

Was Kingswear's church tower also built for defence?

The parish church in Kingswear dates from Norman times and still has the original tower. The first known reference to a chapel in Kingswear is in the deeds of Totnes Priory when land was given by Willelmus de Vaschi "for the increase of the maintenance of the chaplain who for the time being serves the chapel founded in the honour of the Blessed Thomas the Martyr at the said Kingswere". St Thomas was canonised in 1173 so it is assumed that the church was built shortly after this date.

According to Charles Cox¹ church towers dating from the Norman period sometimes had an additional defensive purpose. This is especially true in the counties which suffered from border raids, such as Northumberland, but similar towers are found elsewhere. In these towers access was by a winding staircase around a central newel and protected by a portcullis. The towers had upper chambers with a fireplace with a flue to the roof to provide living accommodation. Much of this could easily apply to Kingswear's church tower although there is no evidence of a portcullis.

The de Vaschi family had extensive holdings in Northumberland dating from 1093 including the barony of Alnwick and so would have known about the dual use of church towers in that county. There is a history of raids from the sea in south Devon and these probably continued after the Conquest so there could have been a similar defence role to be met at the entrance to the river Dart.

The Kingswear tower has a circular stone staircase to the first floor, taking two full turns to get to the higher level. Earlier accounts report a fireplace on the first floor with a flue to the roof. The flue still exists and stretches from the ground floor to the top of the tower, figure 2. It is possible that the flue and the fireplace are later additions as, unlike the staircase, the flue is not integral with the wall.



Figure 1 Stairs inside the tower



Figure 2 Flue from the second floor to the roof



Figure 3 Arch from inside tower



Figure 4 Arch from outside tower

Where the fireplace was is not clear. It is assumed that the wide arch in the south wall and next to the flue is original and dates from when the tower was built. The arch, now bricked up – figures 3 & 4, takes up almost the full width of the inside of the tower and could have provided access to the bell rope. The arch, when it was open, would have exposed the present first floor which is about two-thirds up the arch. Perhaps this is not the position of the

¹ J Charles Cox, *English Church Fittings Furniture and Accessories*, Chap III, B T Batsford (1923)

original floor and indeed there are two steps down from the top of the staircase which suggests that they were originally intended to reach a higher level perhaps with a final flight of wooden steps or ladder. One could speculate that these could be raised to prevent access to the upper floors

A plan of the church, figure 5, shows that the arch subsequently housed an organ. The plan shows steps up from the ground level inside the tower leading to the back of the organ and partitioned off from the room which is now used as the vestry. The door shown in figure 4 is a recent addition and the north entrance to the church was outside the tower off the picture to the right, as in Figure 5.

Cox states that another feature of a tower used for defence is “*lower windows far from the ground and so narrow as to be little more than loopholes*”. Kingswear has two, see figure 6, which face to the west (river) and to north (up river). No doubt these were for letting a little light into the first floor – there would have been no glass – but would also be difficult for anyone on the ground to project a missile into the tower.

Cox writes that the original purpose of a tower was as a campanile or bell tower and that there was an increase in the number of bell towers built after the Norman Conquest. The slatted openings of the bell chamber are on all four walls and probably were included when the tower was built with a single bell housed inside although the earliest bell now in the tower dates from about 1500. Before the church was rebuilt in 1845 the roof of the nave was lower and the tower had a view down the river.



Figure 6 Church tower in 1905 before the addition of a new vestry

down”. Was also there much of a settlement at Kingswear with a continuing threat of raids from the sea? Neither Dartmouth nor Kingswear are mentioned in Domesday but their manors inland at Townstal and Coleton were. Many towers supported an iron cradle to house a beacon fire but it is not known if Kingswear ever had one of these. For many years there has been a small lighthouse just down stream of the church on Lighthouse Beach. Could this be a replacement for an earlier one on the church tower?

The difficulty with the above speculation is that if the tower were to serve a dual purpose of a lookout over the river entrance, and perhaps a navigation aid, why was it not built 100 yards further up what is now Church Hill, where the house Bryndart now stands? It would have had a much better view. Perhaps just being able to see over the brow of the hill from the top of the tower was sufficient without being too conspicuous to potential raiders.

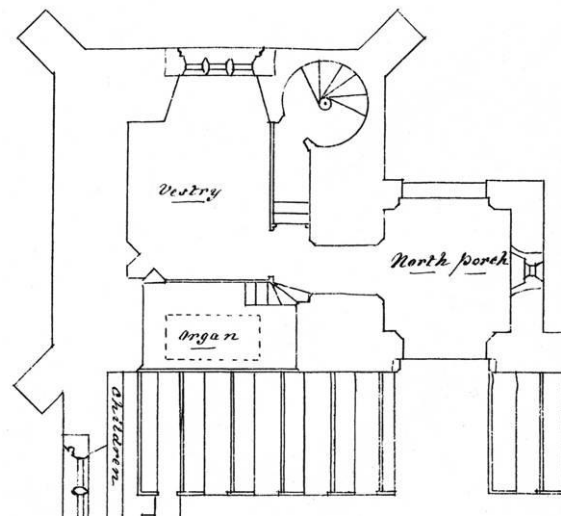


Figure 5 Plan of tower area after the church was rebuilt in 1845

Dartmouth and Kingswear castles date from about 200 years later so the Kingswear church tower was the only lookout on either side of the river for a considerable time. In fact there was then little in the way of settlement on the Dartmouth side. “*When Kingswear was a market town Dartmouth was a furzy*