

Portland Breakwater Fort

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| Commenced | 1868 | Original intended armament 14 x 12.5-inch 38 ton RMLs 1878 Mounted 7 x 12.5-inch RMLs 1878 Proposed 12 x 12.5-inch RMLs 2 x 12-inch BL 1886 Proposed to mount 2 x 12-inch BL casemates 6 and 8 1888 Proposed 5 x 12.5-inch RMLs 2 x 12-inch BLs casemates 6,8. 4 x 6pr QFs in casemates 1,3,11,13. 1891 Proposed substitute 2 x 9.2-inch BLs for 2 x 12-inch BLs 2 x 6pr QF and 2 x MG on top 1892 7 x 12.5-inch R.M.Ls 1898 6 x 12.5-inch R.M.L. 2 x 12pr. QFs on roof. 1907 2 x 6-inch BL IV guns on roof 2 x 12pr. on jetty 1919 2 x 6-inch BL IV guns on roof 2 x 12pr. on jetty 1943 40mm bofors? |
| Completed | 1875 | |
| Cost | £ 75,968 to June 1868 (£202,658 Est.) | |
| Map Reference | SY 707762 | |
| Position | Portland Harbour breakwater | |
| Type | Circular casemated iron on granite | |
| Ditch | The sea | |
| Guns | 14 | |
| Barrack Accom. | | |
| Present use | Empty | |
| History | Coast defence to 1956. Lighthouse on top. | |
| Disposal | Handed to the Navy in 1956 | |
| Condition | Deteriorating | |
| Access | By arrangement with Portland Base | |
| Sources | 'Fort' Volume 9, 1868 Committee Report, Lecture by Col. Inglis The Development of Iron Armour to 1882 | |

History and Description

The 1860 Commission called for a large casemated fort on the extremity of Portland Breakwater and by June 1868 the foundation ring, 200ft. in diameter, constructed by Mr. Coode C.E, was twelve feet above the high water mark. The fort was then handed to the War Department. Settlement caused the design of the fort to be reconsidered, one of the plans being for a two-tiered iron fort mounting fourteen guns in the lower storey with fifteen in the upper one costing £273,658. An alternative plan for a one-tiered fort mounting fourteen guns costing £199,213 with four gun turrets on top for a total of eight guns costing £229,846 was eventually chosen. As with the Spithead forts the turrets were not supplied. The fort, designed by Captain E.H. Steward R.E. is 116 feet in diameter with 6.5-inch plate walls, containing fourteen embrasures, constructed on top of spawls faced with granite masonry. The gun floor is 23ft. above H.W.M. The fort is constructed in a similar manner to the iron portions of Spitbank Fort at Portsmouth with two strong rings of box-girder construction going all round the battery, one at the level of the floor the other at roof level, against which the armoured wall rests. This consists of three 6.5-inch plates with port frames of 2.25-inches. The original armament was to be 12.5-inch RML guns and an L shaped jetty was built alongside to land these 38-ton guns. The fort was complete by 1875 and received 7 x 12.5-inch RMLs by 1878. In 1880 the Defence Committee reported that *'though not two thirds of the contemplated weight of the superstructure has been given, the subsidence has reached 2 feet and has scarcely come to rest. This subsidence has not, however, interfered with the working of the guns nor dislodged the armour. The upper tier has been abandoned, but nevertheless with the improved type of guns with which it is about to be armed the fort will have a large excess of energy over the original design and twice the power of resistance'*. The armament list for 1893 shows quite clearly that the seven 12.5 inch guns were mounted in alternate even numbered casemates 2 to 14 and the Précis of Correspondence for Portland dated 7-11-88 confirms this. It was then proposed to mount 6pr QFs in casemates 1, 3, 11 and 13. The Defence Committee proposed to replace the RMLs from 6 and 8 with 12 inch BLs. to defend the harbour. This was not carried out and in 1893 it was proposed to substitute the two 12-inch BLs with 9.2-inch BLs with 2 x 6pr QFs on top. No provision was made for this. Provision was made for the guns to be operated by steam power. In 1892 it was also reported that the basement was adapted for the use of Whitehead torpedoes. The fort was re-armed in 1898 with two 12pr. Q.F.s on the roof to supplement two already in place on the breakwater. These were followed by 2 x 6-inch BL guns in 1907 which were still on the armament returns of WW1. The 12prs. were removed in 1920. The Navy have always referred to the Fort under its original name of Fort Head (North Head) or Fort Chequers, presumably due to its receiving the same chequer camouflage pattern as the forts at Spithead. Some broken 12.5-inch RMLs, still lie in the sea close to the fort.

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