

The Landmark Trust

WEST BLOCKHOUSE

The West Blockhouse was built in 1854-7, but the value of the deep-water anchorage at Milford Haven which it protected had been recognised long before that. Concern about invasion by the French (or indeed the Spanish) was as fierce in the 16th century as the 19th, and Henry VIII had ordered two circular blockhouses to be built as early as 1539. The one nearest Dale was named the West Blockhouse, and gave its name to the point on which it stood. In 1814, during the Napoleonic Wars, the great Royal Dockyard at Pembroke Dock was established but it was to be another forty years before plans for increased protection along the coastline became a reality under Lord Palmerston's aegis, a great believer in 'gunboat diplomacy' himself. Relations with France, meanwhile, were rapidly deteriorating in the 1850s after Napoleon Bonaparte's nephew, Napoleon III, declared himself Emperor in France in 1852. Warfare on land and sea was about to change out of all recognition with the advent of steam and modern technologies, but in the 1850s military engineers still held fast to what they knew and buildings like the West Blockhouse show how the engineers of the day tried to prepare for the warfare of the future.

Four new forts were built at the mouth of the haven: on Thorn Island, Stack Rock Island, Dale Point and, most westerly, on West Blockhouse Point. It was intended that these forts' artillery would de-mast any enemy ships before they reached the docks (the new, steam-driven screw was still believed to be an auxiliary form of propulsion). Sadly, all plans and records for the building of the West Blockhouse have been lost and we do not know who designed it but by 1857, a battery holding six guns had been built, with accommodation behind for 41 men and one officer, all of finely dressed limestone. From plans made in 1866 we know that the soldiers were to sleep in barrack rooms on the ground and first floor, where they would also eat and while away their leisure hours. Six 68-pounder guns were also in place by 1859, standard smooth-bore issue that had been in use for twenty years, 10 feet long and weighing 95 cwt. The rails on which the wheels of the slide up, on which the gun-carriage recoiled when fired, can still be seen on the east flank of the battery.

There is no evidence that the West Blockhouse was ever garrisoned in the 19th century, as the threat of invasion faded. In fact, the blockhouse was obsolete almost as soon as it was built and would have been unlikely to withstand the latest cannon fire. In comparison with the more massive forts that followed in the 1860s, the West Blockhouse seems almost friendly, its open, exposed batteries directed as much against a landward as seaward attack. Its site and design would have made it quite effective had a land attack ever materialised, the landward side being protected by what is effectively a dry moat, crossed only by a drawbridge. The parapet which protects its roof is also higher on the landward side – but neither fort nor battery would have withstood attack or siege for long.

The West Blockhouse was to see more use in the 20th century during the two World Wars than in the 19th. In 1900, the Milford Haven defences were re-armed and a new battery built outside the blockhouse. In 1904, a very thorough survey was made of both new battery and old fort, which was invaluable as restoration work began. In WWI, West Blockhouse Battery, by now with new Breech Loading guns, was designated a Counter Bombardment Battery and finally received a garrison, of the Royal Artillery, although it never saw action. After the war, a caretaker was once more left in charge, the battery used for exercises with a skeleton staff maintaining the guns, one of whom was Cliff Gough, later Brigadier.

In 1939, the battery was once again manned in earnest and German bombardment of Pembroke Dock began in July 1940, followed by the laying of aerial mines, increasingly effective despite the laying of a boom across the mouth of the haven. In these early stages of the war, the only defence against the enemy bombers came from machine guns at the coastal batteries, although ack acks eventually arrived, together with protective gunhouses. Life at the West Blockhouse in these years must have been hectic, other duties including

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firing warning shots across the bows of ships failing to comply with port regulations and guiding the RAFs flying boats back to Pembroke Dock with searchlights. After the war, the fort was used for a while for Territorial Army exercises but finally closed formally in 1956. The fort remained in MOD ownership although the land around was sold.

RESTORATION OF WEST BLOCKHOUSE FORT

The Landmark Trust acquired West Blockhouse Fort in 1969, and the land behind it in 1970. The fort had been vandalised, but was still basically sound. Restoration finally began in the autumn of 1986. The two greatest problems were repair of damage done by 20th-century alterations to the windows and to the roof. Metal shutters had been fitted to the windows on the seaward side and to make these fit, the stone reveals had been crudely cut back. Strips of stone had to be cut and then pieced in to fill each missing section of these reveals, a very long and laborious job. A new window was made at the same time, where a door had been cut through into the lower barrack room when it became an engine room.

The roof of the fort was not originally designed to support guns, being constructed in the same way as other mid-19th century barrack buildings, with shallow brick vaults strengthened with iron girders, and a layer of asphalt on top. When two guns were mounted on the west wing in 1901, a concrete structure was cast to support the weight, cutting through the brick vault. Girders were added to give extra strength. Besides disfiguring the interior, this was not in fact doing the roof itself any good, and so we decided to remove it altogether, and to remake the brick vault. Ideally we would then have liked to lay a stone roof, but the structure was not strong enough to support it, and so the present tiles were laid instead. Several of the granite coping stones of the parapet also had to be replaced, where they had been dislodged, or were damaged.

As the original drawings were lost, we did not know details of any joinery or interior fittings that had subsequently been altered. Luckily, the very thorough 1904 survey provided most of the information needed, such as the design of the windows. We decided not to make use of the ground floor, as the accommodation on the first floor, if one barrack room was subdivided, was quite large enough and more pleasant to live in. Unfortunately, the vandals had burnt all the floor boards in the north barrack. The boards lining the walls were also mostly gone, but enough survived to show us what it had looked like and pitch pine salvaged from a warehouse in the Liverpool docks was used to renew it. The new floor is higher than the original, to be able to see out of the windows on the seaward side of the fort - a privilege (or risk) denied the garrison men. New doors were made, copying one that survived and the rooms inside are surprisingly snug and well insulated from the tempestuous winds.

Outside, building sheds and other flotsam were cleared away. One such unwanted object turned out to be part of a mounting for a 19th-century gun, and this was put back in position. Two Vavasseur mounts were also stacked at the back of the fort, and these too have been repositioned. Unfortunately the great granite coping stones of the battery parapet had mostly been thrown down the cliff when they were removed to make way for the new guns in 1901, and there seems to be no way of getting them back up again. The drawbridge had rotted beyond repair and so a new one was made to the same design, with a new handrail, and winding chains. The steps were provided with new railings and the approach straightened and tidied. Given its more peaceable use today, the last word on the fort should perhaps go to one of the men who served at the West Blockhouse in the 1930s. Charged with waking his fellows, he was remembered by Brigadier Gough, as yelling: "Come on, just have a look at the view, there are people who would pay pounds for this opportunity!"

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. West Blockhouse sleeps up to 8 people. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please visit www.landmarktrust.org.uk