

Dover Castle: A Travel Feature

by Cheryl Pendry, PassPorter Featured Columnist

Many castles become famous for their roles in war, but usually those wars date back centuries. Not so with Dover Castle on the southeastern coast of England. Its position at the start of the shortest sea crossing between England and continental Europe made for a pivotal role in one of the turning points of World War II.

Dating back more than 1,000 years, Dover Castle has stood on its current site since Roman times and even today, a Roman lighthouse and church, dating back to around the year 900 AD can still be seen there. Much of the Castle you see today dates from around 1180, when King Henry II rebuilt its fortifications. It's one of the biggest castles you'll find in the whole of England.

It was strengthened over the years by a succession of English kings, and with good reason, as one of the castle attractions demonstrates. The 1216 Siege Experience takes you back in time to the days when the castle was one of the few remaining places holding out for King John against rebellious citizens, who had allied themselves with Prince Louis of France. Using light, film and sound, the show really brings to life what people would have gone through during that siege, and is well worth seeing.

Beautiful though the castle is, towering on a hill above Dover, England's busiest sea port, the real attraction is buried far beneath the fortifications. Following the outbreak of the Second World War, the situation for the Allied forces was becoming desperate, with the Germans advancing across Europe. Countries were falling rapidly and soldiers from Britain and her allies had retreated to the beaches of Dunkirk in Northern France near the Belgian border. There was nowhere else to fall back to.

Against that background, plans were put together for Operation Dynamo to evacuate the troops back to Britain. The nerve center for this operation was the secret wartime tunnels underneath Dover Castle. These tunnels were first dug during the Napoleonic Wars and were in near constant use from that date onwards, but today they're best known for the work that took place in them in the 1940s.

As you walk through the tunnels, it's impossible to believe that around 700 people were based here during some of the worst days of World War II. That included switchboard staff, after a military telephone exchange was installed to serve the underground headquarters.

It's quite something to see the Command Centre, where Winston Churchill, then the Prime Minister of Great Britain, viewed the Battle of Britain. That's the name given to attempts by the German air force, the Luftwaffe, to try and gain air superiority over the British Royal Air Force. The plan was that once that was achieved, the Germans would then invade Britain. But despite undertaking the most sustained bombing campaign up until that date, the plan failed and is now widely seen as a major turning point in the war.

Not only were these tunnels a command center, but they were also home to an underground hospital. It can't have been easy trying to work under these conditions, and another of the exhibits shows a surgeon attempting to save the life of an injured pilot.

Since those days in the 1940s, the tunnels had been on standby to be used in the event of a nuclear attack, but gradually they fell into disuse before being re-opened for visitors to step back into history.

Dover Castle is open throughout the year, except between December 24-26 and on January 1. The Castle is also closed on Tuesdays and Wednesdays between the beginning of November and the end of January. It's about a mile and a half from Dover Priory railway station, so to reach the Castle without a car; you'll either need to catch a taxi or a bus there.

Dover itself is about an hour and a half's drive from London and it's also home to another famous sight. Situated on the southeastern coast of England, you'll find the famous White Cliffs of Dover here, which have been described as the country's most popular stretch of coastline. With good reason, as they've been the sight that has welcomed people to England for centuries.

Of course, if you fancy heading further afield to mainland Europe, Dover is one way to start those travels, with the Port of Dover the busiest in England. As well as regular ferry services across to France, Dover is also becoming a regular port of call with many cruise ships. You never know, with its recent Mediterranean excursion, perhaps one day we'll see the Disney Magic setting down anchor there!

About The Author: Cheryl and husband Mark live in England and love to travel, particularly to America. They are in the process of visiting every Disney theme park around the world, having already been to Disneyland Resort Paris, Hong Kong Disneyland and both American Disney resorts. They are now planning for their trip to Japan in the spring to visit the Tokyo Disney Resort. [Click here to view more of Cheryl's articles!](#)

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