

# Fort Burgoyne and WWI

Barry O'Brien - Dover Tales

The much documented Christmas Eve, 1914, air attack on Dover, which saw the first bomb dropped on English soil from an aeroplane, had, in fact, been preceded by an aerial attack on Dover Harbour some days prior. There may have been an even earlier attack on Dover Docks, in October 1914, this time by a submarine. It was reported that the periscopes of three submarines were seen and 'briskly' fired upon by guns of the Harbour Defence, although official reports appear to downplay this apparent attack.

Such was the unpreparedness for attack from the air (it was, after all, only five years since Bleriot had flown the Channel) that Dover's sole anti-aircraft protection took the form of a small 12-pounder sited at Langdon, although this was soon



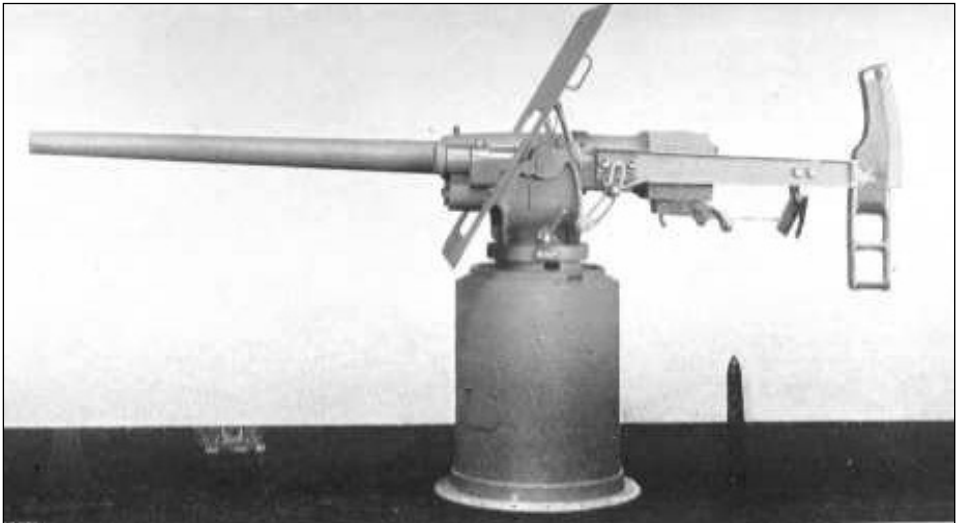
**FORT BURGUYNE**  
DOVER

supplemented by two 6-pounder Hotchkiss quick-firing guns located on the Western Heights, on the ground at the top of the 64 Steps, while Pom-Pom auto cannon were installed around the Castle.

As Dover found itself in the front line of mounting hostilities, the Royal Navy had moved to war stations as early as July 27th, 1914, when armed guards were placed at the dockyards and piers, while searchlights began sweeping the channel on August 1st and the first requisitioned trawlers arrived the following day.

On land, field defences soon began to be constructed at St Margaret's.

During the evening of the August Bank Holiday Monday, August 3rd, some sixty



*QF 6 Pounder Hotchkiss*



*Dover Area Map*

aeroplanes of the Army's Royal Flying Corps arrived at Swingate Downs. Britain's official declaration of war was formally announced the following day.

'Proclamations were immediately issued on Aug 5th warning the public that entrance into Dover would only be allowed under severe restrictions, that all persons would be liable to search and that letters would be liable to be opened if a censorship were established. The cliff paths to St Margaret's Bay and on Shakespeare Cliff were closed and access was forbidden to Swingate Downs and the land adjacent to Fort Burgoyne and the Duke of York's School'. Some 22,000 civilian passes were issued by the Chief Constable of Dover 'to persons desiring the requisite permission'. Furthermore, the movement of vehicles in and out of Dover was prohibited between the hours of 8pm and 5am. Such Restrictions of Movement or similar were to remain in place until one month after the signing of the Armistice.

The troops of the Dover Garrison, the 12th Infantry Brigade, under the command of Brigadier-General Wilson, CB, departed the town on August 18th, 1914, ultimately destined for France where their recently completed training was to 'stand them in good stead'. The Kent Territorial Brigade briefly filled the void before they,

themselves, removed to Canterbury. Various Regiments, many of them at full strength, were soon to occupy the town's barracks, with the 3rd Royal Sussex at Connaught Barracks and the Royal Fusiliers at the Duke of York's School, where of course, students were still away on holiday. Although most of these Regiments would stay in Dover, The Royal Sussex would only enjoy a brief stay before departing for Seaford in East Sussex, where they would establish a transit and reinforcement depot at the nearby port of Newhaven.

The Dover Battery of Territorials, 1st Kent Battery RFA, of the 3rd Home Counties Brigade RFA, were mobilised on August 4th, 1914, with a strength of 120 and were stationed at Fort Burgoyne until December, 1914, when they sailed for India and on through Mesopotamia, modern day Iraq.



*Royal Sussex Badge*

With the Belgian city of Antwerp under siege, the hastily convened Royal Naval Division was sent to its defence, marching into Dover from bases at Walmer and Betteshanger. Among their number was the poet Rupert Brooke who had been commissioned into the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve as a temporary sub-lieutenant. Antwerp, however, soon fell to the German forces, with the city's shipyards being a prime site for the construction of submarines later despatched from Ostend and Zeebrugge. Among their targets were the minesweepers and converted trawlers much known to Dover and lauded by Admiral Bacon who, in May, 1916, would record that the "drifters and trawlers, in difficult waters, and under conditions totally strange to them, had maintained their allotted stations without a single accident".

The early months of the war saw a number of temporary camps established around Dover at Northfall Meadow Camp, Longhill Camp, The Danes, and the Connaught Barracks Hutments, where the training Battalions occupied either hastily constructed huts or were in tents, moving into civilian billets or empty houses during winter.

Among the first attempts to strengthen the harbour's defences was the Navy's purchase of the SS Montrose, the ship famously used to make good his escape to North America by renowned murderer Dr Hawley Crippen. The Admiralty planned to use the ship as a blockship to protect the Harbour from future torpedo attack. However, before the Montrose could be sunk, the ship broke loose from moorings during a gale, drifted out to sea and was wrecked on the Goodwin Sands on December 20th, 1914.

By Christmas, 1914, Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS) Guston had been established, located on the eastern side of the Dover to Deal road next to Fort Burgoyne. HMS Arrogant was RNAS Guston's parent ship as it was for RNAS Dover (Marine Parade), sited in the town at the foot of the cliffs below the castle. This seaplane station was located on the site of the Roller Skating Rink opened only 4 years earlier which, in turn, had been built on former military land at Motes Bulwark (Guildford Battery). It was requisitioned and duly expanded to provide three hangers, a mess room, accommodation, stores, workshops and administration buildings, serviced by a slipway down to the beach.

As Fort Burgoyne, under the command of Major JT Chapman, was established as a Royal Garrison Artillery (RGA) Mobilisation Centre for recruits, which saw the formation of 85th Siege Battery in December, 1915. Some small respite was provided with the establishment, by a Miss Bailey and Miss Horwood, of a YMCA Hut on the site. Such YMCAs offered material, educational and spiritual support to recruits beginning their training, supplying pastoral care, writing materials and refreshments. 85th Siege Battery were sent to France in May, 1916, in charge of two 12-inch road howitzers.



*Skate Rink Dover Seafront*

Air attacks on Dover continued to be mostly by Zeppelin airship but by January, 1916, the threat of attack by aeroplane had very much become a reality, including the first moonlight raid which took place on January 23rd, 1916. Such attacks proved only to underscore the inadequacies of the town's anti-aircraft defences and led to provision of a 6-pounder Hotchkiss, such as that located at the Western Heights, at Dover Castle close by the Pharos, with two more installed at Fort Burgoyne. These guns were to fire shrapnel shells which burst at a pre-determined distance rather than on impact and, as such, had limited effectiveness.

Sadly, the guns at Fort Burgoyne had not yet been readied for use at the time of a seaplane attack at 1.57pm on March 19th, 1916, which caused considerable damage to Dover, dropping bombs on various locations across the town including Northfall Camp, where four soldiers of the Royal Fusiliers were killed, and eleven others injured.

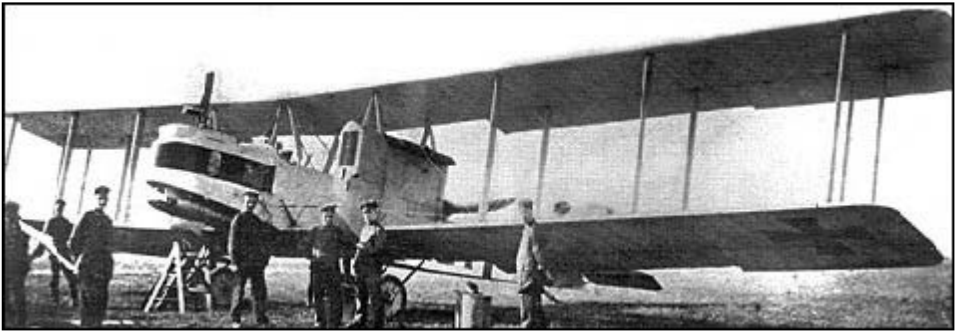
An accident at Fort Burgoyne with unimaginable consequences was narrowly avoided on Thursday, June 29th, 1916, when a Type 10 Nieuport biplane took off from the airfield at RNAS Guston bound for Dunkerque, France, piloted by Flt Lt Talbot who was accompanied by Air Mechanic 1st Class Hampson. Recalling the incident in a letter to Talbot's family sometime later, Mr A.R. George told of his having witnessed the incident first hand. "Between five and six thousand of us (RGA recruits) were drilling on the parade ground at Fort Burgoyne, and you can imagine we were closely packed in, when an aeroplane rose from behind the fort and suddenly swooped down directly over the heads of the men drilling; so closely, in fact, that many fell on their faces to

avoid being hit by the propellers. But the pilot, in order to avoid what would have been a terrible catastrophe swerved sharply to the left, and the machine fell into a sunken road near the fort. There is no doubt that the machine would have landed in the thick of the men with terrible results, but with safety to the two men in it, and it was freely admitted by all who witnessed it that the pilot lost his life in a most gallant attempt to avoid crashing amongst the dense mass of men." Mr George concluded, "I heard it said by the airmen there that air currents around Fort Burgoyne were very bad and this was probably the cause of the accident". Air Mechanic Hampson died from multiple injuries sustained in the crash the following day, June 30th, 1916.

Attacks by enemy seaplanes had not abated and four bombs dropped from two aircraft on August 12th saw one cause 'slight injuries to [seven] soldiers on parade at Fort Burgoyne', while a raid of Friday September 22nd, 1916, saw an enemy seaplane '[get] over Guston, dropping bombs in the vicinity of the Duke of York's School'. Fortunately, these bombs fell into open fields causing neither damage nor casualty.

German naval attacks were not limited to submarines and on the night of April 20th/21st, 1917, six German destroyers attempted a raid on Dover, firing a reported total of sixty-one shells which 'fell harmlessly enough in ploughed fields in the neighbourhood of Hougham and Guston'.

A daylight air-raid of August 12th, 1917, saw an enemy aircraft approach Dover from the direction of Guston. 'The first signal of its presence was a bomb dropped on the cricket ground at Fort Burgoyne which [slightly] injured five soldiers on



*Gotha G IV*

parade. Fire was immediately opened and the seaplane dropped five bombs altogether. One bomb fell in the Northfall Meadow camp of the 5th Bn Royal Fusiliers; another, obviously meant for the wireless station, hit the cliff at the back of the Prince Alfred Inn East Cliff.

As the bombardment of Dover continued, with shells sometimes passing over the town and striking the hills above, including those around Frith Farm, so the size and effectiveness of the shells developed, with one unexploded naval shell which fell at Castlemount found to weigh over two hundredweight (100kg).

Fort Burgoyne was again the subject of enemy bombing in the early hours of December 5th, 1917, the "cock crow raid" as it came to be known, when a German Gotha dropped four bombs 'from the Camber to Fort Burgoyne, setting alight a paint store on the floating dock. A number of explosive bombs were dropped, the last falling just outside one of the big buildings of Connaught Barracks and exploding a quantity of hand grenades! It was during one of the raids during 1917 that a soldier imprisoned in one of the small cells at Fort Burgoyne notoriously escaped by cutting the ventilation bars above the door, bending them back and taking flight.

The Fort Burgoyne cells were also used for the imprisonment of conscientious objectors in transit to Canterbury prison. In a deposition later given as oral history to the Imperial War Museum, one Walter Griffin describes the 'dark, windowless' cells as having been used to accommodate two people adding that they had 'damp problems'. Walter Griffin describes three cells he was imprisoned in with a Jehovah's Witness named Jim Houton, with prisoners being given military rations.

July 18th, 1918, was the last time the Dover, anti-aircraft guns were fired at an enemy machine 'but none who saw the last shot go up from the Dover guns on that July morning for a moment thought that it was the last shot from a gun on British soil in the Great War'.

In all there were 113 raids on the Borough of Dover, with 185 bombs and twenty-three shells falling on the town resulting in twenty-three deaths and seventy-one injuries. By the time of the Armistice, seventy-seven armed trawlers were based in Dover, including sixty-four employed as minesweepers, along with eleven paddle minesweepers and ten tunnel or shallow-draught minesweepers. In total twenty-nine minesweepers had been lost

during hostilities, accounting for 295 fatalities.

The first returning British prisoners of war passed through Dover on November 17th, 1918, when a party of eight hundred were met at the Admiralty pier by the Prince of Wales prior to moving on to a repatriation camp which had been formed at Northfall Meadow. During the months after the war various dignitaries passed through Dover, many occasioning much celebration

including, at different times, Marshal Foch, and Sir Douglas Haig, while on December 12th Vice Admiral Sir Roger Keyes, Naval Commander-in-Chief, Dover, and Commander of the Dover Patrol, was awarded the Honorary Freedom of the Borough as the town itself became one of three dispersal stations of the Eastern Command.

*Compiled with sincere thanks to Kathleen Hollingsbee and Phil Eyden*

## Dover Wombles and the National Open Garden Scheme

**Deborah Gasking**

I created this group in about January or February this year after walking down to Shakespeare Beach with a couple of rubbish sacks and set to litter picking. Repeat the next week. Repeat the second week? Yes, but with a friend – it did not take long to realise that the task was greater than a single picker...

So, I took a friend, then another and so on. We needed a single point of contact, thus our Dover Wombles WhatsApp group. And one has now multiplied to about eighteen.

To date, we have picked up sixty-two sack loads of rubbish plus many bulk items

Not only do we litter pick but also get stuck into planting as well. Last year we got permission from Morrisons to plant alongside the full length of their store alongside Bridge Street. However, with the double whammy of Covid19 restrictions and almost drought-like conditions, the saplings (from The Woodland Trust) that we planted before lockdown, mostly withered, and died.

Fast pedalling forward to February this year, following the end of lockdown, we

began planting shrubs, plants, and bulbs, and scattering tough seeds – calendula, poppy forget-me-nots, and many others. Weeding takes a bit of a back step, but it does get done, and there are plenty of them as we have stirred up the soil a few times releasing those weed seeds into the light.

Mostly, all contributions come from our gardens plus donations from Morrisons and Transition Dover and are of the tough variety for the tough environment this area is for growing.

We have now seen many bees and other pollinating insects here. And I get a thrill each time I walk past (pulling out the occasional weed, as I go). This month could see the end of planting in this area. So, onto the next. We have identified a couple of other areas which would benefit from our TLC.

As a member of Transition Dover, I have recruited volunteers from their team, and we are all active in making Dover a fabulous place to live. We will be erecting a banner, part sponsored by Morrisons, soon to highlight our efforts.