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Report on the Telecom Cable Trench Watching Brief at Fort Cumberland

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Summary

Fort Cumberland is an 18th-century fort built on the shingle spit of Eastney Point on the south-eastern corner of Portsea Island. It is a Scheduled Ancient Monument (Hampshire monument no. 277) and is the home of English Heritage's Centre for Archaeology. It is described in the English Heritage's Visitors' Handbook as 'perhaps the most impressive piece of 18th-century defensive architecture in England'.

A watching brief was carried out on a telecom cable trench excavated alongside the Left Curtain wall of the Fort, and the following is the report on the findings of the excavation.

Keywords

Excavation
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Summary

The following report summarises the results of a watching brief on the excavation of a service trench at Fort Cumberland (Hampshire Scheduled Ancient Monument number 277) undertaken on the 25th and 26th of May 2000.

The trench excavation revealed the layers of gravel representing the sequence of development and use of the Parade Ground. Also uncovered by the excavation were the remains of a light railway track that serviced a now-demolished building that stood against the Left Curtain wall – the track presumably used for the transportation of munitions or supplies.

Other features observed and recorded were seen in the vicinity of the casemates of the Left Bastion and included the footings to the casemate walls, the remains of a 19th-century brick culvert, and a spread of rubble that appeared to form a raft for the footings of the road surface leading from the perimeter road to the Left Bastion.

Introduction

The insertion of a telecom cable spur to the refurbished casemate of the Left Bastion (casemate number 7) involved the excavation of a trench from the British Telecom (BT) junction box alongside the Left Curtain wall (***see figure 1*** for location plan).

A watching brief on these excavations was undertaken by members of English Heritage's Centre for Archaeology (CfA) based on site at Fort Cumberland.

Methodology

The trench was excavated by the BT subcontractors using a small mechanical excavator. Where archaeological features were encountered, the archaeologists were able to undertake more careful excavation of the features by hand.

The archaeological evidence revealed was recorded and photographed to the specifications set down in the English Heritage CfA Recording Manual (CfA, 1998)

Results

The trenching initially located the end of the ducting from the ring trench inserted in 1999. This terminated approximately half way down the Left Curtain wall at a position just inside the original Fort entranceway. At this point the new British Telecom manhole and junction box were inserted. A trench running from the junction box to the internal corner of the Left Bastion wall to the north-west was machine excavated and a watching brief undertaken. The trench was c.0.3m wide and c.0.35m deep, and the total length excavated was 44.5m, 12.5m of which was through the tarmac surface of the Left Bastion access road.

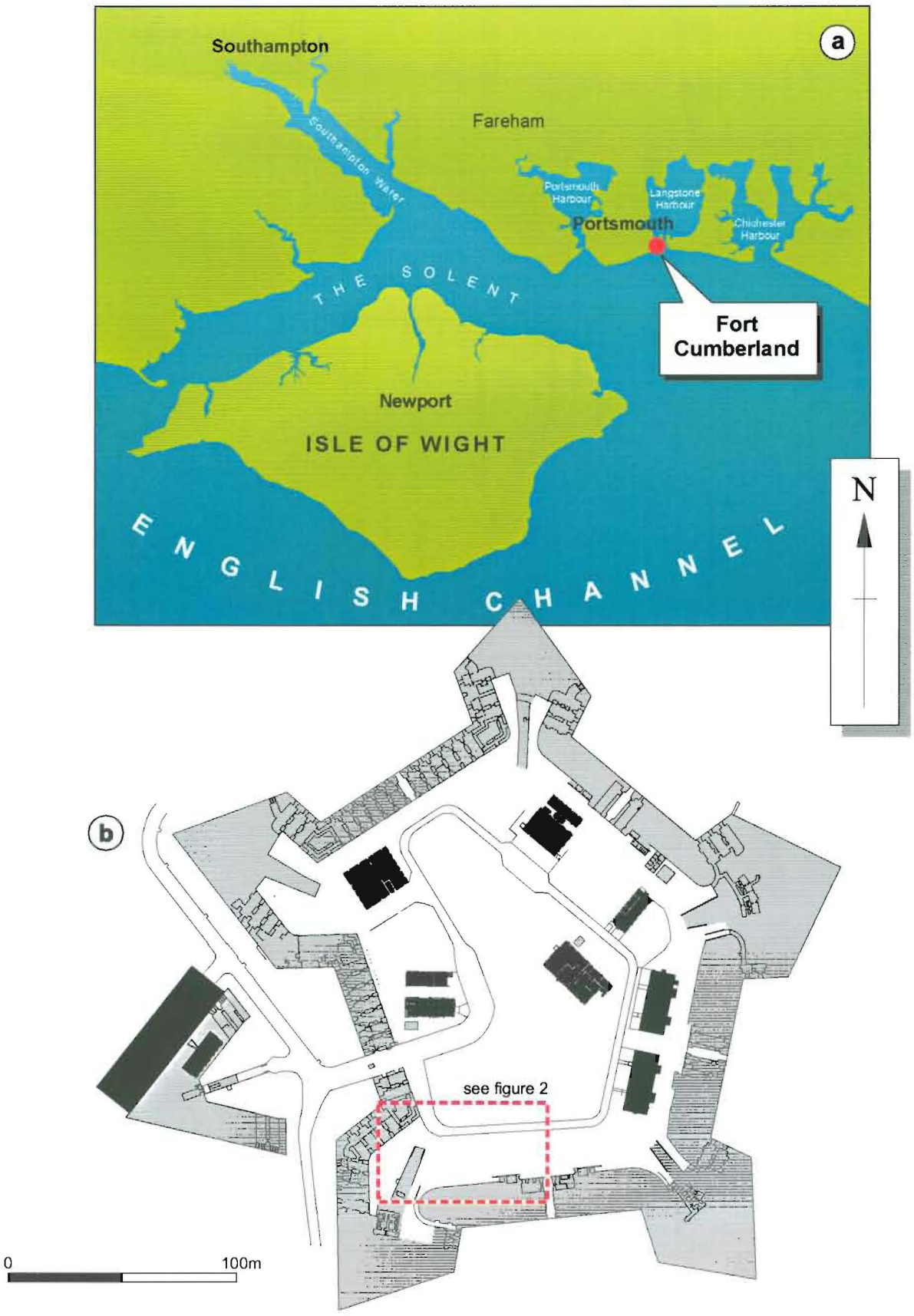

Figure 1. Fort Cumberland's position on the south coast (a), and location of figure 2 in relation to the fort (b)

Figure 2 Telecom Cable Trench Location

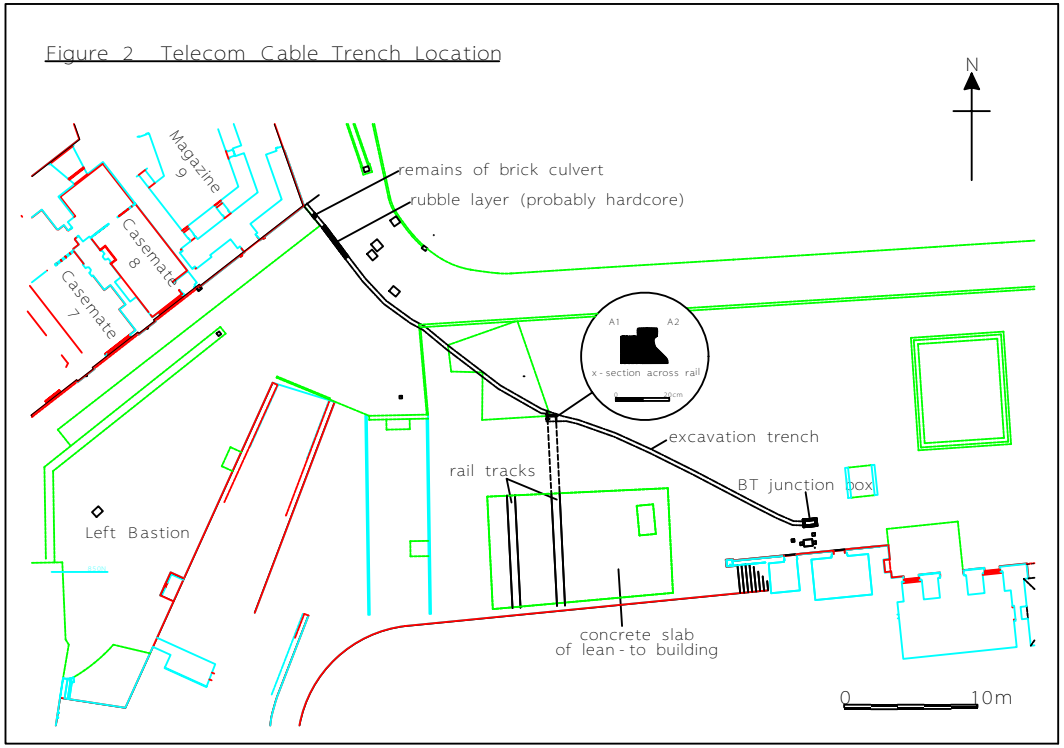

Figure 3 Photograph showing the remains of the rail tracks - 1m scale

Figure 4 Photograph showing the excavated remains of the 19th century brick culvert - 0.3m scale

Figure 5 Photograph showing the footings of the corner of casemate 9 in the Left Bastion - 0.5m scale

Positioned alongside the curtain wall there is a concrete slab measuring 13.5 x 8.4m which formed the footing of an earlier building (now removed). Cut into the curtain wall above are the sockets for the roof, and set into the concrete slab are a pair of railway tracks that run perpendicular to the curtain wall out towards the parade ground. The tracks are at the western side of the slab, and are separated by a distance of 2.7m.

The trench excavation ran at an angle across and to the east of the slab and within the excavation the easternmost of the two tracks was encountered (***see figures 2 and 3***). A short length of track was excavated and it was possible to preserve this in situ by re-routing the cable ducting through the gravel beneath. The track had a 0.60m (c.2 feet) guage and consisted of iron rails set onto concrete rubble footings, with 0.075m (3 inch) wide iron sleepers also set onto a bedding of concrete. No evidence for the western of the two tracks was seen in the trench. This could have been either because the track originally halted at some point between the slab and the excavation trench, or that it had been taken up and removed.

The northern extent of the eastern track was not established during this watching brief although it is interesting to note that in the trial excavation undertaken in 1999 (to establish the survival of the 18th-century barrack block) c.3.7m to the north of the telecom trench, no evidence for the continuation of the track was seen.

From photographic and plan evidence it appears that this building was constructed in the early part of the 20th century, and the rail tracks are contemporary with its construction. Following the disuse of the rail tracks, the building continued to be used as the gap running along the inside of the tracks had been filled in with concrete to level the floor surface.

The tracks were most likely used for the transfer of supplies or munitions, and it is likely that the building against the curtain wall was a store.

Other features uncovered during the excavation of the trench included the remains of a brick culvert 2m from the corner of the left bastion wall (***see figure 4***). This was aligned northeast-southwest, it had been truncated to the south, and dates from the early-mid 19th century.

Further along the telecom trench to the south a cemented limestone and brick rubble layer was exposed. This measured 2.7m wide and appeared to have been laid as hardcore, possibly to support an earlier road surface into the left bastion.

The stratigraphy seen throughout the excavation trench showed the same layering as seen in excavations elsewhere around the Fort with alternating bands of fairly clean orange\brown gravel layers interspersed with darker gravel layers relating to the episodic refreshing of the gravel surfaces and the subsequent vegetative growth.

The footings of the corner of the bastion were exposed by the excavation trench down to a depth of 0.5m. At the base of the brick wall was a limestone plinth below which were the wall footings, and these consisted of roughly squared limestone blocks stepped out from the line of the wall quoin (***see figure 5***).

Conclusions

The excavation of this cable trench showed the sequence of the build up of the gravel parade ground surfaces and corroborated evidence seen and recorded elsewhere in the Fort in previous excavations.

The record of the features encountered, such as the buried rail track and the brick culvert, has improved our knowledge and understanding of the layout, function and development of the Fort through time.

The importance of undertaking watching briefs on service excavations such as this was borne out by the discovery of the rail track, and the fact that by careful consultation between the archaeologists and the contractors on site, it was possible to re-route the service trench slightly and preserve the tracks in situ.

Acknowledgements

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