

The Cliff Casemates under Dover Castle

by Jon Iveson

THE CLIFF CASEMATES were begun in 1797 in an attempt to solve the accommodation problems at the castle during the Napoleonic Wars. They were not built as gun positions as is sometimes stated - this appears to be a misunderstanding of the term casemate.

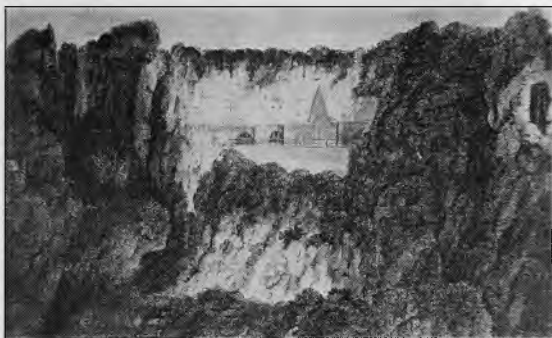
Four parallel tunnels were dug into the cliff from a terrace on the cliff face, which was reached by an entrance ramp cut through the chalk from a point just above Canon's Gate. These tunnels extended approximately 100 feet into the cliff. In 1798 three larger and longer tunnels were dug to provide officer's quarters further to the east, and between them a well, a latrine and a communicating tunnel were excavated.

At the back of the seven casemated barrack tunnels a second communication passage was constructed, leading to another entrance further from the cliff edge. This may have been constructed later than the other tunnels as Twiss in 1803 proposed "more communication opened to them". Each tunnel was ventilated by means of wide vertical shafts to the cliff-top above, and a further shaft was cut to provide ventilation for the communication tunnel.

The four soldiers' tunnels ended with brick fronts with windows and doors opening on to the terrace. The three officers' tunnels probably ended in a similar arrangement but with individual balconies for each casemate. It is possible that the soldiers' tunnels had first floors inserted later.

The tunnels were at first simply cut into the rock, and were completed by the

end of 1798. Early in 1799 a serious fall of chalk occurred near the well and the first troops did not occupy the casemates until 1803. A further, more serious, fall occurred in the winter of 1806 which 'entirely cut off all communication in front of the casemates'. In November 1810 another cliff fall occurred, but the lining of the casemates in brick which was completed in that year at a cost of £701 14s 6d was begun in 1808, probably as a result of the 1806 collapse.



Cliff Casemates in 1802

The barrack rooms were heated by fireplaces, and lit by oil lamps. Men were provided with iron bedsteads, and kit was hung from pegs on the walls. An account written in 1812 states that one room could contain 200 men.

Thomas Pattenden's diary records the building of the casemates; ".....this year 1797 the new subterraneous Bomb proofs which open in the Cliff next the Sea over the Moat Battery were dug and formed for Barracks for the soldiers - and in the year 1798 three more subterranean for the officers were dug and formed a little beyond the former ones - with a well between the two sets of Barracks for their use and proper communications from one to the other."