

NOVEMBER MEETING

Three Generations of Burgoynes

A talk by Barry O'Brien

Reported by Alan Lee

Barry commenced his talk by stating that Fort Burgoyne was built on the highest strategic point in Dover in the mid-19th Century. The aim being to help strengthen Britain's defence system and to give extra, landside protection, to Dover Castle.

The major concern, at that time, was an invasion by France, led by Napoleon III, who had greatly expanded his maritime forces. Britain's own army was depleted and having to deal with an insurrection in India and a war in China.

In 1858 information was received that France was secretly planning to invade Britain. Panic ensued as it was thought that the coastal defences would be unable to repel an invasion.

The Prime Minister Viscount Lord Palmerston decided to bolster defences at a number of key locations, Dover being one of them. Work would see the construction of a new fort to be called Castle Hill Fort designed by Captain Edmund Du Cane. He was also responsible for the Officers Barracks at the Citadel on Dover's Western Heights. Construction started on the fort in 1861 and was completed in 1868. It cost £88,053 (equivalent to £9 million today). In the end it was named Fort Burgoyne in honour of General John Fox Burgoyne.



Engraving of John Burgoyne

Well, who was this General? In 1737 his father, also named John, had, at 15 years old, purchased a commission in the Horse Guards. Through his school friend Lord Strange he got to know his sister, Lady Charlotte Stanley, the daughter of Edward Stanley Lord Derby who was totally opposed to John and Charlotte marrying. On hearing this they eloped and were married.

Derby was furious and cut his daughter off without a penny. John had to sell his commission to finance the first couple of years of their married life. After the birth of their daughter, Charlotte Elizabeth, Derby accepted them back into the family.

In 1756, with the outbreak of the Seven Years War, John Burgoyne became a Captain and Lieutenant-Colonel in the Coldstream Guards. In 1768 he was elected MP for Midhurst, Sussex and the same year distinguished himself as a Brigadier General in Portugal.

At the outbreak of the American War, now a Major-General, he arrived in Boston in May 1775, although his wife was extremely



Surrender at Saratoga

ill at the time. On 17th October 1777 he surrendered his entire army of 5,800 men at Saratoga. At that time, it was Britain's worst defeat in the Revolutionary War. The American General Horatio Gates granted him parole to return to Britain to defend his name. He was deprived of his regiment and on arrival learnt that his wife, Charlotte, had died whilst he was in America.

He was later to father four more children with the actress and opera singer Susan Caulfield who he may have married in 1781.

When the Whigs came to power in 1782 his rank was restored and he was given the colonelcy of the King's Own Royal Regiment, made Commander-in-Chief in Ireland and appointed a Privy Councillor. At that time, he was also a well-known dramatist.

In 1792 John Burgoyne died and bequeathed the bulk of his estate to his wife Susan with rotation to their sons. John Fox Burgoyne was 10 years old at the time. Educated at Eton and the Royal Military Academy, Woolwich he was commissioned into the Royal Engineers as a 2nd Lieutenant on 29th August 1798, aged 16.

Before he was 18, he was promoted to Lieutenant, took part in the Siege of Malta, and then became aide-de-camp to General Henry Fox. Promoted to Captain he saw action in Egypt then in 1808, during the Peninsular War, he became commanding engineer on the staff of Sir John Moore.

During the war of 1812-15 in North America he was Chief Engineer and then



Sir John Fox Burgoyne

served firstly in that role in the Army of Occupation in France until 1821 then at the Royal Engineers Depot, Chatham.

1837 he was promoted to Colonel and the next year to Major-General and appointed Knight Commander of the Order of the Bath.

As an Inspector General of Fortifications, he advised on relief work during the Great Hunger, or Potato Famine, in Ireland. In 1851 he was promoted to Lieutenant General and to Knight Grand Cross of the Order of the Bath. In 1854 he became Colonel Commandant of the Royal Engineers as a Colonel and in 1856 he became a Baronet.

On 2nd August 1856 the Prime Minister, Lord Palmerston invited him to go over the plans of all defensive works under construction, both home and abroad. At that time, he held various posts and honours including permanent member of the Defence Committee, President of the Army Signal Committee, awarded an



Field Marshal Sir John Fox Burgoyne

honorary degree as Dr of Civil Law, made a Fellow of the Royal Society, awarded the Order of the Medjidie 1st Class and the French Legion of Honour 2nd Class.

He was the president of a committee ordered to inspect the War Department Magazines and report on the storage of gunpowder following an explosion of a large private powder magazine at Erith, Kent.

In 1868 he was given the freedom of the City of London, appointed Constable of the Tower of London, and promoted to Field Marshal on his retirement.

Field Marshal Sir John Fox Burgoyne, 1st Baronet, GCB died at Kensington, London on 7th October 1871 and is buried in the nearby Brompton Cemetery.

Castle Hill Fort in Dover was renamed Fort Burgoyne in his memory.

Sir John Fox Burgoyne and his wife Charlotte Rose had eight children. Hugh Talbot Burgoyne, their only son, was born in Dublin on 17th July 1833 and entered the Royal Navy in 1847, aged 14.

On 29th May 1855, during the Russian War, as a Lieutenant, whilst serving on the steam sloop HMS Swallow in the Sea of Azov, he volunteered to land at a beach where the Russian Army was in great strength. Along with his two companions Lieutenant Cecil Buckley of HMS Miranda and Gunner John Robarts of HMS Ardent, and against considerable enemy opposition they set fire to corn stores, ammunition stores and destroyed a large amount of enemy equipment. For this



Hugh Talbot Burgoyne VC

action all three were awarded the Victoria Cross. Burgoyne was invested with his medal at the first investiture held in Hyde Park, London on 27th June 1857, attended by a crowd of 100,000. Burgoyne due to his rank in the Royal Navy, was the third man presented with the medal.

On 25th August 1864 he married Evelyn Laura Wake-Walker, daughter of Admiral

Sir Baldwin Wake-Walker, 1st Bt. and Mary Catherine Sinclair Worth,

In 1868, he was appointed to superintend the building and fitting out of the HMS Captain, an experimental craft of a full-rigged ship with turrets. When accompanying the Channel fleet to Gibraltar and shortly after midnight on 7th August 1870, the Captain was off Cape Finisterre, Spain when a squall hit the top heavy craft and she heeled over, capsized, and sank. Over 450 officers and men went down with her;

but about eighteen managed to make it into the launch, which had been thrown out when the ship rolled. Burgoyne and a few men were spotted on the keel; and as the launch came near, the men jumped and were picked up. Burgoyne would not or could not jump, however, and was lost. His body was never recovered.



Captain Hugh Talbot Burgoyne VC