

WHITESAND BAY BATTERY - dated 1890

English Heritage site – Designated Ancient Monument 978

The Whitesand bay Holiday Park is situated on what was once known as Whitesand Bay Battery. Also known as Raleigh Battery it was one of several forts constructed as a defensive posture to the French and known as Palmerston's "ring of fire". Napoleon III, nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte, adopted an aggressive foreign policy which included the invasion of old England. The Whitesand fort, designed to protect the western approaches to Plymouth (a strategic naval target), was commissioned by Lord Palmerston in 1860.

Work was undertaken by W.T. Jinkin of Plymouth commencing in 1890. The guns were transported by sea to Wacker Quay, then by rail to Tregantle fort and finally by traction engine along the coast road to this fort site. The Whitesand Bay coastal road is still known as Military road.

Many of the fort's original features still exist today. For example the high banks around 'Moat way' formed the 'glacis', or gentle slope/incline extending down from a fortification, designed to protect the fort on all sides and to hide the installation from view by land or sea. This was a dry moat some 20 feet deep 'revetted' on the inside (ie. masonry to protect against explosions) with a vertical wall between 1 and 8 feet thick. At strategic points large octagonal concrete 'caponiers', a form of bunker, were positioned to provide 'enfilade' fire (ie. gunfire directed along the length rather than the breadth of a formation). Two are still intact; one on the north aspect of the holiday park and one on the west.

The Guns

The gun emplacements are in very good condition and can be seen as they were over 100 years ago. The recesses either side of the guns provided protection and housed the ammunition lifts. The rings, which acted like teeth, can still be seen. A spoke wheel attached to the gun would be used to pull the gun to left or right. The hooped rings on the wall would have rope through them and the guns could be pulled manually into firing position.



These battery guns were mounted on Elswick 'disappearing mounts'. In fact the 'Montcrieff' disappearing mount was one of the systems used here; named after designer, the military engineer Lt. Col. Montcrieff. The gun would first be raised above the parapet. On firing the energy from the recoil would be used hydraulically to lower the gun below the level of the parapet. From the enemy's perspective, the gun would effectively 'disappear' thereby giving no target against which to return fire.



nb. Illustrations courtesy of Crownhill Fort

Outside the Vaults bar & restaurant lies "Bess" a 64lb cannon manufactured in 1809 at the famous Carron ironworks in Falkirk, Scotland. Originally built to fire a cannonball "Bess" was modified by rifling the barrel to accommodate a 32lb shell. This effectively increased her range and accuracy.

The fort housed three 64-pdr RML guns to the east and two 6inch BL guns to the west.

On the practice battery there were 3-pdr QF (quick firing) guns which were replaced in 1903 by 12-pdr QF guns fronted by a low concrete parapet wall. There are four mountings for 64lb RML guns which were later superseded by 6inch guns on 'Vavasour' mountings. The RML guns were dismantled in 1903 whilst the QF guns remained until the 1950's; the racer rails and pivots for these guns remain intact on the seaward side of the park, together with bunkers, range finders and gun emplacements.

By taking a walk turning right at Moncrieff way towards the westward tunnel you will notice a flight of stairs to a concrete plinth. This was one of the depression range finders (DRF) that gave information to the gunners regarding distance and trajectory of targets up to 4 miles distant. The view from this point is spectacular and well worth a visit.

The Tunnels

The site of the holiday park has a labyrinth of tunnels and underground chambers, some of which can be freely explored. The tunnels provided cover for moving men and materials with minimum exposure. Noticeable are the recesses within the tunnels designed to give added protection against blast injuries from exploding shells.

The underground chambers adjacent to the gun emplacements housed the ammunition in 'shifting' lobbies. Engineers in felt suits (to prevent sparks) transferred the shells into mechanical hoists next to the guns. There are two hoists at Whitsand, these are very rare and in good condition.



The Buildings

It is still possible to enjoy a "flavour" of the original fort. The Vaults restaurant and bar was originally the officers mess. The brickwork in the restaurant/bar has been stripped back to the original brick. There are photos and artifacts

available to see in the bar. In the Chapel there is authentic architecture of the time.

The History

Although commissioned in 1860 the main guns were removed in 1909 being considered obsolete. By 1915 the station was abandoned and by 1919 even the ammunition had become redundant.

In the second world war the Fort had a revival in importance as one of the first radar stations with significant importance protecting Plymouth's western flank. The radar equipment was housed where the Radar station bungalow now stands. One curious fact is that whilst being a 'top secret' installation, German POW's were still used to work the land in the surrounding area.

The practice battery continued to be used by the MOD until the 1950's when it was finally retired from service. Since that time the site has taken on a more peaceful role in the leisure industry.

The Legend

One of the more unusual tales relating to the Fort dates back to the second world war when the practice battery was still used regularly. Early in the conflict the navy located the first ever radio controlled target ship in Whitsand Bay. This ship was directed up and down the bay so that the various on shore batteries could blaze away at it. Yet the ship remained untouched for three days! It was then transferred to Malta for the land based defences to practise on; but the same happened and the ship remained unscathed. This ship was eventually converted to be a supply carrier for the D-Day landings where it was hit and sunk by the Germans!