

Cromwell's CASTLE

“There is also Newe Grimsbye lying between the ilands of Treskawe and Brayer distant from St Marie’s shoare about a league, a very safe and good Harbour for shipping of 2 or 300 tunnes, of capacity able to hold 50 or 60 ships, but hath only 2 inlets, where of one is through St Marie’s sound...on Treskawe flank there has aunciently been built a strong Castle and Blockhouse which is now gone to decaye; where the Blockhouse stands, a newe Blockhouse and strong redoubt may be erected, which may easily be guarded by 20, or 30, men...”

The above is an excerpt from a report belonging to the Calendar of State Papers (Domestic Series) from the reign of King Charles I. Submitted at some point between 1631 and 1632, it is an assessment of the fortifications of the Isles of Scilly. The islands’ strategic importance to the security of England had been a concern for monarchs and their advisers for almost a century. Funds for the construction of the ‘aunciently’ built castle and decaying blockhouse mentioned above had been provided initially by the youthful Tudor, King Edward VI, in 1549.



The castle in a winter storm.

last engagements of the war and its remains today are known as King Charles' Castle. In an irony unimaginable to the original report's author, the name of the 'newe Blockhouse' was to become Cromwell's Castle.

Cromwell's Castle stands sentinel at the northern entrance to the harbour at New Grimsby, like a great, granite drum. Positioned towards the north-western tip of Tresco, the castle's foundations are lapped by the tide at high-water. Here the channel between Tresco and Bryher runs relatively deep, before opening on to the sea beyond Shipman Head. The castle consists of a hefty, round tower, sixty feet high and with walls 12 feet thick. Its circumference is about 150 feet. At the seaward foot of the tower is a spacious battery. Both tower and battery were designed for cannon, though currently only the battery has guns. These are cast iron 18 pounders from the early nineteenth century.

Since the eighteenth century, the entrance to the tower has been via the battery but the original doorway is about halfway up on the south side of the tower. It was accessed by a wooden staircase or ladder. On entering the tower today, the single wooden floor gives the impression of one cavernous, cylindrical room. In fact, Cromwell's Castle contained three separate floors. The original, high doorway

Facing page, left to right:
*Atop the gun tower's parapet; 18 pounder on the battery;
The handsome, stone vault.*

This page:
*The original doorway is about halfway up the south side
of the tower; Stone steps lead into the gloom
of the tower.*



By the mid-1550s Tresco's defences were made up of two blockhouses and a castle. One blockhouse was built near Old Grimsby, on the eastern shores of the island. It is still standing today. The castle and the second blockhouse, mentioned above, protected the channel near New Grimsby. The castle was built on the low cliff of Castle Downs. The blockhouse was situated immediately below it, at the water's edge. The 1630s report reviewed the state of these eighty year old fortifications.

The report advised that a 'strong redoubt' be constructed on the site of the crumbling blockhouse. Twenty years were to pass before this suggestion was put into effect. The new fort was completed in 1652. Much had happened in the intervening years. The country had been riven by civil war. It is estimated that over 800,000 people in England, Scotland and Ireland had been killed in the conflict and its legacy of disease and upheaval. The monarchy had been overthrown and England had been declared a republic, with Oliver Cromwell at its head. Charles I was dead, executed for high treason in 1649. The 'strong Castle' of the 1630s was a ruin. It had been destroyed in one of the

has a set of stone steps which run down to what would have been the first floor. From here another set of steps go down to a basement. Above the level of the first floor, empty joist holes and a fireplace demonstrate that there was yet another floor. It was from this point that the tower was accessed up the whitewashed stairway that spirals its way to the gun platform.

Inside the tower, as the eye adapts to the gloom, it is possible to appreciate the handsome stone vault that forms the ceiling to the room. Its sturdy ribs arch inward with surprising grace. Other details emerge, most notably the graffiti. It is on the walls, in the doorway and the window recesses. Scores of names carved into the wall of an ancient monument would normally be just another depressing example of modern, anti-social and destructive behaviour. At Cromwell's Castle, however, the graffiti is not so much vandalism as something of an historic feature.

Some of the earliest visible examples of this antique tagging are to be found in one the large window recess. The great thickness of the castle's walls allows for a man to lie down in the cavity between the main room and the



window itself. Two footholds have been worked into this huge, sloping window sill. Once, this alcove might have provided a vantage point for a defender and his musket. The footholds are clearly in use still today as some of the render around one of them has been recently damaged. A shot may never have been fired from the window but many have used it as a place to make their mark.

A certain I.M., for example, chiselled his initials into the recess' stuccoed walls and had the foresight to make a note of the year as well, 1733. A host of other initials and dates decorates this niche. Whatever I.M.'s motives may have been, this 276 year old act of minor vandalism does more to bring this old fort to life than any number of signboards, guide books or interactive media displays ever could. In reading this and all the other graffiti, the imagination stirs and Cromwell's Castle becomes peopled again.

Around the time that I.M. was busy engraving, a great deal of work on the defences of Scilly was being carried out. Abraham Tovey, Master Gunner, arrived on Scilly in 1714. He oversaw the repair and development of the fortifications of the Garrison on St Mary's and to Cromwell's Castle over the next thirty years. An initial programme of repairs was laid out in Colonel Christian Lilly's 1715 report to the Board of Ordnance, which examined the state of fortifications from Plymouth to Scilly.

When Lilly had visited Scilly, he had been unimpressed by Cromwell's Castle, which he referred to as "...an ill-contrived building of no ancient date...". He made a number of suggestions for the improvement of the castle and the cost of the work. Included in the list was "To Broaking a Window through the wall of the Castle being 12 foot thick and pinning up the same and putting in a new stone window."

The new window may well have been the very one that I.M. was to deface in 1733. I.M. might have even written his initials in the fresh render of a job just completed. Lilly's report ends with "A list of the Gunners in his Majesties Garrison and Islands of Scilly..." Lilly writes of a James Mitchel and a John Mitchel. He notes that John "...served abroad one year and a half in Genl. Kirk's Regiment, his first warrant commences Jan 22nd 1704." At this period in time it was common for the capital letter 'J' to be spelt as an 'I'. The surname Mitchell appears again in later documents. On 16th October 1733, it is recorded that Justinian Mitchell was appointed a gunner on the Isles of Scilly. There is a chance that the graffiti of I.M. belongs to this family: a celebratory act by Justinian, perhaps, in honour of his warrant. Both John and Justinian Mitchell were still gunners on Scilly in 1735. Whoever I.M. 1733 was, the graffiti remains a tantalising reminder of the castle's past.

In compiling the report, Colonel Lilly made a number of maps and plans, with all the precision and skill to be expected from the Third Engineer of Great Britain. One of these is of "...the Castle upon the Island of Trescoe", Cromwell's Castle. It shows the old entrance to the castle and the steps and gallery that lead to the doorway. The window near the castle steps has since been filled in and the new window is not marked. Possibly the most intriguing element of the plan is the shoreline. The land around the castle has been eroded to a considerable degree. The castle is now joined to Tresco on a slim causeway, with only bare rock around it. As one of the best and most experienced military engineers in Britain, it seems unlikely that Lilly would be inaccurate about the ground surrounding the castle. His plan seems to illustrate the losing battle that Scilly is constantly fighting against the sea.

Despite Lilly's plans and Tovey's industry, Cromwell's Castle fell into disrepair again. William Borlase described it in the 1750's and remarked that though it had been repaired in 1740 "...and put into a very good condition of defence... the Timber Works are already much decayed." Reference to the poor state of the castle's timbers was to be made by many observers for the next 150 years. Borlase refers to the fort as Oliver's Castle. Up until this point the castle had only been referred to it as Tresco Castle (once mistakenly the castle of Bryher) if at all. This, perhaps, marks an up-turn in the nation's regard for Oliver Cromwell, the regicide.

Borlase explored the castle further:

From this Battery we passed into a Guard-room in the Round Tower, from which we ascended into another room arched with a stone roof, the more securely to support a Battery of small Cannon (Four-pounders) on top of this Tower. The Parapet is about six feet high...

A set of narrow steps runs up to the top of the parapet. A



Facing page, top: Graffiti as an historic feature;
bottom: Colonel Lilly's 1715 plan of Cromwell's Castle.
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This page, below: Wheelbarrow photographs courtesy of
Mrs Doris Dalton.



metal rail at the top of the steps discourages people from venturing out any further. An elderly Ministry of Works sign carries the words "Visitors are warned to take every care to avoid accidents." The sign may appear to be a little unnecessary but it is not entirely pointless. On some sadly unrecorded date during the 1930's, Vernon Hicks along with Charlie and Bill Baker wheeled a bicycle out to Cromwell's Castle. Unable to manoeuvre the bike up the winding stairway, they hauled it up the outside of the castle to the top of the tower. Vernon Hicks then cycled around the rough and stony top of the parapet. Having completed a circuit, he handed the bike to one of the Baker brothers, who promptly repeated the short but perilous journey. This cycle ride inspired later efforts with a wheelbarrow and passenger.

In the early twentieth century, Jessie Mothersole wrote of the castle:

"The flooring and other woodwork of the interior has mostly disappeared, and what remains is green with damp; but the outer walls are just as strong as ever. The flat bomb-proof roof is now overgrown with grass and brambles"

For years the castle remained in this state of disrepair. In the 1950s the erosion of the land around the castle had begun to undermine its south-eastern foundations and threaten its future stability. Cromwell's Castle was in danger of being cut off from Tresco. A programme of renovation and conservation was undertaken and has continued ever since. Today regular checks and repairs to the castle are made every year by English Heritage, who are now responsible for its upkeep. Lilly and Borlase would be delighted by the present timbers of Cromwell's Castle. As one of Scilly's architectural and historical landmarks Cromwell's Castle is a treat to visit. As a window into these islands' past, it is unforgettable. ❁

Cromwell's Castle is maintained by English Heritage and is free to visit. Please do not add to the ancient graffiti. *The Islander* would like to thank Allan Brodie of English Heritage for his help and advice and English Heritage for permission to reproduce the Lilly plan. Allan Brodie's book *Defending the Isles of Scilly* will be published by English Heritage in 2010.