

Camber Castle



**A look into the past of
Henry VIII's castle**

£1







John Speed's map of 1610. Camber Castle is circled.

Until late in the 16th century, most of the low lying ground between Rye and Winchelsea in East Sussex was a shallow harbour – the Camber – protected from the sea by a long series of shingle banks. Between 1512 and 1514 Sir Edward Guldeford built a circular tower at the end of one of these shingle spits to defend the harbour, although it was not provided with any ordnance.

Henry VIII took steps to protect the south coast against possible invasion from mainland Europe – building artillery forts at strategic positions, such as Deal and Walmer. Camber Castle was built using the earlier circular tower, incorporating it into the central tower. Like all Henry VIII's fortifications, it was highly symmetrical.

Work on what was then called “Winchelsea Castle” began in 1539, and much of the building material was from local sources. Timber came from Appledore and Beckley. Quarries at Hastings and Fairlight provided some of the stone and more was obtained from the demolition of buildings in Winchelsea, probably including stone from St Thomas' Church. The castle is dressed with limestone, some of which came from Caen, France. An estimated 600,000 bricks were manufactured on site.

In 1541, by an Act of Parliament this castle and all others in Sussex and Kent were put under the command of the Constable of Dover Castle and the Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports who at that time was Sir Thomas Cheyne.

By its completion in 1544 the castle had cost £23,000 and by 1553 the garrison strength was 29 men (captain, deputy, porter, deputy, 16 gunners and nine soldiers).

Within fifty years the silting of the Camber, and the eastward shifting of the harbour entrance, were already making the castle obsolete. In 1637 the garrison was disbanded, and the guns that were left in the derelict fort were removed in 1642 when the castle was partly dismantled.



Camber Castle stands on old shingle ridges



A reconstruction of Camber Castle as it may have appeared in 1540

Excavations at Camber Castle began in April 1963 under the direction of the Ministry of Public Buildings and Works and continued intermittently until 1983. English Heritage took responsibility for it from 1984 and Rye Harbour Nature Reserve has been opening it to the public since 1999.

Timeline

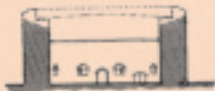
- 1287** The Great Storm. Old Winchelsea, sited somewhere near the *present* mouth of the river Rother, is finally destroyed following severe storms over the previous 30 years.
- 1288** New Winchelsea created on the hill of Iham overlooking the Camber.
- 1486** Sir Richard Guldeford is granted the lordship of Iham (now Winchelsea), in return for building and maintaining a tower to protect “The Camber” – but he failed to do so!
- 1512** Sir Edward Guldeford built the central tower, at the end of a shingle spit and only a few metres from the sea.
- 1538** A treaty between France and Spain (who had previously fought between themselves) made England vulnerable to attack.
- 1539** Henry VIII began work on Camber Castle. The central tower was extended upwards, the passageways, bastions and stirrup towers were constructed.
- 1542** The final work on remodelling the outer defences began, enlarging the bastions and heightening internal structures.
- 1544** The castle was completed.
- 1580s** The Rye Fellowship of Fishermen were given the power to maintain a light at Camber Castle to help guide boats into the port of Rye.

- 1626** The sea had receded so far that the harbour was out of range of cannons, and the castle was useless. King Charles gave permission for the castle to be demolished, but for some reason it was left.
- 1637** The castle was decommissioned only 100 years after its final alterations. This was partly due to changes in fortifications, but mainly because the retreating sea had left it stranded inland.
- 1642** The guns were removed from the now derelict castle and taken to Rye. The ruin was used as a quarry for a short while, the stone being taken to make buildings in local villages.
- 1644** The remaining timber and lead was removed by the Mayor and Jurats of Rye.
- 1943** The castle was used as an anti-aircraft gun base during World War II.
- 1967** Camber Castle was taken into Guardianship by the Ministry of Public Buildings and Works.
- 1970s and 1980s** Excavations removed most of the soil and rubble which had filled the inside of the castle. Conservation work began to protect the monument from further deterioration.
- 1995** The main programme of work was completed and the castle was opened to the public by English Heritage and Rye Harbour Nature Reserve.

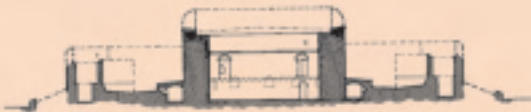
Construction

Camber Castle was built in three stages:

Phase I – between 1512 and 1514, consisted of an artillery tower with a single storey gun deck with gun ports below.



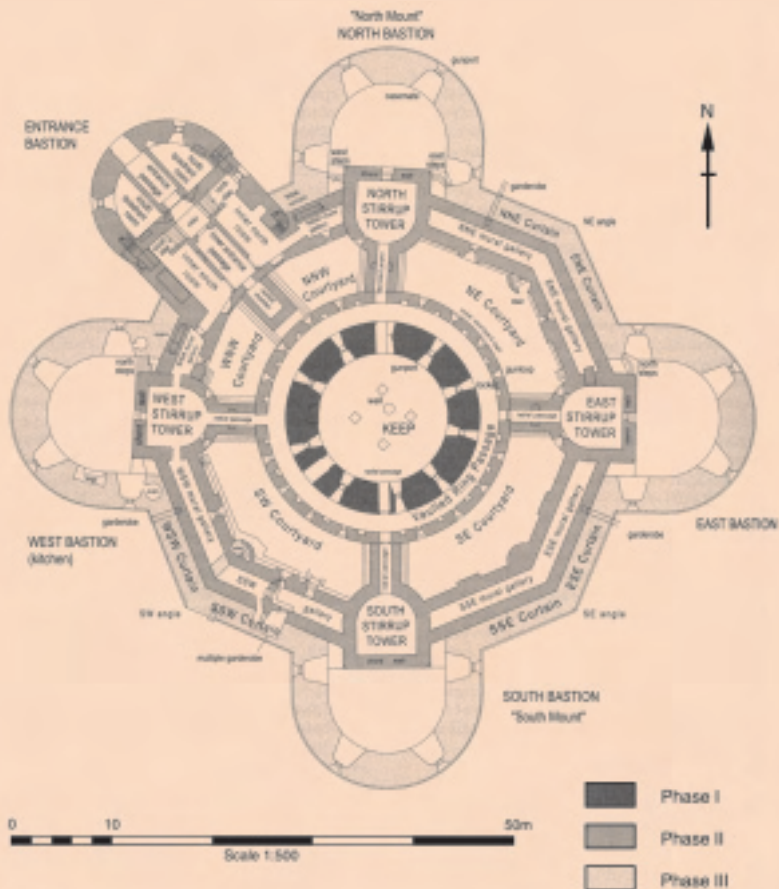
Phase II – begun in 1539, followed the device forts design, which was the concept of Stephen Von Haschenperg. This type of castle emphasised close defence and internal security, with a number of hidden passages.



Phase III – there were doubts about the castle's effectiveness, so only 18 months after it was armed and in use, the castle underwent further alterations. The finished castle was much more effective, having guns mounted at a number of levels and with improved outer defences.



Plan of Castle



Entrance Bastion

The entrance to the castle is through the gatehouse in the northwest bastion. The gatehouse was built in three stages. First, in Phase II of the construction of the castle (1539-40) a rectangular gatehouse was built. Second, and also in the Phase II works, a D-shaped bastion was added to the front of the gatehouse (forming the curved wall through which visitors enter the castle). Third, in Phase III (1542-43) a first floor was added to the gatehouse and bastion. The rooms on the first floor of the entrance bastion were accessible via stairs in the Inner South Room. There was a private garderobe attached to a suite of accommodation used by the captain, with a room with large windows suitable for entertaining.



Below the entrance was a basement room, but due to the high groundwater levels, this was often flooded, and was abandoned within three years. The staircases down to the basement are still evident on either side of the entrance.

The entrance bastion also appears to have housed the hall, dining room, porters' lodge, and the wainscot chamber (wood panelled room).

At the far end of the entrance bastion, there is a vaulted chamber which would have been used as a storage area. Records of 1542 suggest there may have been a moat around the castle but no archaeological evidence for one has been discovered.

Central Tower



Central Tower

The tower is some 65ft in diameter externally. The 11ft thick walls contained staircases connecting the storeys. The original tower (1512) was about half the present height, and the floor was higher. There were 10 gun ports, a fireplace, and a staircase leading to the roof.

When the tower was raised by Henry VIII the floor was lowered to create a basement level. Above this, extra storeys were added to make three levels, plus the roof. Opposite the viewpoint and at the top of the tower the remains of a circular staircase which led to the roof are still visible.



Fireplace showing herring bone brick pattern

Around the circumference of the tower there are recesses at the height of each level.

These would have held the beams to support the floors, but are now used as nest sites by a variety of birds.

Looking down into the tower, the only remaining floor level is the basement, with a well in the centre. There are also four square stone bases, on which wooden pillars stood to support the upper floors.



Inside central tower showing the well, square stone base and recesses for beams

South Bastion

When the castle was taken into guardianship most was already filled in. The south bastion has not been excavated, to preserve anything buried beneath, and to show visitors how the castle had been left.

As the sea receded, ships became out of range of the cannons in the base of the bastions. As a result cannons were placed at a higher level, and larger more powerful pieces were used to increase the castle's range. The weak roofs of the bastions could not support the heavy metal cannons, so they were filled with rubble.



Looking out at roof level across the fields to the sea beyond, you can see how the coastline has changed. The ridges in the ground are shingle with a thin layer of soil on top. Each one is where the coastline lay for a short while and shingle accumulated.

The straight wall submerged in the earth of this bastion is the remains of the Stirrup Tower. It is the top part of the straight chord wall (the stirrup towers were D-shaped, the curve facing inwards towards the central tower).



The castle now lies 1700m from the shore

Vaulted Passageway

There is a circular vaulted passage which runs around the base of the central tower. The roof has partly fallen in, but originally the full length was covered. Walking along the passageway, the 'loop-lights' which let light in, would have enabled the soldiers to defend the central tower if the outer walls had been breached and the enemy were in the courtyard above.

Between each loop-light there is a rectangular niche in the wall for general storage. There are two arched doorways leading into the basement level of the central



tower, and four radial passages leading away towards the four bastions (only two of these passages are now accessible). The radial passages are significantly lower than the vaulted passageway. Even though the average height of people was less than it is today, the passages were built lower for a reason. If the outer walls were breached by the enemy, the only way into the tower was via these radial passages – the enemy would have to duck to enter the passage, thus making it harder for them to attack.



Stirrup Towers

The stirrup towers are D-shaped towers which had two storeys and a parapet at roof level. They stand to the rear of the outer bastions and were constructed during Phase II (1539-40) and were heightened in Phase III (1542-43). 'Gunloops' provided cover for the courtyard, in case the enemy made it through the outer walls.

There were four stirrup towers constructed inside the outer bastions. There were rectangular storage compartments in the back wall, either side of the door leading to the outer bastion.

The towers are linked by the Mural Passage which would have run around the circumference of the whole castle. The Mural Passage is linked to the inner Vaulted Passageway by radial passages beneath the courtyard. This doorway leads from the North Stirrup Tower towards the East Bastion via the Mural Passageway. Elsewhere in the castle it is noticeable that doorways have been blocked off. For example, the doorway into the Entrance Bastion from the kitchen area has been partially blocked – which may have created a serving hatch.



*Looking from Kitchen Bastion to Central Tower
with derelict Stirrup Tower between*

East Bastion



Embrasure showing chimney flue

The East Bastion is one of the four main bastions, North, South, West (kitchen) and East which were added during Phase III of the construction (1542-1543). There is also a smaller Northwest bastion, which acts as the entrance.

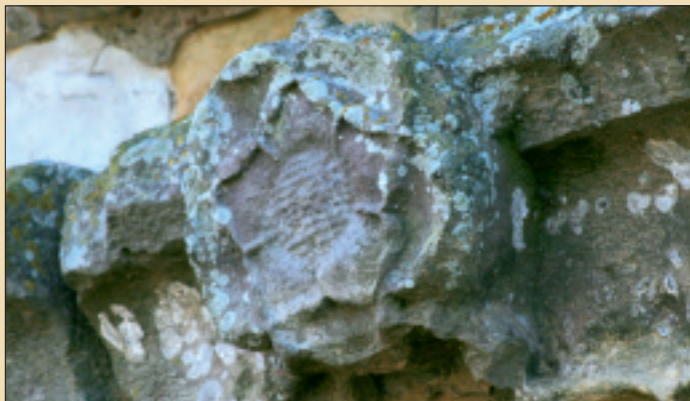
The bastion has curved walls, and like the rest of the castle is fairly squat. Camber's design differs from earlier castles because it was built to meet the needs of artillery warfare. The rounded shape of the bastions was designed to deflect enemy shot and allow the defending cannons coverage of the castle's perimeter.

The cannons would have been positioned within the casemates in the walls of the bastion, pointing through the embrasures which now look out over the fields. Before the sea receded, any attacking fleet was in range of the guns here.

Above each embrasure there is a chimney flue to allow smoke from the firing of cannon to escape – remember that the bastions would originally have been roofed. With the number of embrasures in each bastion, it would have been possible to create a wide arc of fire, protecting the castle from all angles.

Tudor Rose and Staircase

Circular stone staircases are in evidence all around the castle. In the courtyard there are two sets of staircases that would have led up to the top of the outer courtyard wall. Looking upwards, towards the central tower one can see how it was built progressively. The original tower (1512) was about half the present height – a line of bricks, or a masonry ledge, which would have then been the top, is clearly visible. The tower was later raised when the stirrup towers and walls were built (1539). Along the ledge on the tower there were ornamented carvings. These included beast heads (with spouts for gutters), shields with crosses and vertical markings, a fleur-de-lys, and Tudor roses. Most have been eroded by the weather, but on the sheltered side is a fine example of a Tudor rose.



Tudor Rose



Courtyard showing well

Kitchen (West Bastion)

Right to left, the double chimney, the chimney flue above the embrasure, the bread oven



The outer bastion situated on the west of the castle was used as a kitchen by the garrison. There is one main fireplace in the side wall where the majority of the cooking would have been done. It possesses a double chimney and would have had an iron cooking range at its base.

At both ends of the semi-circular walls there are bread ovens. These are lined with tiles to withstand the heat, and each has a small chimney connected to it.

With the west bastion facing inland, and also serving as the kitchen, only smaller guns would have been mounted here.



Tiled interior of bread oven

Courtyard

The courtyard is a ring shape around the central tower. The bastions on the outside, and the tower on the inside would all have been roofed, leaving the courtyard between them, open to the air.

The well in the courtyard is one of two supplies of water in the castle (there is another in the tower). Although the top of the well has been rebuilt, the interior walls are original.



Well in the courtyard

On either side of the courtyard there were covered passageways ringing the castle. Next to the tower was the Vaulted Passageway (partially fallen in now), and on the outward side was the Mural Passage. Both are still present, and are connected by radial passages passing beneath the courtyard.



Courtyard showing steps over the radial passages and Stirrup Tower bottom right

Life in the castle

Many domestic objects have been found during excavations at Camber Castle, which give a clue as to the life of its inhabitants. Objects such as rings, buckles, lace tags, bells, pins and leather shoes, give us information about the soldiers' clothing and appearance. Also knives, saws, keys, locks and pottery pieces have been recovered which provide evidence for activities in their daily life. In addition, bones discovered at the castle represent a wide range of animals ranging from cat to deer and whale.

Obviously not all of these were a source of food, however many show signs indicating that they were skinned after death.

The percentages of animal bones discovered gives some information about the inhabitants' diet:

Sheep	66 (36%)
Rabbit	46 (24%)
Cattle	40 (22%)
Chicken	24 (13%)
Pig	8 (4%)



Weaponry

As Camber Castle was an artillery fort, it would have contained a large number of weapons in case of attack. Weaponry constitutes 15% of all metalwork found at Camber Castle during excavations, a majority of which can be dated to the 16th and 17th centuries. Most of the weapons discovered were made of iron, which does not tend to survive well when buried, however, canon balls, arrowheads, musket parts and equipment, swords, armour and other hand weapons were found which give an indication as to the military technology during the time of Henry VIII.

Iron cannon balls found at the castle vary greatly in size indicating that a wide range of guns was used. Also,

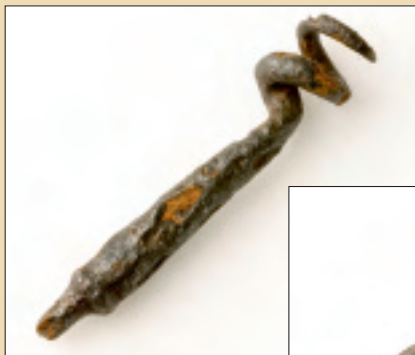


Gunpowder dispenser

many arrowheads were found which were specifically designed to pierce armour.

Muskets and other handheld guns were also used and stored in the castle. Parts of muskets and musket equipment have been found, including matchlocks, powder flasks, wormer and musket balls.

Examples of hand weapons including four halberds and six pike heads have been excavated, but few sword pieces were found which is surprising at a site of this period.



Wormer



Spear

Further reading

Henry VIII's Coastal Artillery Fort at Camber Castle, Rye, East Sussex: An Archaeological, Structural and Historical Investigation

by Martin Biddle, Jonathan Hiller
and Ian Scott. 2001

Websites

www.wildrye.info/reserve/cambercastle

www.english-heritage.org.uk



Rye Harbour Nature Reserve



Look out for the Environment Agency lorries that maintain the sea defences. Please get off the road to allow them to pass.

Camber Castle



The castle is open on Saturday and Sunday afternoons (2-5pm) in July, August and September, and on Summer Bank Holidays and by guided walks.

There is a small charge for entry – £2 adults, £1 concessions, accompanied children free.

School visits can be arranged – phone 01797 227784.

Artefacts from Camber Castle are stored at the Stone Hut at Dover Castle and can be seen by appointment with English Heritage – 01304 241892.

Booklet produced by Friends of Rye Harbour Nature Reserve with editorial assistance from English Heritage.

www.WildRye.info