

TENBY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

ST. CATHERINE'S FORT, TENBY - DETERRENT OR FOLLY?

by Neil Westerman.

Between 1867 and 1871 a major building operation was undertaken on St. Catherine's Island Tenby with the construction of St. Catherine's Fort. This fort was one of a proposed chain of forts built to protect Pembroke Dockyard from possible attack by the French. The construction of the fort followed a report by a Royal Commission appointed to consider the defences of the United Kingdom (1860). The Commissioners examined in detail the defences of the Royal Arsenals and Dockyards at Portsmouth, Plymouth, Pembroke, Portland, Thames, Medway, Chatham, Woolwich, Dover and Cork. The Commissioners recommended work costing over 11 million pounds spread over four years. The estimate for Pembroke Dockyard was £765,000. The commissioners view was that the fleet alone was insufficient for the defence of the Kingdom and fortifications were needed to enable a small body of men to resist superior forces which may attack. The commissioners stated that Pembroke Dockyard's 'destruction by an enemy would not be so disastrous to us as that of Portsmouth, Plymouth or Chatham; but it is nevertheless, the opinion of your commission, that the loss of the ships in course of construction at the period of attack, and the great diminution of the power of the nation to reinforce its fleet in time of war, that would thereby be sustained, are... reasons abundantly sufficient for rendering it secure.' The Commission identified four possible places at which an enemy might land and advance on the Dockyard, namely Tenby, Lydstep, Freshwater East and Freshwater West. The Commission proposed five self-defensible batteries to protect the above mentioned landing places. The proposal for Tenby was a battery equipped with 15 guns with barrack accommodation for 150 men. Six years were then allowed to elapse before the War Department proceeded to purchase St. Catherine's Rock from Tenby Corporation for the sum of £800.

On Thursday 23rd January 1868 the foundation stone of St. Catherine's Fort was laid by Captain Clements of the Royal Engineers. The contractor was Mr George Thomas of Pembroke who was also responsible for the construction of the Prince Consort Memorial on Tenby's Castle Hill. The building of the Fort took over three years and was not without incident. In August 1868 the smack *Pearl*, delivering a cargo of limestone, was driven ashore on the South Beach and became a total wreck. On December 1st, 1868 William Jenkins, a member of the 1st Pembrokeshire Artillery Volunteers was killed in an accident falling over 70 feet onto rocks. A second vessel, the smack *Morning Star*, was lost on the South Beach in August 1869 followed by the *Lady of the Lake* in May 1870. The *Lady of the Lake* was carrying limestone from Lydstep quarry to St. Catherine's fort and foundered off Bear Cave in Gubar Sound. The construction of the fort was complete by May 1871 but it was of little use for defence purposes, as it had no armaments. The guns were finally installed in September 1874 but were not actually fired for the first time until September 1877! The *Tenby Observer* reported that 'practise was made in the direction of Monkstone, one of the shots striking the point'. The fort was equipped with six 7 inch R.M.L. and three 9 inch R.M.L. armaments. As early as 1886 the government had concluded that St. Catherine's Fort was incapable of adaptation to modern requirements but decided

that it should be retained with a reduced armament. Two of the nine-inch guns on the top of the fort were removed in 1892. By 1901 the fort had been mothballed. The only inhabitants shown in the census returns were the caretaker Samuel Woodhead, his wife Harriet and their two sons.

Following decommission in 1906 the War Office offered St. Catherine's Island and Fort for sale by tender. Advertisements appeared in local newspapers in February 1907. The opportunity therefore existed for Tenby Corporation to repurchase the island and restore it to public ownership to be enjoyed again by the people of Tenby and visitors to the town free of all charges. Prior to the sale of the island to the War Department it was a popular spot for picnics and for courting couples. This was not to be however as the successful purchaser was Mr Evan Jones of Llanelli who paid £500 for the Island and fort. He subsequently opened the fort to the public with an admission charge of three pence. In 1914 the Fort was sold to Mrs Windsor-Richards of Caerleon Monmouthshire for £2000 and was transformed into a luxurious family home. A detailed account of the subsequent history of the fort can be found in the *Tenby Times* for July 2002 (The Story of St. Catherine's Fort by Patrick Ovenden).

The construction of St. Catherine's Fort was not welcomed by everyone in Tenby. Shortly after its completion the building of the fort was being questioned. *The Tenby Times* newspaper (6 June 1874) published by J. Henton featured a lengthy article under the title 'A Departed Joy': It stated that 'We have in St. Catherine's Rock a departed joy, never to return, the memory of which is sad to many.' The article continues 'St. Catherine has been deposed, and Mars reigns in her stead. The gentle saint has been compelled to yield to the god of war. A grim and ugly fortress has replaced the shrine sacred to her memory'. The view was expressed that the erection of the fort had destroyed one of the attractions of Tenby, was a waste of money and in time of war would serve to draw fire on the town.

Today the forts are often referred to as 'Palmerston's Follies'. As Prime Minister Lord Palmerston was one of the leading players in the policy of constructing fortifications to protect the Kingdom from French aggression. When the expected attack did not materialise it became popular to refer to these forts as 'Palmerston's Follies'. In the case of St. Catherine's Fort this may be a little unfair, as Lord Palmerston died two years before construction began! However it is a fact that St. Catherine's Fort never fired a shot in anger and was considered by many to be a monumental waste of taxpayers money. In 1907 the *Tenby Observer* commented that the forts 'were obsolete before they were begun'. This hints at the main problem with the fortifications. They were a product of their time and rapid advances in military hardware soon made them obsolete. The introduction of iron plating to protect warships combined with major technological advances in gunnery led eventually to the decommissioning of the forts. But were they really a folly? It can be argued that as the French decided not to launch an attack surely they did fulfil their purpose which was to act as a deterrent.

In researching the building of St. Catherine's Fort one of the more unexpected finds was the amount of detail provided in local press reports. Normally military activities are shrouded in secrecy but in this case detailed accounts concerning the construction of the fort appeared at regular intervals in the local papers. The *Tenby Observer* for January 7, 1869 provided a report on the progress being made in building the fort including 'the magazines and stores, which lie beneath the surface of the rock, are finished. The offices are lofty and spacious and are secured from shot and shell by being imbedded in the heart of the rock'. All useful information for any

French spies in the area to pass on to the French government! On May 5th 1870 an even more detailed report appeared. The following extracts provide a flavour of this report. To quote 'On the basement are a series of bomb proof chambers, designed for general store rooms...On the second floor we have fine gun rooms, 23 feet 6 inches by 20 feet...The roof, like that of the rooms below is bomb proof, being protected by six successive layers of brick... The fort will be defended by six guns in casemates and three en barbette...The walls are provided with loop holes for flanking and raking the ditch'. To top it all a report on 1st October 1874 provides details of photographs taken by local photographer Mr Robert Symons of the raising of the seven and twelve ton guns. Copies were available to purchase from his St. Julian's Street photographic depot.

Presumably the War Department controlled the amount of information released about the construction of the fort. This supports the argument that the fort was built as a deterrent. The War Department wanted the French to know what they would be up against as this would help to deter an attack. Clearly this policy was a success as no attack was made.

Today St Catherine's Fort stands neglected and unused. As a fine example of Victorian military architecture in a picturesque setting it is as much a part of Tenby's historical heritage as the town walls and Georgian buildings. It deserves to be preserved and restored to its former glory. In a time when tower blocks built in the nineteen-sixties are being listed and preserved for future generations to enjoy surely the same protection should be given to St. Catherine's Fort. Similar forts elsewhere have been renovated and opened to the public as museums – Weymouth, The Needles, Isle of White, and Fort Nelson at Portsmouth are just a few examples. All of these were in a derelict condition prior to restoration which proves that it can be done if the will to do it can be found (and of course the funding).

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