

The Napoleon Series

SAN SEBASTIAN THEN AND NOW - THE SIEGE OF 1813

By Gareth Glover

Those that have read my two previous articles on Vitoria and Burgos will be aware that I was fortunate to visit northern Spain this summer [1999]. My third and final visit was to the sight of the last major siege of the Peninsular war, San Sebastian.

THE SIEGE

San Sebastian stands on a peninsula, projecting northward into the Bay of Biscay. The fortress was of a basic square design covering the flat area of the peninsula and fully enclosing the town. To the north a steep rocky mount with an ancient castle on its summit and a number of batteries added protection to the town.

The western face of the fortress was a simple loop-holed sea wall overlooking its harbour. The south wall had a high curtain wall with a bastion built at each end. The curtain wall was protected by a major hornwork. The eastern curtain wall stood some twenty-seven feet high and ran along the bank of the River Urumea. The river is tidal here and at high tide reached four feet up the wall. Low tide revealed the entire wall as well as a broad strip of sand banks and rocks; however, care had to be taken because the rocks were slippery and quicksand not unknown.

To the east the Chofre hills commanded the walls at a range of 500 to 1000 yards.

San Sebastian was not thought of seriously as a fortress by the French, as it was commanded by the surrounding hills. It was a merely designed to protect against Spanish insurgents.

Within two days of the huge victory at Vitoria, Spanish insurgents did arrive near San Sebastian but were not foolish enough to attempt to attack; they simply sat down to blockade it and await the British army with its siege guns. General Rey was governor of San Sebastian.

The British army under General Graham arrived on 12 July 1813, and formally took charge of the siege. This time there was no lack of materiel. Guns were delivered from England and bolstered with ship guns and some of the captured French guns from Vitoria. Stores and supplies were easily supplied through the port of Passages a few miles to the east.

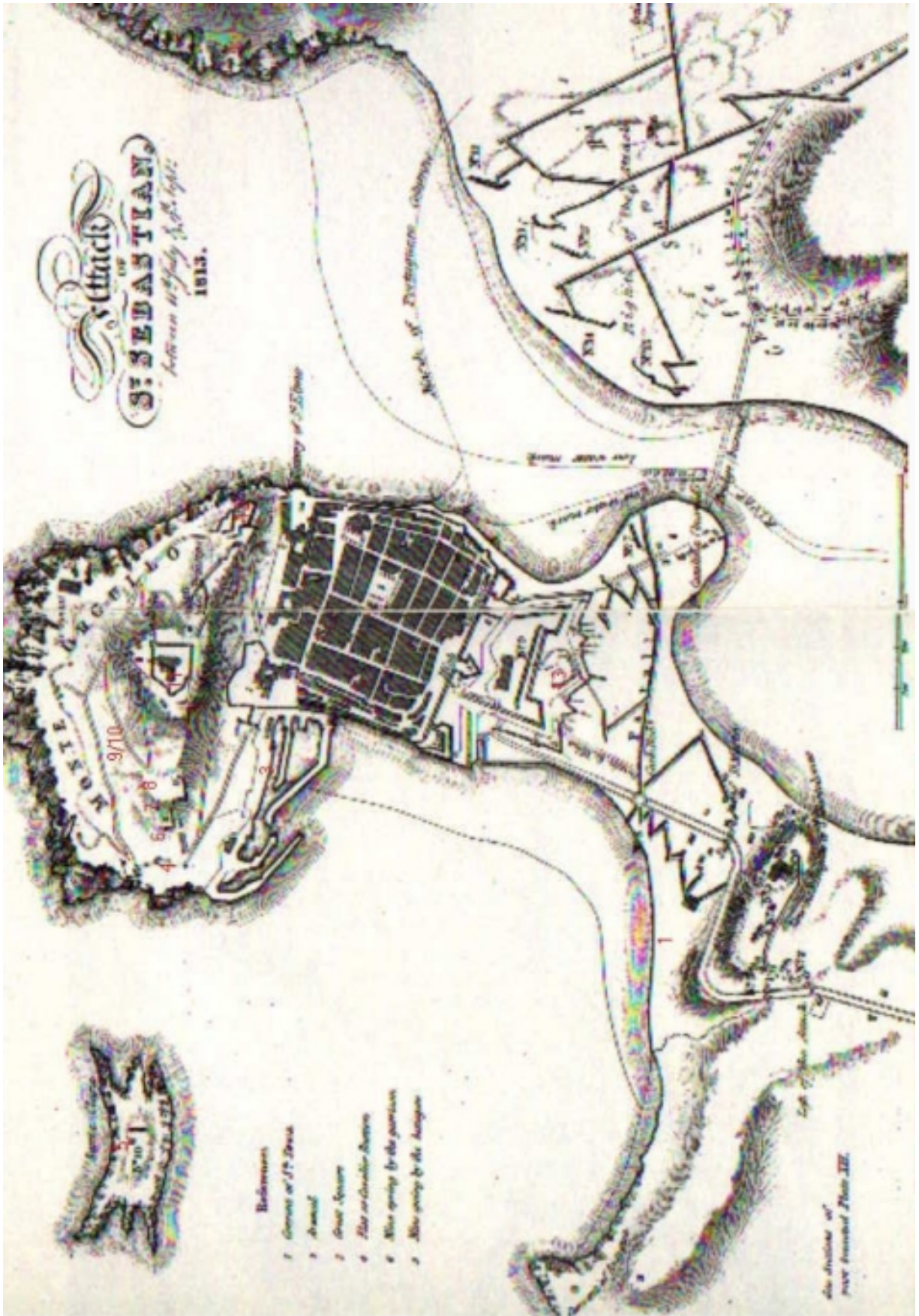
Although trenches were cut across the sand hills to the south, the main attack was from the guns on the Chofre sand hills which made breaches in the eastern wall and bastions. Further batteries were established on Mount Olla and the Isla of Santa Clara, both of which utilised teams of British sailors to haul the great guns to the top. Following failed attempts, a full scale assault was made on the eastern wall breaches across the sands on the 31 August 1813. The attack stalled at the breaches until General Graham reopened the artillery fire just over the heads of the attackers, smashing the French defenders just within their works. The attack recommenced with huge success and the French garrison retreated to the hill and citadel behind. The town was sacked partly because the British believed the inhabitants favoured the French, fire caught hold and the town burnt to a shell.

Rey and his gallant men continued against all odds on Mount Orgull. They had no bomb shelters, so the men dug small hollows in the hillside to sleep safely in. The British increased the pressure until, commencing a furious cannonade at 10 a.m. on 8 September with all 55 heavy guns they could muster, the French were forced to capitulate. British officers touring the hill immediately after recorded that every defensive position showed major damage and they were amazed the French had lasted so long.

SAN SEBASTIAN TODAY

Today, San Sebastian is a thriving city and popular resort. It has grown massively in size since 1813, now occupying all the land shown on the appended 1813 map including the Chofre sand hills, etc. The River Urumea has been straightened and contained within stone banks allowing the land on either side to be reclaimed, the neck of land San Sebastian now stands upon is now much wider than in 1813. The Eastern and Southern walls of the fortress have disappeared completely under the city and now form a wide boulevard dividing the old and new city with car parks below, hence the photo of the old fortifications imprinted on a photo of the city now, found in the carpark! However, the western wall around the harbour and the defences on Mount Orgull are well preserved and are well worth a visit, however, I do not recommend the climb on a hot summer day! The castle of La Mota is now crowned with a large statue of Christ. The convent of St Bartholomew is still visible in the now New Town, near the Cathedral, but shows no evidence of its once warlike use as a site for batteries.

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Attack on
ST. SEBASTIAN,
Between July 28th & Sept. 1813.



- Batteries**
1. *Command of St. David*
 2. *Armed*
 3. *Great Square*
 4. *Star or Circular Battery*
 5. *Two openings by the bastion*
 6. *Two openings by the bastion*

*See divisions of
 new fortification Plate III.*



1. View of Mount Orgull and harbour



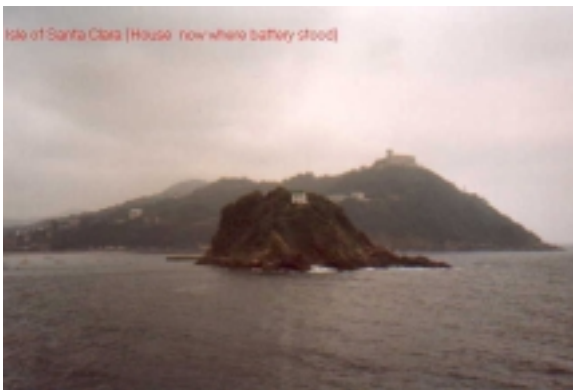
2. Eastern wall overlooking harbour (gun emplacements arrowed)



3. Defensive wall running above harbour



4. Western cliffs and battery facing Santa Clara island



5. Isle of Santa Clara (House indicates position of battery)



6. Hornwork of Santa Clara



7. Storehouse behind Hornwork of Santa Clara and looking up to St. James Battery



8. Battery Napoleon built by French



9. French gunpowder store and sentry box



10. Gunpowder store again--note protective wall to south, but no protection to north, danger of Royal Navy blowing the store up.



11. British 9-pdr brass cannon on garrison carriage in La Mota Castle, barrel dated 1813



12. Gateway of Mirador Battery



13. Photo in Car Park showing how the southern wall and hornwork looked before being built upon and the extension of the land to the east.

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