

MEDIEVAL ST PETER PORT



CONSTITUTION OF THE TOWN

St Peter Port was never formally recognized as a town during the Middle Ages by either the English King or his parliament. Most English towns in those days, once they felt they were big enough, or important enough, requested a charter from the king which set out their rights and privileges, but the Guernsey charters apply to the whole island. The town of St Peter Port does not have a separate charter, so officially it is still merely a settlement within the parish.

The town does not have burgesses, aldermen or a mayor as English towns do, but is administered as part of the parish of St Peter Port. The Constables and Douzaine administer the parish as a whole, in the same way as the other nine island parishes are administered. It is interesting that the town, and the island, still have the same system of parish administration as in the Middle Ages. However, it is clear from medieval documents that both local merchants and English government officials considered that the settlement had developed into a town by the beginning of the 1300s, with or without a charter of its own.

The town centered around the church, called “ecclesia Sancti Petri de Portu” (the church of St Peter Port) in a document dated between 1052 and 1058, and spread south and west along Fountain Street and Cornet Street, and northward along High Street and the Pollet. The harbour by the church was protected by a rocky islet, on which Castle Cornet was built and opposite which a pier was built during the 13th century.

It is difficult nowadays to appreciate just how small the medieval town was and how steep the cliffs were on which it was built. St Peter Port retained its medieval 'feel' until the 18th century, when wealthy merchants started to build large houses on the outskirts of the town. During the 1820s and 1830s more changes took place as considerable road widening and leveling was carried out. Large areas of Mont Gibel in the centre of the town were quarried away and the ground used to reclaim land from the sea especially along the South Esplanade.

BOUNDARIES OF THE TOWN, AND THE 'BARRIERES DE LA VILLE'

In 1350 King Edward III sent instructions to the Bailiff of Guernsey that he was to build a wall around the town. Many English towns were also fortified at this time, and many of them still have their medieval walls, towers and gatehouses. Southampton, for example, still has most of its walls, and its Bargate.

However St Peter Port is built in the lee of a steep hill. No evidence has yet been found for a wall around the town, and there would have been little point in building one as any enemy could have stood on the top of Mont Gibel (as one still can) and shoot down into the town. Instead the Royal Court or the Governor of the island (the States of Guernsey had not yet been constituted) appear to have arranged to have two large forts built, one at either end of the town, and between these forts the backs of the houses on the western side of the town, against the hill, appear to have been in a fairly continuous line with very few windows and doors. On the eastern side of the town the cliff fell fairly steeply to the sea, with very little beach, and this was presumably deemed to be sufficient protection.

BARRIERES DE LA VILLE

These are five stones which, when a line is drawn between them, apparently mark the extent of the medieval town. The present stones were replacements, installed in 1700, but no evidence has yet been found to suggest that there was a wall which joined up the stones, or that the stones marked gateways into the town. The fact that the town and parish of St Peter Port have always been an integral administrative unit means that it is unlikely that there were actual walls separating the town from the rest of the parish. The parish would probably have been most unhappy for the town to separate itself off behind walls, as it produced most of the income of the parish, and indeed a sizeable proportion of the income of the island.

However it is known that the Royal Court were concerned with matters of inheritance at this time, and the stones were erected for administrative convenience to mark what was then considered to be the limits of the medieval town, and to show the area within which 'preciput' did not apply.

'Preciput' concerned the way in which property was inherited from father to son, and meant in effect that the eldest son inherited what could be called a 'double share' of his father's estate. The idea was developed in the Middle Ages in an attempt to avoid property being divided into uneconomic portions. It was finally abolished in Guernsey in 1954.

But to return to the 'barrieres'. The easternmost barriere stone is found outside the Town Church and has carved on it the words 'Barriere de la ville 1700'. The next barriere stone is at the top of Cornet Street, at the junction of Cliff Street, Hauteville and Tower Steps. Between these two stones, on the southern side of Cornet Street behind the present houses a bank and ditch appears to have been dug as a defensive work in the early Middle Ages.

Opposite the second barriere stone was the fort which defended the southern access to the town, called the Tour (or tower) Beauregard, on what is now the Mignot Plateau. This was a large walled defensive position with buildings inside it which commanded the southern and western approaches to the town. It is interesting that the name Beauregard, which means good view or good outlook was also a popular name for fortified positions in England at this time.

This was also the site of the only known gateway out of town, and marked the end of Cornet Street. It probably had houses built up to it on either side, again defining the limit of the town.

A levy appears to have been made on somewhat reluctant islanders towards the cost of building this fort, and also the Tour Gand at the northern end of the town, to give protection from attack by the French.

Whilst in this part of town it is appropriate to speak of the battle with Owen of Wales, known as the Descent of the Aragousais, who landed at Vazon Bay with a force of 3,000 Spanish mercenaries in 1372. They made their way across the island and fought a fierce battle with 800 Guernseymen led by Edmond Rose on the plateau outside the town. Tradition places this battle at various sites around St Peter Port but there is good reason for thinking that it probably took place at the top of Havelet, about half a mile from the top of Cornet Street . The valley is said to have run with the blood of the dead and injured, and the Guernseymen retreated to Castle Cornet, where they were besieged by Owen and his men until the French King ordered him elsewhere.

The town now stretches north, and the street which defines this boundary is Rosemary Lane . This curves around the southern and eastern base of the Tour Beauregard and down the hillside to Fountain Street where the third barriere stone is found at the bottom of the steps. Fountain Street did not extend further than this stone in the Middle Ages. Beyond it were the fields which formed part of the Bordage Cornet.

It is known that the former St Peter Port Rectory and its garden, which stood on the site of what is now the Guille-Alles Library and the shop next door were on the edge of the town and that buildings to the south of the rectory and the Moulin de la Mer, which was on the site of the Bonded Store (under the market buildings), were inside the town.

So a line can be drawn from the barriere stone at the bottom of Rosemary Lane across the Market Halls to the northern side of Market Street . Then the boundary turned east along Market Street , curving slightly to reach the southern end of the Rue Tanquerel.

At the top of the steps in the Commercial Arcade which lead down to Church Square , on the northern side, there is a door which closes off the Rue Tanquerel. Looking over the door, the backs of the houses which formed the western edge of the medieval town can still be seen. What is now the Commercial Arcade was once a steep hill, Mont Gibel, which was almost completely dug away when the Arcade was built in the early 19th century. The spoil from this exercise was used to reclaim the area which is now the South Esplanade.

The boundary of the town then went north, but not in a straight line, using the backs of houses and properties, and crossed Smith Street half way up. The fourth barriere stone is set in the wall beside the Post Office. In the Middle Ages Smith Street was not very long, and at the barriere stone it petered out into a small country lane called la Rue Chasse Vassal (Mr Vassal's lane).

The boundary continued north along the backs of the houses on the western side of the Pollet to Forest Lane and then turned east down this lane to the fifth barriere stone, set into the wall of the building opposite Moore's Hotel. There was also a row of houses built on the eastern side of High Street and the Pollet, on the 'banque', but the cliff then fell quite steeply to the narrow beach.

The other fortification built to protect the town was found in this area, at the northern end of the Pollet between the barriere stone and the short road called Le Tourgand. 'Gand' can be loosely translated as 'place of safety', but no trace of this fortification has ever been found. However there are references to wood from the Forest of Bere being imported to the Islands to build barricades in the Middle Ages, and the Constable of the Tower of London was asked to issue an export licence, so it is possible that it was only an earthwork with a palisade, rather than a stone building.

ENTRANCES AND EXITS TO THE TOWN

There were three main roads into and out of the medieval town. To the south was Cornet Street, which started on the western side of Church Square, beside the church, and curved round and up as far as the Tour Beauregard. Here was a large gateway, although this area has altered so much that there is now no indication of where precisely the gateway was. Beyond the gate were fields, and a track leading on up the hill to St Martins and the west of the island.

This is the only road which is known to have had a gate on it. In contemporary documentation much is made of this gate and if other gates had existed they would certainly have been mentioned. The gibbet, or gallows, was here, and when Catherine Cauches and her daughters were burnt for heresy in 1556 the bonfire was here, just outside the town boundary.

In the middle of the town Berthelot Street rose steeply up the hill, going first west and then curving round to become the Castel Road (now the Grange). This road led to the Castel, Cobo and the Landes du Marche area of the island.

At the northern end of the town the Pollet gave access to the north of the island along a track behind the dunes and shingle banks.

CHURCHES, CHAPELS, MONASTERIES AND CONVENTS

In a charter of William the Conqueror dated between 1052 and 1058 the Abbey of Marmoutier in France was granted 'oversight' of the churches of St Peter Port, St Andrew, St Martin, St Mary of Torteval, St Sampson and Trinity (Forest). There is reason to believe that the islands had been christianised from Normandy at some point in the 5th century, so by the date of the charter there may have been a place of Christian worship on the site of the Town Church for about 500 years.

The century after the death of William I seems to have been a time of general prosperity and it is interesting to note that parts of several Guernsey churches can be dated to this time, the 12th century. The south transept was added to the Town Church in the later 15th century and gives some idea of the wealth of the town merchants at this time. When the church was renovated at the end of the 19th century a beam dated 1466 was found in the wall of the south transept.

The best known chapel in St Peter Port was the chapel of St Julian, dedicated to the patron saint of travelers. It was founded in 1351 by Pierre de St Peye, and was an alms house with a Master, and brothers and sisters. It was suppressed at the reformation, but originally stood at the bottom of St Julian's Avenue, next to the medieval public school of the town.

The main confraternity attached to the Town Church was that of the 'Confraternity of Charity for the Deliverance of Souls from Purgatory'. This was a group of lay men and women who had Mass said daily for the souls of the departed and others in a chapel built in the churchyard which adjoined the church. The chapel was known as 'la chapelle Belfroi' and may also have served as an ossuary.

The only monks known to have had a house in Guernsey, apart from the Priors of the Vale and Lihou which were daughter houses of Mont St Michel, were the Cordeliers or Franciscan Friars. They had a house and a chapel at the bottom of College Street and were expelled from Guernsey in 1536. They returned briefly during the reign of Mary Tudor, and when Elizabeth College was founded in 1563 the chapel was used as a schoolroom, and as accommodation for the Master.

SANCTUARY ROADS AND HOLY WELLS

Guernsey has never had sanctuary roads in the English sense, but if someone committed an offence for which they knew they could be hanged they could seek sanctuary in a church. The Court then met in that church, and the accused was usually sentenced to banishment. They were given a 'permit' which allowed them to travel from the church to either St Peter Port or St Sampson's Church from which they would leave the island at the next high tide, when the sea came up to the walls of these two churches.

In the days before the National Health Service many people believed in the healing power of holy wells and fountains. Guernsey had its fair share of these, and there were at least four in or near St Peter Port. The fountain of Le Vau Lorent (Vauxlorens) was famous for the cure of sore eyes and La Fontaine des Corbins, below Les Cotils, was supposed to cure tuberculosis, or consumption as it used to be called, if you drank the water. There was also a Fontaine St Pierre near the Town Church at the Pont Orson, in Fountain Street, underneath the markets and a Fontaine Notre Dame on the site of the Golden Lion Public House.

THE STOCKS AND THE CAGE

A well known form of punishment for minor crimes, these items were set up in Church Square, outside the north door of the church. When people were sentenced to the stocks or the cage they were not usually kept in them all the time, but put there every market day, or every Saturday for several weeks from dawn to dusk. The cage was a wooden, slatted affair which could be raised off the ground by means of a pulley, so that it swayed in the wind!

THE MARKET, AND CRAFT GUILDS

Before 1300 the island market, which would have sold vegetables, fruit, fish and meat was held at the Landes du Marche in the Castel. This was a central point for the island, and all main island roads still lead to it. It is also possible to still see the western edge of the medieval market behind some of the houses in the area.

With the increase in importance of St Peter Port as a trading centre the market gradually and unofficially moved to the edge of town between 1250 and 1300. This was mainly for the convenience of the merchants, but the market remained an island market and did not provide an income for the town, as markets in English towns did.

In 1309 when the King's Justices visited the island they found that the market 'met on Sunday during Service, to the great scandal of Christianity' and so they agreed that it would be held every Thursday instead. Land for a market was granted in an area at the top of the present Smith Street, stretching from the Fontaine Chasse Vassal in the north to the Val Vidcocq in the south, the chemin le Roi, or King's Highway, in between. This area was outside the town boundary, and the chemin le Roi may have been the upper end of Berthelot Street.

In later years various parts of the market moved down into the town, with meat mostly being dealt with in Cow Lane, and the fish market ending up against the west wall of the South Transept of the church where the churchwarden had to regularly go out and tell the women to be quiet during divine service. Eventually dedicated buildings were erected in the 19th century.

No evidence has yet been found for craft guilds or guild halls in Guernsey. Presumably this is because such guilds were illegal under the Norman Customary Law. The island's income was based on its position as an entrepot, a place that goods passed through rather than a place where goods were made for onward sale. An instance of this was the wine trade from Bordeaux and Bayonne during the 13th century, which brought merchants from southwestern France to supervise the maturing of wine in the cool granite cellars of St Peter Port before it was sold on to England. Some merchants settled in the island and surnames like Falla and De Garis are from the towns in that area.

THE HARBOUR

St Peter Port has always had the most popular harbour in the islands, as there is deep water fairly close inshore, plenty of fresh water, and shelter from the prevailing southwest wind. In 1275 Edward I, understanding that many wrecks might be avoided if a wall were built "between our castle there and our vill of St Peter Port" gave permission for a tax of 12 deniers to be levied on every ship and 6 deniers on every small boat which called at the port for the next three years, the proceeds of which were to go towards building the wall, or pier. The pier gave protection from southeasterly gales, which produced a dangerous sea in the roadstead.

After the French raid in 1295, when most of the town including the church was laid waste and about 25% of the inhabitants killed, various 'good men of St Peter Port' petitioned the king to renew this tax so that they could rebuild the town and pier.

Halfway down Pier Steps, the venelle or passageway that runs down from High Street to the sea front there is a cross passage. This marks the eastern edge of the medieval town and from here the banque or cliff fell quite steeply to the beach.

The port contributed considerably to the economic prosperity of the island, accounts of feudal dues suggest a growing population and in 1331 records show that 41 wine-sellers, 12 beer-sellers and 70 bakers were convicted of minor infringements of the law, whilst 22 people were convicted of using false measures in St Peter Port.

HOUSES, MUNICIPAL BUILDINGS AND MEDIEVAL MANORS

Some medieval domestic artifacts have been found during archaeological digs in St Peter Port, but nothing appears to remain of the houses. Unfortunately the most likely area for remains of this kind, to the west of the Town Church, was cleared completely in the 19th century, and High Street, the other main thoroughfare, was constantly being rebuilt. As far as is known no local furniture or furnishings remain, either.

The town houses of medieval merchants were usually designed with a shop on the ground floor, living accommodation above, and storage areas in the 'cellar'. This type of layout can still be seen, particularly in buildings on the seaward side of High Street.

However there is a 16th century building still standing which gives an idea of what the original houses might have looked like. This building stands on the southern corner of High Street and Berthelot Street and was rebuilt in the late 16th century by Mr Briard, and for 400 years was known as the Maison Briard. A walk up Berthelot Street gives a good impression of what the town would have looked like in those days - narrow twisting streets, many of them quite steep, with houses built of both timber and stone jutting out into the road.

Unlike English towns St Peter Port did not have specific municipal buildings in the middle ages, no Town Hall nor any Guild buildings. Nor did it have an Hotel de Ville in the French sense, because the town has always been administered as part of and together with the parish of St Peter Port.

The first building to be used solely by the Constables and Douzaine was the house formerly belonging to the Le Marchant family, in Lefebvre Street, which was purchased at the end of the 18th century. There is no record of where meetings were held before then, although it is possible that they were held in private houses, as in the other parishes, or in the church.

However the English Justices of Assize when they came to hear cases in the early 14th century met at the king's grange in 1309, and this was identified with La Plaiderie in 1331. This is an area just outside the town boundary, close to what is now Moore's Hotel, and it is entirely possible that the Royal Court also met here. A Court House is noted on this site in 1643, and the present Court House at the top of Smith Street was built between 1792 and 1803.

During the middle ages at least six large areas of land within the king's feudal holdings in Guernsey were given to various local merchants, possibly as a reward for defending the island. They are still sometimes called 'manors', although they are not a manor in the true feudal sense. One of these so-called manors was the Manoir Le Marchant.

This holding was situated on the edge of the town and shared a common boundary with the houses on the western side of High Street. It stretched from Berthelot Street to Le Marchant Street, and westwards up the hill to beyond New Street. The Le Marchants built a house there with a chapel and a large hall attached. The house was rebuilt in the 18th century and later became the Constable's Office for St Peter Port.

Visit Guernsey thank Gillian Lenfestey for the use of this information

WWW.VISITGUERNSEY.COM

