

# *Dover's Hidden Fortress*

*Derek Leach*

Unknown to most people who drive along the A20 to the Eastern Docks as well as to many Doverians is an almost hidden, fantastic 19th century fortress, which in any other town would be a major tourist attraction. Largely derelict and deteriorating its existence has been threatened several times since the Second World War. The Dover Society and its predecessor, the New Dover Group, have been to the fore in objecting to any official vandalism.

Earthworks were thrown up in 1779 when Britain was under threat from the French. Later, with the country again under threat from republican France and then Napoleon, plans were made to transform the Western Heights into the largest and strongest fortification in the country, able to house thousands of soldiers, not to repel a French landing at Dover, but to counter the expected landing between Hythe and Rye.

The plans envisaged a citadel - a modern version of a castle keep - on the highest ground including a parade ground, storehouses, barracks and a 420 foot deep well. This would be connected by deep ditches to a redoubt - a strong outwork capable of firing in any direction with commanding views of the town and harbour. Construction began in 1796 and continued until 1814 when the threat from Napoleon evaporated. Accommodation for 1200 soldiers was provided by the Grand Shaft Barracks named after the incredible staircase begun in 1804 and

completed in 1807. This gave direct access from the cliff top barracks to the town below with 59 steps descending to a circular excavated bowl at the top of three spiral staircases, each 140 steps, built around a circular brick-lined shaft. At its foot a tunnel led to Snargate Street. A military hospital was also built. The works were, however, incomplete.

When William Cobbett visited in 1823 he was not impressed, 'a couple of square miles or more, hollowed out like a honeycomb...that either madmen or profligacy the most scandalous must have been at work here for years'.

Work resumed in 1853 when Napoleon III posed another threat. The top of the hill was removed as it was essential for the Citadel to have a clear view of the Drop Redoubt. A massive engineering feat is the four miles of connecting Lines (dry moats/ditches) 30 - 50 feet deep and 30 feet wide criss-crossing the hill top with 18 inch thick brick sides. Concealed gun galleries in the ditch walls enabled musket fire along the floor of the moats. The new South Front Barracks provided additional accommodation, increasing the capacity to 4,000. Married quarters and a garrison church were built. An officers' mess inside the Citadel resembled a mock Tudor country house with a ceremonial staircase. The exposed western flanks were protected by the new Western Outworks. Vehicle entrance from the south was via the new and forbidding Archcliffe Gate,

whilst from the town on the north side a steep hill led to bridges over two ditches, then through a narrow tunnel with a sliding door.

The works between 1853 and 1860 cost £700,000, but were abandoned in 1920 because the barracks were condemned. Occupied and fortified again in the Second World War they were again vacated. South Front Barracks were demolished in 1959 and the Grand Shaft Barracks, occupied temporarily in the 1950s, followed in 1965.

In 1954 the Prison Department took over the Citadel, which later became a Borstal (young offenders' institution). Casemates became cells and the deep ditches kept everybody in, but insensitive demolitions, alterations and additions were made without consultation. The New Dover Group complained to the Ombudsman, resulting in formal criticism of the Home Office. The Dover Society (successor to The New Dover Group) protested again in 1990, resulting in yet more criticism of the Home Office. Prison Officers' houses were also built.

The War Office transferred 126 acres to Dover Corporation who planned to fill in the historic moats with town refuse! To prevent this, a campaign, initiated by John Peverley, fought successfully for scheduling the fortifications as an Ancient Monument. Despite this, the Corporation drove a new road through the North Lines, although the North Entrance was spared. Archcliffe Gate was not so lucky; it was demolished. The Garrison

Church and Military Hospital suffered the same fate.

English Heritage became responsible for the rest of the fortifications but, with their flagship attraction of Dover Castle so close, only carry out absolutely essential repairs. Compare this with the restored Napoleonic forts around Chatham and Portsmouth now open to the public.

A welcome development in 1989 was the formation of the White Cliffs Countryside Project to protect and maintain the ancient chalk grasslands around the Heights. Later, in 2000, the Western Heights Preservation Society was formed with volunteers clearing rubbish and scrub from the fortifications and organising open days for the public to view the incredible Drop Redoubt.

Now housing and other developments are proposed and once again The Dover Society is taking a keen interest to ensure that the integrity of this scheduled ancient monument is protected. Some limited and sensitive development may be acceptable, but, if so, the opportunity should be seized to ensure that there is a substantial practical gain for the Western Heights fortifications.

\* \* \* \* \*

*NB Dover's Hidden Fortress - the history and preservation of the Western Heights fortifications by John Peverley was published by The Dover Society in 1996 and is still in print.*