

Martello Tower No. 24

General

Martello towers are gun towers constructed to defend the vulnerable south eastern coast of England against the threat of ship-borne invasion by Napoleonic forces. Built as a systematic chain of defence in two phases, between 1805-1808 along the coasts of East Sussex and Kent, and between 1808- 1812 along the coasts of Essex and Suffolk, the design of martello towers was based on a fortified tower at Mortella in Sicily which had put up a prolonged resistance to British forces in 1793.

The towers take the form of compact, free-standing circular towers on three levels built of rendered brickwork or stone. The towers of the south coast were numbered 1-74 from east to west, while those of the east coast were identified by a system of letters (A-Z, and then AA, BB etc) from south to north. Although they exhibit a marked uniformity of design, minor variations are discernible between the southern and eastern groups and amongst individual towers, due mainly to the practice of entrusting their construction to local sub-contractors.

Most southern towers are elliptical in plan, whilst the eastern group are oval or cam-shaped externally, with axes at the base ranging between 14.4m by 13.5m and 16.59m by 14.4m. All are circular internally, the battered (inwardly sloping) walls of varying thicknesses, but with the thickest section invariably facing the seaward side. Most stand to a height of around 10m. Many martello towers are surrounded by dry moats originally encircled by counterscarp banks, and/or have cunettes (narrower water defences) situated at the foot of the tower wall.

The ground floor was used for storage, with accommodation for the garrison provided on the first floor, and the main gun platform on the roof. The majority of towers carried a single heavy gun, although a four-gun, quatrefoil-shaped tower was built at Aldeburgh, and three large, circular ten-gun towers known as redoubts were also constructed at particularly vulnerable points, two of which survive at Eastbourne and Dymchurch.

As the expected Napoleonic invasion attempt did not materialise, the defensive strength of the martello tower system was never tested, and the tower design was soon made obsolete by new developments in heavy artillery. Many were abandoned and fell into decay or were demolished during the 19th century, although some continued in use into the 20th century as signalling or coastguard stations. Of the total of 105 single-gun towers built, some 46 examples survive, 29 on the south coast and 17 on the east coast. Those which survive well and display a diversity of original components are considered to merit protection.

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Martello tower no.24 at Dymchurch survives well in carefully restored form, retaining its original appearance externally and a substantial proportion of its constituent components and features, including, unusually, its original gun barrel. As one of a pair of closely-spaced examples, no.24 illustrates the clustering of towers around particularly vulnerable points and the carefully planned integration of the martello tower system.

Details

The monument includes a martello tower, one of a pair lying towards the south western edge of Dymchurch, a modern seaside town situated on the south Kent coast. The tower, which is Listed at Grade II, lies c.250m north east of its twin, tower no.25. The pair were constructed in 1805-6 as part of a chain of 21 towers guarding the coastline of Romney Marsh, between Hythe in Kent and Rye in East Sussex. They were specifically designed to protect Marshland Sluice, the main drain of the three which emptied into the sea at Dymchurch, then the administrative centre for the Marsh. Tower no.24 lies c.12m behind Dymchurch Wall, the c.4.8km long bank which protects the eastern part of the reclaimed marsh from the sea.

The slightly elliptical, brick-built tower measures up to c.13m in diameter externally and was constructed on three levels. It stands to a height of c.10m, with battered (inwardly sloping) walls ranging from 1.5m to 4m in thickness, the most substantial section being the wall base on the south easterly, seaward side. The brick walls are faced with channelled cement render designed to simulate the appearance of Portland stone ashlar. A thick central column rises from the basement to the top of the tower, from which springs the barrel-vaulted first floor ceiling which supports the gun platform on the roof.

Access into the tower is by way of a first floor doorway with stone dressings situated on the landward side, originally reached from the ground by a retractable ladder, although this has not survived. The doorway is headed by a plaque displaying the tower number. The first floor is divided into three rooms by wooden partitions and provided accommodation for the garrison of 24 men and one officer. Two fireplaces heated the rooms, which are lit by a pair of splayed window openings containing sash windows to the west and east. These are headed by vents designed to draw off smoke from musket fire. Further indication of the role of small arms in the tower's defences is represented by a wooden musket rack fixed around the central brick column. The brick-lined, unlit basement is reached by a trap door leading down through the suspended timber floor near the entrance. This was used to store ammunition and supplies, and provision for these includes a barrel-vaulted gunpowder store partly recessed into the thickness of the outer, seaward wall.

Safety features include ventilation slits in the double-skinned walls and a carefully designed light box separated from the magazine by a pane of glass. Cisterns dug into the basement floor, fed by rainwater pipes leading down from the roof, were designed to augment the water supply. These were originally covered by timber floorboards, which have not survived. The open gun platform is reached from the first floor by an internal stone staircase constructed in the thickest part of the tower wall. Mounted on a central pivot is the original, cast iron 24 pounder gun barrel, manufactured and supplied by Samuel Walker and Company of Rotherham, set on a mainly wooden traversing carriage, a modern replica. The operation of the gun, which can be turned through 360 degrees by a series of rope pulleys, required between ten and fourteen men. It had a firing range of one mile. Four ammunition stores in the form of arched recesses are set into the c.1.8m high, sloping parapet which encircles the roof.

The martello tower was used during the later 19th and early 20th centuries as a coastguard station and look-out tower. Between 1959-69 it was restored by the Ministry of Works, work which included the re-rendering of the exterior brickwork and the

replacement of most of the original woodwork. The monument, which houses a small museum, is now in the care of the Secretary of State and open to the public. Excluded from the scheduling are the modern metal steps which lead up to the first floor entrance, and all other modern fixtures, fittings and display boards.

Extract from Historic England Listing

<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1014626>