THE GRAND SHAFT

Jon Iveson

The top of the Grand Shaft showing the arrangement of three spiral staircases around a central light well.

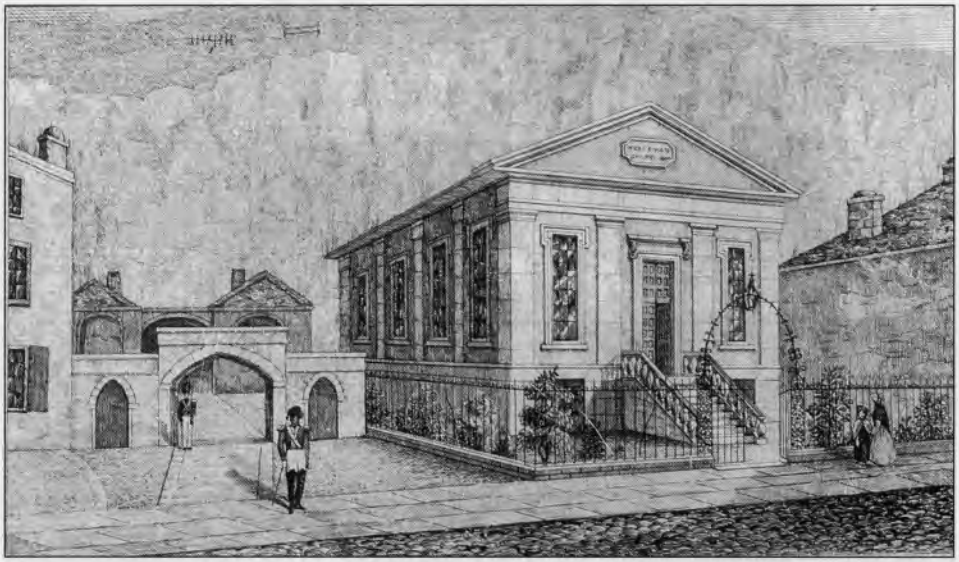
The Grand Shaft, which links Snargate Street with the Western Heights fortifications 140 feet above, is one of the most impressive survivals of the nineteenth century fortifications in Dover.

The staircase is made up of three separate stairs winding one above the other around a central light well. Access from Snargate Street at the bottom of the shaft is by way of a sloping tunnel 180 feet long cut into the chalk cliff. At the top a flight of steps leads to the natural bowl in which the Grand Shaft barracks once stood.

The Grand Shaft was built as an afterthought to solve the problem of getting troops from the barracks on the Heights to the town below without having to travel large distances or risk slippery tracks and footpaths. Because the Shaft was added later it cut through the parade ground of the Grand Shaft Barracks, making it virtually useless for the purpose of drilling troops.

The building of the Shaft was the idea of Brigadier General Twiss, who suggested it in October 1804 in a letter to General Dundas:

"the new barracks.....are little more than 300 yards horizontally from the sea beach.....and about 180 feet above high-



The Snargate Street entrance to the Grand Shaft, circa 1840.

with them and the centre of town, on horseback the distance is nearly a mile and a half and to walk it about three quarters of a mile, and all the roads unavoidably pass over ground more than 100 feet above the barracks, besides the footpaths are so steep and chalky that a number of accidents will unavoidably happen during the wet weather and more especially after floods. I am therefore induced to recommend the construction of a shaft, with a triple staircase..... the chief object of which is the convenience and safety of troops..... and may eventually be useful in sending reinforcements to troops or in affording them a secure retreat."

Planning for the staircase must have already been fairly advanced since an estimate already existed as to what the cost of construction might be. This cost was estimated at £3,947-7-0d, including a figure of £150 for the purchase of the land on Snargate Street and the removal of a stable which stood on the site.

Work commenced in November 1804 and progressed rapidly. However in after heavy rain caused a two-ton block of chalk to break away from the side of the shaft and carry away the scaffolding, injuring one man. Work was resumed, but the scaffolding was again carried away in December and work was again stopped.

Despite these problems the Shaft was eventually completed in 1807. The cost of the work totalled £3,331-2-10_d. – an underspend of over six hundred pounds.

The top of the Grand Shaft has changed little since it was built, although the barracks and parade ground were removed during the 1960s. The Snargate Street entrance has however been altered a number of times.

When completed the foot of the Shaft was provided with an open courtyard surrounded by a wall. Access was by way of a Gothic style archway through which ran a cobbled road. Pedestrian access was by way of two smaller arches in the same style, which flanked the roadway on either side. At the back of the courtyard against the cliff guard rooms flanked the tunnel.

This design was swept away in 1860, when the drainage for the Heights was amended following a report from the Barracks and Hospitals Improvement Commission in 1858, which noted that "the drainage from the Western Heights Barracks is brought down to the town sewers by a vertical pipe to the shaft and stairs. When the privies are flushed the force of the water down the pipe forces the sewer gas through traps into houses and the shaft. A large tank is required at the bottom of the shaft with a foul air pipe." This tank was installed under the courtyard and the Gothic façade removed.

The new entrance comprised two equal sized round-headed arches. The south-western arch was open allowing a road into the courtyard. The other arch was blind with a window into the room behind. The entrance gate was a sliding wooden door, which could be pushed through a slot into the room on the north-eastern side. This arrangement seems to have become inconvenient, and the sliding door was replaced by a hinged door or gate at a later date and the slot was blocked. The guard room at the foot of the cliff was extended along the north-east wall as far as the façade.

Around 1900 the arched entrance was replaced by two brick pillars and hinged wrought iron gates. The arrangement remained the same until the site was partly cleared in 1967.

The Shaft itself was restored during the 1970s and further work was carried out in 1986. In 1995 the entrance courtyard on Snargate Street was restored and the 1860 façade rebuilt.

'FERRY FOCUS' REPORT

Christopher Burrows • East Kent Ferry Club

P&O STENA LINE

The main event in the last few months has to be the dramatic collision at Calais of P&O/SL's flagship P&OSL AQUITAINE. The ferry was preparing to berth at No.7 berth at 09.30hrs on 27th April when the ships' engines failed causing the AQUITAINE to collide heavily with the berth, injuring 37 passengers and one crew member. After some five hours alongside at Calais foot passengers were able to disembark as were car passengers, albeit via the ships' upper car deck due to the damage to the lower car deck bow visor. The AQUITAINE was dispatched later the same day to the ARNO yard at Dunkerque for a preliminary survey and the removal of a 3 metre section of the ships' bulbous bow. Thereafter she proceeded at slow speed to A&P Falmouth (who completed her expensive refit last year) for full repairs and was expected to return to service by the beginning of June. Due to the temporary loss of the P&O/SL AQUITAINE some rescheduling of sailings was undertaken. The exact cause of the incident is not yet known.

SEAFRANCE

Seafrance, now wholly owned by the state-owned SNCF French Railways have announced an FF600 million order for a new 32,OOOGRT ferry for their Calais - Dover service. The new ship with capacity for 1800 passengers and 700 car or 120 freight units is to be constructed by Aker Finnyards Oy and is scheduled to enter service in September 2001. With a service speed of 25 knots the ship will cut the crossing time