

MARTELLO TOWER NO.24

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Martello Tower No. 24 in Dymchurch High Street was one of 74 towers built along the south coast between 1805 and 1812 to resist the threatened French invasion.

Of the 74 Martello Towers built on the Kent and Sussex coast, Martello24 is considered to be the best surviving example, being closest to its original condition and it can be seen as it was when occupied by the military in 1806. It has been restored to its original design and layout with almost all of the original tower still in place.

The tower contains almost all of the features of the original design including brickwork, front and parapet doors, window openings, fireplaces, ventilation shafts, the original 24 pounder muzzle-loading cannon on the gun platform, parapet shot lockers, hauling rings, replica gunpowder barrels, and replica 'Brown Bess' muskets.

ORIGIN OF MARTELLO TOWERS

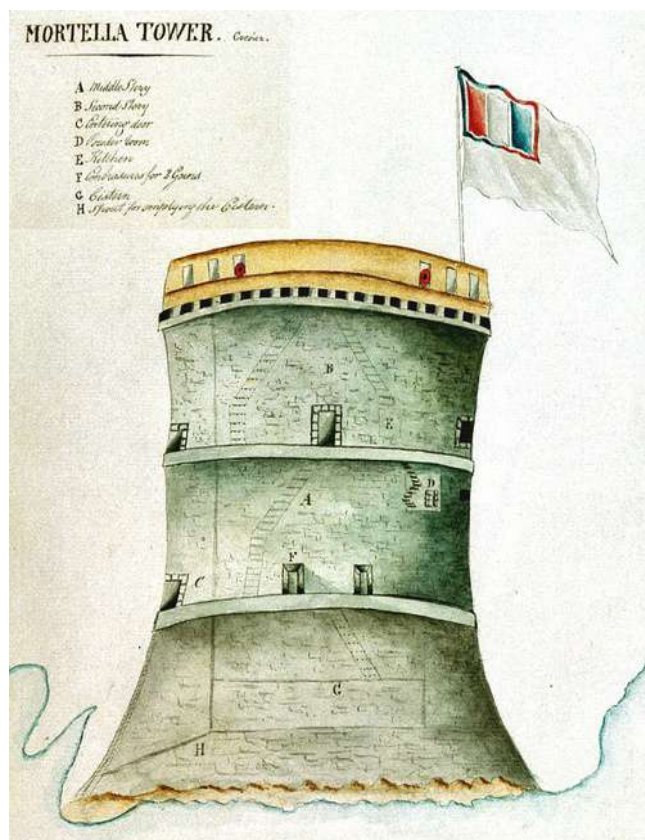
On 7th February 1794, a tower mounting only two or three guns (probably 12 pdrs.) in the Bay of Mortella, Corsica, beat off two British warships and was only taken eventually from landward.

Although there was a long tradition for the use of isolated gun towers in the Mediterranean, and indeed in a few places around the British coasts, the spirited defence of the Bay of Mortella Tower created a marked impression on all the naval and military officers who were present.

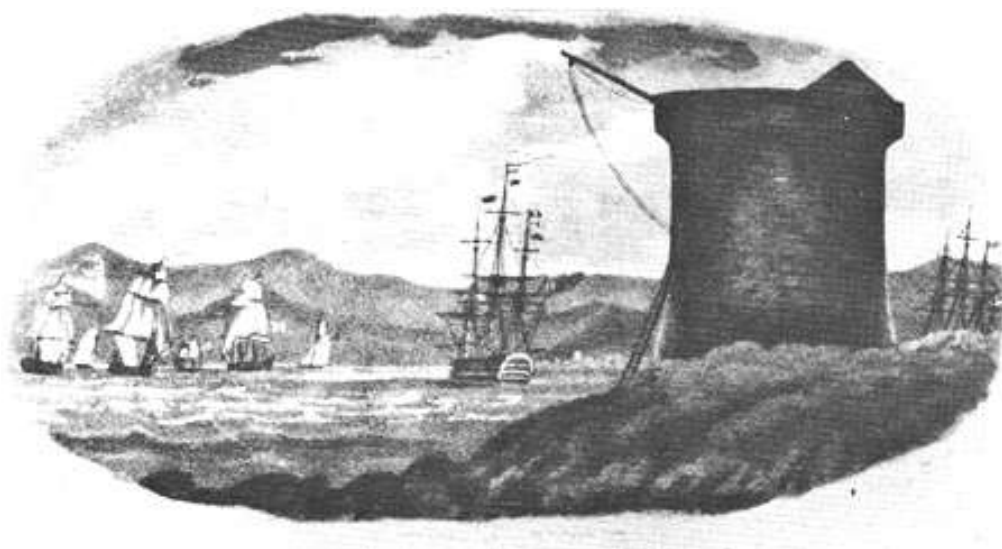
On the British evacuation of Corsica in 1796 the Mortella Tower was blown up but its reputation was so remarkable that a drawing was made of it by John McArthur. Secretary to Lord Hood. A model was also made which is still preserved in the Rotunda at Woolwich. It was this tower which was to give its name to the towers erected around the coasts of Southern and South- Eastern England between 1805 and 1812.

A craze for gun towers developed and Martello Towers are to be found In Ireland, Scotland and as far away as Canada.

Somewhat similar gun towers had however been erected earlier by the English in the Channel Islands and on Minorca.

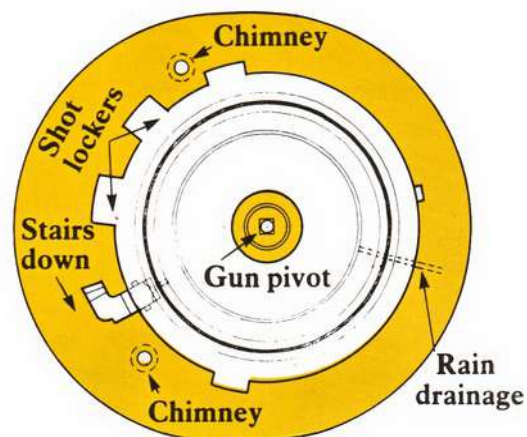
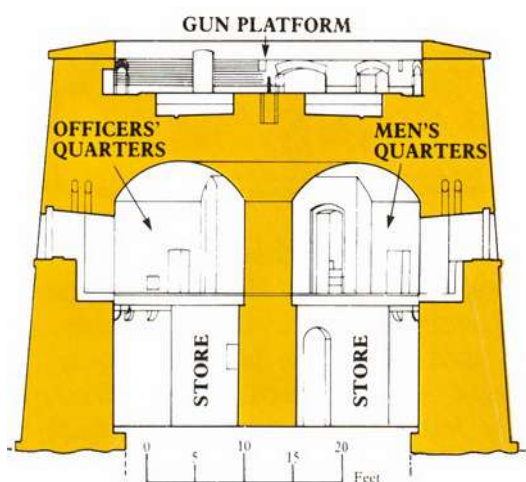


*Elevation of the Bay of Mortella Tower, Corsica.
From original drawing taken on the spot.*



Mortella Tower, St. Firenza Bay, Corsica published 1809

PLANS OF MARTELLO TOWER No. 24



GUN PLATFORM

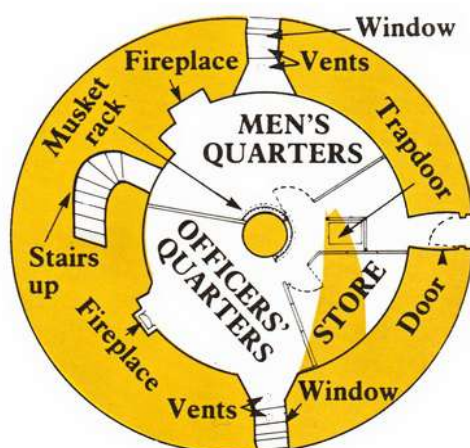
This tower, together with Tower No. 25, 300 yard-to the south-west, was built to protect one of the sluices which controlled the water level of Romney Marsh.

The present fixed external stairs are modern. Originally, there was a movable ladder. The garrison's living, quarters were on the first floor. The small room on the left of the entrance was intended for an officer, the other two rooms housed the rank and file. Round the base of the central pillar supporting the vault was a stand for 27 muskets.

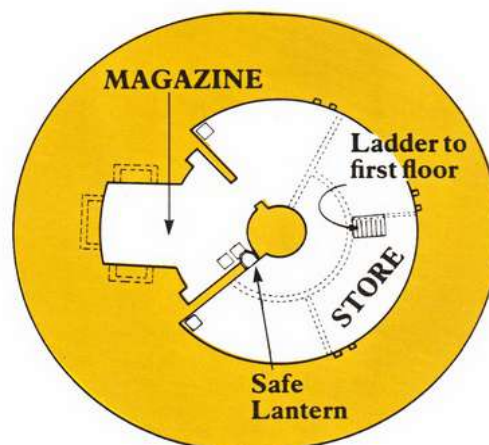
A ladderway just within the entrance served the store rooms and magazine in the basement. The magazine was walled off from the rest of the chamber and lit by an oil lamp kept for safety behind plate glass.

On the roof a 24 pdr. cannon, mounted on a traversing carriage, provided the main armament. The supply of powder to the gun was by hand by way of the stairs. In the lower part of the staircase door there is a round hole through which cartridges were passed, the door being kept shut in order to reduce the risk of flashback.

This tower was until recently occupied by Coastguards. The evidence for the restoration of its internal partitions was taken from the neighbouring Tower No. 23.



FIRST FLOOR



BASEMENT

ENGLISH COASTAL DEFENCE DURING THE REVOLUTIONARY AND NAPOLEONIC WARS

There had been threats of invasion in 1779/80, in 1797/98. when the French landed forces in Ireland and Wales, in 1801 and again in 1803 when for a time England's command of the sea was threatened.

An appreciation of the military situation was set out at length in a report of the Commanders in Chief, August 1803. The threatened coastline extended from Yarmouth to Selsey and Hythe Bay was considered a likely invasion point.

London was assumed to be the object of the attack and a number of defensive measures were taken around the capital. Batteries already existed at Dungeness, Hythe Bay and in the Dover-Deal region. Small batteries were also equipped along the Sussex coast from Rye to Selsey.

The most significant new precautions were taken along the Kent and Sussex coasts. An earlier scheme to flood Romney Marsh was revived but, when it was suggested that a canal from Shorncliffe to the River Rother would be a profitable substitute, it was seized upon with alacrity. In 1804 and 1805 the Royal Military Canal was constructed under the direction of the engineer Rennie.

At the same time, the field works constructed on the Western Heights of Dover during the American War of Independence, were strengthened and converted into an entrenched camp for 5,000 or 6,000 men, where they might remain in security "in readiness to move against an enemy wherever required"

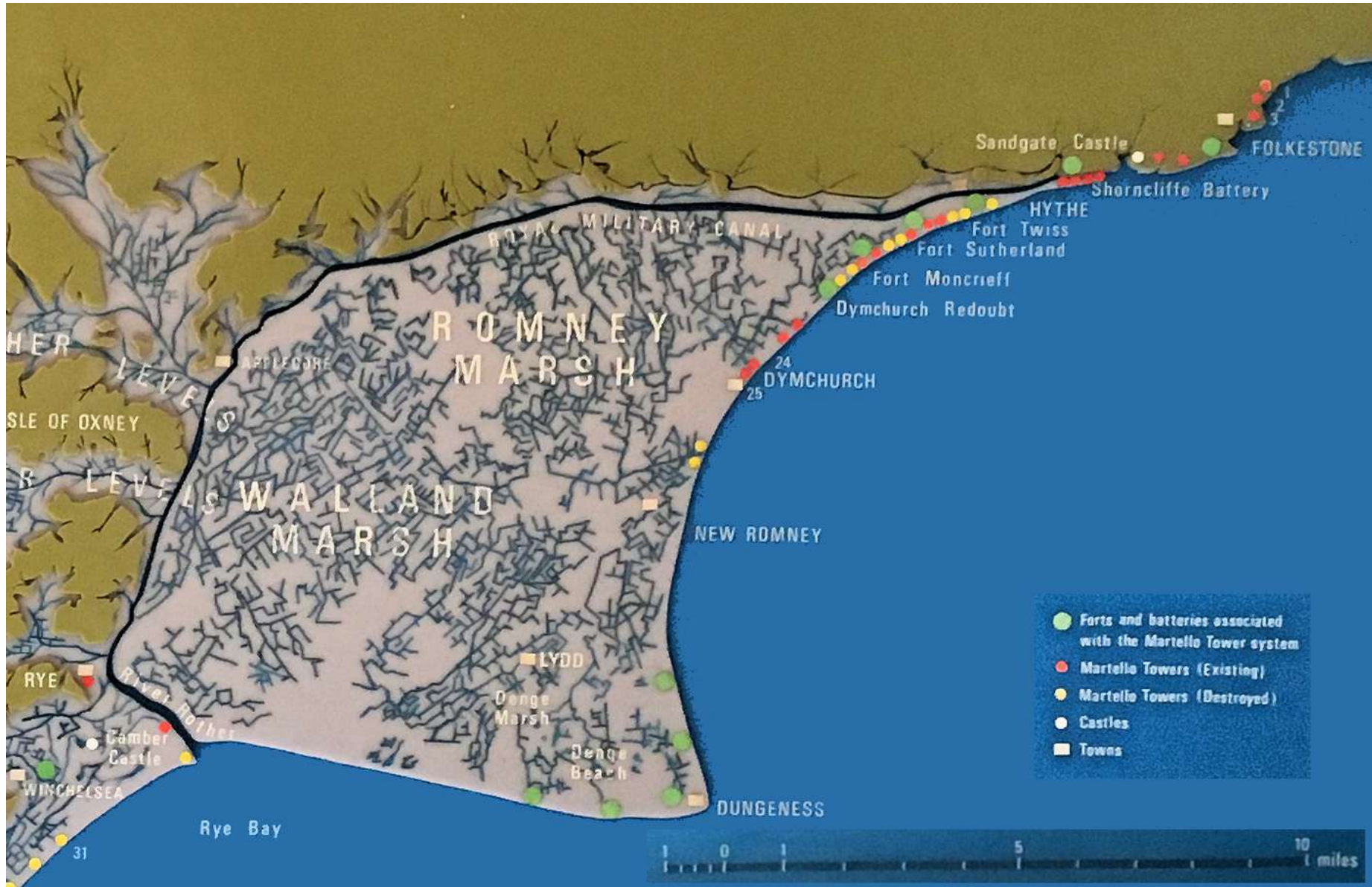
The third type of fortification, the series of towers later called Martello Towers, was to be a cause of controversy for 18 months. Towers were first suggested in July 1803. Largely at the insistence of William Pitt they were finally agreed upon. Work began in 1805 and they were not entirely completed in 1808.

There were 74 towers arranged in two divisions from Folkestone to Romney Marsh and from Bexhill to Seaford. The principal object of the towers in such stretches as Hythe Beach and Pevensey Bay was to bring a hot and concentrated artillery fire upon the flat-bottomed barges, the horse boats and the covering men-of-war of the invading force. Sometimes an isolated tower dominated the side of a town as at Rye, while certain towers were built in pairs as protection for the gates of the marsh sluices.

Associated with the line of towers were other forts or batteries which were either in existence prior to 1803 or were built especially to defend certain places beyond the scope of the towers. These additional fortifications included the Eastbourne and Dymchurch Redoubts.

Somewhat belatedly, attention was paid to the East Coast defences and the building of the Essex and Suffolk towers began in 1810 and finished in 1812. There were 29 of them from St. Osyth to Walton-on-the-Naze and from Shotley to Aldeburgh.

MARTELLO TOWERS ON THE KENT COAST



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MARTELLO TOWERS ON THE SUSSEX COAST



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THE MARTELLO TOWERS OF THE SOUTH COAST

The design of the South Coast Towers is attributed to an Engineer Officer, Capt. W. H. Ford, stationed at Dover, who proposed towers as a means of protecting the English coast in a memorandum written before July 1803. His earliest design was for square towers. Eventually smaller round towers were favoured for reasons of economy.

The internal diameter was to be 26ft. and the towers were to be 33ft. in height from foundations to parapet. The towers appear oviform, inasmuch as the circles of the external surface and of the internal surface are struck eccentrically to make the wall thickest on the seaward side and thinnest on the landward side.

There were two types of South Coast Tower: (a) those surrounded by a ditch about 30ft. broad with access by way of a bridge, and (b) those with no external defence with access by means of a removable ladder.

It was calculated that each tower would require 200,000-250,000 bricks. The bricks - superior London Stocks - were supplied by Messrs. Adam & Robertson of Old Bond Street, London, a firm of builder's merchants who had done work for the East and West India Dock Companies. The building contractor was a Mr. Hobson, the work being inspected by two Engineer Officers, Capts. Cunningham and Goldfinch.

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CANNON ON THE ROOF



The original gun, a 24 pdr., smooth-bore, muzzle-loader is now mounted on a restored traversing platform. The gun is mounted on a common carriage, which worked or recoiled on two massive timber skids, part of a platform fixed to a central pivot capable of being turned through 360°. The original plan was to mount in addition two short-barrelled 24 pdr. carronades on carriages also fixed to the central pivot. This seems not to have been put into practice.

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