

The Artillery of the Crookhorn, Farlington and Langstone Redoubts

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These three earthworks acted as supplementary defence to the main fortifications constructed on Portsdown Hill between 1861 and 1870. Forts Wallington, Nelson, Southwick, Widley and Purbrook can lay claim to being the greatest British peace-time fortification construction costing many millions of pounds and several human lives. It generated much debate and assessment as to their necessity and their effectiveness. In brief, the main advocate of the project, designed to improve the country's defences and especially those of its predominant naval and military port, Portsmouth, was none other than Henry John Temple, Lord Palmerston (1784-1865).

Since 1815, following the French defeat at the Battle of Waterloo ending the Napoleonic Wars, a groundswell of opinion had grown in this country believing that the French would avenge this great reverse at some point. Periodically, this level of belief was raised, sometimes almost to fever pitch, depending on the fluctuating political situation both here and in France and the amount of acerbic comment in the newspapers. Further concerns came with the seizure of power in 1848 by Bonaparte's nephew Louis Napoleon as Napoleon III (1808-1873) and growing French naval strength. Could the Royal Navy, the country's first line of defence, halt a French invasion before it had even made land? Whatever Palmerston's thoughts on the Navy were, he believed that it was fallacious to rely on it alone and thus, in his capacity as Prime Minister at this time, between 1859-1865, he set up, through his Secretary of State for War, Sidney Herbert (1810-1861) a Royal Commission to assess the Defences of the United Kingdom.

Their 1860 report recommended nationwide improvements to cost £10.3 million of which Portsmouth's upgrade would account for £2.8 million.

The purpose of the line of five forts was to prevent an enemy, having routed the Royal Navy and landed forces and artillery in strength nearby, from utilizing the heights of Portsdown to bring artillery fire to bear on Portsmouth Dockyard. With smooth-bore artillery, the range involved was too great, but the game-changer was rifled artillery and the adoption into British service in early 1859 of William Armstrong's system. The authorities must have known that the French were at the same stage of development with their rifled artillery, the *Système La Hitte*. Achieving a range of five miles with relative accuracy was now possible and other closer Portsea Island targets such as the Hilsea Lines and Gatcombe Park, purchased to house the Royal Artillery in 1854, inviting.

The five forts designed by the Royal Engineers were of the polygonal style characterised by an ability to provide overwhelming fire from rampart guns, ditch defence afforded by guns in caponiers and even a degree of local defence within the forts should they be stormed. Additionally, the forts were positioned in close enough proximity to provide a degree of covering fire for its neighbour. Strong though this arrangement was, land attack from the east remained concerning. An enemy might land in the Bracklesham Bay area for example, head inland and attack Fort Purbrook from the north-east thrusting down between Havant and Purbrook along a line roughly occupied by the present day A3. Alternatively, or perhaps even additionally, outflanking the forts with a drive along the coast south of Havant along the line of the railway. These three redoubts were proposed to negate these threats.

Both the redoubt at Crookhorn (grid reference SU 680070) and at Farlington (grid reference SU 687065) were no more than

800 yards apart. The former, started in 1862, lay around 650 yards to the north of Fort Purbrook and was apparently connected with it via a subterranean tunnel. Its design was a four-sided structure with a proposal for fifteen guns on the ramparts in horse-shoe arrangement covering all points of the compass except to the south and six guns assigned for ditch defence in two caponiers. The latter, most likely started at the same time and the same distance from Fort Purbrook, was a more complex six-sided trace with a proposal for eighteen guns on the ramparts covering all points of the compass except to the west and south-west. Langstone Redoubt (SU 692055) was a five-sided trace with eighteen guns proposed for the ramparts and possibly only rifle fire scheduled for wet ditch defence. The construction of this redoubt was never started: it was decided in 1868 that a less elaborate earthwork could be raised as soon as an attack was known.

The exact nature of the proposed artillery for Crookhorn and Langstone redoubts has not yet been discovered but the intention at Farlington's redoubt was for eighteen, 64-pounder rifled muzzle-loaders, most likely conversions of old smooth-bore 32-pounders on the Palliser principle and on six-foot parapet carriages and slides. In 1876 fourteen were present but by 1891 only eight guns remained: five 64-pounder Rifled Muzzle Loaders of 71 cwt on the same carriages facing north, south-east and south; two of the same type but of 58 cwt, upon special carriages – the so-called Moncrieff Disappearing Gun facing north-east and one four-inch Breech Loading Gun on a six-foot parapet siege travelling carriage facing south-east.

Had all three redoubts been constructed and armed as originally intended there is no doubt that with Fort Purbrook as well, the eastern end of Portsdown packed a powerful punch. If the intention was to include the seven-inch Rifled Breech loading Armstrong Gun as it was at the other forts, then so much the better. The range of these

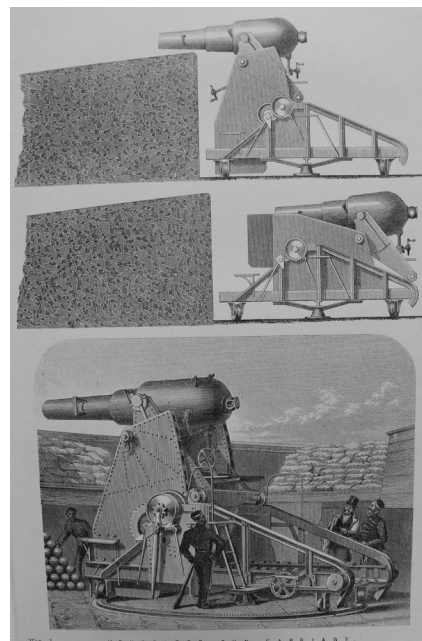
guns was entirely dependent on the barrel elevation that the carriage would allow. Both 64-pounders at around 11 degrees elevation could send a 64 lbs common shell to a maximum range of 3,890 yards (2.2 miles) using an 8 lbs charge of Rifled Long Grain powder and the seven-inch Armstrong Gun at around 10 degrees elevation could send a 90 lbs common shell to 3,600 yards (2 miles) using an 11 lbs charge of the same powder. Neither these guns nor those of the main forts ever fired a shot in anger! The latter were not completed until 1871, ironically the same year the French suffered a heavy defeat in the Franco-Prussian war and the perceived threat from that quarter was never to be the same. But was it unfair to dub the scheme 'Palmerston's Folly'? Arguments can be made to support both viewpoints: 'yes', because of the massive amount of money it required and 'no', based on recent research showing that Napoleon III never had any intention of invading this country.

Sources:

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Moncrieff Gun Carriage

Courtesy the Trustees of the Royal Armouries