

FORT BURGOYNE

- A Brief History

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DURING THE SIXTY YEARS following the Battle of Waterloo, British popular and political opinion suffered three periods of alarm with regard to imagined French aggressive intentions.

The first of these, in 1847, was triggered by advances in technology. Explosive shells had increased the power of artillery, and steam power for naval vessels threatened to render obsolete overnight the Royal Navy. It was feared that the French might gain a temporary command of the channel and, no longer reliant on wind or tide, land a considerable force on British soil. This view was put most forcibly by General Sir John Fox Burgoyne, Inspector General of Fortifications, and was strongly backed by Lord Palmerston the Foreign Secretary. The revolutions of 1848 forced Louis Philippe, the French king, and his son to take refuge in England and the panic subsided.

In 1851 and 1852 the coup d'état and subsequent re-election of Napoleon III caused another panic, which was only dispelled when France and Britain allied themselves against Russia.

The third, more serious, alarm was generated once again by technological advances. France launched an ironclad steam warship - La Gloire, and new rifled guns increased the range and accuracy of artillery fire to such an extent that bombardment ranges increased from 4,000 to 8,000 yards. Despite the recent alliance during the Crimean War, fears about French intentions were increased by Napoleon III declaring himself Emperor and by building work beginning on the Suez Canal. The development of a large fortified harbour at Cherbourg was inspected by Prince Albert and Britain's defences suffered in the comparison. Britain, it was felt, was falling behind, and this feeling became apparent with the growth of Rifle Volunteer units up and down the country.

These various alarms caused money to be spent once again on fortifications and

armaments throughout the 1850s, but it was not until August 1859 that a Royal Commission was instructed to enquire into the "present state, condition and sufficiency of the Fortifications existing for the defence of our United Kingdom..."

Work was already underway on the Western Heights at Dover but when the Commission reported in February 1860, amongst their recommendations was the construction of a new fort to the north of Dover Castle "in order to prevent an enemy establishing his batteries on the high ground, which overlooks the castle in that direction."

Although this fort was originally called Castle Hill Fort it was quickly renamed Fort Burgoyne in honour of the General who had pushed so hard for new fortifications.

In November 1860 approval was granted to acquire the land and the outline design approved by the Secretary of State for War. In June 1861 work began on the construction of bomb proof casemated barracks to house one Field Officer, six officers, 217 men and two horses. These barracks were built by civilian contractors at a total cost of £29,508 but the remainder of the work was completed by military labour.

The fort was designed by Captain Edmund Du Cane who was also responsible for the reconstruction of the defences on the Western Heights. The completed form of the fort is polygonal reflecting other forts engendered by the Royal Commission, such as those on Portsdown Hill at Portsmouth.

Fort Burgoyne is surrounded by a dry ditch 35 feet wide and revetted with concrete and flint in places due to problems with the structure of the underlying chalk. In the centre of the north face, hidden in the ditch, is a double caponier to give flanking fire along the ditch floor in both directions. At both the

north-east and north-west corners of the fort are single caponiers with another on the west flank to give cover to the remaining ditches. On either side a ditch stretches across the crest of the hill to give two wings to the fort, each with its own emplacements for guns. The battery at the west wing was protected by a caponier to defend the ditch.

Within the fort bomb-proof casemates provided the accommodation and also acted as platforms for the guns, some of which were housed in Haxo casemates. Ramps led up to the top of the casemates to enable guns to be positioned. The casemates along the north side of the fort were intended as men's barracks, flanked on either side by officers' quarters. In basements beneath the officers' quarters were rooms for servants, officers' kitchens, larders, scullery and cellars for wine and beer. At either end of the casemated barracks, and adjoining the officers' quarters, were the main magazines with passages sloping down to give access to the north-east and north-west caponiers.

Water tanks beneath the centre casemates provided water in case of siege and the fort's main gate to the south was flanked by guard rooms and cells. The access bridge and ditch at this point was protected by gun rooms in the ditch wall.

By the end of 1868 the fort was complete at a total cost of £88,053 although its guns and the racer tracks on which to mount them had not yet been fitted. The fort had been constructed for 29 guns along the rampart, six of which were to be protected by Haxo casemates. In the caponiers and flanking batteries there was room for 26 smaller guns or carronades, and two guns on the parade level protected the ditch to the east wing battery. East wing battery was to be equipped with five guns and west wing battery with four.

The total capacity of the magazines, including the expense magazines in the Haxo casemates, the caponiers and the wing batteries was 3,672 barrels of powder.

Despite the confident assertion in 1874 by the Deputy Director of Works (Fortifications) Lt. Colonel Jervois, that "so long as it is held (Fort Burgoyne), an attack is impracticable either upon the castle or along the northern front of the Western Heights", the fort still had no guns.

By 1886 Fort Burgoyne was equipped with six 7 inch Rifled Breech Loading guns (RBLs) seven 40 pounder RBLs, two 32 pounder smooth bore guns and, in the caponiers, sixteen 24 pounder carronades. It was proposed that these should be replaced with one fixed 5 inch breech loader (BL) and one mobile, four 64 pounder Rifled Muzzle Loading guns (RMLs), fourteen 24 pounder carronades and four mobile 8 inch RML howitzers. In addition these guns were to be supplemented by a machine gun.

The proposal to change the armaments at Fort Burgoyne also recommended that the Haxo casemates be blocked as they were now obsolete. In 1888 this report was accepted. Also in 1888 it was realised that the 24 pounder carronades providing flanking fire along the ditch towards east wing battery were useless as they were blocked by the brick piers of the entrance bridge and the carronades were removed.

In 1892 it was recommended that two 6.6 inch howitzers and a 4 inch BL replace the four 64 pounder guns intended to be fitted in place of the 7 inch RBLs, and that the number of carronades be reduced to seven, with the remainder of the guns being replaced by nine machine guns. This work was carried out and in April 1893 only the 4 inch BL remained to be fitted. By 1906 all the guns had been removed and replaced by three machine guns in the fort and three in its wing batteries. Fort Burgoyne now became a defensible barrack and a base for mobile guns rather than a permanent defence.

During the First World War brick gun emplacements were constructed and during the Second, when the fort was home to two batteries of 25 pounder field guns, concrete emplacements were added.

Today Fort Burgoyne remains virtually unchanged but is part of Connaught Barracks and is not accessible to the public.

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