

FORT  
AMHERST



# VISITOR GUIDE

Discover Britain's biggest and  
best preserved Napoleonic fort

BRITAIN'S HISTORY REDISCOVERED

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# Welcome to Fort Amherst

DEFENDING MEDWAY WITH PRIDE

## FORT AMHERST: WHY IS IT HERE?

Fort Amherst's main purpose was to defend Chatham Dockyard from a landward attack by an invading army. With nearly two miles of ramparts, gun positions, barracks and underground works, it was a formidable obstacle. Its secondary role was to protect the approach to London point against an invading army by providing a strong point behind the enemy's line of attack.

It may be hard to believe now, but for its time, it boasted some of the best defence technology in the world.

*Rochester from Chatham 1832.*  
Watercolour by Joseph Milford William Turner

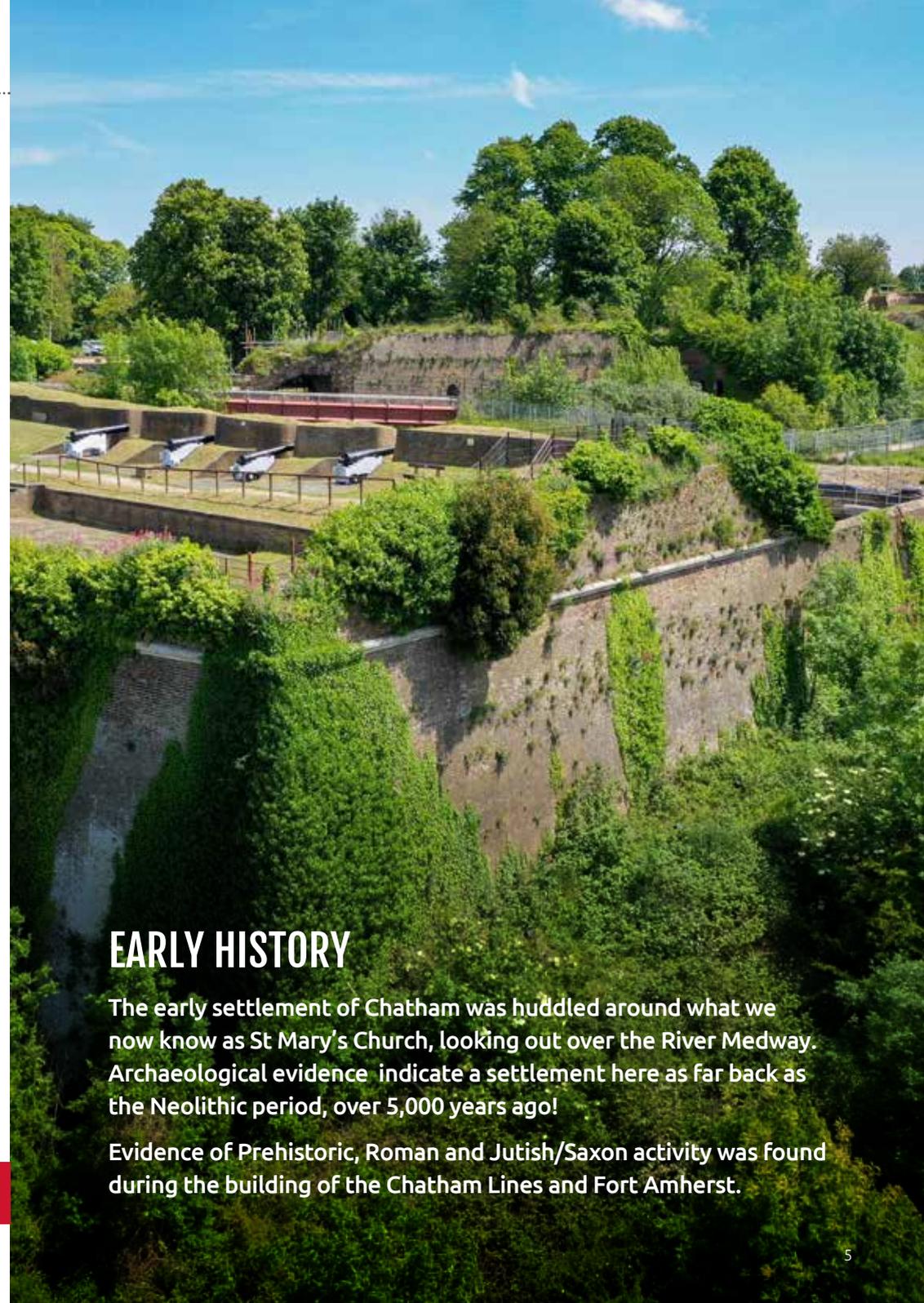


# GLOSSARY

Soldiers at Fort Amherst spoke these words; some are still heard today! How many do you know? If you see a word in **red**, you will find it listed here.

- **Armoury:** a place where weapons are kept.
- **Artillery:** large guns, mounted on carriages or sledges. Also the name for the part of the army that uses those guns.
- **Battery:** two or more big guns, used by the military, in the same place. Also the name of the part of the army that uses those guns.
- **Calibre:** the width of the inside of a gun's barrel. Also the weight of the shot fired from them.
- **Caponier:** a covered passage across a ditch round a fort.
- **Casemates:** brick vaulted compartments in which guns are mounted
- **Haxo** casemates were designed in the early 1800s by French military engineer, Baron Haxo. They are free-standing casemates that can be built on the top of a rampart, protecting gun crews.
- **Drawbridge:** Is composed of two distinct parts, the platform which acts as a defence barrier when horizontal and a pathway when vertical.
- **Garrison:** a group of soldiers whose job is to guard the town or building where they live.
- **Great Lines:** the open ground in front of the fortifications that provided a field of fire for the defenders.
- **Gunport:** opening through which a gun or cannon can be fired.
- **Loopholes:** narrow holes through which soldiers could look for enemies, or fire their weapons.
- **Magazine:** gunpowder store.
- **Musket:** a smooth bore gun with a long barrel, fired using a flintlock mechanism.
- **Ordnance:** military material, for example weapons, ammunition, vehicles and equipment.
- **Ramparts:** a defensive wall or bank built around a castle, fort or settlement.
- **Redoubt:** a standalone defensive structure that could be defended independently of the main fortifications and had all-round defence.
- **Sally Port:** an opening or gate that allowed the defenders to make attacks on a besieging army, but difficult to break into.
- **Sidearm:** a personal weapon, such as a sword, revolver or bayonet, worn at the side or in the belt. Also the tools that are used to operate artillery such as rammers and sponges.
- **Siege:** enemy forces surround a town or building to cut off supplies and force surrender.
- **Tattoo:** The ceremony to close The Garrison for the night.
- **Tenaille:** a sloping 'field' within a fortress. Protected by ditches on three sides.

Many of the terms used originate from the French, which was the official language of fortifications of the time.



## EARLY HISTORY

The early settlement of Chatham was huddled around what we now know as St Mary's Church, looking out over the River Medway. Archaeological evidence indicate a settlement here as far back as the Neolithic period, over 5,000 years ago!

Evidence of Prehistoric, Roman and Jutish/Saxon activity was found during the building of the Chatham Lines and Fort Amherst.



## Command of the Oceans

Imagine a time when Britain's power lay in its dominance of the oceans.

Since Tudor times (over 400 years ago) Chatham Dockyard built, repaired and maintained Britain's warships. From the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 to the 20th Century Cold War, Chatham played a vital role.

Britain began to build up its navy during the 17th and 18th centuries. But in June 1667, the Dutch, another strong sea-faring nation, launched an attack up the River Medway. England suffered a terrible naval defeat – with 13 ships destroyed and the fleet's flagship (The Royal Charles) humiliatingly taken.



*Rifle Brigade summer camp on Spur Battery*

## Command of the Heights

Immediately the seaward defences were strengthened. However, some generals considered that the Dockyard could also be attacked from the landward side – and that the high land around Chatham should be strategically used to protect them.

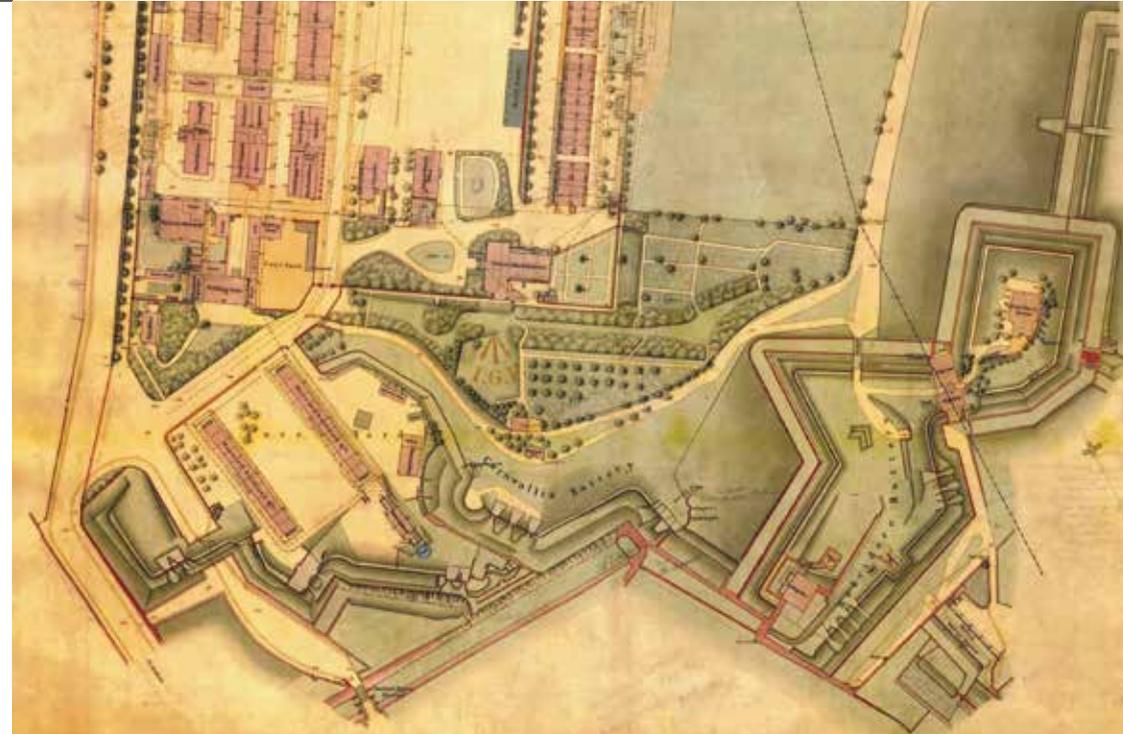
Land to build fortifications was compulsorily purchased in the early 1700s, but it took an invasion scare by the French in 1756 for the work to actually begin. These first 'Chatham Lines' built around the dockyard were ditches, earth **ramparts** and timber revetments.

Unfortunately, the people and buildings of the ancient town of Chatham were in the way. The old town was demolished and rebuilt on the marshland at the bottom of the hill, where modern day Chatham is now.

## AMERICAN WAR OF INDEPENDENCE

These first Chatham Lines were soon in disrepair and useless, but soon there was a new threat. Between 1775 and 1783 Britain was at war with the American colonists who had powerful support from France.

There were fears that the French might help America by attacking the Naval Dockyards, and so the Chatham Lines were rebuilt and strengthened with brick-lined ditches and stronger brick ramparts. Both ends were fortified with strong **redoubts** – Townsend in the north, Amherst in the south. This was the origin of Fort Amherst.



*Fort Amherst and Chatham Barracks circa 1880.*



# NAPOLEON: PREPARING FOR WAR

## NAPOLEONIC WARS – 1799 TO 1815

The Napoleonic wars were a series of conflicts between European nations and the French Republic, led by Napoleon Bonaparte. Napoleon was ambitious for power. He had risen from the post of **artillery** officer during the French revolution to become 'First Emperor of the French' in 1804. It was vital that Britain was prepared for attack!

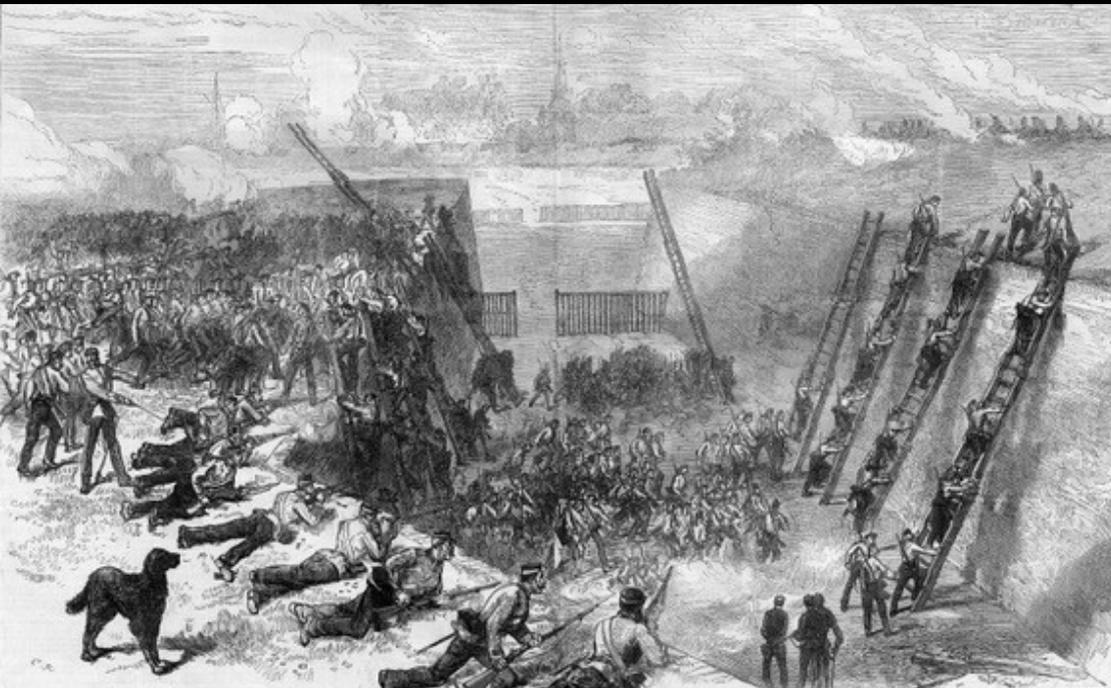
During this time, Britain's navy and soldiers were as well trained as possible; Fort Amherst and the people of Chatham would have been on constant high alert, ever ready for a land-based attack.

A British fleet, under Admiral Lord Nelson, fought and defeated the French Navy at sea in the Battle of Trafalgar (1805).

However, the wars continued until Napoleon was defeated at The Battle of Waterloo in June 1815 by a combined European army commanded by the Duke of Wellington.



*Training in Siege Warfare, Prince Henry's Bastion. Is that 'Dash' the dog?*



## Preparation

In the late 1700s and early 1800s, the Lower Lines were built. Fort Amherst was strengthened with the addition of Spur **Battery** and Prince William's Battery (at Chatham's highest point) and Horn Work (an Italian style of fortification). The Guardhouse and bridge that protected the roads was also rebuilt. Cannons were placed around what was now commonly known as the Chatham Lines. Cannon require plentiful supplies of dry gunpowder - so the Fort Amherst Grand Magazine was built as the main powder store.



## Tunnels

Part of the site included a chalk pit with caves. These caves were extended between 1776 and 1805, by Royal Cornish Miners creating underground tunnels and gun positions that would be well protected in the event of a **siege** – and allow the enemy to be fired on without being seen. The tunnels were equipped with a well, privies (toilets), gun positions, **musket** galleries and defensible gateways - examples of which you can see today.

*Part of the main underground galleries.*



*Royal Engineer siege training using the fortifications in the 19th century illustrates what an attack by French invaders would have been like.*





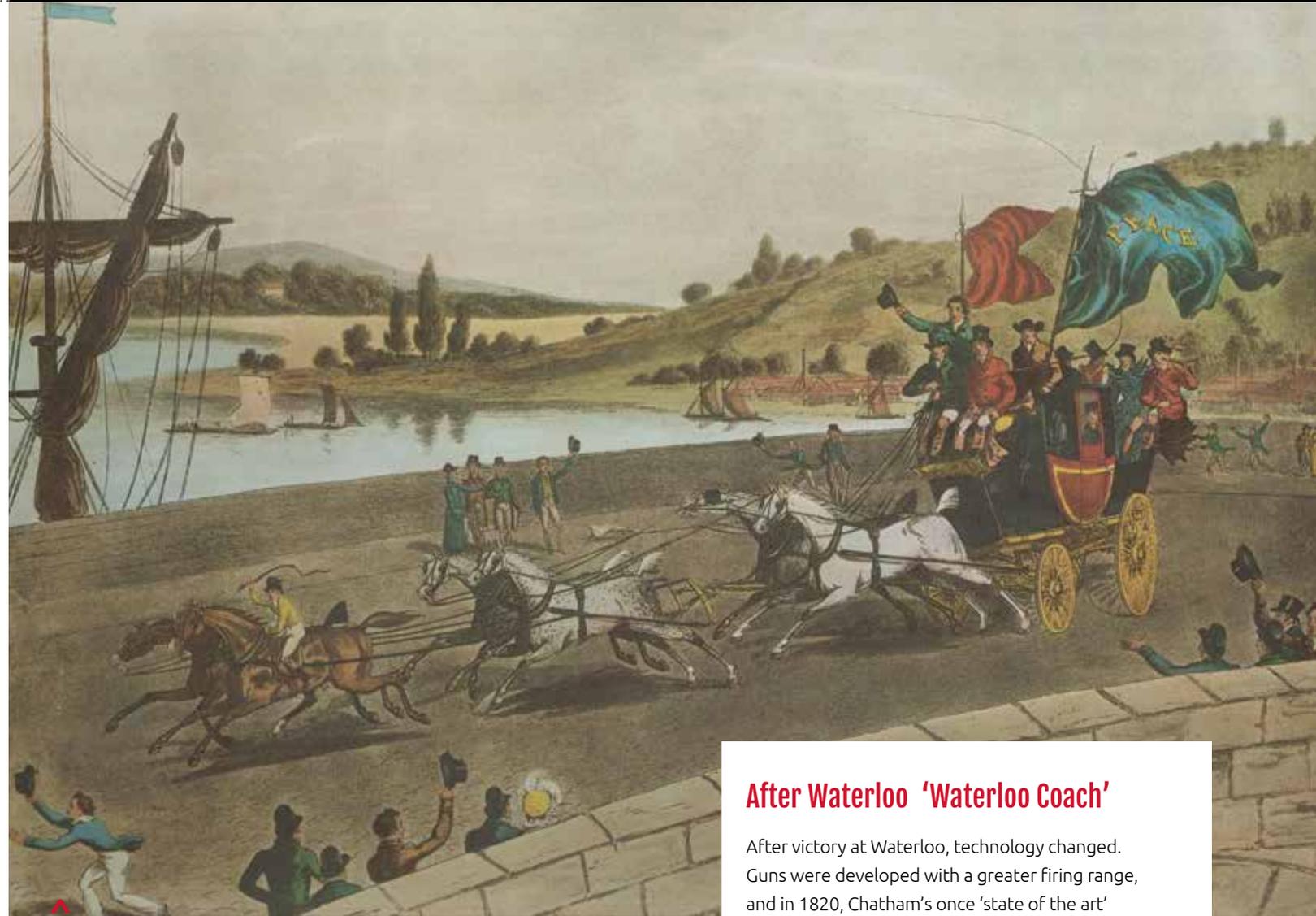
## A Soldier's Life

Fort Amherst was on high alert. Army life was harsh, and the pay was low, at one shilling a day for a private soldier: not an attractive job! There was no forced enlistment, and most soldiers signed up for the 'bounty' of £23 17s 6d appropriately equivalent to £1053 in today's money.

They were expected to get up early, do a variety of jobs and train to fight. Jobs included mending uniforms, cleaning guns and cooking. There were punishments, too – such as flogging for drunken behaviour.

Married soldiers received extra food, but this was only a half ration, and not all wives could stay at the Fort with their husbands'

The Duke of Wellington famously declared his men to be 'the scum of the earth' – adding however, that 'it is wonderful that we should have made them to the fine fellows they are'. This suggests that army life, at least for some recruits, instilled discipline, purpose and pride.



*The Waterloo Dispatch crossing Rochester Bridge, bringing news of Wellington's victory at Waterloo. Print courtesy of Medway Archives.*

## After Waterloo 'Waterloo Coach'

After victory at Waterloo, technology changed. Guns were developed with a greater firing range, and in 1820, Chatham's once 'state of the art' defences were declared obsolete.

However, they were still useful to the army, and during Victorian times, the entire fortifications were used as a training ground. In fact, for entertainment, thousands of people descended on Chatham to view these practice sieges, which are described in detail in Charles Dickens' book, *The Pickwick Papers*.



# FORT AMHERST: WORLD WARS



*Boy soldiers at Prince William's Barracks, winter of 1939/40.*



## WORLD WAR I

Some of the world's first anti-aircraft guns were mounted here to protect the Dockyard from aircraft and Zeppelins (airships). Fort Amherst and the Chatham Lines were used to train Royal Engineers and other soldiers for battle in France.

## WORLD WAR II

Winston Churchill declared the Chatham area to be a 'Nodal Point' to be defended at all costs. The Chatham Lines were adapted to form anti-tank ditches. Anti-aircraft guns were installed at Fort Amherst - and used! The tunnels became a civil defence control centre, and a military anti-invasion HQ.

### The ARP Role

The Fort Amherst tunnels were adapted for Civil Defence coordination for the North Kent region. ARP (Air Raid Precautions) was operated by Medway Group Control. Messages were taken, usually by phone, and emergency services given instructions of where help was required during an attack. Most of the staff of the Medway Group Control were local women. Today, a section of the tunnels has been realistically reconstructed and equipped to demonstrate how people lived and worked in the tunnels during this time.



# EXPLORING THE LOWER FORT AREA

## 1 CAVE YARD

### Discover! Who lived in 'Birdcages'?

Outside the Visitor Centre are openings in the chalk cliff. This was a very busy area. Imagine the noise of workshops as carpenters and blacksmiths mended and built items to maintain the Chatham Garrison.

On either side of the entrance were buildings nicknamed 'birdcages', which had distinctive cast iron balconies. Built in the mid 19th century, they were the quarters for some married soldiers.

Look down the hill to St Mary's Church. The church you see was consecrated in 1903. It is the fifth church reputed to have been on this site. The first was the Saxon church of 947. This was followed by a Norman church in c1120, a Gothic church built in 1316, and a Georgian one of 1788 in which Charles Dickens worshipped. The church tower is known as the Victoria Tower. This was built in 1897, and by permission of Queen Victoria was named the Victoria Tower to mark her Diamond Jubilee. The eight bells in the tower were known as the Victoria Peel.

**Answer:** Married soldiers and their wives.



## 2 ARTILLERY STORE

### Discover! Why do guns need carriages?

Next to the Visitor Centre, spot the wooden building with four big doors. This has been designed to look exactly as it would have done in Napoleonic times, when it housed artillery. Inside is the Fort's collection of reproduction field guns, and their carriages (the wheels used to move the heavy guns) which are used for re-enactments and displays.

**Answer:** They are too heavy to move without wheels.



*The Cave Yard 'Birdcage', some of the earliest purpose built army married quarters.*



### 3 LOWER CORNWALLIS BATTERY

**Discover!** Take a moment to spot a tripod: what was it used for?

Walk along the cliff face towards the display of cannon balls and artillery shells. Then walk up the slope to the top of the battery. You will see four gun positions. Two face towards Chatham, and two cover the slopes below Belvedere Battery, the main defensive ramparts higher up the Fort.

In front of Lower Cornwallis Battery is the deep Barrier Ditch. It runs to the site of the Barrier **drawbridges**, and used to run all the way down to the Medway River.



Look to the left, where a small tunnel allows you to reach a lower infantry firing position known as Fausse-Braye. This provided protection for a **Sally Port** entrance leading from the tunnels.

Follow the footpath back to the Cave Yard, keeping the high wall on your right. With the rampart on your left, notice a small breach in the ramparts to a grassy area. This 'gap' was made to give access to the children who attended a small **garrison** school, built in the Victorian times in the mid 1850s. Today it's a great place for a picnic and a nature area.

Leaving the picnic area, proceed to the brick vaulted Haxo **Casemates**.

**Answer:** It is part of a washing line, used in this area in Victorian times.



### 4 HAXO CASEMATES

**Discover!** Where does the word 'Haxo' come from?



The Fort was designed to be well protected. In fact, the only way to enter the Fort from the Chatham direction was via a series of drawbridges and gates. If the enemy tried to enter, gunners in the casemates could provide heavy fire cover, whilst under the protection of the arches.

The arches were built in 1815, and were built in British forts from the mid 1850s onwards. Unfortunately, when the 'Birdcages' (married quarters) were demolished, they were badly damaged and had to be reconstructed

Continue past the **Haxo** Casemates to the upper Barrier Guardhouse.



**Answer:** The Casemates were designed in the early 1800s by French military engineer, Baron Haxo.



## 5 CHATHAM BARRIER AND GATEHOUSE

**Discover!** Why do you think the beds are so large?

Barrier Road, or as it was once known 'The Military Road', provided the principal highway from Chatham into the Chatham Garrison and Dockyard defended area. As you pass over the bridge you can peer down into the Barrier Ditch as it descends to the river at Gun Wharf. To your right as you depart the bridge there is a model of one of the original drawbridges that once crossed the Chatham Barrier Ditch. Ahead you will see the formidable Chatham Gate and Guardhouse. A troop of soldiers would be stationed here night and day to control traffic through the gate. At night the gates would be closed to all traffic at the beating of the **tattoo**. To the left and right of the gateway there are several rooms. These would have been used as the duty office, barracks, and possibly a cookhouse area. There is also a cell that would have been used to lock-up unruly or drunken soldiers and sailors for the night before appearing in front of their officer in the morning!



*Historic Ditch*

The gatehouse was capable of defending itself against attack. As approached from the bridge. Visitors may enter the galleries to visit the barrack rooms. Above the gateway there were two cannon positions to protect the approach to the Chatham Barrier from the town. Just beyond the gateway and to the left there is a privy built into the wall for the relief of the guards.

The Chatham Barrier and associated structures are mentioned in the writings of many celebrated authors including Charles Dickens, William Thackeray, Jane Austen and Bernard Cornwell. The Military Road through the Chatham Barrier was for many years a processional route for Royal visits, foreign dignitaries and regiments departing for service overseas and sometimes triumphantly returning home. Visitors here really are walking in the footsteps of history!

**Answer:** Because two soldiers slept in them at the same time.

## 6 166 BATTERY ANTI-AIRCRAFT MEMORIAL

**Discover!** What is a 'territorial army'?

Leap forward in time to 1940. It is World War Two, and Fort Amherst is needed to defend the realm again – but this time the threat is German air raids.

The memorial garden commemorates the achievements of 166 (City of Rochester) Battery, Royal Artillery, for its defence of the Medway Towns during the early years of the war.

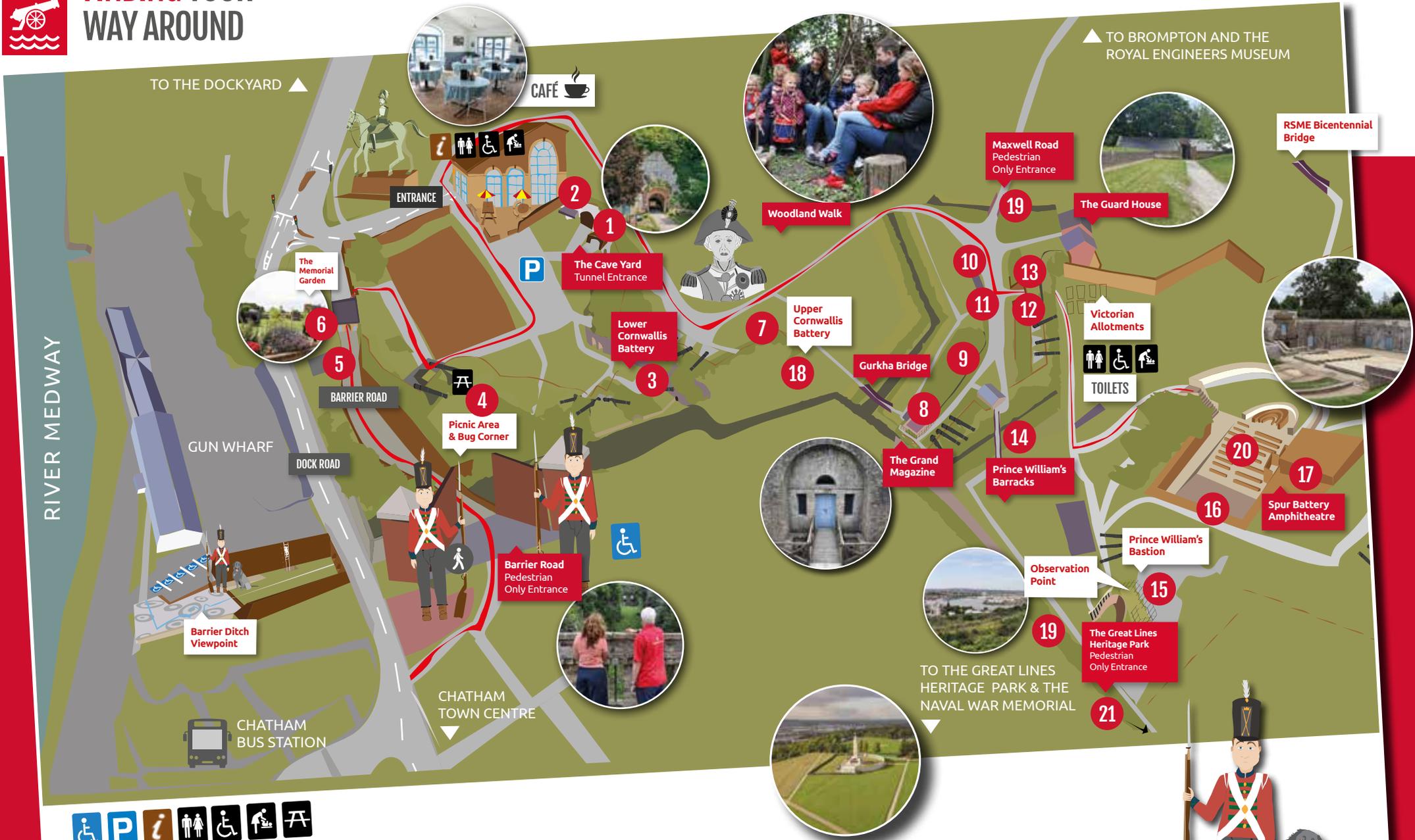
The Battery was a local Territorial Army unit, which trained on heavy anti-aircraft guns at Fort Borstal, Rochester. During 1940/41, the Battery turned around several bombing raids, potentially saving many lives.

Displayed are a 3.7inch heavy anti-aircraft gun; a 40mm Bofors light anti-aircraft gun; and an anti-aircraft searchlight. This equipment is representative of what would have been used at the time.

*Anti-aircraft guns on The Memorial Garden*



**Answer:** A British armed force, whose members are not professional soldiers, but who train as soldiers in their spare time.



**FOR YOUR INFORMATION**

- Please take care as historic sites can be dangerous • Children should be accompanied at all times • Dogs are allowed on leads
- Wilful damage to the monument is an offence • Smoking, commercial photography and use of metal detectors is prohibited.





## 7 UPPER CORNWALLIS BATTERY

### Discover! Why does gunpowder have to be dry?

After making your way up the hill (or through the tunnels) catch your breath and admire the views of the Medway River below.

You will notice three doors in front of you:

The left-hand door leads to a **Sidearms Store**, with examples of the sidearms used to operate and fire the 24-pounder cannon to your right. A brick recess beyond a second cannon was used to store cannon balls.

The centre door leads to the top of the shifting lobby. It is possible to peer up at this from within the tunnels. This was used to move gunpowder from the stores in the tunnels to expense magazines.

The right-hand door leads to the local powder store for the battery. The soldiers called it an expense magazine. It was vital to keep it secure. For this reason, it had barred gates and double wooden doors with a barrier between them. Inside were pre-made cartridges of gunpowder of the correct weight for each type of cannon. These were kept in flannel bags and stored in barrels to keep them dry. In fact, only people wearing special 'magazine' clothing were allowed beyond the barrier.

**Answer:** Damp gunpowder does not ignite.



## 8 GRAND MAGAZINE

### Discover! What, or who, is a 'Gurkha'?

From the Upper Barrier Battery, follow the sloping footpath to the left of the Sidearms Store. At the top, follow the footpath to the right to the Sidearms Store roof. This is an observation area for the lower areas of the Fort, with a plaque commemorating a visit by NATO engineering officers.

Cross the wooden bridge. This was built by locally-based Gurkha engineers. Now you are facing the Grand **Magazine**. Follow the wall, keeping to the right, and enter the Grand Magazine over the small bridge.

Storage of gunpowder was tricky. It is highly incendiary (flammable), but also had to be kept dry.

To prevent dangerous sparks, the fittings on the barrels were made of copper to prevent sparking, and therefore reduce the risk of accidental explosions.

The Grand Magazine is low-lying, but the pit below the bridge protects it from flash-flooding. To prevent damp, the building was designed with huge cavity walls, tunnels and a wooden suspended floor with air vents. Men would change into special woollen magazine clothing in front of the entrance before handling the barrels.

**Answer:** The British army established a regiment specifically for Nepalese recruits in 1815; they are known as Gurkhas.



Grand Magazine Courtyard



9

## BELVEDERE BATTERY

**Discover!** Scan the skyline.  
Can you see another fort?

Leave the Grand Magazine by following the low wall known as a 'fire step'. This was important for defence. Notice that the ground behind the wall is sloped. This helped a soldier for two reasons:

1. He could rest and fire his musket using the top of the wall.
2. To reload his gun, he could step back down the slope - safely below the enemy's line of sight.

At the corner of the wall, bear right and head towards the railings on your right. You will approach a flagpole, and see the Expense Magazine and a battery of cannon to your left.

Follow the path to a short flight of steps. From here enjoy views across the River Medway and surrounding towns.

Can you see the Norman castle and cathedral at Rochester to the right?

**Answer:** Towards the centre skyline is a 'stepped' building. This is Fort Pitt, built at the same time as Fort Amherst.

10

## AMHERST GUARDHOUSE

**Discover!** Where does the word 'barracks' come from?

Retrace your steps, this time with the railings on your left. You will see the Amherst Guardhouse, with its sloping roof, on your right.

Pass a gateway on your right, and walk up the slope to see the exterior of the Guardhouse.

This area contains army married quarters, and is not accessible.

The Guardhouse, built into a section of dry ditches, controlled access to Amherst Redoubt. It contained a small barracks, store rooms, small arms magazine and an **armoury**. At each end, on a lower level, are two courtyards. One contained a well, and access to the dry ditch system.

**Answer:** From the French (*barraque*) and Spanish (*barraca*) – 'temporary hut for soldiers during a siege'.



Belvedere Battery



Amherst Guardhouse



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## BELVEDERE SALLY PORT

**Discover!** Can you spot evidence of cannon ball marks on the brickwork?

This gateway, known as a Sally Port, allowed soldiers access to the outer areas of the Fort and onto the **Great Lines**. It meant that troops could move within the Fort, but it could be closed off and defended if an enemy tried to penetrate the heart of the Fort.

**Answer:** In the late 1800s, a chain link portcullis device was created to protect wooden gates in fortresses. It was tested at Fort Amherst, by using a six-pounder artillery piece to see if it was effective.



A sketch of The Tenaille  
by Billy Childish



## 12 CAPONIER

**Discover!** How was this covered ditch used in WWII?

The **caponier** had two jobs: safe communication between Amherst Redoubt and Prince of Wales Bastion; and to provide enfilading fire (sweeping fire) down either direction of the ditch to prevent an enemy progressing into the Fort.

The caponier had its own small garrison, with ammunition and supplies. In a siege, the soldiers would have been expected to have held out until overrun, or relieved.

In the later 1800s, it was converted into a powder store (magazine) and the current auxiliary entrance made.

Not currently accessible to the public.

**Answer:** During WW II, it served as an air raid shelter for the residents of Amherst Redoubt.

## 13 TENAILLE

**Discover!** Why are so many military terms in French?

A **tenaille** is a sloping 'field' within a fortress. It is designed to be in firing reach of both artillery and musket fire, and is also protected by ditches on three sides. These ditches cannot be seen by the enemy until they are on the field.

An approaching enemy encountering a tenaille would only realise they were trapped when it was too late. Ditches stopped them going further forwards, and they were stranded on what was effectively a killing field.

If this had happened at Fort Amherst, artillery pieces on Belvedere Battery and Prince of Wales Battery would have bombarded the enemy with a with deadly crossfire.

**Answer:** France was a leading military power during a time when the study and development of fortifications was formalised.

## 14 PRINCE WILLIAM'S BARRACKS

**Discover!** What did old or injured soldiers do?

This was the only known purpose-built barracks at Fort Amherst. It was designed to house the Invalid Gunners – a small detachment of men either too old or unfit for regular service, who serviced and maintained the guns and stores. They also fired a gun at noon each day, and other necessary salutes.

The barracks housed artillery pieces on its upper floor, and infantry fired from a parapet on the roof.

In the later 1800s, the barracks became quarters for married soldiers, and during the Crimean War acted as an overflow hospital. Notice the remains of a pair of brick casemates: these were used as a kitchen and laundry area at that time.

During World War Two a light anti-aircraft gun was mounted on the roof.



**Answer:** Some joined the Invalid Gunners and did odd jobs.



## 15 PRINCE WILLIAM'S SALUTING BATTERY AND OBSERVATION POINT

**Discover!** Who was the monarch during the Napoleonic wars?

From this strategic, high vantage point, a 5-gun battery gave officers a clear view across the field of fire known as the Great Lines. Walk along to the observation point, where you can see for several miles across both Chatham and Rochester.

Royal Salutes were fired from here for appropriate birthdays, and for visiting military and civil dignitaries. Imagine a tall flagpole proudly flying the main Chatham Garrison flag, and the single gun position firing the noon-day cannon right up until World War One.

Rings were fitted to the stone mantles. This allowed 'block and tackle' to restrain recoil from the guns, and reduce the number of men needed to operate them.

World War One: an anti-aircraft gun was mounted here.

World War Two: just below the observation point, a six pounder anti-tank gun was emplaced as part of the 1940 anti-invasion defences.

**Answer:** King George III.



Royal Wedding Salute fired from Prince William's Battery

## 16 SPUR CASEMATES

**Discover!** Why is there a deep ditch below the casemates?

These strong, brick, arches are one of the best-preserved features of Fort Amherst. They were built to ensure protective cover of the Spur Battery ditch. They allowed crossfire of both artillery and muskets along both angles of the ditch, which formed a dog-leg shape.

Even if the enemy infiltrated the ditch, they could not climb up into the gun embrasures, which also had an iron grill fitted around each cannon barrel.

In later times, the casemates became barracks, hospital accommodation and married quarters, before being condemned as unfit for human habitation.



**Answer:** To stop the enemy climbing up to the guns.

## 17 SPUR BATTERY

**Discover!** What is the field of fire?

Walk along to the Spur Battery. This projects into the field of fire of the Great Lines, enabling artillery to protect the flanks of the other bastions of the Chatham Lines – or to mount counter attacks against a besieging force.

There is a pivot and traversing rail. This mounted a Victorian large **calibre** traversing gun, although there is some evidence that it may also have been used as part of experimental searchlight operations. The light could have assisted night time fighting, or used to locate military balloons.

Military Punishments: the flat area was used during the 1800s not only for floggings, but at least one execution. This area was secluded, but allowed enough room for an entire battalion to witness the punishment.



**Answer:** The area that can be covered by the fire from a weapon, or group of weapons, from a given position.



## 18 UPPER CORNWALLIS BATTERY

**Discover!** What was the range of the 68-pounder smooth bore cannon?

From the Guardhouse, return to the path by the low wall, bear left towards the Grand Magazine and keep it on your left. Cross the wooden bridge, and follow the path down the hill until you reach the exit from the tunnels. There is a footpath to the right, and above the tunnel exit. Follow this to the Upper Cornwallis Battery, where you will see guns and a flagpole.

This battery covered the military road approach to Fort Amherst from Fort Pitt. The single gun by the flag mast is a 68-pounder smooth bore cannon, the largest cannon then in British service (mid-19th century). You can view the lower areas of the Fort, and the Cave Yard, before following the path by the fire-step wall, past the Expense Magazine, back to the Visitor Centre and Café.



**Answer:** 3310m (3620 yards)

## 19 EXIT OPTIONS

If you exit via the brick bridge on to Maxwell Road, you can walk to the village of Brompton past the Garrison church, or take the other direction across the footbridge behind the Expense Magazine, out onto the Great Lines and the Naval war memorial.

The route down the hill takes you to further parts of the Fort, and onto the Visitor Centre.

## 21 THE GREAT LINES HERITAGE PARK

Medway's most prominent green space - connecting Gillingham, Chatham and Brompton. The Field of Fire is so named as it was an open stretch of land immediately in front of the Great Lines fortifications. If the fortifications were breached then the enemy would have to cross the Field of Fire; its openness would allow for a clear view, and shot, of the approaching enemy.

## 20 AMPHITHEATRE

The area where military punishments were carried out, is now an outdoor arena for entertainment seating up to 250 people. Check the Fort Amherst website for events, or how to book.





# THE TUNNELS

## Introduction and Main Entrance

There were always chalk caves on the site. From the 1790s, the military engineers expanded these, strengthening them with brick arches at weak points. Soldiers and contract labour carried out the work.

During the Napoleonic period the caves had several roles:

- *Providing secure protection for guns to fire the full length of the Barrier Ditch*
- *Sheltering the garrison during a siege or bombardment*
- *Storage and magazine space*
- *Providing access between the lower and upper works of the Fort*



## Medway Group Control

When World War Two threatened, these tunnel sections became the control centre for all Civil Defence activities in North Kent. They are now reconstructed as they would have been in the summer of 1940.

The centre operated under great secrecy. From here, sirens were sounded, rescue parties organised, and arrangements made to restore normal life after an air raid.

There are two main rooms in Group Control:

The first room is the Guard Room and Office. Beyond the door at the far end is a dormitory. Notice the chemical toilets, which were replaced by the end of 1940 with flushing toilets outside. At the end of the dormitory, turn right directly into the communications centre, where all incoming and outgoing messages were processed.

The second room is the Operations Centre.

Decisions were made here about the messages received. Incidents were plotted on a board, the position marked on the large map, and the message filed on a clipboard.

The Deputy Group Controller (officer in charge) sat at the desk at the end. The table was for an emergency committee. Its job was to allocate resources, such as rescue teams, first aid parties and the emergency services, to recorded incidents.

Can you see the old manual telephone switchboard and the air raid siren sounder switch?



## Garrison Well

Leave the Medway Group Control, turning left into the main tunnel. On the left-hand side, is a short, narrow tunnel leading to the well shaft. This is approximately 18m deep with water at the bottom. The well supplied water to the Fort and infantry barracks next door. Note the holes cut into the chalk to provide platforms during construction.

You are actually in the middle of the well shaft: you can peer down, as well as look up to the surface.



## Shifting Lobby Shaft

The main tunnel turns sharply to the right. Note three openings through brick arches: pass through the centre one.

You are at the base of a large, deep shaft. This was used to help move ammunition to a magazine above; it also helped circulate fresh air. The shaft likely predated the military conversion of the tunnels.

During World War Two, the shaft was capped to prevent bomb damage and gas attacks.

## Lighting and Ventilation Tunnel

Further up the main tunnel, on the right, is a wide, high tunnel leading to a doorway. This allowed natural light in, and provided an emergency exit into the Fort's main defensive ditch.

Can you see a brick arch? Brickwork in the tunnel is only used to support weak points, or a change in direction.

## Main Stairway

At the head of the main tunnel, note a flight of steps against the wall on the left. This was the main route up to the surface. It is exactly as Napoleonic soldiers would have seen it: a rope along the wall, and no rail on the steep drop to the right. For reasons of safety, the stairs are closed to today's visitors!



## Ammunition Shaft

Just beyond the main stairs is the base of a circular shaft. Here barrels of gunpowder were hauled up to the "shifting lobby" (the room above). They were then transferred to the magazines and gun batteries ready for use.

Can you see some 'sockets' cut into the chalk? Once there was a wooden platform, possibly to stack barrels. You may even spot some soldiers' graffiti, with initials carved in the chalk under the brick arches.

## Musket Gallery

Take the turning on your left into a short tunnel, and then turn right. Follow this narrow tunnel until it opens into a brick chamber with **loopholes** in the wall, and metal bars in the brickwork above. Soldiers could fire muskets through the holes, with the smoke drifting up through the bars above.

The chamber is part of a special defensive system to prevent enemy forces getting into the tunnel system (if they managed to break into the Upper Sally Port entrance!



## Privy

These two toilet arrangements have been reconstructed to represent the original 'privies'.

**Question:** *Why are there two types of privy?*

The 'privy' a soldier could use depended on his rank. Can you tell which was which?

### Officers' Cubicles

These had natural light and ventilation. They also had 'divides' that gave some privacy.

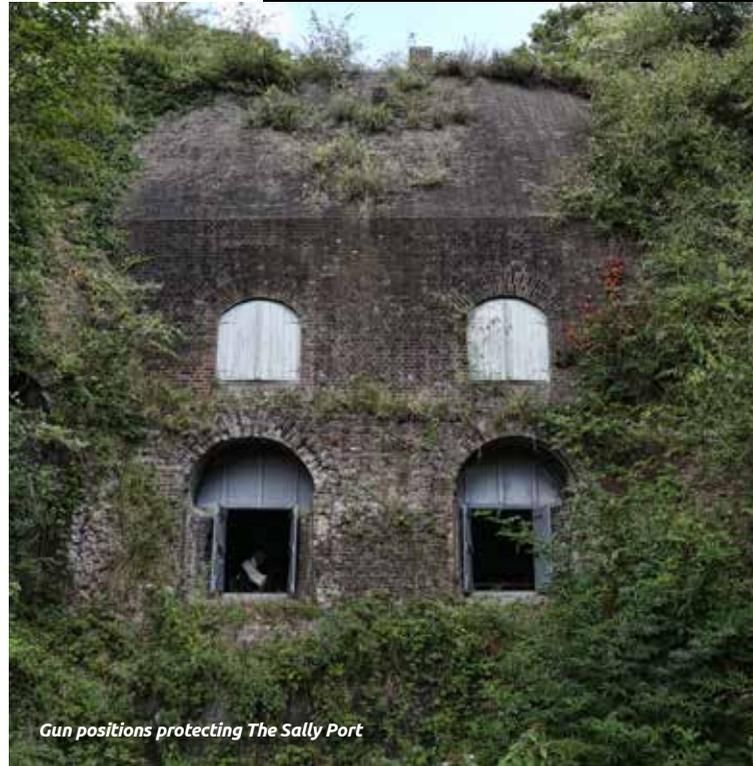
### Ordinary Ranks

The only light and ventilation came through the louvres. The shared communal bench gave no privacy!

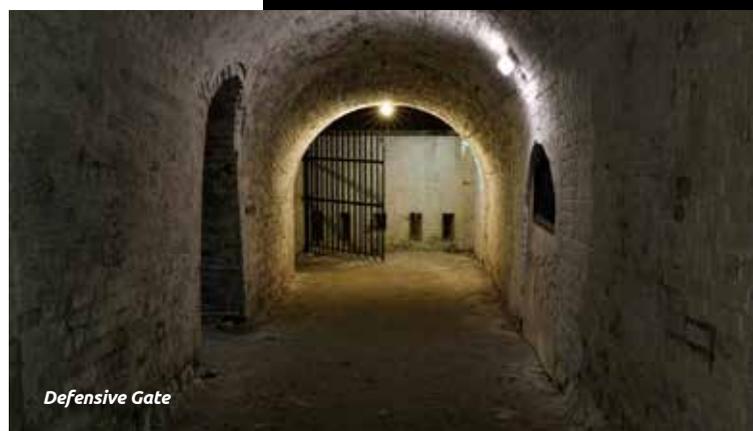
Under the privies are drainage channels, with a holding pit that had to be cleaned out by hand. Would you like that job? The pit at the bottom of the shaft had to be cleared of 'solids' to allow liquid to drain away. Can you see the steps (cut into the sides) where the cleaning party descended to do their work?



Ordinary ranks privy



Gun positions protecting The Sally Port



Defensive Gate

## Sally Port and its defences

These clever arrangements were designed to prevent the Fort being stormed by the enemy. Return to The Musket Gallery. Before you exit, note the iron rod that controls the Defensive Gate beyond. Once you leave the gallery, turn left and view this Defensive Gate arrangement from a different angle.

Beyond the Defensive Gate, around the corner, is a second iron gate known as the Sally Port. This is a special doorway that opens directly onto the enemy's side of the Fort's defences. If there is a siege, it allows soldiers in the Fort to make raids, usually at night. (Unfortunately, if discovered, the enemy might try to break in!)

Outside the Sally Port is a safe zone where a raiding party could be assembled. It is designed to be heavily protected by nearby gun positions and musket firing points.

The Sally Port itself was heavily defended. If enemy soldiers broke through, the Fort soldiers in the Musket Gallery could close the Defensive Gate using the control rod without exposing themselves to enemy fire.



## Lower Gun Casemates

Beyond the iron gates find this spacious brick-paved area. To the left are two arches for the housing of smooth-bore cannon.

Look through the **gunports** to the outside. Can you see the Great Barrier Ditch? This ran all the way down to the Medway River. The two arched brick bridges spanning the ditch were built around 1890 to replace the earlier bridges.

Directly beneath the gunports is a pit. This prevented the enemy from climbing in. When the guns were fired, there would be lots of smoke; can you see vents either side of the gunport doors?

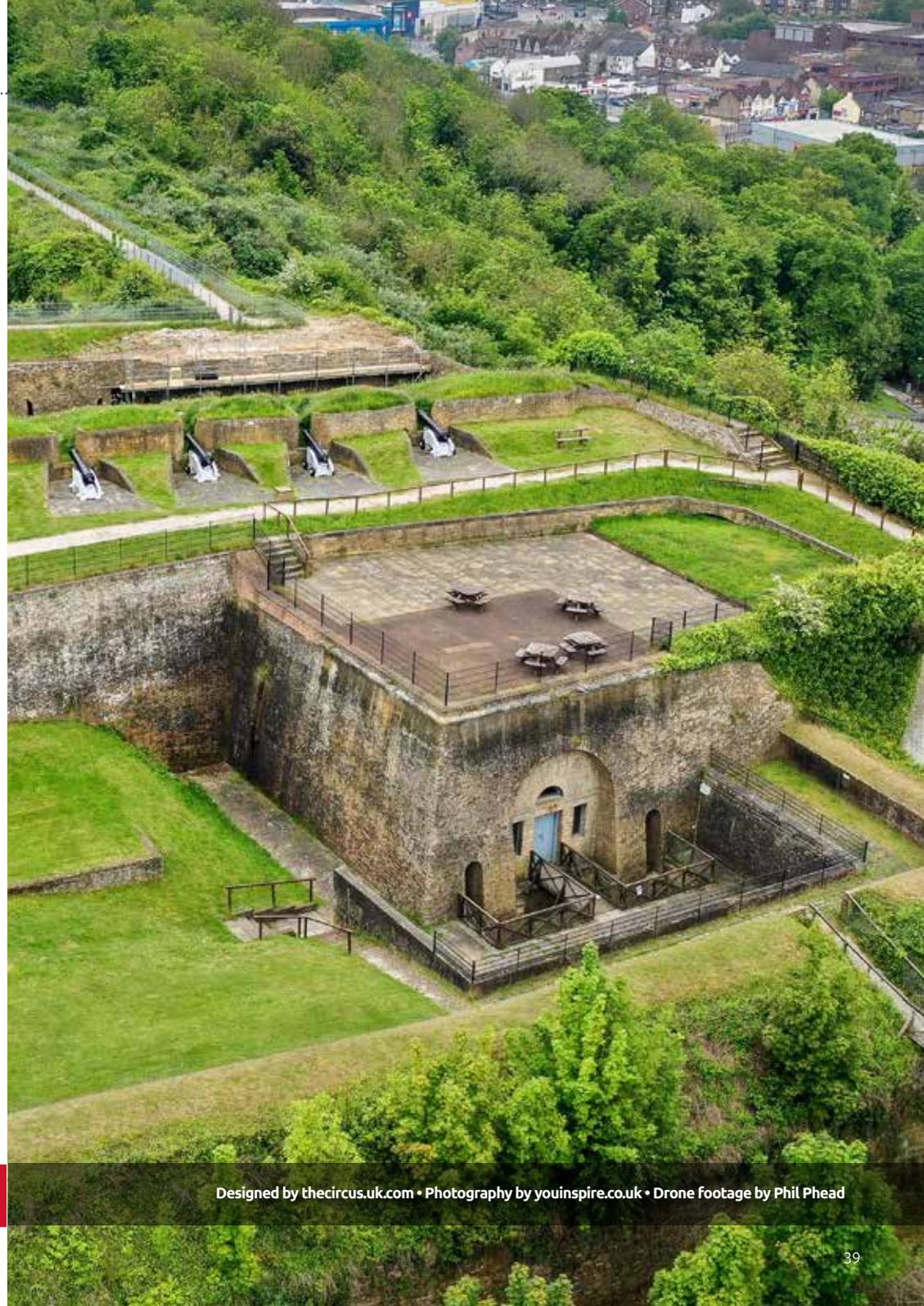
The fireplace helped warm the soldiers, and could also heat the shot to fire at a ship's rigging if the Fort was attacked from the river.

Next to the right-hand gunport is a flight of stairs. Climb these to the Upper Gun Casemates.

## Upper Gun Casemates

These timber-floored casemates had two-gun ports housing carronades (lightweight cannon). The cupboard to the left of the door stored the tools or sidearms needed to operate them. A large opening, high above the gunports, helped disperse any smoke.

In the left corner, by the steps, an ammunition shaft also acted as a lightwell. A lantern hung at the top of the shaft to illuminate the stairs.





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