

Reviews

DOVER'S HIDDEN FORTRESS

— — — REVIEWED BY DR. PHILIP ROBINSON — — —

DOVER'S HIDDEN FORTRESS: the history and preservation of the Western Heights fortifications. By JOHN PEVERLEY. With: "The White Cliffs Countryside Project on the Western Heights", by KIRK ALEXANDER. Dover. The DOVER SOCIETY, 1996. 38 pp. £3.95 + 35p post & packing.

Every historic English town must have its heritage-horror story from the 1950s and 60s. At that time, while the cities of Brunswick (Braunschweig) and Warsaw were being lovingly restored to what they had been before the depredations of war, Canterbury could demolish its unique Georgian Guildhall, and Dover, as we read in John Peverley's fascinating account, was seeing its irreplaceable Western Heights fortifications complex mutilated and destroyed by its very custodians. That was a time for putting the past (and not only the war) behind us, for embracing the new (that is, for americanising). The fruit of these impulses was acquiescence in the gutting of our northern city centres to give way to high-rise, in the razing, for good measure, of Victorian and Edwardian dwellings, excellent in their fabric but "condemned", ostensibly for their lack of an indoor toilet and bathroom. John Peverley's little book is a story of folly from beginning to end and consequently it should not surprise us.

His core chapters are an edited version of an article in the *Architectural Review* (1959) on "The Brick Cliffs of Dover" and a report of his talk to the DOVER SOCIETY (8 April 1991) on "The Fortifications 1959-95: their Destruction, Restoration and Preservation 1959-1990". Although only modestly reminiscent, John Peverley emerges single-handed as responsible for the listing of the fortifications as an Ancient Monument in 1962. This he achieved whilst

working on the other side of the Atlantic. His sense of place, his love of the locality, has to do with the fact that he was born and went to school in Dover and began his work as an architect in Canterbury. The Western Heights are his baby.

The saga of their original development is hilarious and outrageous by turns. While it was doubtless sensible enough to develop gun emplacements there during the American War of Independence, for fear of what our colonies' allies (France, Spain and the Netherlands) might get up to, it was surely extravagant, in all senses of that word, to undertake elaborate fortification during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic periods with the idea that significant elements of the British army might reside there safely in order to outflank a French invasion somewhere between Hythe and Rye. Thus the fortifications, inspired by Vauban (the French themselves were fortification-mad from Vauban to Maginot) face the land and not the sea... Cobbett writes in 1823, early in a spell of neglect for the project, of its madness and profligacy: enough bricks to have housed all the agricultural workers of Kent and Sussex. Further scares, to do with Napoleon III and the prospect of German unification, brought about the completion of the entire complex in the late nineteenth century, only for the army to abandon it in 1920 on the grounds that the living accommodation was "condemned" (a word subsequently to enjoy a protracted and shameful career in the history of planning).

Forget the idea that Hitler's cross-Channel shells accounted for much of the eventual destruction:

- 1959 - Western outworks filled in by the Prison Commissioners (Home Office);
- 1959 - demolition of the South Front Barracks by War Department;
- 1961 - Dover Borough Council proposes to use the Lines (huge ditches) as a rubbish dump;
- 1962 - Dover Town Clerk describes as "nonsense" the listing as an Ancient Monument;
- 1963-67 - Archcliffe Gate demolished to make road and viewing point;
- 1965 - Grand Shaft Barracks demolished;
- 1966 - Grand Shaft staircase sealed;
- 1978 - Citadel: Napoleonic period powder magazine bulldozed by Home Office;
- 1990 - Home Office constructs Borstal Accommodation Block without consultation despite the Ombudsman's ringing denunciation of the earlier destruction which was then repeated.

In the light of this well-told, but sorry tale one can only hope that the Young Offenders' Institution in the Citadel may in the course of penal fashion someday go elsewhere, that its site may also someday cease to be in the "custodianship" of the Home Office, allowing the entire complex

to become a nature reserve far from the Ministries' eyes and vandalistic thoughts. Kirk Alexander (Project Manager of the White Cliffs Countryside Project) provides a short postface to the book which allows an upbeat ending: Dexter cattle on the slopes to manage the grass; orchids galore; and thanks to volunteers and current local authority for time and money invested in protection and management.

The illustrations are indeed "profuse" as the cover claims, but this reader at least would have liked to see the photographs dated, even approximately. That would have allowed the present-day to be instantly distinguished from the historic, making the narrative still more striking. The volume, furnished with maps both historical and current, is an excellent companion for any would-be-stroller over the Heights, as a foreword about access by May Jones (Dover Society) and a prefatory glossary seek to ensure. However, the Dover Society, whose chairman Jack Woolford gives a brief introduction explaining the background to the publication, disclaims, in a printed "warning", any status for it as a guide. This, though it might appear inconsistent, is certainly prudent as a protection against possible litigation. Anyone who visited the site with the 1995 KFAS Conference will agree that it requires some athleticism! Congratulations all round to the Dover Society for assisting the birth of John Peverley's baby into print.

Tilmanstone in Old Photographs

----- TERRY SUTTON -----

The rapid changes that have overtaken the village of Tilmanstone, resulting in the loss of many picturesque thatched buildings, are described in a booklet just published by two residents, Bob and Kathleen Hollingsbee.

When Bob - a sub-editor on the *Dover Express* - and Kathleen moved to the village from Dover they admit they were considered to be outsiders. But soon villagers discovered here were two "townies" willing to put something back into the community.

They allowed Bob to copy old family photographs and told Kathleen old stories about the village when it had two bakeries, two forges, carpenters and wheelwrights, a village police constable, village nurse, two or three shops, a post office, two butchers and other amenities. They were the days when horse-drawn carriages, travelling between Dover and Thanet, used to stop off there.