas dome into a skirt at its edge that channels the water safely away. The canopy has the added advantage of reflecting light back into the main space; it also has an agreeable maritime resonance of sails and campaign tents fitting for this fine remnant of the days when French ships stalked the Channel.

Martello Tower is one of five Landmark sites chosen by artist Antony Gormley for an installation called LAND, a collaboration with Landmark in celebration of its 50th anniversary. From May 2015 until May 2016, five different, lifesize representations of a human figure in cast iron are placed at Landmark sites representing the four compass points (Saddell Bay, Martello Tower, Clavell Tower and on Lundy), anchored by a fifth near the centre of the country, at Lengthsman's Cottage in Warwickshire.

Mounted on the parapet above the gun terrace, the Aldeburgh figure stares enigmatically out to sea.

As Antony Gormley has said, LAND in combination with the Landmark Trust's 50th anniversary is 'an occasion to think and feel the nature of our species, its history and future, and its relationship to the huge biodiversity of living beings that exist on the surface of this extraordinary blue planet.'

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. Martello Tower sleeps up to 4 people. To book this building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please visit www.landmarktrust.org.uk or phone the Booking Office on 01628 825 925.