

# National Treasures

**T**he squat, square, stone tower sits on a rise watching over the southern approach to the village. If we were in the Borders it might be the remnants of a castle keep. In Cornwall it could be the ruined engine house of a tin mine. But we're in Kent and this is the mysterious St Leonard's Tower. Since we moved to West Malling, near Maidstone, from London over 28 years ago, the tower has been our favourite spot to walk. Sitting on the steps below the big oak door, looking over the fields is a great place to unwind and put the world to rights.

What makes the place even more special is that no one is quite sure who built the tower and why. One fact seems clear, the tower takes its name from a chapel dedicated to St Leonard that stood nearby. The most popular theory is that the tower was once part of a castle, built between 1077 and 1108 by Gundulf, Bishop of Rochester.

This would give our humble tower very grand connections as Gundulf, a Norman monk who came to England after the Conquest, built several castles, including Rochester, Colchester and the White Tower of the Tower of London. He also founded St Mary's Abbey in the centre of West Malling, now occupied by a community of Anglican Benedictine nuns offering hospitality to those seeking a peaceful retreat from the pressures of the world.

In *A Short History of West Malling* (1951) Anthony Cronk says: "When we see how St Leonard's Tower still dominates the road into West Malling, it is easy to understand that it was built to defend Gundulf's lands and abbey from the maraudings of the wild Saxons from the Weald."

An alternative theory says the tower's builder was Bishop Odo of Bayeux, half brother of William the Conqueror and thought to have commissioned the famous tapestry.

The sides of St Leonard's Tower are around 33ft and it stands about twice as high, pretty much its original height. The 6ft-thick walls are built of coursed rubble (roughly shaped stones on level beds) but with dressed stones quoins.

The tower is in the care of English Heritage, which says it originally had a basement and two floors. Joist holes showing the level of the wooden floor of the first-floor chamber can still be seen. A spiral staircase in the north-west turret connected the floors. The turret has narrow openings through which arrows could be fired.

The original entrance, in the east face, was reached by a wooden staircase. This was later blocked, and a new round-headed archway formed on the west side at ground level. The tower is lit by round-headed windows.

Below the tower is a small field and a huge wall on a medieval base runs down to St Leonards Street. The wall may have formed part of an enclosure attached to the tower. At the end of the wall the Ewell spring emerges, with the stream flowing under the road and into a lake, now part of Manor Country Park but previously within the

St Leonard's Tower: a place for quiet contemplation and for walking the dog

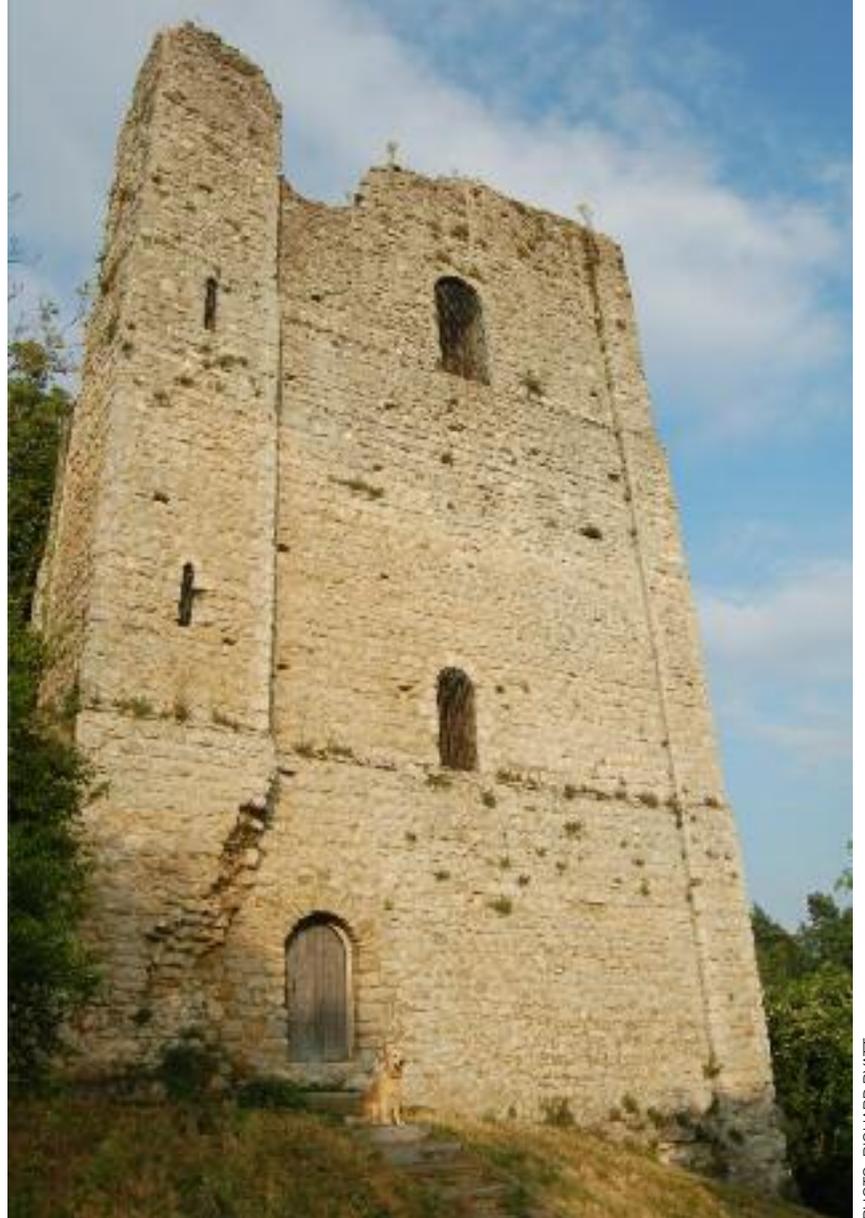


PHOTO: RICHARD BYATT

## No 9: St Leonard's Tower, West Malling, Kent

Richard Byatt celebrates the mystery of a Norman tower

estate of the Grade-II listed 18th century Douces Manor, now converted to apartments. Roman burial urns were discovered beside the road near the spring in 1892.

At the far end of the lake the stream is channelled under another lane and through the grounds of St Mary's Abbey, to emerge in the village once more as a beautiful cascade. Turner captured it in a watercolour held by Tate Britain – the subject only recently identified by a local resident.

The stream links the tower to the manor house, the abbey and the village, a reminder of another age. You catch glimpses of St Leonard's Tower as you walk or cycle around West Malling. It's a true landmark, seemingly unchanging as the years roll by yet in need of protection and care if it is to endure. I shall be raising a glass to Bishop

Gundulf (and to Odo just in case) on November 6, the feast day of St Leonard. ☉

*Richard Byatt is a freelance writer and editor*

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