



Commentary on Cherbourg harbour

Inner harbour

We are now entering Cherbourg's Inner Harbour which is made up of two parts:

- the Eastern side on your right, used for commercial and passenger transport:
- the Transatlantic dock where most of the car ferries dock, with daily crossings to England and three crossings a week to Ireland. This area also harbours cruise ships such as the Queen Mary 2 during their stop-overs.

We will talk a little about the history of this area on our way back.

- a little further over to the East you can see an open area called les Mielles where various loading operations take place, notably for the transport of nuclear spent fuel. The Flamands jetty marks the end of this zone, closing the inner harbour on its Eastern side.

- the military port is located in Western side of the harbour. Its construction was originally planned by Louis XVI but work was only started under Napoléon 1st, when work on the large breakwater was started up again in 1802.

The port itself is split into different areas: the inner port and three docks. The docks are fifteen feet deep and there are 7 dry docks and slipways. This area was only officially inaugurated by Napoleon III and was paradoxically built to protect the town against attacks from the English.

This zone accommodates the arsenal, a naval dockyard used for building sailing boats and propeller-driven vessels up until the end of the 19th century, during which time, 400 warships left the shipyard. 1898 marked a change in its history, as the first submarines were built, the Narval and the Morse being the first.

The first nuclear submarine the Redoubtable was launched in 1967 in the presence of President de Gaulle. You can now visit this submarine as it is permanently exhibited at the Cité de la Mer

The arsenal has since been privatized and besides the military activity the naval shipyard is run by the company DCNS who have ensured that Cherbourg has kept its place as a high-technology producer. Many different submarines have been constructed since, both for French and foreign navies, the last of which was the Terrible in January 2009, the latest generation nuclear submarine. Up to this day, over one hundred submarines have been built at the shipyard.

This whole infrastructure stretches over to the sea wall you can see before you to the north, the Homet breakwater. It was built between 1899 and 1914 (after the main sea wall) to allow large ships such as battle cruisers and warships that could not enter the main berths at the time to restock their fuel stores.

This breakwater starts at the Homet fort, an integral part of the defence system for the port of Cherbourg as it was one of the first ports edified in the enormous construction project to build the sea wall.



Built using plans designed by the engineer Pierre Jean Decaux between 1779 and 1786, it is set on a rock of the same name belongs at present to the military part of the old arsenal. It changed names twice : originally called the Artois fort after a visit from the Count of Artois in 1786, it was then named the Liberty fort during the First republic era, before taking on its present name : the Homet fort.

After the events of June 1848, hundreds of Parisian rebels were held here, despite the motto 'Liberty, Equality and Fraternity', engraved in large letters on the main port.

It was declared obsolete in 1875 due to its position, considered less advantageous than the newer bastions around the port, but was not concreted over.

Through to the outer harbour

We are now leaving the inner harbour, crossing the breakwater of the Homet wall, to reach the Chavagnac fort, located furthest to the west of the outer harbour.

You can see a stone riprap here that protects the sea wall. This barrier is regularly refilled, as is the northern side of the outer sea wall.

We are leaving the Homet fort to our left, with its watchtower monitoring and regulating navigation within the harbour. Behind the fort you can see the immense infrastructure necessary in order to build a submarine.

Arrival at the fort of Chavagnac

We are now approaching the fort of Chavagnac, the only fort to be completely surrounded by water. Building was started in 1854 as part of the defense project for the port. It differentiates itself from the other forts by its triangular shape (non circular like the others) with rounded angles which allow better surveillance and defence of the pass.

It is built on a huge rock that was discovered by Count Chavagnac in 1787 during studies to sound the deeper waters around the port with a view to building the future sea wall.

It was little used from 1896 on following the construction of the Querqueville breakwater just behind us.

If you run your eyes along this 1,200 metre long breakwater, you will see a metal platform. This was used for supplying the petrol necessary for operations after the D-day landings in June 1944, via a pipeline running from England to the French coast. It has since been abandoned, as has the fort, which is now only used by birds. It has become a sanctuary with many species of marine birds including cormorants who dry the wings in the breeze.

This breakwater, which protects the western side of the harbour and reduces the size of the pass, was started at the Querqueville fort, built in 1787, but work stopped when large areas of rock were found nearby. Thought to be too dangerous for ships, the western pass was therefore one kilometre to the east and interrupted construction work on the fort of Chavagnac.



Use of the Querqueville fort was by then very limited, but construction work was nevertheless finished in 1795. It was first used for military barracks and a landing area for seaplanes in the last century, before becoming the Navy's safety training centre and now an Inter-army school, the Fourriers. This fort is the only one that can be visited during the country's 'Heritage days' where many national monuments are open to the public free of charge.

Through the western pass

We will now leave the fort at Chavagnac and head towards the outer sea wall, with its 3 forts. The western pass measures 1,100 metres and is the largest of the entire harbour.

On your left is the Western fort, edified in 1850 as part of the defence project for the pass. Built around a circular courtyard, the fort has a double-level blockhouse covered by an open-top battery complete with a parapet covered in bricks. The lower floor was used for accommodation for around 375 men and the weapons store. In 1890 it was razed and concreted over for reinforcement.

The fort has a small port and a lighthouse that is now used as a beacon to help ships coming in and out of the portside of the harbour. It is powered by a wind turbine and solar panels.

One other extra: it has a basketball court!

The last watchmen left the fort in the early 1980's.

We are now going along the outer sea wall, 3,700 metres long. We will spend a moment talking about how it was built.

The port of Cherbourg would not have been developed in the same way without the construction of its sea wall and forts. This maritime edification created the largest artificial harbour in the world, with a surface area of 1,500 hectares (3,705 acres). It represents one of the biggest building projects ever undertaken. It is important to know that the volume of stones used for the construction work is roughly the same as that used for the Gizeh pyramids in Egypt; a total of 6 million square cubic metres of rock!

Cherbourg had only a single castle to protect itself from numerous English attacks in the 17th century, one surrounded by fortifications designed by Vauban himself. Renovated in 1687, an order was given to raze it to the ground in 1688 due to petty rivalry. A decision that was cursed by Admiral Tourville during the Battle of La Hougue in 1692 as he was unable to protect a large part of his fleet from the invaders.

He tried to take shelter in the bay of Cherbourg but his ships were sunk off the tip of the Homet cap, including the admiral's own vessel the Soleil Royal. Their remains were found and are now kept in the arsenal .



Many years on and with constant onslaughts by the British, Louis XVI decided that the town could become a strategic stronghold and ordered the construction of a protected military port . In 1776, he created a committee to be headed by Mr de Suffren, Governor Dumoriez (Commander of Cherbourg) and Mr de la Bretonnière. Several projects were put forward:

- M. Decaux (an engineer) suggested the edification of a small sea wall between 'île Pelée' and the Homet rock, leaving a single central pass into the harbour.
- Viscount de la Bretonnière (officer in the French Navy) proposed the construction of a 4 km-long sea wall between 'île Pelée' by scuttling old warships and covering them with large volume of rocks.
- Lastly Louis-Alexandre de Cessart also opted for a large sea wall but this time creating a pier with 90 wooden cones 20m deep. These were to be filled with stone and linked using iron chains.

The latter project was chosen, creating great tension between those involved in managing the project.

Despite this construction project having been officially adopted, two forts on the Homet rock and the 'île Pelée' were added to it in order to maintain the idea of a smaller sea wall nearer to the coast.

Work on the outer sea wall started in 1782 with the construction of a prototype in Le Havre. The first cone was built and went through tests at sea. Towing the cone all the way to Cherbourg was a test in itself but the operation was a success and it arrived safely in Cherbourg harbour.

Mr de Cessart was named project director and Mr de la Bretonnière was in charge of towing and immersion operations for the cones. The work site took shape little by little.

The cones were built on the beach at Chantereyne (which has since been transformed into Cherbourg marina) and the first cone was submerged with little difficulty at a depth of 1,200 m in June 1784 west of île Pelée. It was then filled with stones transported from the small port Le Becquet (a quaint little port just outside the eastern edge of the sea wall and near to the quarry used at the time). The project then ran into difficulty as some cones were spaced too far apart causing a negative effect on the project's efficiency, others did not resist the onslaught of successive storm and broke up before even being filled.

On June 22nd, Louis XVIth came to Cherbourg in person to see the project's progress as the 9th cone was submerged. He used his time to visit the surrounding area and there decided to build the fort at Querqueville.

Only 18 of the 90 cones planned were immersed in 1788, certain of which did not survive the many storms. The project was seen as a failure and the advent of the French revolution did nothing to help progress; work stopped in 1792.

It was under Napoléon Bonaparte's rule that work on the sea wall was resumed was 1802. He decided that work should be carried out according to De la Bretonnière's method and that canons should be placed on the central part of the wall.



Just a year later, he gave the responsibility of building a military port and arsenal to an engineer called Cachin. Work was completed in 1813 and at last Cherbourg would be protected from English invasion.

Work on the sea wall however, was once again interrupted between 1813 and 1823 following the fall of the Empire. It would only be finished under Charles Xth when two small forts were added to each end of the sea wall in 1853.

We are now passing by the salmon farm where around 300,000 fish are bred.

The 'Saumons de France' brand is now widely distributed with a production of over 1,000 tonnes a year. The strange boat you can see is used to store fish food. This farm is well protected by the break water but as there are strong currents within the outer harbour, the salmon must swim constantly. This works their muscles and creates a very high quality flesh.

I talked earlier about the strong currents here. It is important to know that some of the strongest currents in Europe are to be found off the Cotentin regions coastlines, with the Raz Blanchard current to the west and the Rez de Barfleur to the east. Enormous currents of over 12 knots or 20 km/hour have been measured in the Raz Blanchard

Arrival at the central fort

Here we are at the central fort, also known as Napoleon's battery. Edified in 1803 to accommodate weapons and military troops, it originally had 3 firing levels, two of which were blockhouses, along with a platform. There are two ports around the fort and it is very similar to Fort Boyard but with one floor less.

Always on the frontline of merciless storms, it was partially destroyed on February 12th 1808 when a violent storm along with a high tide and strong winds pulled away a section of the structure, carrying 229 people out to sea. It was rebuilt 1811.

The lighthouse which existed at the time was destroyed at the end of the 19th century.

Later on in its history, the fort was taken by the Germans during the Second World War and used as a strategic hold to defend the eastern and western passes.

On the top of the fort is a 37mm canon. You can also see the imposing firing post with its armoured doors and access to the lower galleries as well as the bullets impacts dating from combats during the liberation of France.

Gulls are the only ones holding the fort now along with a few other species, but the fort has been left abandoned.

The sea wall is continually battered high wind and waves and requires considerable and constant renovation, taken care of by the French navy. For example in 1979, the wall gave way at 18 different points and in the 1980's, more than 20,000 tonnes of boulders were used to refill the stone embankments. You can see these repairs all the way along the wall where mortar is regularly replaced as it explodes under the effect of too much salt.



At low tide you can see that these stone embankments have been used as foundations for the sea wall. This base is about 12 metres high and hundreds of metres in length, all of which lies on a bed of sand. There was no natural rock base here, so every single boulder had to be brought in by small boats.

Apart from the protection it gives to boats in the harbour, the sea wall also helps avoid flooding of Cherbourg town centre which is always a risk with strong northerly winds and very high tides.

The small boxes of rusted metal you can see on the wall are guard posts which were used by the Navy to warn of attacks.

Arrival at the Eastern fort

We are now nearing the Eastern fort. Unlike the others, this fort was severely damaged during the Second World War as you can see by its mass of concrete blocks. Following the call from General de Gaulle on June 18th 1940 and with worry of the Germans taking possession of the harbour in Cherbourg and its armaments, the Resistance decided to blow up the armoury in the fort, turning it into a ruin. Only two canons are left in the rubble. They also damaged a number of submarines being built at the shipyard.

The fort was also hit by a ferry in the 1990's when it missed the entrance to the outer port and scraped its hull along the rocky embankments. Luckily there were no injuries and the ferry was repaired and sent back into service.

The fort now has a starboard light to guide boats through the eastern pass.

You can imagine the strength of the explosions in view of the mass of concrete that was moved.

Through the Eastern pass

We are now going through the eastern pass in the direction of île Pelée, a fort that has been completely taken over by the couples of silver headed gulls who live and reproduce here.

Cherbourg is so overpopulated with these gulls that the town has to implement sterilization campaigns on the fort and on roves in town in order not to be overrun by the birds.

Arrival at île Pelée

Here we are at the fort of île Pelée, the biggest and oldest of them all. It was built between 1777 and 1784, using plans created by Mr Decaux (director of all fortifications in Lower Normandy) and has a granite citadel, a trench and a fortified enclosure. It has had different names through the eras: the Royal fort, the National fort and the Imperial fort, but was finally given the name of the rock on which it was built in 1848. Louis XVIth came to stay here and the fort also imprisoned rebellious members of the nobility during the revolutionary period.



A port was then built with a granite slipway and the fort was modernized by German troops during the occupation who installed electricity on the island during the Second World War.

The eastern section of the sea wall starts from île Pelée and was built at around the same time as the Querqueville breakwater in order to finish the outer harbour. A new pass was then added, an idea from Cabart Danneville who the pass is named after. The pass is also known as the Collignon pass due to the beach of the same name just opposite.

The total length of the sea wall is 8 km.

Back into the inner harbour

We will now head back into the inner harbour, passing by the Flamands port and fort as well as the jetty that has marked the end of the inner harbour since 1922.

The Flamands fort is set apart from the others as it is not part of the defence system for the harbour. Built between 1844 and 1856, it was used as a powder magazine for the pyrotechnics section of the Navy.

In the distance we can see the Montagne du Roule, standing at 117 metres high. The Roule fort is located at the top, now a D-day museum. There is a great view over the whole of the town and port – worth a visit!

Arrival in the inner harbour

Here in the inner harbour we will delve into the history of the transatlantic terminal right in front of you.

Before becoming famous as a stop-over for cruise ships, the port of Cherbourg had already made its name when it welcomed the 'Luxor' in August 1833. This ship had a very special cargo from Thebes – the obelisk of Luxor which was to be shipped up the Seine river to Paris and erected in the Place de la Concorde.

The 'Belle Poule' also made its first stop-over in our harbour, bringing back the ashes of Napoleon 1st on the 8th December 1840.

Another prestigious ship that stopped in Cherbourg on its only continental visit and second to last stop-over was the Titanic on April 10th 1912.

The ferry terminal was built on Lawton Collins quay in 1912 replacing the previous wooden structure. As the terminal is located at the front of the port, the bigger cruise ships such as Normandie, the Queen Elisabeth or the Europa with their large drafts had no access and anchored out in the harbour. In 1929, 985 stop-overs brought 300,000 passengers through Cherbourg.



„RADE DE CHERBOURG“

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So in 1928 work started on the deep-water port and a new transatlantic terminal. The architect René Levavasseur collaborated with the engineers Chalos and Fleury. The final part of their project was a building to accommodate European immigrants leaving for the United States. The Atlantic hotel is the orange building you can see and is now the offices of the Cherbourg Chamber of Commerce and Industry. An identical building in New York welcomed these immigrants to America; over 400,000 in a period of 10 years in the 1930's.

The transatlantic terminal was unfortunately damaged in the war, its 70 metre high bell tower dynamited by the Germans in 1944. The embarkation gallery covered the length of the Quai de France and 9 metal gangways enabled passengers to board their ships. Two of these are still represent and used during cruise ship stop-overs.

A large number of buildings were destroyed in the war but the CCI set up a renovation project in 1948 and most have now been restored to their former glory (with the exception of the southern wing).

The transatlantic terminal received visits from the likes of the Queen Mary and the Queen Elisabeth up until the 1960's The next decade saw a period of decline, mostly due to rising competition from in air transport. The Chamber of Commerce looked for new solutions and decided to develop a cross Channel link and freight transport. Several parts of the terminal were knocked down in order to make way for new maritime activities up until 1989, when the building was registered as historical monument and two thirds of its edifice was saved from further destruction.

Since April 2002, this architectural wonder has been rehabilitated and transformed into the Cité de la Mer, a museum based around the oceans with its famous tenant, the Redoutable.

Thanks to its harbour, Cherbourg is a protected port that is now accessible 24 hours a day in any weather conditions, although you strongly advised to sail before the tides change!

It is therefore an ideal port for stop-overs and has become the most popular port in France for sailing ships with over 12,000 berths reserved every year. Indeed, Vauban called the town "the inn of la Manche" The marina presently offers has 1,537

Besides this, Cherbourg has also played host to a number of sailing events such as the Figaro race, the Tour de France by boat, British rallies and the Tall ship's race.

We hope you have found this visit interesting. Thank you for sailing with us!