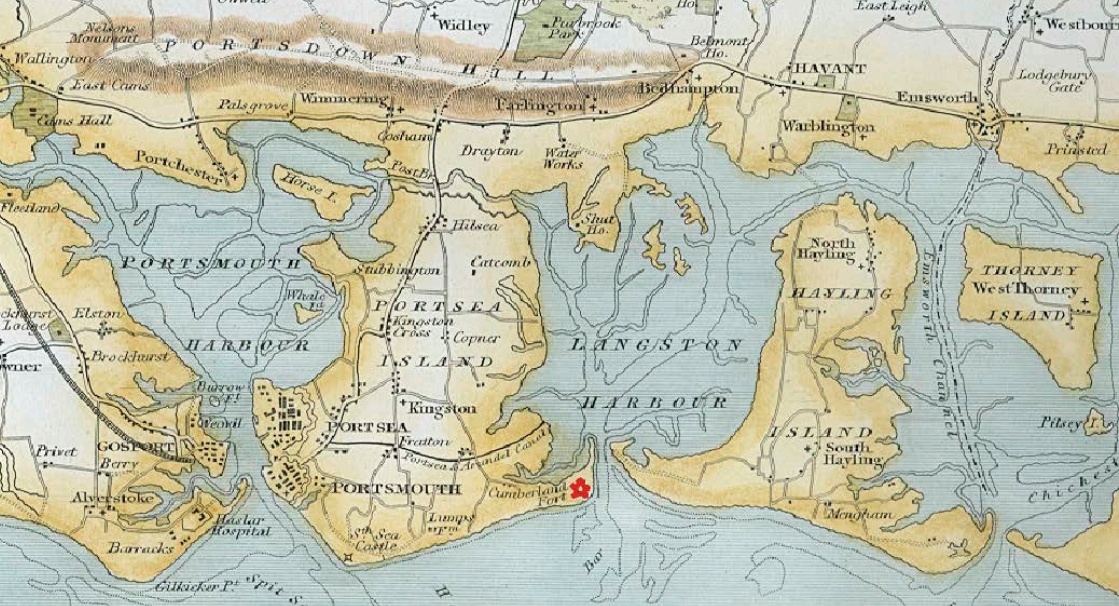




Historic England

Fort Cumberland





Building the Fort

Fort Cumberland, located at Eastney Point on the south-eastern corner of Portsea Island, was built to control the entrance to Langstone Harbour and improve the eastern defences of Portsmouth Dockyard.

The Jacobite Rebellion of 1745 increased the threat of French invasion and after his victory at the battle of Culloden in 1746, William Augustus, Duke of Cumberland undertook a review of the nation's defences. A new fort on Eastney Point, replacing an existing gun battery, was recommended. Designed by the Ordnance Engineer John Desmaretz, construction began in 1747.

The first fort was star-shaped, built of earth with rubble stone revetting. Gun embrasures for large guns were concentrated on the seaward side, to the south and south-east. Developed from a medieval design, star forts use the points of the star (redans) to provide defensive fire in all directions, leaving no blind spots where attackers could hide.

Following an assessment of Portsmouth's defences, plans to rebuild Fort Cumberland were submitted in 1782, with work commencing in 1783. The new fort was completed in 1812.

A version of an 1842 map by Thomas Moule, with the location of Fort Cumberland marked in red

The second fort retained the star-shaped principle but on a much more formidable scale, with 34 guns to bear on any approaching force. It also incorporated casemates, where men, stores and powder magazines were housed within the curtain wall. Gravel infill around the brick vaults would have dissipated any explosion, protecting those housed beneath. An 1859 plan numbers the garrison at 711 men.

Plan of the second Fort Cumberland (1782-1812) and later buildings superimposed over the first fort (shown in red)
© Historic England



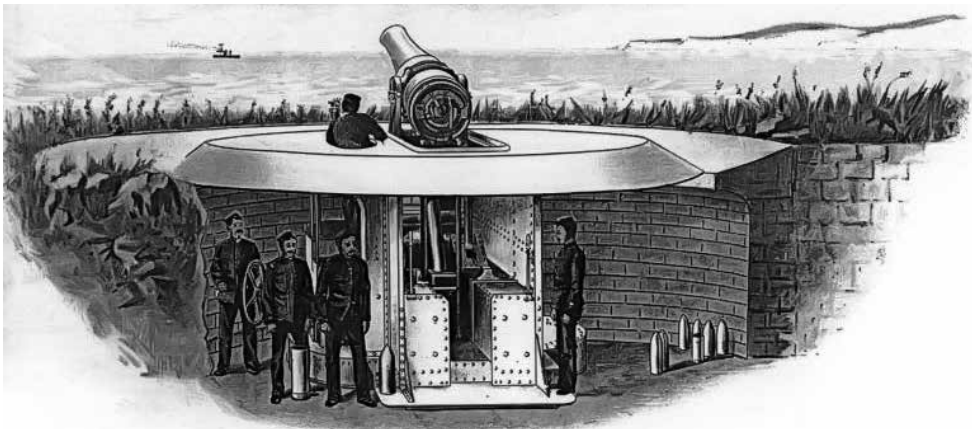
Two buildings from the first fort, the Guardhouse and the Storehouse, were retained. By 1861 the storehouse had been remodelled as a hospital, while new buildings included a cookhouse and houses for officers. In the late 19th century wagon sheds were added, while the garage and motor transport shed date to the 1930s. The guardhouse became a rope store around 1910 and after the second world war, the first floor room was converted into a theatre and cinema.

Around the main gate, the casemates housed the pay office, guardhouse and a detention cell. Here, graffiti includes tallies of the days and drawings of ships. There is even a quotation from the Old Testament.

Defences

Any force planning to land at Eastney and march on the dockyard would have had to take Fort Cumberland. Gun embrasures on the curtain walls and bastions housed large guns capable of inflicting massive damage to enemy boats in Langstone Harbour, or any soldiers approaching on land.

The fort walls were protected by an outer slope designed to slow attackers before they found themselves in the dry ditch. They were then faced with the sheer limestone curtain wall, 7.7m high. Cannon on top of the bastions and in the casemate windows would have fired along and across the ditch.



In the 1890s the Fort was equipped with hydropneumatic guns on disappearing gun carriages that protected the gun crew within refashioned concrete emplacements. Designed to fire out to sea, these guns were positioned along the seaward side.

The disappearing gun in operation
Image from <https://www.victorianforts.co.uk/>

A High Angle Fire Battery, designed to drop shells from height onto armour-clad warships, was added in the 1880s. Only six were constructed in this country and this is therefore a rare survival.

In the First World War a 15-inch Howitzer was installed for training purposes. Two pill boxes were constructed in the Second World War, with some of the gun emplacements modified to take anti-aircraft guns.



Clockwise from top left:

On parade 1921:
Gun drill outside the
Guardhouse;
Gun crew;

Vehicle testing in the
dip tank, 1950s;
Bomb damage in the
moat, 1940;
Biblical graffiti in
the cell.

All black and white
images courtesy of The
Royal Marines Museum
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Graffiti image © Historic
England

History

In 1858 Fort Cumberland was transferred from the War Department to the Admiralty and in 1859 became the Headquarters of the Royal Marine Artillery. Their Howitzer and Anti Aircraft Brigade was based here in the First World War, then from 1923 the fort housed the Mobile Naval Base Defence Organisation. After the Second World War the Fort was occupied by the Royal Marines Technical Training Wing. A 'dip tank' or amphibious vehicle testing pit in the moat dates from that period.

Fort Cumberland has seen action only once, when an air raid on August 26th 1940 took the lives of eight men in a casemate bomb shelter situated where the vehicle entrance is now. Their memorial can be seen on the central pillar.

The Fort was scheduled as an Ancient Monument in 1964, vacated by the Ministry of Defence and taken into Guardianship in 1975. The Central Excavation Unit moved in and archaeologists have been based here ever since. They now share Fort Cumberland with various tenants, who occupy and work in the casemates, bringing new life to those old structures.

Natural History

As well as its historical importance Fort Cumberland also provides a diverse range of habitats for wildlife. The open parade ground, 'cliff-top' ramparts and massive stone walls, along with the coastal scrub and grassland of the surrounding moat and outworks, support a rich biodiversity.

During the winter months birds are the most visible sign of life. Flocks of Meadow Pipits roam the parade ground joined by an occasional Curlew, Oystercatcher or Shelduck – high-tide visitors from Langstone Harbour. The attractive and nationally rare Black Redstart is a regular winter visitor and sometimes stays on to breed.

In early spring the tiny white flowers of Scurvy-grass, Rue-leaved Saxifrage and Whitlow Grass carpet the ground and as the season gains momentum the Fort blossoms. Coastal specialists such as Sea Beet, Sea Campion and Sea Radish thrive here. Wild Clary, a plant which isn't native to the area, is believed to have arrived as seeds with the building stone from Portland. It now grows in profusion on the lawns and ramparts.

Left to right:

Sea Campion;
Autumn Lady's Tresses;
Wild Clary
© John Vallender





Clockwise from top left:
Green-eyed Flower Bee;
Emperor Dragonfly;
Common Blue
butterflies;
Great Green Bush-
cricket
© John Vallender

Come high summer and the Fort is buzzing with life. The spectacular Emperor Dragonfly patrols the moat in search of prey, while the profusion of flowers attracts many other insects, including the bizarre Green-eyed Flower Bee with its bulging headlamp eyes. Butterflies abound – thirty different species have been recorded here. At seven centimetres long, the Great Green Bush-cricket is the Fort’s largest insect, although it can be surprisingly difficult to spot amongst the vegetation.

As the days shorten Autumn Lady’s Tresses, an orchid with spiralling spires of frosty white flowers, appears. Foxes feast on blackberries, Kestrels hover overhead, scanning the ground for unwary voles and mice and circles of Fairy Ring Champignons spring up overnight. In Autumn migrating birds, such as Wheatears and Whinchats, stop off to feed and rest before crossing the Channel.



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For further information on Fort Cumberland visit:

HistoricEngland.org.uk/about/contact-us/Fort-Cumberland

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