

**Broad Character: Military**

**Character Type: Military Defence and Fortification**

**Regional Perspective: Southern England**

**Compiled by Seazone Solutions Ltd / M A Ltd, January 2011, after comment from D Hooley, English Heritage**

**INTRODUCTION: DEFINING/DISTINGUISHING ATTRIBUTES**

Military coastal defences can be found all along the Southern England coast, although there is a tendency to find them concentrated around the main ports (Portsmouth being an example) due to their perceived vulnerability to foreign attack over many centuries.

A small number of examples of prehistoric fortifications are found within the region including the Iron Age hillforts of Devils Dyke and Thundersbarrow and the Bronze Age settlement at Highdown camp and encampment near Seaford.

Portchester Castle was originally a late Roman fortification though the castle was added to in phases during the Saxon and Medieval periods, and also in the seventeenth century.

The remains of medieval fortifications can be seen at Calshot, Hurst and Southsea Castles in Hampshire, Edburton Castle in West Sussex and at Hastings. These were all sited in coastal locations and designed to deter or prevent attack from seaward.

Post-medieval fortifications were similarly sited in coastal locations. Examples in the region are Branksea Castle, Hurst Castle and Castle Goring.

Early Modern fortifications are abundant in the region in the form of Palmerston Forts including, amongst others, Fort Brockhurst, Fort Elson, Fort Nelson, Fort Purbrook, and Fort Rowner) and Martello Towers along the East Sussex coast including Newhaven Fort and Eastbourne Redoubt. A number of Sea Forts were also constructed during this period.



**Fort Brockhurst (© English Heritage)**

Remnants of WWII fortifications can be seen stretching across the Southern England coastline. These include the line of tank traps which overlook Hordle Beach in the New Forest, gun emplacements along Southampton Water, and pillboxes which are scattered along the whole coastal area. During WWII, troops were billeted at the sixteenth century Hurst Castle, and the MOD still uses the two Victorian wings there.



**Pillbox along Dorset coastline (© Maritime Archaeology Ltd)**

**HISTORICAL PROCESSES; COMPONENTS, FEATURES AND VARIABILITY**

The Southern England region has always been considered as vulnerable to attack, with mainland Europeans seeing the south-eastern corner of England as the natural gateway to the country (Wheatley, 1990). Fortifications and anti-invasion defences have therefore been constructed along the coastline accordingly.

Remains of prehistoric fortifications within the region including the Iron Age hillforts of Devils Dyke and Thundersbarrow and the Bronze Age settlement at Highdown camp, and encampment near Seaford.

In the early years of Roman influence in England, the construction and location of coastal installations was related to supply routes, the transportation of goods and the harbouring and maintenance of the small Roman naval fleet rather than solely for defence (see de la Bedoyere 2006; Laycock 2008). Portchester Castle is a well preserved example of a late Roman fortification on the Southern England coast. It is thought to have been built in the late third century AD as part of the defensive system of 'Saxon Shore Forts', probably operating in conjunction with a fleet, to defend the coasts of the eastern Channel and East Anglia from sea-borne raiders from mainland Europe. Originally a Roman fortification, the castle was added to in phases during the Saxon and Medieval periods, and also in the seventeenth century. Although initially constructed for defence purposes, it has been used for many different purposes in its 1700-year history ([www.portchestercastle.co.uk](http://www.portchestercastle.co.uk)).

The remains of medieval fortifications can be seen at Calshot, Hurst and Southsea Castles in Hampshire, Edburton Castle in West Sussex and at Hastings, East Sussex. These were all designed to deter or prevent attack from seaward. Impressive sea defences surrounding Portsmouth Harbour include the Round Tower of Henry V from which a chain boom used to be stretched across the harbour to a tower on the opposite bank, in order to prevent invasion. Since the Norman period, Portsmouth has been a prime focus of naval power, and it was in 1194 that Richard I took the decision to create a naval and military base there from which he could attack France (Wheatley, 1990). King John later decided to station all his war galleys there and in 1212 instructed the City's mayor to build a high, strong wall around the dock 'so that we may avoid damage to our vessels and their appurtenances' (Wheatley, 1990). In Medieval times Hastings was one of the most powerful towns of the federation known as the Cinque Ports, linked with Dover, Hythe, Romney and Sandwich which provided most of the ships and men needed to defend the coast from attacks by the French (Wheatley, 1990).



**Calshot Castle (© English Heritage)**

The early post medieval period saw the emergence of England as a nation state, with a consequent placing of defences to reflect national strategic considerations. Against the background of gradual change in the landscape, major conflicting events were taking place. A number of castles were constructed in the region during Henry VIII's reign as part of his south coast defences. These include Branksea Castle, built on Branksea Island as a military fort to defend Poole; Hurst Castle at the end of a long shingle barrier beach at the west end of the Solent to guard the approaches to Portsmouth; and Southsea Castle from which three sea forts are visible, and is now a museum.



**Hurst Castle (© Hampshire & Wight Trust for Maritime Archaeology)**

The early 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the effect of the Napoleonic wars (1803-1814), and England remained at war throughout this time. Having lost most of its colonial empire in the preceding decades, French efforts were focused mainly in Europe. Consequently, Napoleon Bonaparte saw an invasion of England as the key to supreme control over Europe. In response, England decided that a new coastal defence strategy was needed, to include a chain of forts to be built along the coast. The towers were simple and robust, being based on the design of a fort at Mortella in Corsica which stood up to heavy bombardment from a British force. Napoleon's invasion never materialised and the towers had little military significance until 1940 when some were used as observation posts. Originally 103 Martello towers stretched from Seaford in Sussex to Aldeburgh in Suffolk. 45 still stand; many are in ruins but some have been restored as museums such as Seaford and the Wish Tower in Eastbourne.

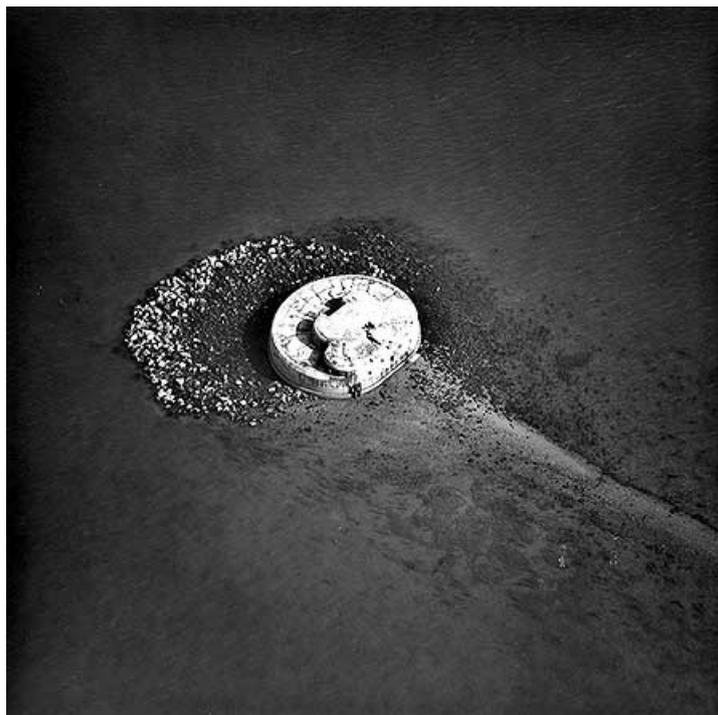


**Martello Tower, Seaford, now a museum (© Maritime Archaeology Ltd)**

Fort Cumberland, as it appears today, was built between 1785 and 1810 in the far eastern edge of Portsmouth at Eastney Point on the site of an earlier fort. It was designed to defend the entrance to Langstone Harbour and was built in a star plan bastioned style (it was the last of this type of fort to be built in the UK). It is now home to English Heritage offices, also hosting heritage outreach activities on National Archaeology Days.

Another significant group of Forts in the region are known as 'Palmerston Forts'. They were built in the 1860s on the orders of Lord Palmerston (then Prime Minister), following concerns about the strength of the French Navy, and were built to defend areas of specific strategic importance along the coast, in particular those surrounding military bases. The forts were also known as Palmerston's Follies as, by the time they were completed the threat (if it had ever really existed) had passed. They were the most costly and extensive system of fixed defences undertaken in Britain in peacetime. Examples from the Southern England region include the line of forts on Portsdown Hill, built to protect Portsmouth Harbour. These include Fort Purbrook, Fort Widley, Fort Southwick and Fort Nelson. The Gosport Advanced Line of forts protected Gosport from the West, and was made up of Fort Rowner Fort Elson, Fort Brockhurst, Fort Rowner, Fort Grange and Fort Gomer. Other Palmerston Forts in the region include Fort Victoria and Fort Albert on the Isle of Wight.

Four sea forts, Spitbank, Horse Sands, No Man's Land and St. Helen's Fort are located in the Solent between Portsmouth and the Isle of Wight and were built after the 1859 Royal Commission of the country's defences



#### **St. Helen's Fort in the Solent**

By the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the impact of warfare in England was considerable. During WW1 the Defence of the Realm Act 1914 enabled vast tracts of land to be requisitioned for the installation of defensive systems of fortifications and associated support facilities, including camps, airfields, munitions production, and storage, although many of these coastal defences and camps were temporary and have left little traces (Hampshire County Council, 2010). Many earlier fortifications that remained structurally sound were reused as defences during this time. These include Calshot Castle which provided Channel defence (as well as a training base for pilots). At the northern end of Langstone Harbour are the remains of a WWI anti-invasion redoubt. It was built on the site of a proposed Palmerston fortification - Langstone Redoubt - and was well placed to guard Langstone Harbour. It is very significant in that it is the only surviving WWI defence left on Portsmouth [portsdown-tunnels.org.uk/invasion\\_defences/langstone\\_redoubt.htm](http://www.portsdown-tunnels.org.uk/invasion_defences/langstone_redoubt.htm)

The British anti-invasion preparations of the Second World War entailed a large-scale division of military and civilian mobilisation in response to the threat of invasion by German armed forces in 1940 and 1941. The rapid construction of field fortifications transformed much of the United Kingdom, especially Southern England, into a prepared battlefield. Short of heavy weapons and equipment, the British had to make the best use of whatever was available and earlier fortifications were reused, for example troops were billeted at the sixteenth century Hurst Castle (the MOD still uses the two Victorian wings there).

Any German invasion of Britain would have to involve the landing of troops and equipment somewhere on the coast, and the most vulnerable areas were the south and east coasts of England. Here, Emergency Coastal Batteries were constructed to protect ports and likely landing places. They were fitted with whatever guns were available, which mainly came from naval vessels scrapped since the end of the First World War. Records of the remaining features from Britain's anti-invasion preparations can be found in the archive of the Council for British Archaeology's Defence of Britain Project: [www.britarch.ac.uk/cba/projects/DoB](http://www.britarch.ac.uk/cba/projects/DoB). WWII defences were later dismantled and 1956 saw the formal end of the military coastal defence policy in England. However, some

abandoned structures can still be seen in today's landscape. These include the line of tank traps which overlook Hordle Beach in the New Forest, gun emplacements and anti-aircraft battery along Southampton Water and the Solent coast, and pillboxes, often with extensive associated trenching and other fieldworks, which were constructed to overlook beaches and to house machine guns are scattered along the whole coastal area.



**Anti-tank device, Bakers Island (© Hampshire & Wight Trust for Maritime Archaeology)**

#### **VALUES AND PERCEPTIONS**

Attitudes to this Character Type are evolving. In addition to the long-appreciated heritage value of most medieval and earlier fortifications, post-medieval military defences are increasingly being perceived as part of the overall historic legacy of the landscape too. More specifically, in the case of WWII, they are seen as historically significant in terms of their place in the front line of the fight for freedom as their construction and use gradually slips from living memory.

Many defences have now been converted into museums which are informing the public about the specific fortifications as well as the general defence of Britain in history. Examples include many of the Palmerston Forts (eg the Martello Tower at Seaford, Fort Victoria on the Isle of Wight). Other examples such as Fort Albert on the Isle of Wight have been converted into residential developments.

#### **RESEARCH, AMENITY AND EDUCATION**

In general, there is scarce interest in research of this Character Type from a maritime archaeological perspective. For example, the built environment (e.g. castles and other fortifications) has often been well-researched in itself but often in isolation from its maritime setting and the maritime defensive strategies to which its built structures were responses (e.g. Johnson 2002). However, there is a wide and on-going research interest in 20<sup>th</sup> century military defences. For example, WWI and WWII military remains have been one of the most active areas of research for special interest groups in recent years and have been the subject of major national research programmes such as the CBA's Defence of Britain Project mentioned above.

Castles and other fortifications along the English coast act as a point of attraction for tourism and educational initiatives. Examples include Fort Victoria on Isle of Wight, a Palmerston Fort now containing a number of attractions including the Underwater Archaeology Centre, and surrounded by a 50 acre country park. Many others have been turned into museums or opened up to the public eg Portchester Castle, Hurst Castle, many of the Palmerston Forts on Portsdown Hill and the Martello Tower at Seaford to name a few.

Local history projects have been developed in the Southern England region which are helping researchers as well as local residents and visitors to the region to understand the maritime heritage of their areas. One example is the Maritime Memories project developed by the Hampshire and Wight Trust for Maritime Archaeology ([www.hwtma.org](http://www.hwtma.org)) which included an intergenerational oral history programme, with younger members of the community interviewing older generations about their island maritime memories, a local heritage day where community members were encouraged to bring their old photos of the fort for a photographic archive to be compiled and displayed, and interviews with many of the people who had previously served at the Fort.

A number of WWI and WWII remains are found underwater and are generally understudied, a contributing factor being that some of them could be considered as dangerous due to the potential presence of munitions. These submerged remains often have amenity value due to their popularity with sports divers. Educational value could be further explored through interactive web-interfaces.

A result of an increased public interest in surviving military remains was the Defence of Britain Project (DOB) (1995-2002), which ran under the auspices of the Council for British Archaeology. The purpose of the project was to record the 20<sup>th</sup> century militarised landscape of the UK, and to inform the responsible heritage agencies at both local and national level with a view to the future preservation of surviving structures ([www.britarch.ac.uk/cba/projects/dob](http://www.britarch.ac.uk/cba/projects/dob)).

In England, there are military vessels (including aircraft) which are protected as war graves under the Protection of Military Remains Act 1986. The primary reason for designation as a 'war grave' is to preserve the site as the last resting place of UK servicemen (or other nationals). However, the Act does not require the loss of the vessel to have occurred during war.

#### **CONDITION AND FORCES FOR CHANGE**

Many examples of this Character Type have been transformed into museums or are open to the public as tourist attractions. These are usually owned or curated by larger organisations such as English Heritage or by smaller charitable trusts who attempt to keep them in a good state of repair. Others which have no such guardianship are often left to decay and are now ruined. The remains of WWII pillboxes and gun emplacements which are scattered along the beaches of the region are suffering the effects of time, erosion and vandalism. Pressures to remove concrete WWII fortifications as unsightly have lessened as attitudes to their historic role have changed, but such threats may still remain from some landowners and managers.

Additionally, erosion and saltmarsh reclamation in later periods may have affected the survival of this Character Type.

#### **RARITY AND VULNERABILITY**

In terms of vulnerability, raising awareness of the significance and uniqueness of coastal military remains in England will make them more valued as a resource for present and

future generations: an integral part of the cultural legibility embedded in the landscape. The vulnerability of this Character Type in the landscape arises from onshore and offshore industrial development as well as coastal erosion processes. However, this could be identified, avoided and/or mitigated through the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) process, enabling an assessment of the possible impact (positive or negative) that a proposed project may have on the environment. EIA considers natural, historical, social and economic aspects, including impacts on landscape.

The Defence of Britain Project (DOB) highlights that there are still significant examples that survive in good condition, and that it is important to preserve them for their historic and unique importance as well as for their educational potential ([www.britarch.ac.uk/cba/projects/dob](http://www.britarch.ac.uk/cba/projects/dob)). Many defence structures that have good public access could be enhanced by appropriately positioned information boards, and incorporated into 'heritage walks', so that their place in history can be understood more comprehensively. The effectiveness of this would be greatly enhanced if aligned with implementation of the provisions to create England's coastal access route under the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009.

There is now a growing business in 'heritage tours' looking at WWII military sites. They are currently confined to places associated with the British and North American air forces, but important points of the defended landscape such as groups of pillboxes, anti-tank obstacles and coastal forts would also be valuable additions to itineraries (Foot 2000).

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