

Dover's Medieval Walls

By Ivan Green

During the 14th century there was an escalation of the long-drawn-out cross Channel hostilities, which had been for so long fought in England's favour, but reverted at that time to French superiority. The French mariners had built up a large fleet of raiding ships which increasingly harassed the coasts of south-east England, and they even carried out raids on the Cinque Port towns with much success.

Attacks largely ceased during the Black Death of 1348-49. But a generation after Europe had recovered from that terrible plague which had caused a temporary halt to hostilities all over Western Europe the French raids resumed and the whole of south-east England became very alarmed, even fearing a wholesale invasion of the country, so much so that the king permitted some castles to be built as a defensive measure. These were Cooling and Scotney in Kent, and Bodiam just over the border in Sussex. The defences of Canterbury and Rochester were also strengthened.

Work on surrounding the town of Dover with permanent walls started in reality in 1368 and there are many references to it in records until 1384 when all reference to wall building ceased, so it is presumed that in that year the work was completed. Later financial references refer to wall maintenance or wall tax.

In 1368 the building of a wall to completely enclose Dover was obviously in full swing, since town records include an entry of £56. 12s. 4d. 'as well as for enclosing the town with walls as for the necessities of the town' and also a payment of £69. 16s. 8d. 'paid this year for works on the new walls for enclosing the town of Dover'. The Snar Gate seems to have been built in 1370.

The materials were home produced, including stone from decayed buildings in the town itself and also quantities from the

beach, clunch of hard chalk from the lower strata of the cliffs, softer and crumbling chalk for the lime kilns, and timber from the wooded valleys in the district. The lime was apparently produced locally, the town always having had limekilns in Limekiln Lane, later, of course, our present Limekiln Street.

The work must have been a heavy burden on the townsfolk, the money being raised by the usual old method of the maletote. The charges were levied and collected first, and then the capital was expended until it was exhausted. Some parts of the western wall and the Snar Gate were built in 1370. The charges for 1371 and the preceding year totalled no less than £72. 16s. 2d. These were large sums in those times, equal to many thousands of pounds today. However, in 1372 the financial burden was only £13. 18s. 0d. In the two years 1372-73 maletotes totalled £76. 19s. 8d. A note states that this sum was spent both on materials and labour. At that time there were ten men working on the walls at a cost of 6d per day each, and at that sum they were well paid for that time.

25 quarters of lime carted to the site cost 3 shillings, and 4 cartloads of stones cost 1s 6d. and carting to the sites where they were to be used cost a further 3d. Wood and tiles for roofing the wall gate cost £3. 5s. 0d. This is generally thought to have been the Biggin Gate. The wall charges ceased to be recorded in 1384, so it is presumed that by this time the major work of wall building was completed, but a tax was imposed for the maintenance of the walls in later centuries. These wall costs persisted into the 15th century. In later years the walls were altered and some of the details of these are complex and not agreed by later recorders. Different generations gave alternative names to some of

the gates. These are too complex to be dealt with in detail here.

In the 1595 map of Dover much of the wall system still survived though in many areas it had disappeared and the town was already expanding well beyond its earlier limits. In some cases, where sections of walls had survived, townsmen had built houses up against their inner sides and in these cases the council imposed a charge.

By the 18th century most of the walls had disappeared, and those gates that survived were a growing nuisance because of their limited width, which impeded trade and commerce.

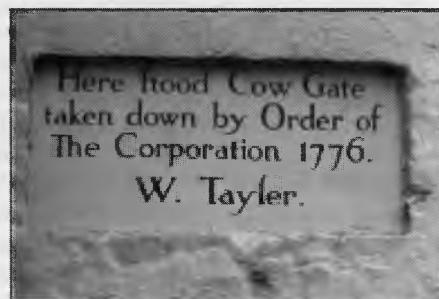
The sites of several of the gates were, however, recorded on stone plaques and in old documents and drawings.

Perhaps the most famous gate was the Biggin Gate which stood near the church of St Mary the Virgin. It stretched across Cannon Street from the present Etam shop to the Abbey National premises on the opposite side of Cannon Street. A slight bend in the street indicates the line of the street outside the gate.

The site of the shop has an interesting history. Many people will remember the inn which once stood there. When this was pulled down, excavations for the foundations for Tesco's first local store unearthed part of the town's old wall. This was covered up by the new foundations and so still survives underground. Tesco soon moved out from their original tiny Dover shop and the present Etam shop arrived.

The Abbey National building was the old site of the Rose Inn, and on its front was the plaque shown in the photograph below. When the Abbey National society recon-

ditioned the old building before they moved in this plaque was moved round the corner into New Street, which should never have been allowed. It should be re-sited on its original position on the front of the building where it properly belongs. The old town wall ran up the side of the present New Street whose original name was New Lane, originally a muddy track just outside the town's wall making a short cut to the end of Queens Gardens. The Cow Gate stood at the top of the old



Queen Street and this plaque was for many years attached to the front of the 'Cause Is Altered' inn which stood only a few yards from the old gate. The Cow Gate was where for centuries the townsfolk had turned out their cattle on the Western Heights, rights which ceased when the Heights were fortified. The inn has long since been demolished.

The Snar Gate stood at the Eastern end of the present Snargate Street, near the Seafarers Hostel. On the brick harbour wall on the opposite side of the street there was for centuries a stone plaque, indicating the gate's original position, but when the wall was rebuilt it was not replaced.

