ST SAUVEUR- LE-VICOMTE

A TALE OF TWO OCCUPATIONS

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A Guided Tour

I visited St Sauveur-le-Victome in June 2017, coinciding with the 73rd anniversary of D Day and the Normandy landings – which the French call *Le Débarquement*. The guide explained that the castle had a long history – built in the High Middle Ages by a French lord, it was occupied twice by the English – between 1360 and 1375, and again between 1418 and 1450. By comparison, the German occupation between 1940 and 1944 was brief and peaceful, since the massive destruction wrought when the town was liberated was the work of *American* planes and artillery.

Interestingly, those two periods of English occupation – and remember, it was English, not British, since the Scots were allied with the French – were different in nature; and it shows. So, in 1360, the castle was ceded to Edward III of England under the terms of the Treaty of Brétigny (mostly concerned with Aquitaine). It was then given to Sir John Chandos, K.G., who held it until his death in 1370, but was re-taken by the French in 1375, after a long siege. However, during those fifteen years, it would appear that the English found the time to re-construct the Keep, or *Donjon*. Whereas the old Keep had been round, the new keep was square; and this, according to our guide, was typical of English building methods, though many English castles had round towers). She also said that the cupboards in the walls of the ground floor of the new Keep must have been built by the English, because cupboards could easily be constructed in the flat walls of a square English tower, but could not be fitted into a French-style round tower, so the French used chests (*coffres*) for storage.

At any rate, it was clear that the new Keep was built primarily for military, rather than domestic purposes, if only because the entrance was on the first floor, the walls are both massive and reinforced with buttresses, and the windows are few and high up. This is interesting, because the conventional wisdom now in England is that many castles built in the later medieval period – and notably Bodiam in East Sussex – were intended to be palatial residences, rather than defensible structures (and the turrets, crenellations and arrow and gunloops were for show).

The guide pointed out that there were other towers supposedly built by the English during the 14th century occupation, apart from the new Keep, these being the 'Tour Hollande' (in the middle of the western wall), and the 'Tour des Cygognes' (at the northern end of that wall). Both these towers are very badly ruined; but both are named after English captains of the 14th century, namely Thomas Holland (1359) and John Storkes (1367) ('cygogne' being French for 'stork').

The 14th century 'English' towers contrast markedy with the gatehouse, though this is also supposed to have been built by an English soldier, or one who served the English cause. This is the *Logis Robessard.* Now *logis* means dwelling, or lodge. This is indeed what it is and it dates from the second period of English occupation. According to the leaflet which is distributed free in the castle, it is 'presumed to have been built by a baron of Hainault who ruled the castle for the King of England from 1418 to 1450' (though the eponymous Robessart is likely to have occupied the place for a far short period of time – see below).

The *Logis Robessard* is a much more comfortable place than the Keep. Despite the fact that it still contains a portcullis and murder holes, the building is not so high, the masonry is less thick and forbidding, there are large chimneys, the windows more numerous and larger, and there is even a tiled (and chequered) floor, and two frescoes. Unfortunately, these are so faded it is impossible to tell what was originally depicted. The figure on the left in one may be a monk, or a friar, but on the other hand he may be a gentleman courting the lady on the right. (My guess is that he was an Englishman paying his respects to a Frenchwoman). In any event, the interior has an air of civilised living about it, and even of the Renaissance.

The 14th century occupation

The difference between the Keep and the *Logis* – assuming we have the dates right – is easily explained by reference to the different nature of the two English occupations, which was determined by the different objectives of Edward III (1327-77) and Henry V (1413-22). The story told by the buildings is confirmed by an examination of the chronicles and archives.

The first occupation came about as a result of agreement rather than conquest. Edward III had spent more than twenty years, battering away at the French monarchy with a series of expeditions. However, having claimed the French throne as early as 1340, he settled (in 1360) for an enlarged principality in Aquitaine, agreeing to renounce his claim to the French Crown and (in principle) to vacate the English garrisons in the rest of France. St Sauveur was one of the exceptions to this grand bargain, along with the port of Calais, the county of Ponthieu on the Somme, and the fortresses of Derval and Bécherel in Brittany, which were also retained. Edward then granted St Sauveur to Sir John Chandos, the idea clearly being to secure a bridgehead in the event of further war.

St Sauveur occupied a strong position overlooking the valley of the Douve; and it was a fortress of great importance, especially because the northern part of the Cotentin was then virtually an island, cut off from the South by the large area of marsh or *marais*, which is now a national park (and well worth the visit). The king ordered Thomas Holland (Earl of Kent), who was captain and warden of the castle and town at the time, to deliver the entire estate to Chandos without delay. More significantly, the transfer was confirmed by Jean II of France on 24 October. The chronicler Jean Froissart related that St Sauveur was 'a very fair estate, and worth full sixteen hundred *francs* of yearly rent'.

Chandos did not spend much time there. He made his *entrée* into his new domain on 20 July 1361 but almost immediately received orders which took him elsewhere. He left on the 29th and, although he returned on 17 October 1362, business kept him away for years on end, though he remained lord of St Sauveur for 10 years. However, his long absence did not prevent him from commissioning substantial repairs and renovations. He almost certainly re-built the Keep and strengthened the curtain walls with new towers though, as we have seen, it was Holland who gave his name to one of these, while another was named after one of Chandos's lieutenants, John Stokes.

How large was the English presence in St Sauveur? Professor Anne Curry and her colleagues tell us that "Although musters carried out at St Sauveur in 1370 and 1371 do not reveal the names of any crossbowmen, an inventory of the stores received by Thomas Castreton, one-time captain of the place, shows that 15 crossbows were kept there". Further, Sir Alan Buxhill's garrison in 1371 included 43 armed archers, and 10 'officers and armed archers', while an inventory from the reign of Richard II refers to 15 iron lances, two more not made of iron and '3 breast plates for the jousts'. This is an intriguing entry, since it could indicate that the English garrison had time to amuse themselves, as well as train for war. On the other hand there was certainly some fighting to be done.

The English hold on the Cotentin in the 1360s was precarious, as was the peace as a whole. The English had not come to settle in this area. St Sauveur was a 'barbican', similar to Calais, which it was important to hold on to, for military and diplomatic purposes. Moreover, Edward III played a double (perhaps a triple?) game in Normandy. While purporting to be interested in a lasting peace, the King made only half-hearted efforts to disperse the Free Companies which continued to infest many parts of France (many of which contained Englishmen). It is difficult to know what Chandos's orders were; but in his absence, the English garrison at St Sauveur adopted an ambivalent attitude towards those Companies operating in the area. In addition they developed a close relationship with Charles of Navarre, who was engaged in an intermittent war of his own with the French Crown.

Charles of Navarre was the lord of nearby Valognes, whose counsellors included the Abbot of Cherbourg; and, in the early 1360s, he even went so far as to retain some of Chandos's principal household officers in St Sauveur, including his Marshal, Guichard d'Angle and his steward, Sir Harry Hay. Jonathan Sumption tells us that he was also planning a rising in Normandy and buying weapons in Bordeaux 'under the nose of the Seneschal' there; and there is also evidence of a plan to ally with Chandos and the Captal de Buch in an attack on French royal forces. Matters came to a head at the Battle of Cocherel (in the Vexin) in May 1364, when a French force led by Du Guesclin scored a decisive victory over a Navarrese force led by the Captal de Buch. Nevertheless the French victory did not put a complete end to Navarrese activities in the Cotentin.

Chandos was killed in battle, down in Poitou, at the beginning of 1370; but St Sauveur remained in English hands for some years; and on 10 November 1373 Edward III took the castle 'into his [own] hands'. Sir Alan Buxhill was then given a lease of the place, at an annual rent of 1,000 marks; but Thomas Catterton, who had been appointed by the courtier Lord Latimer in 1371, remained Captain. However, in July 1374, Charles V ordered his officers to attack the fortress again, as part of a wider campaign in the West of the French kingdom.

Froissart makes it clear that Charles of Navarre and Charles V of France had now come to terms; and, this being so, English rule in St Sauveur was doomed. The chronicler goes on to relate how the French obtained the surrender of Bécherel in Brittany and then moved on into the Cotentin, to attack St Sauveur, whose garrison now consisted of around 120 men. At the end of May 1375 a small fleet of 15 ships was organised in England to bring soldiers over to relieve the siege; but the expedition had to be cancelled. St Sauveur duly fell to the French, after a siege which had lasted a whole year, in July 1375.

The fall of St Sauveur (and therefore of the Cotentin) was decisive. The English did not return for almost half a century; but it also had a surprising repercussion in England. The following year, there were wide-ranging allegations of corruption against several of the King's ministers and favourites, including Alice Perrers, King Edward's controversial mistress. One of the complainants was Sir John Annesley, the husband of Chandos's niece and co-heiress, Isabella. He publicly accused governor the last governor, Catterton of having 'treacherously sold St Sauveur to the French for money'. Catterton came before the House of Lords, but there was insufficient evidence of the charge and no verdict was ever reached. Yet he insisted on pursuing his case, and demanded trial by battle.

This posed a legal difficulty, because the procedure was already outmoded and there were doubts as to whether it could still be invoked. At last, it was decided 'at an assembly of legal experts and senior knights' that 'in an overseas matter' it was entirely legal to fight a duel in England, provided that the Constable and Marshal had been notified; and a day was appointed for 'the big fight' to be held at Westminster.

Great crowds assemble – some say that the numbers are greater than those which were seen at King Richard II's coronation, only three years before. Prayers are said and the fighting begins. The two men fight with lances, then with swords and finally with daggers, and they exhaust themselves in the process. When these weapons have served their purpose, they begin to wrestle. Annesley knocks

Catterton to the ground and tries to leap on top of him, but is partially blinded by sweat and misses his opponent, landing on the ground. The squire now throws himself on top of the knight and the crowd began to sense that the end is near. Eventually, a truce is imposed; but it turns out that Annesley is not so exhausted as Catterton, despite being the smaller man, and he insists, not only that the fight should continue but that, when it does, he should be put back in the same position as before, which is *underneath* his larger opponent. He even promises a large sum of money if this was allowed. The authorities eventually agree; but, in the meantime, Catterton has lost consciousness and fallen from his chair, as if dead. He is revived only when his supporters ply him with wine and water and remove his armour. Annesley still wants to fight. When Catterton revives a little, he approaches him, calls him a lying traitor and dares him to stand up and fight.

At this, Catterton had to admit defeat, since he no longer had 'the understanding or the breath to reply'. It was proclaimed that the duel was over and that everyone should return to their homes; but then

> The squire [Catterton], as soon as he was carried to his bed, began to be delirious and his delirium lasted until about three o'clock the following afternoon when he breathed his last.

The 15th century occupation

The fifteenth century English occupation of St Sauveur between 1418 and 1450 was longer and more peaceable than the earlier occupation, though it came about through a war of conquest, rather than by negotiation, and represented an exercise in colonialism, not seen before.

The nature of the Hundred Years' War changed completely when Henry V shattered the main French field army at Agincourt in 1415 and went on to conquer Normandy between 1417 and 1419. The campaign of conquest was carefully planned and executed; and the war took the form of a series of sieges, culminating in the siege of Rouen, the provincial capital. Although Henry V died in 1422, the work of conquest was taken forward by his brother Bedford, who conquered Maine. The tide only turned in 1429, with Joan of Arc's relief of the siege of Orleans; but even then, the English held on determinedly. There was a period of occupation, lasting some 30 years in Normandy and some 20 years in Maine, before they were driven out. Henry and Bedford therefore required more of their armies than Edward III had done, since much of the campaigning in the 14th century had taken the form of long distance mounted raids, known as *chevauchées*.

St Sauveur formed part of a network of garrisons in the new English Normandy, where settlers were rewarded with grants of land and French titles. In 1420 there were about 4,500 troops in the Duchy as a whole, distributed around some forty garrisons. After the English victory at Verneuil in 1424, the numbers were reduced to around 3,000 but they were doubled after the setbacks of 1429 and 1435, only to be reduced to some 2,500 at the time of the Truce of Tours in 1445. As in Norman England in the 12th century, many of these soldiers and settlers spent most of their time on 'castle-guard' *(guet et garde),* rather than in battle. The chroniclers tend not to deal with this aspect of army life, since it was too humdrum and there were not enough 'feats of arms' to satisfy their readers, but the archival sources are replete with references to it.

At the same time, the constant need for troops (and perhaps a reluctance by some to serve?) led to a step-change in the employment of non-English soldiers in Normandy. This was not confined to the rank and file, but extended up the chain of command to the captaincies of garrisons. Of the 32 captains recorded in a list of Norman garrisons prepared in 1433-4, no fewer than six (19 per cent) were foreigners. Three were specifically listed there as foreign-born, and one of these was the Hainaulter Sir Jean Robessart, who (as we know) gave his name to the *Logis* at St Sauveur; but the records relied on by Curry & Co have him at Saint-Lo in 1439, with his kinsman Richard Bullock or 'Bolok'. This probably indicates that soldiers and captains were assigned to different castles at different times, according to need, especially since we know that Robessart also served in Carentan in Febrary 1440, February 1440 and August 1442.

It is usually stated that there are virtually no signs left now in Normandy of the English occupation, and that this is in stark contrast the innumerable signs of the Norman conquest of England here (and in Wales and Scotland), in the form of castles, cathedrals, abbeys and churches. But St Sauveur-le-Vicomte is a remarkable exception to this, in terms of its architecture and internal features. The *Logis* Robessart looks like a building whose occupants expected to stay, and wanted some degree of comfort.

It was not to be. There was a great deal of resistance to English rule from the start; and it proved to be a determined one. English and French tend to think only of Joan of Arc; but in fact her career was remarkably short (1429-31) and there were many other fighters. The resistance in Normandy was led by men like Phélippot le Cat in Cherbourg, Pierre de la Haye and Robert de Floque in Évreux and, more spectacularly, Ambroise de Loré, who operated in the neighbourhood of Fresnay, St-Céneri and Sillé-le-Guillaume; but, after the French recaptured Paris in 1436, he became Provost there. Ambroise de Loré did not act alone. Basset's Chronicle tells us that as early as 1421-22, a group of disaffected knights led by Sir Olivier de Mauny broke into the Cotentin and did widespread damage there. Stories like these imply that there was support for the resistance amongst the indigenous population, so that English garrisons must have been constantly on guard, even when they were not formally on watch. The French resistance fighters were quite capable of taking a walled town by escalade as well as by storm. The chronicler Monstrelet tells us that they succeeded in scaling the walls of both Hamme-sur-Somme and Compiègne in the same year (1423) – and on both occasions this was 'through neglect of the watch.'

They took Gerberoy in the same fashion in 1449. Even the Canon of Notre-Dame, who did not welcome Armagnac victories, wrote that in 1423:

> The English sometimes took a fortress from the Armagnacs in the morning but lost two to them in the afternoon; and so this accursed war went on and on.

Yet, when the end came, it came quite suddenly. By the Treaty of Tours in 1445, the English surrendered and evacuated part of the territory they held in France, in the hope that the French would agree to their keeping Normandy permanently. Instead Charles VII used the truce to prepare for war. In 1445, 1446 and 1448 he issued Ordinances which re-organised the French army, forming a permanent force out of the bands of 'Skinners' who had terrorised his domains for so long. This new standing army was composed of companies known as the *Compagnies d'Ordonnance* and they were led a group of able captains, some of whom who had been fighting the English all their lives – Richemont, Dunois, Alençon and Poton de Xaintrailles. Meanwhile, John Bureau had re-vamped the French artillery train; and Jacques Coeur improved the coinage and re-built the royal finances, at a time when the English government faced bankruptcy.

The French 'recovery' of Normandy in 1449 was well-planned and well-executed. The Valois took advantage of the fact that they had already nibbled away at the edges of the Duchy, by re-taking Dieppe, Eu and Aumale in 1436, Louviers in 1440, Évreux in 1441, and Granville in 1442. They now launched a full attack from three sides, with armies which may have been 30,000 strong. In the west the Duke of Brittany advanced up the Cotentin. The Counts of Eu and St Pol attacked from Artois in the east. Dunois led the main French army from the south. Since the English were unable to assemble a field army in Normandy, the invasion became another war of sieges, but a bombardment was not always necessary. The English had taken six weeks to capture Harfleur in 1415, but it fell to a surprise attack in 1450. In 1417-19 the siege of Falaise had lasted two months; of Cherbourg, five months; of Rouen, six. In 1449-50 there was no siege at all of Dieppe, Harfleur and Evreux: they all fell to surprise attacks. In the words of one French historian, Normandy collapsed 'like a house of cards', St Sauveur being a potential ace in the pack, which was never played.

Back in England, the Duke of Suffolk mustered an expeditionary force of 2,500 men and appointed Sir Thomas Kyriell to lead them. This was too little and too late. It was late in the year before the muster was held, and bad weather delayed the departure of the expedition. The troops were ill-disciplined and wrought havoc in several towns on the south coast of England. Worcester blamed this on the wrath of God, but also on the government's failure to pay the troops on time. Kyriell landed in Cherbourg in March 1450, but the French caught up with him on 15 April at Formigny – a few miles inland from 'Omaha beach' - and annihilated his army.

The fall of Bayeux, in May 1450, was a particularly miserable and humiliating affair for the English because it was accompanied by scenes of hundreds of women and children fleeing the town, as they made their way in carts to the port of Cherbourg. Caen was bombarded for seventeen days, after which it too surrendered, on terms which allowed the English army to be evacuated via Ouistreham. A ransom of 300,000 *ecus d'or* was agreed, and all the English artillery handed over. Falaise surrendered in July and the French, in the last act of the *recouvrement*, laid siege to Cherbourg. The captain, Thomas Gower, put up a brave fight, but the town was subjected to a tremendous bombardment, and it surrendered on 12 August 1450. On 19 August, James Gresham, who was John Paston's agent in London, reported that:

> This Wednesday it was told that Cherbourg is gone, and we have now not a foot of land in Normandy, and men are afraid that Calais will very soon be besieged.

The fall of Normandy, in these ignominious circumstances, had serious consequences in England. It produced a great sense of bitterness and division. Accusations of treachery as well as incompetence were made, and men wondered how it was that the magnificent inheritance of Henry V had been squandered by the evil counsellors of Henry VI. In this way, it contributed greatly to the dissensions which degenerated into what we call 'the Wars of the Roses' (1455-85).

Further reading.

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The 'new' Keep

The Old Keep (on the left)

The Keep – interior showing thickness of walls

The Keep – interior showing cupboards

The Logis Robessart

The Logis Robessart – interior showing patterned floor

The Logis Robessart – interior showing fresco