

TOWERS OF STRENGTH

by Robert Crouch

MARTELLO Towers were built for the sole purpose of puzzling posterity.' That was the verdict of the author, Sir Walter Scott, almost 200 years ago. Since then, the towers have been intriguing generations of visitors and residents.

Both their name and appearance are alien to their position along the coast of East Sussex. Rising out of the ground like upturned flower pots, these squat grey towers give little away. Except perhaps for their military origin.

During the war with France in 1794, the British attacked the island of Corsica to secure it as a base for future operations. The town of San Fiorenzo, fortified by three watchtowers, was the key. With the British navy blockading the harbour and the army established further up the coast, the battle turned to the watchtower at Mortella Point.

Despite a pounding from the British Navy, the tower stood firm. Its own guns, mounted on the roof, inflicted heavy casualties on the navy, forcing them to retreat. The army moved in, shelling the tower for two days before it finally surrendered.

The military experts were so impressed by the tower that they made sketches and notes before demolishing it. They took their experiences at Mortella Point back to London. When Napoleon threatened to cross the British Channel and invade England, the military decided to build their own defence towers along the south coast. The mispronunciation of Mortella by the British gave rise to the name Martello.

Between 1805 and 1808, 73 towers were built along the coasts of East Sussex and Kent under the supervision of the Royal Engineers. The aim was to protect important installations and vulnerable stretches of coastline where the enemy could land.

The towers were positioned so that the fire from the 24-pounder cannons on the roof would cross, providing total cover. If the enemy was able to break through and land, the towers could withstand a siege until reinforcements arrived.

Covered with a cement render, the 40ft high towers were built of either brick or stone. The walls were 14ft thick at the base, tapering to 8ft at the

top. About half a million bricks - enough to build 30 four-bedroomed houses today - were used in each tower. But despite the thickness of the walls, the real strength came from the mortar which held the bricks together.

A mixture of lime, ash and hot tallow, the mortar set as hard as iron. In 1956, Kent County Council was forced to use explosives to demolish the Martello at Dymchurch. In 1860, the Royal Artillery found it hard to make an impression when testing a new field gun at St Anthony's Hill near Eastbourne.

Yet over the years, the sea tore great chunks of masonry away - the bricks still stuck together by mortar.

Inside, the Martello was a miniature fort. The ground floor provided stores for food and ammunition, with quarters for 24 soldiers and an officer on the first. Access was through a door 20ft above the ground. In the event of an attack, the ladder could be pulled inside to thwart the enemy.

As a further defence, many towers had dry moats, 40ft wide and 15-20ft deep. The sides of the moats were steep and formed from brickwork. In the case of the Martello at Seaford, a drawbridge was used to cross the moat. In times of siege, the drawbridge could be raised as an extra defence.

Of the 47 towers built in East Sussex only 10 survive today. Many were demolished, while others perished at the hands of the sea. Those still standing stretch from Rye in the east to Seaford in the west.

The five which run through Pevensey Bay to the Crumbles in Eastbourne are good examples. The marine artist, Val Princeps, painted views of the sea from the tower in the Martello housing estate. Others have at various times been used as private residences.

The Wish Tower on Eastbourne sea front took its name from the nearby Wish - or Wash - a marshy area of land which is now Devonshire Park. The name stuck when young couples took to writing their names on the wall and making a wish. After World War II, the tower was due to be demolished to make way for a sun lounge and cafe. Fortunately, after a local outcry, the tower was declared an Ancient Monument and restored by the Borough Council in 1959.

Many Martello Towers were not so lucky. But those that remain have been a familiar part of life at the seaside for generations. Though they were never put to the test in battle, they remain as a unique example of military architecture.



This Martello Tower is now surrounded by a housing estate in Pevensey Bay