

TA 31 SE - THE MILITARY INSTALLATIONS AT SPURN POINT TA399 108

Spurn Point is the name given on OS maps to the peninsula at the end of a narrow, tenuous spit of sand and shingle, about 4 kms long, which juts out into the mouth of the Humber Estuary. It is formed of deposited material eroded from the cliffs of Holderness to the North; its shape has changed drastically in historical times, and OS plans from 1888 to the present day demonstrate that this process is continuing. The landscape is characterised by dunes consolidated with marram grass; Spurn Point itself has been colonised by a mixture of buckthorn, bramble and elderberry as well as marram. Despite the scrub cover, sand blow still occurs, and those structures at Spurn which are no longer in use continue to be inundated with sand.

The position of Spurn Point commanding the approaches to the Humber Ports has been strategically important in peace, for the control and protection of shipping, and in times of war as a vital element in the integrated coastal defences of the Humber. This report is primarily concerned with the examination of the remains of the surviving military installations at Spurn; however the history and remains of the civilian occupancy of the point will be described here briefly.

Lighthouses

- 1427 Richard Reedbarrow petitioned to erect a lighthouse at "Ravenersporne" (Spurn) (Hague and Christie, 1975, 24-5).

- 1675 Two towers built by Justinian Angell were lit at Spurn (Ibid, 36-7).

- 1776 Lights were shown from two towers, a high and a low light, which were constructed by John Smeaton. By 1786

Angell's tower and Smeaton's low light had been swept away (Ibid, 37-8). In total four low lights were either lost or taken down between 1776 and 1851 (Hartley and Frost, 1988, 3).

1852 The date of the last 'low light' (Ibid, 3).

1895 The last 'high' light was built (Ibid, 3).

1985 Lighthouse made redundant (Ibid, 49).

Nothing was found of the towers of c.1427 and 1675, which is not surprising given the forces of erosion and deposition at Spurn. Smeaton's tower of 1776 was dismantled about 1895 and there is now no trace. However the circular wall built around it to protect the foundations did survive, and was subsequently used to contain single-storey houses for the lighthouse keepers; these are shown and annotated as such on the OS 25-inch map of 1928. By 1971 (OS 25-inch map) these dwellings had been converted for use as a field centre, but were dismantled in 1985 due to rapid undermining from the sea (Hartley and Frost, 1988, 49). An undated photograph (Hartley and Frost, 1988, 4) shows that the circular wall was stone-built and that the houses were of brick in the mock-Tudor style; the latter were probably built when the new light was erected in 1895. At present the circular wall, 2m in maximum height, and the interior are being overwhelmed by sand; the south-east side of the wall is completely destroyed. The 1852 low light and the 1895 tower are intact but disused.

Lifeboat Service

1810 The first boat was provided and housed in a disused barracks; the crew had to be mustered from Kilnsea or Easington.

1819 A row of cottages were built for the crew at Spurn; the

end building was for many years the Life Boat Inn.

1857-8 A further terrace of houses were constructed, the originals being exposed and liable to flooding.

c.1913 A lifeboat house and slipway were erected after the RNLI took over the Station (Hartley and Frost, 1988, 4).

Presumably the barracks which housed the lifeboat in 1810 was a part of the battery of cannon including barracks and a signal station which Dorman records (1990, 16) as having been installed during the Napoleonic Wars. The Life Boat Inn is annotated as such on OS 25-inch map of 1910 at TA4039 1143 at which time the lifeboat house is shown at TA4010 1100. The Inn was used as a field centre in 1971, and at some time after was demolished; the lifeboat house was almost certainly pulled down about 1913 when the new lifeboat house and slipway were erected at TA3969 1087, and shortly before work started on the construction of the World War I military installations. The 1913 lifeboat house still survives but is no longer used. The 1857-8 terrace at TA4017 1111, together with the school, were demolished in 1976 and replaced with new RNLI houses (at TA399 109); the site is now a car park.

The present lifeboat is kept moored at the end of a newly constructed jetty at TA397 110, usable at all tides. The full-time RNLI crew are accommodated in houses built in 1975 on the site of World War II structures; some of the RNLI workshops and stores are housed in former World War I buildings. The Humber Pilots occupy offices at TA3989 1092, which were converted from former military use; together with the RNLI they man the new coastguard look-out station at TA 3991 1079, and share the use of the new jetty.

Military Installations

History

The history of the Humber Defences and the role of Spurn Point has been researched by Dorman (1990), drawing on material in PRO (including WO 192, 166, 199, 33, and 78). The following brief historical note is a summary of Dorman's comprehensive work; primary sources at PRO have not been consulted.

During the Napoleonic Wars a battery of six 24-pounder cannon together with barracks and a signal station was erected at Spurn Point (Ibid,16). This has not been located. Commonly, when the threat of invasion recedes these military works, or those parts that cannot be converted for civilian use, are dismantled or allowed to decline. In any event the shape of the peninsula has altered drastically since the early 19th century, and probably this battery has been either destroyed by erosion or obscured by sand.

Plans drawn up in 1913 for a comprehensive defence scheme for the east coast ports note the existence of the Port War Signal Station at Spurn Point (Ibid, 21); this is the only military work documented at this time in this location.

In 1915 work commenced on the construction of new defences at Spurn. There was to be two 9.2" breech loading guns to be known as Green Battery (A1 and A2 on RCHME plan), a permanent battery of two 4" quick firing guns (A3 and A4), and a temporary battery of four 4.7" quick firing guns (A5-A8) (Ibid, 24-5). Beside the gun emplacements a number of single-storey barracks were built which, during wartime, were supplemented by a large area of wooden and corrugated iron huts. The complex, known as Spurn Fort, was protected on the river side by a concrete block wall flanked by blockhouses, and to seaward the sand dunes were honeycombed with trenches, barbed wire obstacles and blockhouses connected to the battery area by tunnels. The problem of access

to Spurn Point was solved by the military authorities by the laying of a standard gauge railway to run from Godwin Battery at Kilnsea (TA417 160) along the length of the spit, terminating on the end of a new pier (TA3963 1085) (Ibid,65-7). Very full details of the railway are given by Hartley and Frost (1988). It operated from 1915 until 1951 when it was demolished, and little remains of it now. The rails have survived only where they cross the road along the spit and also at the approach to the engine shed (at TA4038 1131), of which the concrete floor can still be seen. The timberwork of the pier has gone, and all that remains is the stranded end which had been renewed in reinforced concrete about 1936 (Ibid, 7).

Between the wars most of the armaments were withdrawn leaving only two of the 4.7" guns (A5 and A6). At the outbreak of the second world war these were initially moved to occupy the seaward emplacements (A7 and A8), but finally in 1941 they were transferred to the Sunk Island Battery. Positions A5 and A6 were modified to accept twin 6-pounders, and A7 and A8 to take two 6" breech loading guns. The last guns to be installed at Spurn were two 4" breech loading guns (A9 and A10) brought in to cover the area behind the point. Green Battery was never rearmed, but the gun pit (A1) was filled in and used as a foundation for two 3.7" heavy anti-aircraft guns. Other major building works undertaken during the last war include the laying of a road along the length of the spit and running behind the gun emplacements, and a new battery observation post on the WWI 4" gun emplacement (A3): the Port War Signal Station (at TA4046 1137) was also reactivated.

In the immediate post-war years the two 4" guns (A9 and A10) were removed leaving the twin 6-pounders and the 6" guns, reduced for most of the time to a care and maintenance basis. In 1956 the decision was taken to abolish Coast Artillery, and in the following year much of the equipment was removed and the guns scrapped. The Army departed in 1959, and in 1960 the peninsula was bought by the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust, formerly the

Yorkshire Naturalists' Trust, who administer the area as a wildlife sanctuary.

The Remains

The destruction of the military installations has been fairly comprehensive and has continued piecemeal since the Army left in 1959 to the present day; this is clear from examination of post-war ground photographs, mainly in Hartley and Frost, and comparisons between the OS 25-inch map of 1971 and the OS SUSI copy of 1991. In general, the only structures to survive are 1) those so massively built that total demolition was deemed impractical, and 2) those buildings used subsequently by the civilian authorities. In the former category are most of the gun and searchlight emplacements, a number of the blockhouses and the engine houses, all built of thick reinforced concrete. The latter group includes the headquarters building and barracks exclusively of WWI vintage, which were constructed of distinctive, rectangular blocks of concrete, 0.81m long and 0.22m high. All of the superstructures of the lofty battery observation posts have been destroyed, probably for safety reasons, and all of the temporary hutments have gone leaving in many cases just the concrete floor.

The survey

The major problems in investigating the remains are twofold. One is the continuing formation of dunes which have wholly or partly enveloped structures within the site; the other problem is the density of vegetation inherent in the function of the area as a wildlife sanctuary. The only OS map published when the Army was in occupation dated 1928 shows non-military structures only, so heavy reliance has been placed on those plans provided by Dorman (1990, 66) and the RAF air photos of 1946 and 1952. Dorman notes the function of the more important structures on his plan, but not necessarily the minor features.

From the current SUSI copies of the OS 1:2500 plans on permatrace, obtained at OS Hull, two overlays were prepared to show Spurn Point as it would have been at the height of the First and Second World Wars. Where a structure was in use in both wars, it is shown on both plans. Pecked lines are employed on the overlays when a structure is now totally destroyed or reduced to floor level, or when it has been overwhelmed by sand. The sole exception is the railway, the course of which is shown as hard lines despite the fact that it has been almost entirely removed. The plans have been annotated in the following way:

- A: Gun Emplacements
- B: Engine Houses
- C: Searchlights
- D: Battery Observation Posts
- E: Blockhouses
- F: Barracks

Thus A2 refers to a specific gun position; F3 to a particular barrack block. Where a World War I structure is modified or reoccupied during the 1939-45 War, e.g. the gun emplacements A5 to A8, then the same lettering is applied on both overlays.

Emplacement A1 (TA4001 1094)

During WWI the position of a 9.2" gun. The gun pit, 8.5m in diameter, has been filled in with brick debris flush with the top. The pit is encircled by a broad ring of concrete, 7.2m wide, which slopes slightly downwards from the pit and merges with the surrounding dunes (see ground photo).

Neither A1 or A2 were used in WWII to mount a large calibre gun, but situated at the edge of the concrete surround at A1 are the remains of the mountings of the two WWII anti-aircraft guns, visible as a circle of eight bolts and two opposing iron rings, 2.1m in diameter, all set into the concrete (see ground photos).

Emplacement A2 (TA3997 1085)

A WWI 9.2" gun position of similar size and shape to A1, but the gun pit is clear of debris; it is now roofed with corrugated iron, and in use as a workshop. This position was not used for a gun mounting of any description in WWII, but the fact that it is not infilled suggests it served some, as yet unknown function.

Emplacement A3 and A4 (TA3979 1082)

During WWI this was the position for two 4" guns facing the Humber Estuary; in 1940 A3 was utilised as a battery observation post. The superstructure has been removed, but at the position of the North-east gun pit is a roughly D-shaped depression, about 6.2m across the mouth, which has been filled in and some concrete steps inserted on the top. The south-east pit is more rectangular, 6.9m across the mouth and 4.6m from front to back, and also filled with building debris. Slightly forward of the gun positions and beneath them are the magazines, partly buried by sand (see photo).

Emplacement A5 and A6 (TA3974 1071)

This was originally the position of two 4.7" guns in WWI, and was rebuilt to accommodate two twin 6-pounders during WWII. Nothing can be identified of the earlier structure, but the later emplacement is the best preserved of any at Spurn. The two gun pits, 6m in diameter, contain building debris to within 0.8m of the top, and there are quantities of brick and concrete debris scattered around. The integral structures behind and between the gun pits, presumably magazines, are still roofed (see ground photos).

Emplacements A7 and A8 (TA3980 1069)

All that survives is an overgrown platform with a two-

step revettment to the seaward side now a total of 1.6m high.

Emplacements A9 and A10 (TA3974 1078)

This was a battery of two 4" guns set up in WWII. The position is now occupied by high dunes and there is no trace of any structures here.

Engine Room B1 (TA3978 1084)

Annotated as engine house on Dorman's WWI plan (1990, 66) but not on WWII plan. It is largely submerged in sand though access is still possible; only the north-west wall face is exposed to a height of 3.6m (see RCHME ground photo).

Engine Room B2 (TA3976 1082)

Like B1 this is named on Dorman's WWI plan only. The west face of reinforced concrete, 5m high, is exposed, the rest being overwhelmed by shifting sand. There are seven openings into it, but these and the interior are gradually being filled with drifting sand (see Dorman' photo, 1990, 68 and RCHME ground photo).

Engine Room B3 (TA3973 1074)

Named on Dorman's WWI map, not on his WWII plan; it possibly powered the two nearby searchlights (C1 and C2). This building is unroofed and much of it has been demolished and is buried beneath sand, scrub and debris. The surviving walling of concrete blocks is 0.45m thick and up to 2m high.

Engine Room B4 (TA3975 1075)

This building has been identified as the "new engine room built behind the twin 6-pounder positions" to provide power for nine artillery searchlights (C4-C12) in WWII (Dorman, 1990, 72).

It is still roofed with at the east end four steps leading down to the entrance, 1.8m wide; blown sand covers the interior.

Engine Room B5 (TA3994 1084)

Annotated by Dorman (1990, 66) as a magazine in WWI and an engine room in WWII, this flat-roofed building is still in use. It displays the regular, concrete block construction typical of other WWI buildings at Spurn; as such it does not resemble any of the other engine rooms.

Defence Electric Lights C1-4 (pre-WWII searchlights)

Dorman mentions four DELs sited on the extreme flanks of the battery and annotates them on his WWI plan (1990, 66-7). C1 at about TA3972 1076, C2 at about TA3976 1073, and C3 at about TA3986 1070 have all vanished beneath the dunes. Dorman names a searchlight (C4) on both his maps at TA3995 1077. It survives in ruinous state with a brick wall roofed in concrete. On the south-east side there is a suggestion of a curved wall which seems to have housed a circular mounting similar to that in the WWII searchlight (C5). A tunnel leads back in direction of a smashed-up brick and concrete structure which is called a shelter, one of two, on Dorman's WWI plan.

Coastal Artillery searchlights C4-C12 (WWII searchlights)

There was a total of nine searchlights in operation during the Second World War of which C4 has been described above.

C5-C8 are concrete, flat-roofed structures centred at TA397 106 to the South and South-east of the batteries A5-A8 at what was originally the edge of the dunes, which now extend a further 75m to the South. C5 is the best preserved (see RCHME ground photo) with the circular mounting, 2.9m in diameter, exposed and the flat roof still intact. The others are very similar but inundated with sand to a large degree. Some 16m to the South-east of C5 is a building of brick with a flat concrete roof; it

is probably a look-out post.

CASL C9 (c.TA3978 1055)

No trace in dune landscape. The RAF air photo of 1952 (540/650: 5047) indicates that at some time before that date, the dunes to the South of the gun emplacements A5-A8 were bulldozed flat to clear the line of fire: there is no trace of C9 on this AP and the dunes have re-established themselves.

CASL C10, at TA3963 1085 on the end of the pier, is inaccessible and its survival cannot be verified.

CASL C11 was formerly sited at TA3967 1083 on the wooden section of the pier which is now washed away.

CASL C12 is shown by Dorman (1990, 66) occupying a building at TA3982 1090 which he names as having been a workshop in WWI. The building has been demolished.

Battery Observation Posts

Dorman names four (D1-D4) on his WWI plan (1990, 66), all of which are destroyed. D1 and D2, at TA3975 1072 and TA3980 1070 respectively had stood behind batteries A5-6 and A7-A8 and were probably demolished when the new gun emplacements were made in WWII. D3 existed at least until 1976, but it has been demolished. A photo of 1976 in Hartley and Frost (1988, 46) shows it to have been a tall concrete structure; it is not known when it went out of use. The present Humber Pilotage and Coastguard Station at TA3991 1079 occupies the site of D4.

The WWII map in Dorman (1990, 66) names only two BOPs; one of them on the position of battery A3 has already been mentioned, the other (D5) at TA3980 1085 has disappeared beneath the dunes. However it is known that D3 and D4 survived into the 1970s, and

they may have continued in use through the Second World War.

The wall, shown by Dorman (1990, 66) which protects Spurn Fort across the isthmus on the north side and along the west, river side, has survived from a point close to the site of the guardhouse at TA4016 1106 as far as the blockhouse E4 at TA3975 1084; west and south of this it is buried beneath the dunes, except for a short length to the South of the railway jetty at TA3971 1080. It is constructed of concrete blocks, 0.4m thick and 1.5m high internally; in places it has been repaired with reinforced concrete, but the repairs are in a worse state than the original. Of the five blockhouses (E1-E5) depicted on Dorman's maps along the length of the wall, E5 is destroyed, but the remainder are in good condition though E4 has been partly covered by sand (see RCHME ground photos of E1 and E4). Of the fort defences on the seaward side noted by Dorman (Ibid, 67), very little that is cohesive has survived. Erosive factors and dune development has been particularly prevalent in this area.

Barracks

Dorman (Ibid, 67) mentions that a number of single-storey barracks were built beside the WWI gun emplacements, but subsequently a large area of wooden and corrugated-iron huts were provided. Indeed much of the accommodation, workshops etc. at Spurn, as in all Army encampments, would have been temporary during both wars, and all of these have been flattened leaving at best the concrete floor only. Their approximate positions have been marked on the relevant RCHME overlays (F1-F7 on WWI plan, and F8-F10 on WWII plan).

Barracks F1 (TA398 107)

These are not named as barracks by Dorman, but their situation behind the battery of 4.7" guns suggests that one of their functions would have been as accommodation for the gunners on station. There is now no trace; new buildings were erected

here in WWII (see F8).

Barracks F2 (TA3987 1080)

Dorman (Ibid, 66) shows a geometrically laid-out group of eleven huts none of which have survived.

Barracks F3-F7 (TA3986 1090)

This complex was built in 1915 and comprised an isolated officers' quarters (F3), a central block (F5), east and west wings (F4 and F6), named barracks on Dorman's WWI plan, and a smaller building of unknown purpose (F7) behind the central block. They remained in use through WWII; F3 and F4 are still used by the Humber Pilots, F5 is derelict and F6 and F7 have been demolished since 1971 (see RCHME ground photos). The somewhat ornate style of these buildings, by military standards, and the use of pre-formed concrete blocks is replicated elsewhere and is distinctively WWI. The central, unannotated block was probably the headquarters building.

Barracks F8 (TA3979 1075)

Situated behind the gun emplacements A5-A8 on the site of WWI accommodation/shelters (F1), is a random arrangement of six brick buildings, now unroofed and surviving to an average height of 1.5m, each with a baffle-wall at either end. They probably served the dual function of blast shelters and accommodation units for the gunners on station.

Barracks F9 (TA3994 1091)

These structures were all destroyed when the lifeboatmen's houses were erected here in 1975 and there is no trace. The OS 25-inch map of 1971 depicts six unroofed buildings, some with baffle-walls similar to F8, with which they probably shared the same purpose.

Barracks F10 (TA4014 1103)

A level area of concrete is all that remains at this site annotated as barracks on Dorman's WWII plan.

Dorman's plans show a number of other structures within the confines of the fort, few of which are named. Those which are include a WWI hospital at TA3980 1088, now reduced to its foundations, a WWI workshop at TA3982 1090, and the WWII Royal Artillery Stores at TA4009 1101. Further buildings are visible on the RAF APs of 1946 (CPE/UK.1748:3007) and 1952 (540/650:5047), all of which have now gone.

Port War Signal Station (TA4046 1138)

This structure, erected in 1915, formerly stood some 450m to the North-east of the entrance to Spurn Fort. It housed the Fire Command Post and was provided with its own barracks, officers' quarters and wireless station, all enclosed by a concrete block wall with two flanking blockhouses (Ibid, 69). At the start of WWII it was re-activated, and in 1943 a Coast Artillery radar was installed (Ibid, 73). The shadow cast from it on RAF AP of 1952 (540/650:5090) indicate it was about 45 feet high, and a ground photo of 1950 (in Hartley and Frost, 1988, 10) shows that it was still in use. It appears unannotated on the OS 25-inch map of 1971, but it has since been demolished. The tower was sited on a raised platform protected by an angled, concrete-faced wall, 1.2m high, on the seaward side; slight traces of what appear to be covered ways, presumably to the aforementioned blockhouses, can be seen. Behind the platform, 1.7m lower, are the floors of the barrack buildings. It is no longer possible to determine from field evidence which elements are of the First and which are of the Second World War.

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