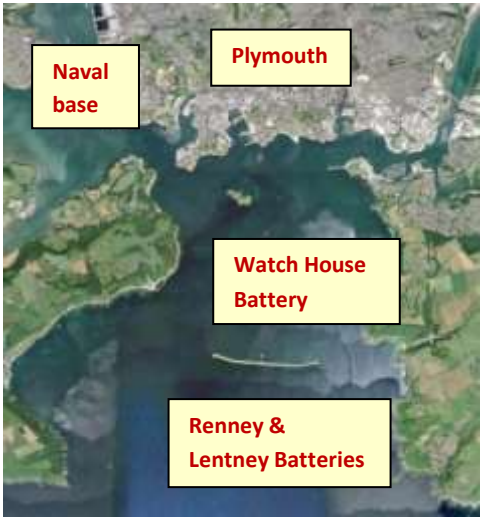
Frontline Wembury in World War I

David Pinder



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Introduction

On November 10th 2018, Wembury Local History Society mounted a substantial exhibition commemorating the centenary of the 1918 Armistice. The core of this exhibition was a series of displays exploring aspects of Wembury during the hostilities. These displays have now been recast and made available as articles downloadable from the Society's website (wemburyhistory.org.uk).

This article is an expanded version of the display which explored early 20th-century defences in the parish. These were compact, yet very powerful, installations designed to protect Plymouth's naval dockyard from bombardment from the sea. The article also provides a brief survey of the 20th-century fortifications' subsequent fortunes, and their state today.

Nineteenth-century legacy

After 1860, major defence investments were made east of Plymouth, especially in forts. France was seen as the potential enemy, the main fear being that French troops would invade elsewhere and attack Plymouth and the Dockyard by land. The two largest defence works east of Plymouth – Fort Stamford and Fort Staddon – therefore faced away from the sea, to repel invaders landing elsewhere and aiming to dominate Plymouth by capturing Staddon Heights (Figure 1).

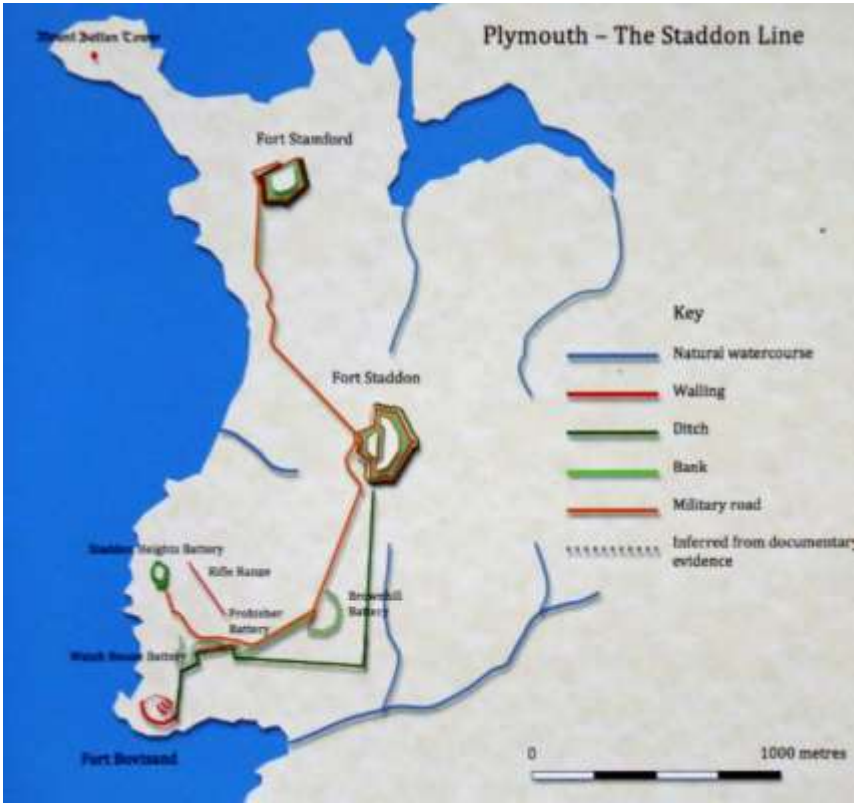

Figure 1 Pre-twentieth-century fortifications in the Staddon area © Polyalbion.co.uk

However, strategic priorities and military technologies can change rapidly. By 1900 Germany was seen as the new threat. And rapid

advances in battleship construction and armament meant that heavy bombardment by German warships from miles out at sea was now the greatest danger. Less than 40 years after they were built, therefore, Forts Stamford and Staddon had lost most of their strategic value.

It might be expected that the key coastal defence would be Fort Bovisand - the imposing existing fortification on Staddon Point, immediately overlooking the eastern entrance to Plymouth Sound (Figures 1 and 2). Although this dated from the same era as Forts Stamford and Staddon, it at least faced in the right direction! Moreover, by the late 19th century its weaponry included fourteen 10-inch, and nine 9-inch guns – the greatest concentration of firepower Staddon Point had ever known.

Figure 2 Fort Bovisand © David Pinder

But here, too, technological change was taking its toll. While the fort's guns were numerous and heavy, they were also muzzle-loaders – problematic in terms of firing speed, power and range. Like its landward-facing counterparts, therefore, Bovisand's fate was demotion. By 1903 all its outdated muzzle-loading guns had been removed, and it appears that its chief armament during World War I amounted to no more than a handful of rapid-fire twelve-pounders.

While these were an advance on the old muzzle-loaders in terms of speed, they were no match for battleships.

Twentieth-century response

Both east and west of Plymouth, new coastal defences able to thwart seaborne bombardment were now urgently needed. This had major consequences for Wembury. Although the local community was used to a military presence - both Fort Staddon and Fort Bovisand are in the parish – additional firepower in new locations was the new priority. But what defences were added, and which sites were chosen?

Watch House Battery

The first direction in which firepower migrated was upwards. Since 1869 there had been a small battery on the cliff top, high above Fort Bovisand. Around 1901 this Watch House Battery was completely rebuilt and equipped with modern gun emplacements and their necessary support infrastructure – magazines, a guard house, shelters and stores. Far more compact than a fort, this development had the advantage that it was a much less obvious target. Yet it was still powerful: Watch House Battery was equipped with two 6-inch, breech-loading guns, specifically chosen to deal with fast warships which might elude heavier armament. More information on armaments, including a photo taken at Watch House, can be found in the appendix.

Quite apart from the advantages brought by modern weaponry, Figure 3 underlines Watch House Battery's strategic value. The site did not simply command the eastern entrance to Plymouth Sound; its combination of height and modern firepower extended its threat well out to sea.

Figure 3 Western outlook from Watch House Battery. Because of subsequent fencing, this view is no longer available. © David Pinder

Just as the defences went upwards, they also moved further out along the coast, and therefore deeper into Wembury. Here, Renney Camp was built to support two major batteries: Lentney and Renney (Figure 4).

Figure 4 Watch House Battery and Renney Camp relative to Plymouth Sound and the naval base. © Google Earth, 2018

Lentney Battery

In 1905, Lentney Battery (Figure 5) was completed a mile south of Watch House Battery and Fort Bovisand. Originally designed to have 3 gun emplacements, only two were built. Defence cuts seem to have intervened. But, as with Watch House Battery, its guns – 6-inch breach-loaders – were chosen specifically to deal with fast warships. Figure 6 shows that Lentney, like Watch House, was able to guard a wide sweep of the Channel. Being close to sea level, however, there was concern that it could be attacked by a landing force, a concern countered by the addition of an 'unclimbable' fence.

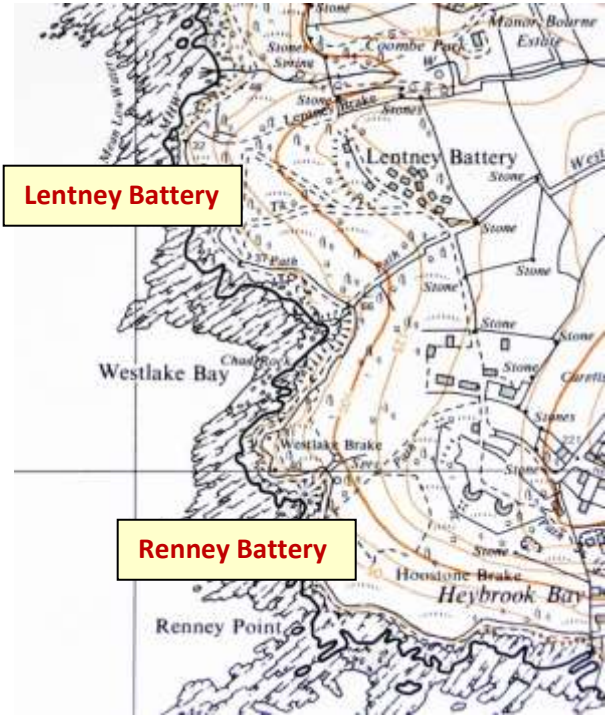

Figure 5 Location of Renney and Lentney Batteries. Crown Copyright. Reproduced under the Ordnance Survey's 50-year rule.

Figure 6 Seaward view from the Lentney site. The concrete building is part of the battery. © David Pinder

Initially this battery appears to have been regarded as a supplementary site, as it was soon placed in reserve. Defence cuts may again have been a significant factor. But as WWI approached it became important for training, and was swiftly placed on a war footing when the time came.

Renney Battery

Renney Battery (Figure 7) lies a quarter of a mile south of Lentney, with which it shared the adjacent garrison buildings known as Renney Camp. Built in 1905-6, Renney shared Lentney's design with three important differences. It had all three gun emplacements that were originally envisaged. It was given the heaviest armament of all Wembury's early-twentieth-century defences, i.e. three 9.2 inch breach-loading guns. And, because of the guns' scale, it was much larger than Lentney and Watch House.

Strategically, therefore, this was the heavyweight battery designed to counter the most powerful enemy battleships. Yet, despite its size, it again offered a very low profile, and was therefore difficult to target.

Figure 7 Modern aerial view of Renney Battery. Renney Camp's permanent buildings are top left. © CastlesFortsandBattles.co.uk, 2019

Renney was just as isolated and potentially vulnerable to an assault from the sea as Lentney. In 1914, therefore, three blockhouses were built in front of the battery and linked by an 'unclimbable' fence.

Renney Camp

The garrison attached to Renney and Lentney Batteries occupied two nearby sites. One, comprising several stone buildings, was located just north of Renney Battery, and can be seen in Figure 7 and close to the southern edge of Figure 9. This site was essentially the local HQ for the Renney / Lentney encampment.

A short military road led from Renney Battery to the second garrison site, a cluster of huts behind Lentney Battery (Figures 8, 9 and 10). Although Figure 9 dates from 1954, and therefore shows the WWII layout, the WWI huts were also on this site.

Figure 8 A Renney Camp WWI hut. Moved to Wembury after the war, it served as the village hall until the mid-1950s. One half still exists. © Peter Lugar

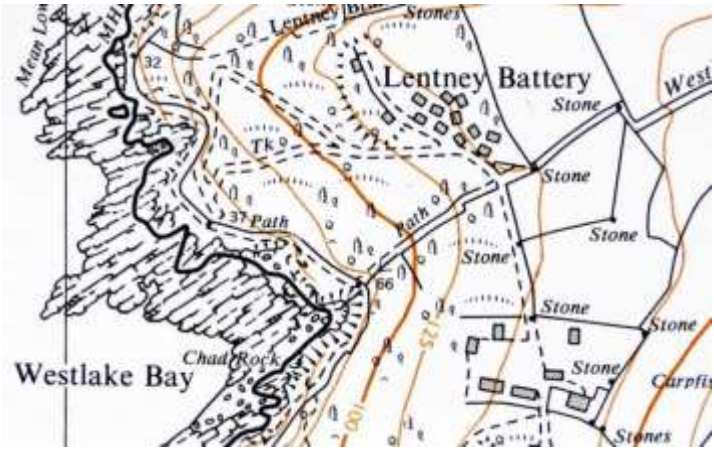

Figure 9 Site of Lentney Battery relative to Renney Camp © David Pinder

Figure 10 Military road linking Renney and Lentney Batteries ©David Pinder

The majority of the garrison's troops would have been housed here. It is likely that some soldiers using the huts would have been those who manned the guns, men who were considered to be the elite gunners of the Royal Artillery. But many would have been ordinary soldiers whose job it was to undertake all the very necessary day-to-day tasks of keeping the unit running, as well as providing defence if either of the batteries came under attack.

After the war

During the war, although the guns were naturally used for training and firing practice, not a shot was fired in anger. To a great extent the batteries' role was as a deterrent. Later, their fortunes varied.

Watch House Battery remained armed with its 6" guns throughout the interwar period and WWII but then, in 1946, was rapidly decommissioned.

Lentney Battery remained in commission during the 1920s but was then stood down in 1930. This decision presumably reflected an assessment that two 6" gun batteries were not now needed. However, WWII led to its reactivation with new and enhanced armament: two 6" guns, as before, plus a 6-pounder and two 12-pounder guns. In this period its most important function was as a training facility. For a short time following WWII the site was used to test captured German weapons, and it was officially decommissioned in 1956.

Meanwhile, **Renney Battery** fared best of all. Armed throughout the interwar years, in 1933 it was enhanced by the addition of two searchlights. Then, in WWII, it underwent a substantial upgrade. The three 9.2" guns were fitted with long-range mountings, and probably strengthened barrels, which increased the battery's reach to almost

32km (20 miles). In addition, two 60-pounders were added, as were a 6-pounder, two mortars and two Bofors 40mm anti-aircraft guns. However, this substantial upgrade did not guarantee a long post-war life as a long-range battery: in 1957 the armaments were decommissioned. The site then became a training centre and was eventually released by the MoD in 1991.

The batteries and camp today

Watch House Battery today

Compared with the architecturally impressive Fort Bovisand, Watch House Battery is a utilitarian concrete edifice (Figure 11).

Figure 11 Watch House Battery from the rear. Access to this site is no longer possible. © David Pinder

Despite this, Historic England views it as important, classing it as part of 'an integrated military landscape overlooking Plymouth Sound'. The heritage significance of this landscape is demonstrated by the fact that, as a whole, it is a scheduled Ancient Monument and consequently should have the highest level of protection. This high designation has

not, however, safeguarded the battery: Historic England now classifies it as being in poor condition and at serious risk of further deterioration.

Until a few years ago, Watch House Battery could be reached either via a short spur path leading up to the site from the coast path, or by taking the former military road running along the edge of the Staddon Heights golf course. Although the battery itself was fenced off for safety reasons, its interior could easily be viewed through the fence.

Because of vandalism, access to the large majority of the integrated military landscape on the heights has now been blocked by the MoD. Unfortunately, therefore, this important site can no longer be viewed, and is steadily decaying out of sight.

Lentney Battery today

Apart from its guns, this battery is still largely complete, and Historic England has given it a Grade II listing. As at Renney, scrub and trees completely screen the site when viewed from the coast. And, as at Watch House, no maintenance is undertaken. Even so, the structure is sound, and it is the only major defensive site from the WWI era that is readily accessible (Figures 12, 13 and 14).

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Two paths lead up to the battery from the coast path. The easiest of these is a tarmac military road which starts near the prominent white-painted navigation light just south of Bovisand chalet park. Both paths lead into a large open area, from which it is easy to enter the rear of the battery and explore its gun emplacements, magazines, stores, etc.

REMEMBER, HOWEVER, THAT THIS IS A DANGEROUS SITE. FOR EXAMPLE, ONE STEP BACKWARDS WHEN STANDING ON A GUNPIT TAKING A PHOTOGRAPH COULD RESULT IN A VERY SERIOUS FALL. THERE IS NO HELP IMMEDIATELY AVAILABLE.

Figure 12 Above: Rear view of Lentney Battery; below: 6" gunpit at Lentney ©David Pinder

Figure 13 Lentney Battery: the upper and lower ends of an ammunition lift © David Pinder

Figure 14 Steps down to one of Lentney Battery's magazines © David Pinder

Renney Battery today

Renney Battery now lies on the northern edge of housing at Heybrook Bay. Disarmed in 1957 it became a Grade II listed building in 1992. Many interior features survive but, although the site is cared for (Figure 15), it is privately owned and cannot be entered.

Figure 15 Rear view of Renney Battery. One of the gunpit entrances is to the right of the large black blast wall. © David Pinder

From the seaward side Renney Battery is now hidden by vegetation, but it can still be glimpsed from the footpath leading from Renney Road down towards the sea. In addition this path, which curves around the battery and somewhat below it, follows the line of the 'unclimbable' fence installed (together with three blockhouses) to protect the battery from a land attack from the sea (Figure 16).

Figure 16 Path following the line of the 'unclimbable' fence around Renney Battery © David Pinder

Renney Camp today

Unlike the batteries, the permanent buildings are not listed on the Historic England register and therefore have no statutory protection. However, they were sturdily built and have been well converted into houses. Several are shown in Figure 17, and the complete group, plus two new properties, is visible in Figure 7 (top left).

Figure 17 Army buildings at Renney Camp, now converted to housing
© David Pinder

At Lentney the hut encampment has been cleared completely, the site is overgrown and nothing is now visible. Just as the camp has disappeared, we know nothing about the many ordinary soldiers who must have lived in these huts and worked on the batteries, except for one person. This was Jeremiah Siyabi, a member of the South African Native Labour Corps. His story is explored in a related article, *World War I, Wembury and the South African Connection*, downloadable from Wembury Local History Society's website publications page.

Appendix:

Coastal battery armaments

The standard armaments installed at coastal batteries in Britain and throughout the empire were the 6" and 9.2" weapons with which Watch House, Lentney and Renney Batteries were equipped. Both types of gun were originally designed for warships, but were then adapted for coastal defence. Some were also mounted on heavy-duty railway bogies and deployed on the western front in France. Although

both the 6" and 9.2" guns were breach loaders, and therefore had a higher firing rate than the outmoded muzzle loaders, the smaller type was the quicker of the two. Consequently one of their important roles was to engage vessels that had escaped the larger guns.

6'' coastal guns

There are many photographs of 6" coastal guns available on the internet (Figure 18). One of the conclusions to be reached from these is that the protective gun housings varied greatly. Recently, however, a photograph showing the system at Watch House Battery has been discovered (Figure 19).

Figure 18 Two contrasted approaches to 6" gun crew protection

Figure 19 6" coastal gun at Watch House Battery.

The gun itself can be seen on its rotatable mounting, which was bolted to the base of the gunpit. The barrel's breech end protrudes over the

gunpit's circular rim, on which the no. 1 gunner and perhaps two or three assistants would stand. The small square in the right-hand bottom corner of the picture is a hatch covering the top of an ammunition lift used for raising the shells. A second lift, out of view to the right, would have brought up the propulsive charges. Traversing and elevating the gun were done manually by using driving wheels; reports indicate that these movements were swift because the mechanisms were finely balanced.

9.2" coastal guns

Viewed on maps, the 9.2" gun batteries appear very similar to their 6" counterparts. When they are visited, however, it quickly emerges that that they were much more massive (Figure 20). Individual 9.2" gunpits varied a little in size, but most were around 10 or 11 m (30 to 35 feet) in diameter, and at least 3 m (9 or 10 feet) deep.

Figure 20 View into a Renney Battery gunpit from the rear

Rather than being completely circular, they were open at the rear to facilitate access, although at Renney Battery the opening was eventually narrowed by adding brick blast walls. This probably occurred in World War II.

Construction on this scale was essential because of the size of the guns. An impression of this is provided, firstly, by the plan in Figure 21 and, secondly, by the combined weight of the gun and mounting: 125 tons. As with the 6” guns, only a small crew was necessary on the gun itself: just a master gunner and a small number of assistants. For safety, shells and propulsive charges were raised separately by two ammunition lifts from the magazines below to the level of the bottom of the gunpit. The shells were then loaded onto a trolley which ran on a circular railway close to the wall. This enabled ammunition to be delivered to the rear of the gun whichever direction it was pointing in. Once in the right position, the shells were raised to the gunners high above by another lift, this time incorporated into the gun’s mount.

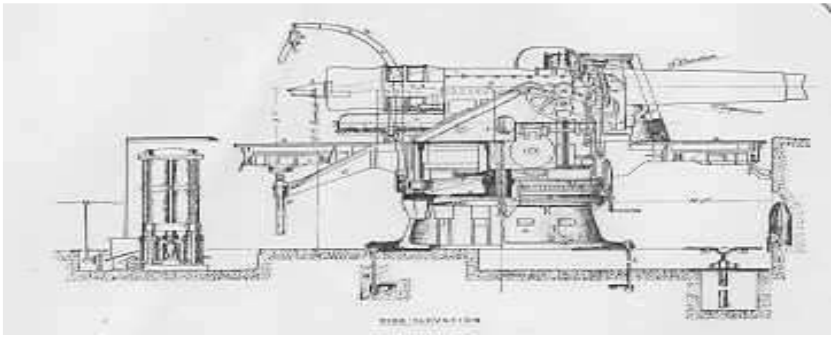

Figure 21 Cross-section diagram of a 9.2” coastal gun

Unlike the arrangement at the 6” batteries, the crew did not operate from the gunpit rim, but on a circular deck which completely filled the top of the pit except for a central void through which the gun mount protruded. At Renney the fixings for these decks can be clearly seen near the top of the gunpit walls. Figure 22, the only one known to show a 9.2” gun being fired, well illustrates many of the points made above. From the gunners’ attire, it is likely that the photograph was taken early in the twentieth century.

Figure 22 Firing a 9.2" coastal battery gun

Initially, and despite the guns' size, movement was manual, again using driving wheels to traverse the entire assembly and elevate the barrel. But by World War II hydraulic drives had been fitted. The pipes for these were let into channels cut into the gunpit base, which again can be seen at Renney. As noted earlier in the main text, World War II also witnessed major improvements in the guns' range. In the early twentieth century the maximum elevation of the barrel was 15 degrees, giving a range of 19 km (11.9 miles). New mountings allowed an elevation of 30 degrees, almost doubling the range (to 32 km or 20 miles).