

A Theft at The Fort

Barry O'Brien – Dover Tales

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On May 24th, 1864, being “the forty-fifth anniversary of Her Most Gracious Majesty Victoria”, as the prominent buildings in Dover flew flags of various relevance and description, while “most of the shipping in harbour displayed a profusion of bunting”, all the troops garrisoned in the town paraded at 10am to be marched “to the plateau adjacent to the Castle Hill Fort (later named Fort Burgoyne and still only three years into Construction) where the troops performed a number of exercises prior to the midday firing of a Royal Salute from the castle.

With the firing of every seventh gun of the salute the massed troops let fire a ‘feu de joie’ (a rifle salute with each soldier firing

in succession along the ranks to make a continuous sound), while the band of the Highlanders struck up the National Anthem with the conclusion of each volley. The ceremony over, the men removed their hats and gave three hearty cheers for Her Majesty, prior to parading before Colonel Maclean RA who took the salute in the absence, on leave, of General Charles Ellice CB.

Sadly, Tuesday May 24th, 1864, was not such a joyous occasion for everyone in Dover as, elsewhere, Private William Rose of the Royal Engineers appeared before Magistrate W P Elsted Esq in the County Police Court charged that on the night of May 21st he did “burglariously” enter the Castle Hill Fort Canteen and steal “therefrom a wooden till containing about five shillings in copper money”.

The licence holder at the canteen, John Prescott, gave evidence that on arrival at the premises at 6am the morning of the 21st he found that a wooden bar, which had previously been placed across a window of the building, had been forced away. On entering the canteen, Mr Prescott continued, he found that the wooden till which, he maintained, had been secure at 11pm the previous night, was no longer in its rightful place.

Private William Higman, Royal Engineers, later deposed that when he went to light the fire for the donkey engine at 5am that morning, on opening the firebox door he discovered a discarded till which was later found to be that which was missing from the canteen. By 7am the till had been returned to Mr Prescott by way of a Royal



Queen Victoria

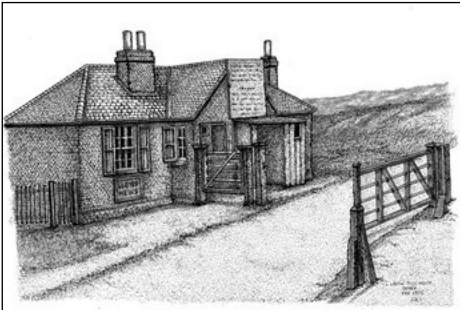
Artillery Sergeant, although the five shillings which had been left in the till the previous evening was missing. At which point Mr Prescott went to see the Captain of the Engineers to level the accusation of theft against Private Rose.

Mr Prescott advised the court that, having left the canteen at 11pm the previous evening, he had occasion to journey into Dover and “close by Love Lane (now Connaught Road) met the prisoner and another soldier named Bruce coming up the hill”. Private William Bruce, Royal Engineers, confirmed that he had caught up with Private Rose walking up Love Lane between midnight and 1am on the 21st and that they had, indeed, met with Mr Prescott but that he, Private Bruce, had parted with the prisoner soon after “about 50 yards past the toll bar”. (The Dover, Deal and Sandwich turnpike leading up Laureston Place and the old Castle Hill Road originally dates from 1797, the later toll house being close to the current turning to Guston.)

Private Bruce admitted that he had been “rather tipsy” at the time and could not remember entering the fort but was sure that he had done so alone. There also seems to have been a suggestion that Private Rose had left his belt in town that evening although Private Bruce could not

confirm whether or not Rose had returned to fetch it, having parted company with him. Bruce did however confirm that the canteen was located only about one hundred yards from where he left Rose.

Corporal Frederick Gates, Royal Engineers, confirmed that although he and Private Rose slept in the same room, he could not confirm at what time of the morning Rose had returned on the 21st, only that he was present at tattoo - 9.30pm, which was known as tattoo from the Dutch phrase ‘doe den tap toe’ meaning that inn-keepers should “turn off the tap” as it was time to return to barracks. The Corporal went on to acknowledge that Rose could well have left at some later time without his knowledge, a fact attested to by a Colour Sergeant who told Mr Elsted that the door to the room had not been locked that night as the key had been lost. Corporal Gates continued that, the following morning, he had been made aware of a cap beneath Private Rose’s bed containing “about three or four shillings worth” of coppers. When Gates enquired further, Rose advised that he had changed all his coin into copper the previous day. This claim was, though, thrown into question by another Engineer, named Forrest, who maintained that Rose had told him he had drawn two shillings



Castle Hill Tollhouse Nigel Walking



Victorian Donkey Engine

from the Pay Sergeant the previous day, the 20th, and by that evening had but eight pennies left.

Sgt Pope of the Kent County Constabulary gave testament that he had visited the canteen with Mr Prescott, where had found that a piece of wood had been prised from a window “as if from the outside.” He also advised that the donkey engine where the till was found was in a “direct line from the canteen to the prisoner’s quarters.”

At conclusion the Magistrate, Mr Elsted, committed Private Rose to trial at St Augustine’s Quarter Sessions.

As a point of interest, the Prescott family were long established in the area and had, seemingly, farmed the land around the top of Castle Hill for many long years. Indeed, the Sergeants’ Mess of Connaught Barracks, built some 50 years later, was located on the site previously known as Prescott’s Pond.

A member of the Prescott family was credited with the conversion to non-conformist religion of one Captain Samuel Taverner, a Captain of a Troop of Horse, at the age of 22. Taverner later received a commission from Cromwell, which he resigned following the Restoration. During his term as Governor of Deal Castle, he had heard Edward Prescott preaching in a field, and, having concealed himself behind a hedge to listen, subsequently became a stalwart supporter of his cause.

In 1670, Taverner was brought before the Privy Council, along with five other prominent Dover men, named Matson, Dell, Barry, Yorke, and Street, to be reprimanded for his non-conformist belief. When Taverner refused to submit to the Privy Council’s orders to desist, he was imprisoned in Dover Castle.



Dover Unitarian Church, Adrian Street

On his release from confinement, Taverner retired to London until he could safely return to Dover and exercise his ministry. Ordained as Pastor of the Dover Baptist Church in 1681, in 1692 he obtained a licence for the south-west end of his dwelling house in Market Lane to be used as a meeting house, and there he ministered until his death in 1696.

The Baptist congregation continued to meet in Captain Taverner’s house until 1745 when, greater religious toleration prevailing, a chapel was built in the middle of Market Lane, on the west side, and continued to be used until 1820 when the General (Unitarian) Baptist Chapel was built in Adrian Street.

The licensing arrangements for the canteen at Fort Burgoyne appear to have been taken over by the military in due course, presumably as the fort’s construction progressed, with an unnamed Sergeant Major of the 38th (1st Staffordshire) Regiment of Foot holding the licence until June 1873 after which a Sergeant MacMahon took on the responsibility until Sept 1878 when a certain Mr G Wood became licensee.

*Quotations taken from The Dover Telegraph
May 28th, 1864*

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