

## **CROWNHILL FORT, PLYMOUTH, DEVON**

### **A DESCRIPTION**

Crownhill Fort was built between 1863 and 1872 as the key to the North-East Defences of Plymouth which stretched from the Tamar River on the west to the Cattewater on the east and included nine other forts and batteries and one keep in between. It was built as part of the largest fortress building boom in British history against the perceived threat of French invasion. The 1850s and 60s were a period of mounting international tension, especially after Napoleon Bonaparte's nephew, Napoleon III, declared himself Emperor in France in 1852. There were mutual feelings of fear and distrust between the two nations and after France launched the armoured steam frigate "La Gloire" in 1858, the British Navy's ability to defend the country was seen to be gravely threatened.

Steam power had greatly improved the accuracy and range for artillery. The adoption of explosive shells, combined with ironclad ships reduced the effectiveness of existing defences. The Channel had been an obstacle to sailing ships, but by mid-century was "nothing more than a river passable by a steam bridge." In 1859, the Prime Minister, Lord Palmerston, responded to the alarm from a Royal Commission report on the defences of the United Kingdom.

The commission called for a massive fortress building programme to protect dockyards and strategic harbours at an estimated cost of £111,850,000. Parliament reduced the scales of the undertaking but nonetheless by 1867, 76 forts and batteries had been built or were under construction around the principal naval ports of Britain. Over £3,000,000 was spent on the Plymouth defences alone, with Crownhill Fort construction costing £76,000.

Crownhill Fort, the largest, most advanced, and least altered of Plymouth's 19th century forts, commands one of the highest points in the city yet is surprisingly inconspicuous. Though covering 16 acres and surrounded by a broad, deep ditch hewn from bedrock, the fort appears from only a short distance to be nothing but a forested hilltop. There are, however, four fighting levels with placements for 32 cannons and six mortars, nearly a half mile of tunnels, and accommodation for 300 soldiers and officers concealed within it.

Like the rest of the North-East Defences, Crownhill Fort was designed by Captain (later Major General) Edmund DuCane who also designed Staddon Fort and, with Captain William Crossman, Tregantle Fort. The great advances in military technology enabled them to break from the centuries old practice of continuous line defences. Each of the forts was designed as a polygon surrounded by a ditch which itself was protected by caponiers (powerful, casemated structures which provided flanking fire across the ditch). Guns, sometimes in casemates, lined the tops of the ramparts and the barrack blocks within were made bomb-proof by the use of mounded earth.

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From its completion in 1872 until 1986, Crownhill Fort was under continuous military occupation. As the French threat receded, the fort was used as a training centre for local volunteer forces in the 1880s and 90s. During the First World War, Crownhill Fort was used as a recruitment and mobilisation depot, with thousands of men sent to fight in the Gallipoli Campaign. In World War II, the fort was refortified as a Point of Resistance, with machine guns replacing cannon and many slip trenches cut to the inner and outer banks. In the early 1980s, 59 Commando provided logistical support to the Falklands Campaign from Crownhill Fort, but shortly after it was declared surplus to requirements.

The Landmark Trust, a building preservation charity, recognised the importance of Crownhill Fort and in 1987, wishing to give it a secure future, bought it from the Ministry of Defence. This was during the years that Landmark was supported by its founder, John Smith's Manifold Trust. Forts were a particular enthusiasm of John Smith's. Landmark's intention was not only to ensure the Fort's preservation and to restore its original layout as far as possible, but also to open it to visitors so that they might both learn from and enjoy the experience.

## **THE RESTORATION OF CROWNHILL FORT**

After acquiring the fort in 1987, Landmark initially focussed on the restoration of the grounds. Over the years, changing uses and indeed lack of use in some cases, led to blockage of pathways and tunnels and altered levels at various points. The covered way and chemin des rondes (the paths around the outside and inside of the ditch respectively) which were badly overgrown and impassable, were cleared and re-opened. There is now a permissive pathway, nearly two-thirds of a mile long, right round the outside. Rifle ranges dating to the 1930's and a post-World War II commando assault course were removed from the ditch and the original levels restored. Modern buildings around the parade ground were demolished, and hundreds of yards of tunnels were limewashed in traditional fashion.

Next attention was turned to the buildings, most of which are now let to local businesses. In the Soldiers' and Officers' Quarters, doors and windows were repaired and air vents unblocked. Their earth roofs were replaced, and Landmark holiday accommodation was created for eight people in the Officers' Quarters. Two of the Caponniers have been restored and armed with original and replica artillery pieces typical of those used in the 1880s.

Today, Crownhill is financially self sustaining, and a thriving little community-within-the-community. Several hundred school children visit the Fort each year to learn about its history and discover what life was like for Victorian soldiers. Through all this, after hours, those staying in the comfortable Officers' Quarters have the place all to themselves.

*The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. Crownhill Fort sleeps up to 8 people. To book the building or any*

*other Landmark property for a holiday, please contact us or visit [www.landmarktrust.org.uk](http://www.landmarktrust.org.uk), where dates for open days and re-enactment events are also posted.*