



JOHN SMITH'S FOLLY and ATHOL TERRACE, DOVER. 1824

## The History of East Cliff, Dover: 1

# Smith's Folly

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Any research into the history of East Cliff must start with Smith's Folly, generally reported to be the first house built there along the seashore. The house, or villa as it is more usually called, was built by Captain John Smith in 1791 and was called Smith's Folly. When it was built in 1791, other houses stood along Athol Terrace, as can be seen from several early drawings, and there were also various dwellings built under and into the cliffs, some little more than converted caves; but certainly Smith's Folly was the first substantial house built at East Cliff.

After the death of John Smith, the villa passed to his son, the famous Sir William Sydney Smith, and thereafter is referred to, in any historical writings, as Sir Sydney Smith's villa.

A first exploration, in Dover Library, revealed several passages, in history and old Dover guidebooks, giving a brief description of the villa; J. Horn's 'Description of Dover' (1817) states:

“Under the Castle and overhung by its tremendous cliffs, is a marine villa the property of Sir Sydney Smith, and occasionally his residence, called ‘The Caves’. It is romantically built and situated. The roofs of the buildings have a singular appearance, being constructed in the form of boats reversed. The principal room is extremely pleasant in the summer.”

Bonython’s Dover Guide of 1823 gives the same information with some slight alterations and a similar description appears in several subsequent Dover guides.

M. Horsley in “Some more Memories of Old Dover” (1890) gives a lot more details of the quaint collection of buildings and of its owner:

“They were commonly called Smith’s Folly and were very conspicuous erections in my young days. The name was given the domain partly on account of the eccentric style of architecture displayed, and partly because so much had been spent on what was, after all, only a poor dwelling, with various outbuildings attached. Captain Smith was aide-de-camp to Lord Sackville at the battle of Minden in 1759 and when he returned from active service, Pitt, who was Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports at the time, granted him a piece of harbour property for his life: on this he built his house in 1791. Some of the walls were of flint, with roofs made of boats reversed and one part of the building consisted of a tower, made in imitation of the prison in Paris called the Temple, where Sir Sidney Smith was a prisoner for two years.

But before the actual building was begun, Captain Smith employed boys to level the ground, giving them sixpence a day and their meals. It is said that while they were at work he would call them in once or twice a day to a prayer meeting which he held. He had a cave excavated in the cliff, with a ledge cut out in the side of the cave, for what purpose no one could tell, and in the centre was a sarcophagus in which he intended to be buried; but when he died his sons would not carry out his ideas but had him buried properly in a churchyard, saying that ‘Though he was crazy, he should at least have a Christian burial’. At his death the government did not claim the property and his son became the owner.”

A lengthy and interesting account of John Smith can be found in an article, which was one of a series published in the Dover Express in 1906-1907 and written by the Editor, John Bavington Jones. The series was called DOVER CAMEOS, Men and Deeds in Famous Episodes in Dover History, (No. 34. John Smith). This goes into further details of the life, career and writings of John Smith, focussing on the man rather than the house he built. However, the article contains a description of the villa, reputed to be by one who remembered it.

“Its position was close to the East Cliff Jetty and it consisted of some half dozen one-storied buildings, roofed by inverted boats. A two-storied erection in front, of a castellated character, formed the entrance, flanked by two round towers with balconies, from which there was access to the upper floors and there was, at the rear of this embattled structure, a tower surmounted by a roof and spire, which resembled that at the West Cliffs Church near Dover. Its western part was so near the sea and the ground so low that high tides were not infrequent visitors.”

A comparison of the two accounts provides a reminder to the researcher of the pitfalls of accepting as fact information collected from books or newspapers. Whereas Horsley had stated that Sir Sidney became owner of the property on his father's death, the *Dover Express* suggested that Sir Sidney did not inherit the property, because he was the second son, and that it passed to his elder brother. Secondly, where Horsley attributed the design of the tower to the Temple in Paris the second article compared it to the West Cliffs Church..

Thirdly, where Horsley stated unequivocally that Smith was granted the land by Pitt, the *Dover Express* article stated that how he obtained the land was a matter for conjecture and suggested that it may have been given to him much earlier by his friend, Lord Dorset, when he was Lord Warden. As the *Cameo* article points out, all John Smith's sons became famous in their time, but the celebrated Sir Sidney was the most well-known. He went to sea at the age of 12, in 1776, and remained at sea or abroad, except for short intervals, until 1810. In fact when John Smith built the villa, Sir Sidney was engaged either in fighting the French or being taken prisoner by them. Nevertheless, John Smith did, in fact, leave the villa to Sidney and after John Smith's death the house is always referred to as Sir Sidney Smith's villa, although he did not spend much time there. His occasional residence at East Cliff must have been between 1810, when he left the sea, and 1815, when he took up residence in Paris.

The *Cameo* article presents an endearing portrait of John Smith as a sincere, loyal individual, with regret that he spent his last days as a kind of eccentric hermit living under the cliffs at Dover and commenting, wryly, on the reason why he is remembered by posterity.

"The notoriety, which John Smith earned by building himself an odd sort of house, illustrates how a man's reputation is frequently due more to his whims than to his more solid qualities; for John Smith was not a fool, although he owned a 'Folly'. He was a plain man content with a plain name, John Smith, yet he might properly have been styled Captain John Smith, for he held that rank in the Guards and was aide-de-camp



The Marine Villa of JOHN SMITH, Esq. (Father of Sir Sydney Smith) under Dover Cliffs

to the commander of the British forces in the famous battle of Minden; but having abandoned the Army and discarded all public affairs, he was known at Dover as John Smith, Esq., of the Folly, under Dover Castle.”

John Smith died on 16 February 1804. As already mentioned, the villa was little used by his son and much of the adjoining land was mortgaged or sold in the following two or three decades. Smith's Folly was eventually pulled down. The Dover guidebook of 1830 records:

“... the building of a substantial house called East Cliff Lodge, used as a boarding or lodging house, built on the site of the former Sir Sidney Smith's villa. Also another genteel dwelling, tastefully fitted up and the whole encircled by a wall.”

Horsley says (1890):

“The name of Sir Sidney still survives in the “Sidney Villas”, the last two houses in East Cliff.”

In continuing to research the history of East Cliff, I have been fortunate to have access to the title deeds of three properties in the road and these have provided a wealth of information which will form the basis of another article. However, there are two items which are relevant to this account of Smith's Folly.

One of the first facts to emerge was that John Smith had agreed to leave the property to his son, Sidney Smith, in a Title Deed drawn up in 1803, the year before his death.

25 June 1803. “Indentures of the lease and release made between John Smith of The Cave near the town and port of Dover in the Co. of Kent Esq. and Sir William Sidney Smith of George Street, Hanover Square in the Co. of Middlesex, Knight, son of John Smith of the other part “... “All those several messuages Tenements Dwelling Houses or Buildings and Towers near or adjoining each other, sit. and being near the bottom of the Cliff of Hill on the summit of which Dover Castle is standing.”

The document goes on to list various other Edifices, Buildings, Rooms, Apartments and Caves, Gardens and pieces of land. These were all to be had and holden to Sir William Sidney Smith and his Heirs but were to be “To the use of the said John Smith for the term of his natural life. And from immediately after his decease or other determination of the Estate To the use and behoof of the said Sir William Smith and his Heirs” etc.

In fact John Smith died within nine months of signing this document, in February, 1804.

The other document of interest here is an affidavit, dated 2 October 1849, made by a John Gregory, Bricklayer, aged 75 years. John Gregory was one of the boys who helped to clear the land for the building of Smith's Folly (mentioned above by Horsley). He describes his work:

“... for a period of upwards of three years, before I was ten years old, (with a number of other boys) I was employed by John Smith to make chalk bricks or square pieces of chalk with which some workmen employed by the said John Smith, erected a building on a part of the estate called East Cliff.”

The document, which covers three pages of closely-written script, includes a description of the work done by the boys in clearing out a cave in the cliffs, purchased by John Smith from its occupant, a man called Simpson, for the sum of £5 (i.e. the cave used by Smith to build his sarcophagus). Later chalk and rubbish was laid upon the beach, says

Gregory, and the ground levelled out, by direction of John Smith, "who immediately afterwards began from time to time to enclose such beachy ground with walls made of flint stones and chalk as the same was from time to time levelled and prepared". Obviously this work was taking place from about 1781 onwards, if Gregory was engaged upon it from about the age of seven. He relates that one day, when he had been working on the site for about five years, he saw two gentlemen in a balloon (whom he was informed were Dr Jeffries and Mr Blanchard) on their passage from Dover Castle to France. (editor's note: Blanchard's crossing took place on 7 January 1785).

A large part of the document is concerned with Gregory's declaration that all the land at East Cliff Estate was owned by John Smith. It lists all the details of the enclosed land, buildings and caves which comprised the property, relating these to the position of the properties occupied in East Cliff in 1849. It also mentions the erection of capstans upon the shingle and the use of the beach for keeping boats and for bathing. Possibly, the new owners of properties along East Cliff required clarification on the original ownership and use of the land, as it affected their title deeds. Whatever the reason for the affidavit, it provides an invaluable insight into the origins of Smith's Folly.

For their help in providing material for this article the author gives grateful thanks to Mrs Winifred Cope, of No. 6 East Cliff, to Mr Steve Peters of No. 9 to Mr Mark Frost of Dover Museum and to Mrs Patricia Godfrey of Dover Library Local Studies Centre.

## The Golden Triangle: Castle Street to the Sea

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### PART 4

Camden Crescent, ten tall and rather distinguished looking houses, extended from New Bridge to the garden of 'The Round House' and until the middle twenties were all, with the exception of No. 1, in single occupation. The ground floor of No. 1 housed the costumiers' and milliners' business of the elitist Misses Todd and Harnden who remained in occupation until the late twenties or early thirties. By 1930/31 the conversion of the other houses in the crescent into four, and in some cases five, flats had been completed and were soon fully occupied. By about 1935, the conversion of No. 1 was also completed, but by then the Misses Todd and Harnden had been replaced by Charles Stewart, a

tailor. In 1940 Nos. 8, 9 and 10 were destroyed by enemy attack along with the south-west end of Liverpool Street, and at the same time the Grand Hotel was damaged beyond repair. In the late forties, when attempts were being made to schedule and repair war damage No. 1 housed the East Kent Joint Planning Committee. The local Fuel Overseer and the offices of the Soldiers', Sailors' and Airmen's Family Association were also there. Later the houses that exist today were used as an annexe to the White Cliffs Hotel and the Hotel de France and later still, as their shipping operation developed, Townsend's took over No. 1 and used it for their operating offices, and eventually, until they bought and moved into the A.A. building in Russell Street now used by P. & O., they occupied the whole of the crescent.

The Granville Gardens, on the same site as the present garden between the sea and Camden Crescent, were, since the turn of the century and until 1939, the scene of much social activity. There had been a bandstand in the gardens since about 1911 and then, in the twenties, a pavilion with glass walls and a glass roof was