

BUILDINGS AT RISK

Forts highlight the Lord of Man's links with Henry VIII

In May of last year the Derby Fort on Fort Island, near Castletown, was subjected to a vandal attack in which pieces of masonry were damaged and a cannon was removed from its stand. This illustrates the vulnerability of some of the island's remoter historic sites, and perhaps a need to make the wider public more aware of why such monuments are significant to the Manx story. In this latest Buildings at Risk feature, Simon Artymiuk of the Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society takes a look at how the Derby Fort is a surviving remnant of a number of fortifications built as a result a 16th-century Lord of Man's close connections to that best-known and most formidable and ruthless of English monarchs, King Henry VIII.

The Isle of Man is today justifiably noted for its spectacular medieval castles at Castletown and Peel, but what is perhaps not obvious is that by the time of the 16th-century equivalent of Brexit – King Henry VIII's break with the Roman Catholic Church in the 1530s – and consequent threat of invasion by Continental powers, technology had made the old style of defences out of date.

The development of weaponry using gunpowder from the 15th century onwards meant that even the most impressive-looking medieval castle walls, built to resist knights in heavy armour, archers and weapons like catapults, could now be blasted through with shots from even the rather primitive cannons of that era.

When the first of the Tudor kings, the Lancastrian Henry VII, invaded England via west Wales to take the Yorkist King Richard III's crown in 1485, he had managed to achieve his victory at the Battle of Bosworth in Leicestershire without any of the kingdom's great castles presenting any obstacles to his advance.

Placing the slain Richard's crown on Henry VII's head on the battlefield was his stepfather, Thomas Stanley, the titular King of Man and subsequently made 1st Earl of Derby.

Through the early 16th century, the next two rulers of the island – Thomas, 2nd Earl of Derby (the one who declared



The circular Derby Fort on St Michael's or Fort Island is the best surviving Henrician era fort in the Isle of Man. Sadly it was recently subjected to a vandal attack

it was 'better to be a great lord than a petty king' and adopted the title Lord of Man) and his son Edward, the 3rd Earl – were in positions close to the second Tudor monarch, King Henry VIII.

While the 2nd Earl took part in the spectacular meeting of Henry VIII with the French King Francis I known as the Field of the Cloth of Gold, and joined Henry in

meeting the Spanish king and Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, as well as fighting the French in one of Henry's wars, Edward the 3rd Earl was even closer to the volatile English monarch.

Inheriting the Manx and Derby titles at the age of just 13 in 1521, he was brought up at court as King Henry's ward and with the monarch's then right-hand man, Cardinal Wolsey, as his guardian.

In 1528, aged 19, he accompanied Wolsey on a diplomatic mission to France. In 1530 Edward, Lord of Man and 3rd Earl of Derby, was one of the nobles who signed a letter to the Pope threatening to end his Supremacy over church matters in England unless the divorce was granted.

In the events that followed, Edward took a leading role in enforcing Henry's policy of the Dissolution of the Monasteries in the north of England – a process which also led to the shutting down of the Isle of Man's religious houses, such as Rushen Abbey at Ballasalla and Douglas Priory (the Nunnery). The wealth of the



The remains of the Half Moon Battery on St Patrick's Isle was another of Edward, 3rd Earl of Derby's 16th-century defences

monasteries was taken for the royal coffers and monastic lands were redistributed among the gentry and nobles.

Edward, Lord of Man, also took a prominent part in putting down the rebellion which broke out against these religious changes across the north of England known as the Pilgrimage of Grace, a popular movement that was crushed with brutal suppression fol-

lowed by bloody executions.

With the building in around 1540 of what we now know as the Derby Fort, plus other new fortifications on the Pollock Rock at Douglas, at the entrance of the Sulby River at Ramsey, on St Patrick's Isle at Peel and reinforcing Castle Rushen, Edward also seems to have followed Henry VIII's policy of building a new chain of 'Device Forts' to counter

the threat of invasion posed by the combined might of France and Spain after the papacy declared an interdict of excommunication against England.

Many of these 'Device Forts' were financed using wealth seized during the Dissolution of the Monasteries and built using stone and other material 'recycled' from nearby abbeyes and monasteries that were being demol-



Douglas Fort can be seen on the Pollock Rock in the background, in front of the town's houses, in this watercolour of the bay by John 'Warwick' Smith painted in around 1795



In this mid-19th century photograph of steamer piers at Douglas some remains of Douglas Fort can be seen, just above George Steuart's lighthouse, in use as a kind of advertising hoarding at the head of the new Victoria Pier

ished. It could perhaps be that the Lord of Man had stone from Rushen Abbey used for the Derby Fort and that material from the original Nunnery convent went into Douglas Fort.

Before the 1530s Henry VIII had taken little interest in coastal defences, but the new threat of invasion led to the biggest programme of fortification building for centuries.

The King ordered the drawing up of maps of the coastline so he could see where forts should be placed, and the state of current fortifications, and then via his henchman Thomas Cromwell issued orders – known as ‘devices’ – in Parliament to get the work of fort building under way.

The new forts, though smaller than the castles of old, were to be constructed with extra thick walls to resist enemy gunfire, and openings called embrasures through which cannons and the primitive and rather hefty firearms of the day could be fired.

Many historians believe that Henry took a hand in designing some of the forts, though the architectural team at Hampton Court Palace were



This little vignette of the vanished Douglas Fort that appears on the title page of Feltham's 1798 account of a tour of the Isle of Man is one of the only known images of it. It was largely demolished in 1818

drafted in to help some designs in the south of England, along with both English and foreign military architects.

Italy was seen to be at the forefront of military technology, so Italian and German treatises on fortification design to withstand cannon were consulted, such as Niccolo Machiavelli's *Libro dell'art della guerra*, published in 1521, and Albrecht Durer's *Befestigung der Stett, Schlosz und Felcken*.

There were particular concentrations of forts built around the Thames estuary, the Kent coast, the Solent and

Portland in Dorset, but also some impressive examples at Pendennis and St Mawes on either side of the Fal estuary in Cornwall and around Milford Haven in Pembrokeshire, Wales.

In the first wave of fort-building, begun in 1539, many of the larger forts had a round keep with supporting bastions, and as well as these smaller blockhouses of varying shapes were built.

These may have taken their lead from the earliest known English defences to be built with use and resistance to cannon fire in mind, those at Dartmouth in Devon.

At the end of the 15th and beginning of the 16th century the merchants there – many of whom were privateers and therefore keen to develop defences against counter raids by Breton and French vessels on the port's shipping – had built a new round tower, today known as Dartmouth Castle, at the front of an earlier ‘fortalice’ so that firepower could be directed against enemies trying to enter the river mouth.

At some time in the 1520s an additional small stone fort or blockhouse had been built further up the River Dart on a large rock next to the quayside known as Bayard's Cove.

This, too, was an initiative of the local merchants themselves rather than in response to direction from the crown.

Although predating the Henry VIII ‘Device Forts’, and being more of a rounded ob-



An image from an interpretation board at Bayard's Cove Fort, Dartmouth, Devon, showing how Henrician era harbourside blockhouse forts were used in the 16th century

long in shape, the surviving Bayard's Cove Fort has some similarities of appearance with the Isle of Man's Derby Fort. It also has a similarity of situation with the Isle of Man's Douglas Fort, which was positioned on the outcrop known as the Pollock Rock that now lies under the the Sea Terminal.

Although the only images of the Douglas Fort to survive are a small vignette on the title page of Feltham's 1798 tour of the Isle of Man, and a glimpse of it in the background of a watercolour depicting Douglas Bay painted by the visiting artist John ‘Warwick’ Smith from the mid-1790s, it is clear that the fort consisted of a small round stone keep with flanking bastions.

Its shape resembles that of the surviving Calshot Castle in Hampshire, although lacking that building's architectural finesse.

It seems a rather more homespun version, so to get an idea of what it was like perhaps we should turn to south west England again, where St Catherine's Castle at Fowey in Cornwall was built at the same time as the official ‘Device Forts’ but as an initiative of the merchants of the port of Fowey rather than of the crown. A blockhouse at Devil's Point on Plymouth Sound built by the noble Edgcombe family at the same time as Henry's official ‘Device Forts’ also bears some resemblance to the Douglas Fort depictions.

It is one of a number of blockhouses that were built around Plymouth Sound in around 1540, again not part of Henry's official ‘Device Fort’ programme but showing solidarity with it.

Such blockhouses are believed to have had a ‘crew’ of around 10 men, who would

have been regarded as military specialists and knowledge of how to use of cannons and firearms was not widespread in that era.

So were noble families like the Stanleys in the Isle of Man and the Edgcombes in Cornwall trying to curry favour with the King by building their own coastal defences, or were they unofficially directed to do so (Edward, Lord of Man was clearly in a position close to the King where this would be possible), or did they feel their interests were threatened by the potential of foreign invasion?

It would be interesting to know where Edward feared an invasion of the Isle of Man might come from – perhaps from nearby Scotland, which had a longstanding alliance with France, or perhaps he thought a foreign force might aim to capture the island as a launch pad for an attack on northern England.

Perhaps he thought such defences would strengthen the island's traditional ‘Watch and Ward’ system of lookouts. If so, did he invite one of the military engineers involved in the official ‘Device Fort’ programme to have a hand in their design – such as Stefan von Haschenperg, who came from Moravia (now part of the Czech Republic) and had a hand in designing forts as far apart as Sussex and Cornwall.

The glacis walled earth bank built around the moat of Castle Rushen to help defend its walls again in around 1540 has the appearance of engineering finesse about it.

Peel Castle also had forts added to it by Edward, Lord of Man – such as the round Half Moon Battery surviving now as a grassy stone base of a tower. In its day, however, it would have had a commanding view and range of fire over the surrounding coast, and the town

if an attack came from that quarter. Most of the Henrician ‘Device Forts’ were never used in anger by the time peace with France and Spain had been signed.

By the mid-1540s it had also been realised that the round tower design was not the best way to position your cannons for best range of fire, and in the 17th century the most sophisticated forts had angular bastions, such as James, 7th Earl of Derby had built in his Kerroogarroo Fort at Balachurry in the English Civil War. He apparently also had a small, more angular fort built close to the Derby Fort, though traces of that have since disappeared.

Some of southern England's ‘Device Forts’ had later uses in the Elizabethan era, Civil War and even the World Wars, with many surviving now as historic sites, while others are succumbing to coastal erosion.

By the date of the surviving depictions of it, the Isle of Man's Douglas Fort was being used as a grim makeshift prison and was said to be in poor repair. It was replaced by cells in George Steuart's new courthouse and was largely demolished in 1818.

However, in photographs from before the 1880s a section of whitewashed wall and part of the tower seems to still have been in existence near the landward end of the Victoria Pier, with large lettering advertising such attractions as Derby Castle painted on them, presumably to attract the attention of arriving steamer passengers. In a photo of 1882 these too are gone. Any remains must now lie under the Sea Terminal.

However, perhaps Sir William Hilary had it in mind when he had the Tower of Refuge built to look like a mini castle on a rock in the bay.



Edward Stanley, Lord of Man and 3rd Earl of Derby, in a portrait sketch by Hans Holbein. He was close to King Henry VIII, having been the King's ward from the age of 13