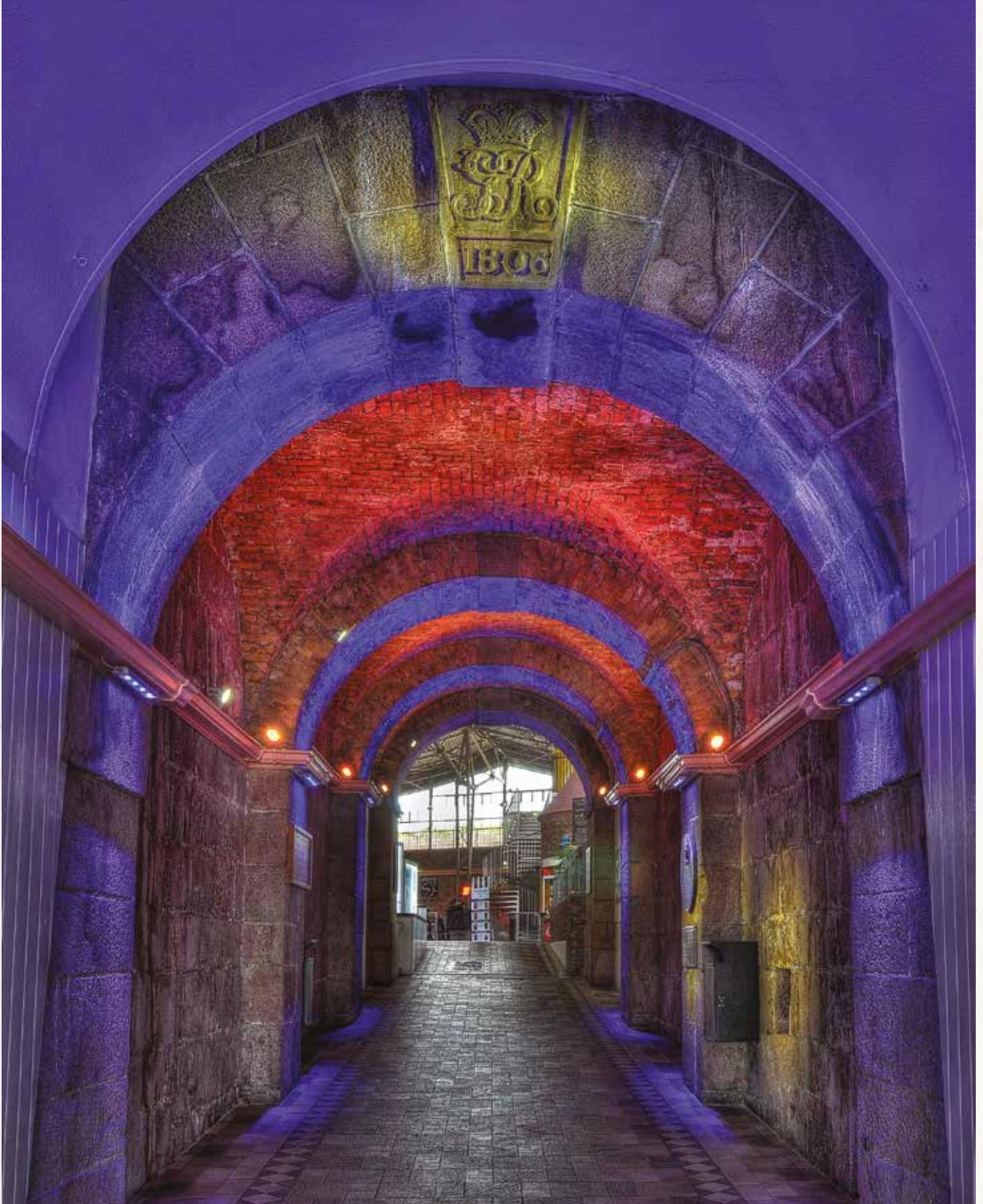


Fort Regent

The History Tour

*Explore the history of Fort Regent
with this self guided tour...*



Fort Regent - The History Tour



The History Tour

Although built originally as a Napoleonic fortress, Fort Regent has been transformed over the years from a defunct military parade ground and coal storage depot into a wet weather venue for tourists and local visitors to become the largest sports and leisure centre in the Island. In this condensed history we endeavour to take you on a journey through Fort Regent's past to the present day.

Protecting the Island

Ever since King John lost most of Normandy, the French had been keen to get their hands on the Channel Islands and by its very nature, the coastline of Jersey afforded many places where it would be comparatively easy to land an engagement force.

As far back as 1550, King Edward VI had suggested the Town Hill (Fort Regent's current location) as a place for the population of St Helier to retire in case of invasion, as it was considered that it would be fairly simple to defend. Nothing, however, was done until after the Battle of Jersey in 1781 when some effort was made to strengthen the coastal defences mostly by the erection of Martello towers, a number of which can still be seen around the Island's coast.

In 1806, the then Lieutenant-Governor, General Sir George Don, informed the Government that the Island was still very vulnerable to attack.

As the Napoleonic Wars had been going on for some thirteen years, the risk of invasion was greater than it had ever been and in fact General Don fully expected that another attempt to capture the Island would be made.

Mont Orgueil and Elizabeth Castles were by now, no longer able to fulfil their defensive roles effectively and if the tide was high the garrison at the latter would have no way of coming to the rescue of a beleaguered St Helier.



Prehistoric Burial Grave

Once again eyes were turned in the direction of Le Mont de la Ville (Town Hill). A military survey of the site was undertaken as early as 1787 by General Henry Seymour Conway who was Governor from 1772 to 1795, and he in fact drew up a plan for the defence of the Town Hill but it did not find favour in the appropriate quarters and was shelved. During his researches however, Conway discovered a pre-historical burial grave, Le Mont de la Ville Passage Grave, somewhere near where East Bastion now stands.

When Conway retired he was presented with this dolmen in recognition of his services to the Island and actually had it transported to his Berkshire home, Park Place, near Henley-on-Thames. There he had it re-erected and it is still there to this day.

Selling of the Land

The Town Hill was owned by La Vingtaine de la Ville, a district of the of the Parish of St Helier and was administered by two Procureurs (Attorneys). There was a long and bitter argument as to the value of the land needed and in fact the dispute was eventually referred to the Privy Council. In the end the value of the land was settled at £11,280, more than John Humfrey, the designer, reckoned it was worth but considerably less than the Procureurs demanded. They had no option but to accept the valuation but the dispute had delayed the start of building for at least eighteen months.

Building the Fort

Some sort of crude defences, mostly earthworks, had existed on Le Mont de la Ville from the Middle Ages and probably earlier but they did not amount to much.

The New Works as they came to be called, were named in honour of the Prince Regent, later to become George IV, and the so called foundation-stone, which can be seen above the main entrance (in what is now the Piazza) was laid by General Don on 7th November 1806.

While in Jersey, Humfrey commanded half of the 8th Company of Royal Sappers and Miners. The other half was in Guernsey, so his force amounted to about 60 men. The bulk of the labour employed on the building of the Fort was local and at one time there were 1,130 men at work.



Creating a Water Supply

Of all the massive undertakings that the building of Fort Regent entailed perhaps the greatest single one was the sinking of the well. Work was started on it in December 1806 and it was eventually completed in October 1808. The pump and machinery for lifting the water through a height in excess of 200 feet was manufactured by Henry Maudsley & Co. It was claimed the pump could be worked by men or horses but it was also said that twenty-four men working for two hours without tiring themselves could easily pump 800 gallons of water into the cisterns.

Thirty Acres of Defence

The area occupied by the defensive complex was in excess of thirty acres. South hill or Le Petit Mont de la Ville no longer forms part of the complex but at one time the Government buildings at Pointe des Pas included artificers' barracks and workshops which pre-date the Fort while other buildings in Pier Road consisted of ordnance yards and a hospital. On the east side bordering Green Street was a rope walk now partly built over and in the 1870s married quarters were built in Green Street itself. These have since been demolished to make way for housing.

In 1914 a regimental institute was constructed in the East Ditch (9), while there was also a sick bay, a tailor's shop and a soldiers' schoolroom nearby. These buildings no longer exist.

Manning the Fort

Fort Regent was garrisoned without a break by units of the British Army until 1927 though a detachment of Royal Engineers remained until 1932 and possibly later. In all there were more than a hundred postings to the Fort which was the headquarters of the resident garrison. Not only did the garrisons provide a welcome source of prosperity to the local tradesmen, but also occasions of spectacular pageantry which delighted and entertained the islanders.

The siege guns that are on display (28) were discovered buried in the West Bastion in 1970, though the original wheels have never been traced. They were the first rifled breech-loading ordnance to go into service with the British Army and were manufactured between 1860 and 1864. Their last likely use at Fort Regent was to serve as the Noonday Gun, a ritual performed regularly during the period that it was garrisoned.

German Occupation

At the outbreak of war in 1939, prior to the arrival of German occupying forces, the Royal Militia Island of Jersey was embodied and based at the Fort until it left the Island for distinguished service with the Hampshire Regiment. Many of the other local inhabitants had their first taste of service life within its walls on enlistment.

The German Forces made good use of Fort Regent during their occupation of the Island from 1940 until 1945.

Primarily it was used as an ordnance depot, though there was also a Todt labour camp in the East Ditch (9). Ironically, the only shots ever fired in anger from Fort Regent during its long military history were by anti-aircraft guns against Allied planes.



Fort Regent Surrenders

On Liberation Day, 9 May 1945 - now celebrated as an annual holiday - it fell to Major Hugh Le Brocq, a Jerseyman originally in the 11th Battalion, Royal Militia Island of Jersey, to demand the Fort's surrender. Soon after 4pm on that day the Union Flag was run to the Masthead of the Governors flagstaff on the West Bastion. This particular flag is of particular importance. It has always been recognised as a symbol of Royal representation in the Island and if it was not flying or an alien flag was in its place, it was a signal to approaching ships that all was not well as indeed was the case during German occupation. The only time this flag is flown at half-mast is on the occasion of the death of the Sovereign.

During the months that followed the Liberation of the Island, Royal Engineers personnel helped by German POWs worked to remove many tons of explosives and other militaria.

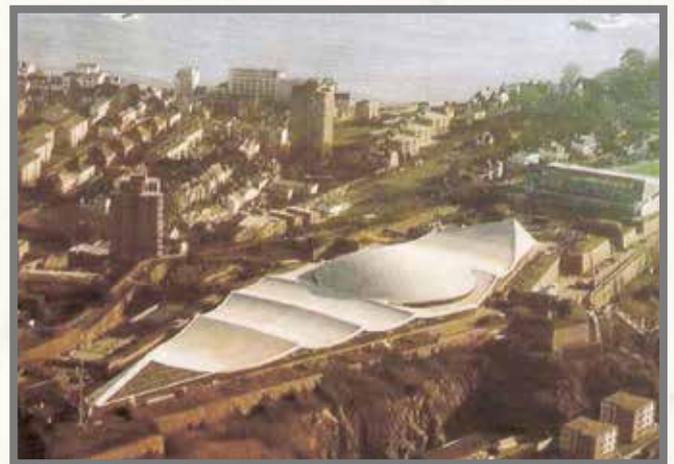
Thereafter this splendid monument fell into a state of neglect, being used as a dumping ground for cars and electrical equipment and the three acre parade ground became a coal store and tip.

Leisure Centre Developments

On the 1st March 1958, Fort Regent was sold by the British Government to the States of Jersey, the purchase price was £14,500. Having bought it, the question then arose, what to do with it? This caused much political bickering, not only in the States Chamber, (the Island Parliament) but also among the population at large. It was not until 1967 that the House unanimously approved proposals for the development into a leisure centre to provide amenities for residents and visitors alike. In 1967, Sir John Wardlaw Milne had died and left the sum of £100,000 to the States of Jersey for the provision of under-cover facilities for the use of visitors, this money was used towards the development.

The neglected Fort and outworks were transformed to provide every modern facility with care taken not to lose its original formidable character, allowing the visitor to enjoy the superb setting of a nineteenth century fortification.

The bold decision to enclose the parade ground with a roof three acres in extent and of unusual architectural design, further adds to its charm. This iconic structure now dominates the St Helier skyline and provides Sports and Leisure facilities for the Island.



Fort Regent believe that disability should be no barrier to your enjoyment of our facilities. In the case of the History Tour, this policy needs to be balanced with the nature of the site and it is not feasible in this case to install a full range of disabled facilities.