

Was Kingswear's church tower also built for defence?

by Michael Stevens

Summary. In the twelfth century raids from the sea were still common and settlements tended to be inland where they would be less liable to a surprise attack. So why was the church built on the shore? The tower is over 800 years old and predates by 200 years any other tower at the mouth of the river Dart.

The parish church in Kingswear dates from Norman times and still has the original tower. The first known references¹ to a chapel in Kingswear are in the deeds of Totnes Priory:

Willelmus de Vaschi and his wife Juliana for the souls of their fathers and mothers and for the soul of Willelmus Buzun, give half the land of Kingeswere to Ricardus the deacon and to others succeeding him or serving the true God, Jesus Christ, and Saint Thomas there.

By the license of lord Rogerus de Nunant whose fief the aforesaid land is and by the sanction of Wido de Nunant Renricus and Baldewinus. Ratified by the seal of lord Rogerus de Nunant and witnessed by Ricardus the chaplain, Johel de Waytord, Jordan de Hode, Robertus the serving man of Wido and the brothers of Martin.

Thomas Becket was canonised in 1173 so it is assumed that the church was built or named shortly after this date. In those days people were rather superstitious and believed that their souls first went to Purgatory where they might remain unless they had done good deeds while alive and people continued to pray for them after they had died.

Whether there was some uncertainty of which land had been given or a change of mind but a second deed is recorded:

I, Willelmus de Vaschi, for the safety of my soul and of my ancestors and of the soul of Willelmus Buzun my lord, have conceded and confirmed to God and to the Church of the Blessed Mary of Totonia and to the monks serving God there, half of the whole of my land which I have in Kingeswere, just as it can be reasonably divided by just men of our mutual friends, that is to say for the increase of the maintenance of the chaplain who for the time being serves the chapel founded in honour of the Blessed Thomas the Martyr at the said Kingeswere. Confirmed by the impression of my seal and witnessed by Michael de Spichewiche, Garinus de Morcell, Willelmus de Linguire, Osmundus de Colatun, Willelmus Daggeville, Willelmus de Winestone, Robertus le Bastard, Godefridus de Austine and many others.

The area of land was further clarified by his son Walterus de Vaschi, presumably after the death of his father:

Instead of the messuages which I have retained as my portion, I have assigned to the said monks for their share all that land which is on the north side between the trench (or ditch) of the chapel and my own messuage which is four perches in width adjoining the messuage of Arnold Parmentarius. Corroborated by the impression of my seal and witnessed by - Martinus de Fissacre, Robertus de Morcelles, Robertus de Punchardun, Willelmus de Winetun, Osmundus de Coletun, Willelmus Knight of Uptun and many others.

There is a steep slope down to the river north of the church so the trench or ditch may refer to Waterhead Creek and the land to the north to what is now known as Hoodown.

According to Watkin¹: “Walterus de Vaschi, son of Willelmus de Vaschi, gave half the land at Kingeswere to Thorre Abbey on its foundation by Willmus de Brywera in 1196”. It is assumed that this means that the de Vaschi no longer owned land in Kingswear.

The above are the only known records of the de Vaschi family at Kingswear. The first deed infers that the chapel already existed. Had the de Vaschi family previously built it and donated the necessary land? Also why was the chapel sited on the river shore when raids from the sea by the Vikings, French and Irish were still common? The Domesday Book does not record the existence of Kingswear but does record the manor of Coletun and the slightly more distant Woodhuish, Lupton and Churston. Similarly Dartmouth, on the opposite shore is not listed

¹ H Watkin, *Transactions of the Devonshire Association*, 43, pp 149-165, 1911

but Townstal on the hill above the town is. There was no other tower on the shore of the river Dart for another 200 years.

According to Charles Cox² 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 vaulted 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. This also describes Kingswear's church tower although there is no evidence of a portcullis.



Figure 1 Stairs inside the tower

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 built into the wall. Where the fireplace was is not clear.



Figure 2 Flue from the second floor to the roof

A possible branch of the family, the de Vescis had extensive holdings in Northumberland dating from 1093 including the barony of Alwick and so would have known about the dual use of church towers in that county which suffered from frequent raids by the Scots. There is a history of raids from the sea in south Devon and these continued into the 15th century so there could have been a similar defence role to be met at the entrance to the river Dart.

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 3, 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.



Figure 3 Church tower in 1905 before the addition of a new vestry

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.

It is probable that the top of the tower had sight of the river entrance and able to give an early warning of an invasion. The engraving by George Townsend, dating from about 1865, part of which is shown in figure 4, suggests that the tower would have had good view of the river mouth. Today the view is interrupted by houses and the raised level of Church Hill,

² J Charles Cox, *English Church Fittings Furniture and Accessories*, Chap III The tower and bells, B T Batsford (1923)

evidenced by the retaining wall on the side facing the river. Beyond the road the ground falls rapidly to the river.

Cox also states that towers sometimes had an iron cradle on top to provide a beacon light. If Kingswear had had such a beacon then it could have alerted a wide area both to the east and west to a threat of invasion from the sea. It would have particularly visible from the Dartmouth side of the river all the way up to the manor of Townstal and alerted such defence forces as there were into action. It would not have been visible from Kingswear's own manor at Coleton but probably would have been from ground near to Nethway. The latter was leased to Martin de Fishacre of Coleton in 1192³ and had become the seat of the lord of the manor by about 1300.

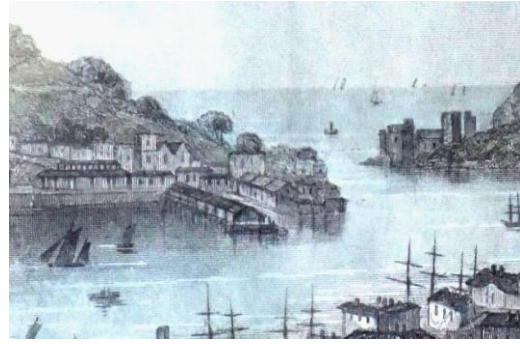


Figure 4 Part of a 1865 engraving

At the time of the Domesday Book the lord of Totnes was Judhel, or Iudhael, who founded Totnes Priory in 1087 and also built Totnes Castle. When Judhel fell out of favour with William II the title passed to Roger de Nunant, named in the de Vasci deeds. Totnes was the principal town in the area being a borough in Anglo-Saxon times and predates both Kingswear and Dartmouth. According to Jenkins⁴ Dartmouth did not establish its status as an independent town until the mid thirteenth century. He also states that Torre Abbey had the right to buy and sell at the markets of Totnes and Kingswear. This would support the saying "*When Kingswear was a market town Dartmouth was a furzy down*".

The harbour was important in Norman times and is the closest point to Brittany, from where several of William's supports originated. Also, according to Lucas Villegas-Aristizábal⁵, the Normans were accustomed to making pilgrimages to the shrine of St James at Santiago de Compostela in what is now northern Spain and a convenient port of departure would have been Dartmouth harbour. It may not be surprising therefore that the river Dart was chosen for the departure for the 164 ships on the Second Crusade in 1147. When the crusaders reached Portugal they were persuaded to liberate Lisbon from the Muslims and this was regarded as a legitimate part of the Second Crusade. Part of the fleet continued to the east Mediterranean where the Crusaders suffered a disastrous defeat at Damascus. The Dart was also the starting point for 37 ships joining Richard I on the Third Crusade in 1190 and then in 1217 as an assembly venue for a Flemish and Dutch expedition to recover Alcaçer do Sal in Portugal still held by the Muslims although this had little English participation.

It has been suggested that Kingswear was an entry point for pilgrims travelling to the shrine of St Thomas at Canterbury, but this is unlikely. Henry II was Duke of Normandy as well as King of England and spent much of his time in Normandy and is reported⁶ to have disembarked at Southampton and Portsmouth 18 times but never via Kingswear. The de Vasci whose origin was east of the Cherbourg peninsula would naturally have chosen the same ports. So why did the de Vasci family have an interest in Kingswear?

Was the building of the chapel of St Thomas connected with the Crusades? Did those going of the Holy War need special religious services before embarking? The shores of the river Dart were mainly shallow mud but that at Kittery Quay, which is close to the site of church of St Thomas, had deep water and could have been a convenient place to land. The lord and dean of Totnes Priory, who was the principal cleric in the area, could have been an influence by way of supporting the kings of the time to whom he owed his holding at Totnes.

³ Ellis, Author. *A History of Brixham and its People*, 1951, p45. Brixham Museum

⁴ John Jenkins. *Torre Abbey: Locality, Community, and Society in Medieval Devon*, Thesis, University of Oxford, 2010, p257.

⁵ [http://www.academia.edu/911618/Norman_and_Anglo-](http://www.academia.edu/911618/Norman_and_Anglo-Norman_participation_in_the_Iberian_Reconquista_c_1018-c_1248)

[Norman_participation_in_the_Iberian_Reconquista_c_1018-c_1248](http://www.academia.edu/911618/Norman_and_Anglo-Norman_participation_in_the_Iberian_Reconquista_c_1018-c_1248)

⁶ <http://www.historyextra.com/feature/king-and-his-castle-how-henry-ii-rebuilt-his-reputation>

Kingswear could have provided the location of a temporary chapel until a permanent one was built around 1173 and also a point of supply to ships in the river.

In the early times most people were illiterate and so it is not surprising that there are few written records and those that do exist are mainly records of endowments to religious authorities. Without the records preserved in Totnes Priory we would not have known that the de Vascis of Kingswear ever existed. One can only wonder what else is not recorded or has been lost over the last 800 years.

As explained above, the origin of Kingswear's church dates from about 1173 when Willelmus de Vasci and his wife Juliana endowed the monks of Totnes with land. William died before 1196 when his son Walterus gave the rest of the land to Torre Abbey. Nothing else is known about the Kingswear de Vasci family or the extent of the land that they donated to the local clergy. Presumably they lived elsewhere and the gift of the land did not deprive them of somewhere to live or an income.

Yvo de Vesci was part of William the Conqueror's invading army was made Duke of Alnwick in Northumberland in 1093. The difference in spelling is not thought significant as there was no fixed spelling in those days and the name appears in various versions. The name derives from Vassy in Normandy. Yvo had a brother, Robert⁷, who unlike Yvo held land listed in the Domesday Book. However nothing more is heard of Robert, could the Kingswear de Vascis be descended from him?

Eustace de Vesci is recorded as having accompanied Richard I on the Crusade in 1191⁸ so presumably he left from the river Dart and no doubt attended the chapel at Kingswear endowed by his relations.

On the death of Yvo the property passed to his daughter Beatrix de Vesci who married Eustace Fitzjohn and gave birth to William de Vescy in 1125, the son assumed the surname of his mother, not his father. She also had a second son, Geoffrey⁹, but nothing more is heard of him. William was appointed Sheriff of Northumberland in 1155 and Sheriff of Lancashire in 1166. He married Burge de Stuteville and had sons, Eustace, Richard and Warin and daughters, Maud and Cecily. William de Vescy died in 1184.

William de Vasci of Kingswear died sometime between 1173 and 1194 and it could also have been 1184. However it is very difficult to tie the two Williams to be the same person as they appear to have different wives and different sons. Upon the death of William de Vescy of Alnwick the title passed to his son Eustace who became one of the prime movers behind the Magna Carta imposed upon King John. Eustace died in 1216 the year when his son, another William, was born. This William married Agnes Ferrers who was born about 1222. Henri de Ferrers fought at Hastings and his son, Robert de Ferrers, became Earl of Derby. The name Ferrers is also associated with Churston, one of the manors listed in the Domesday Book about 4 miles from Kingswear. Hugh de Ferrers of Churston was born about 1269. This is perhaps a rather unconvincing attempt to link the de Vascis of Alnwick with Kingswear but it is included for completeness and in case further research can reveal a more solid link.

Had one reason for a church tower at Kingswear been as a lookout for raiders from the sea then in subsequent years it could also provide a means to mark the entrance to the harbour. The entrance can be difficult to locate in what otherwise can appear to be a continual cliff face.

In 1538, some 350 years after the church was built, a map was commissioned by Henry VIII showing the defences in the south-west, figure 5. Many of the towers shown on the map are labelled "not made". Kingswear church tower is shown with a spire would have made it more visible from the sea and aided the location of the entrance to Dartmouth harbour. There is no other record such a fixture was ever on the tower.

⁷ http://www.1066.co.nz/library/battle_abbey_roll3/subchap133.htm

⁸ <http://www.magnacharta.com/bomc/magna-charta-king-john-the-barons/the-baronage/>

⁹ www.1066.co.nz/library/battle_abbey_roll3/subchap133.htm

Today, further down river there is a beacon on what is now known as Lighthouse Beach at the end of Beacon Road. Could this have taken over the role of marking the entrance to the harbour previously performed by spire on the church tower?

There is some confusion over when St Clements church, up the hill from Dartmouth, was built. Watkin¹ claims that the “*oldest, existing ecclesiastical foundation, is undoubtedly the parish church of St Clement Tunstal or Townstal*”. However he also states that the earliest references to St Clements were held by Torre Abbey which was not founded until 1196 whereas St Thomas of Kingswear is believed to have been built just after 1173.

The Kingswear church tower predates any other tower on the river by 200 years including those of Dartmouth and Kingswear castles and St. Saviour’s church in Dartmouth, across the river from Kingswear. For the record the other early towers at the mouth of the river Dart were:

- 1372 St Saviours Church, Dartmouth
- 1388 Hawley’s fortalice at the later site of Dartmouth Castle
- 1402 Paradise Tower, Warfleet Creek, now demolished
- c1462 Gomerock Castle or Tower
- 1488 Dartmouth Castle
- 1502 Kingswear Castle
- 1641 St Petrox Church at Dartmouth Castle

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Figure 5 Map dating from 1538