

The Defences of Plymouth in 1620

by Martin Read, University of Plymouth

The small medieval Castle Quadrate commanding the narrow entrance to Sutton Pool was effectively militarily redundant by the mid-16th century, but was still used as a command centre and main store for arms and armour. By this time the major defences had moved to the front of the Hoe, where a stone blockhouse and several bulwarks (linear ramparts) for large guns had been built, commanding the entrance to the Cattewater. In 1548 a fort had been built on St Nicholas Island (now Drake's Island), commanding the northern parts of Plymouth Sound and the entrance to the Hamoaze.

At the start of the Anglo-Spanish War (1585–1604), there was no time or funds to build any major new works, so the Castle and Hoe defences were repaired and added to with further ditches, bulwarks and gun platforms. With the passage of the Armada, Sir Francis Drake was appointed, in 1590, to improve the defences. The 'divers platfformes' (earth mounds topped by timber staging), were 'methodised into a fortification regular' on the 'hawclifts' at the south eastern end of the Hoe, later known as the lower fort, defending the entrance to the harbour and anchorage.

In 1592 a local commission proposed a citadel, protecting this corner of the Hoe, and a separate wall to protect the town. An engineer, Robert Adams, was sent down by the Privy Council and recommended the building of a small roughly triangular fort on higher ground protecting the lower fort from landward attack. Adams felt that a town wall would be far too costly and militarily ineffective, given the rising ground to the north. Work on the fort started in 1593 and was mostly finished by 1596.

There were complaints that the two forts were lacking in artillery and that gun carriages and platforms were rotten and needed replacement. A 1623 survey found that there were 17 brass and iron guns in the Hoe fort and 27 guns on St Nicholas Island, with several of these being unusable. Muskets were also recorded, as well as hand weapons such as pikes, bills and halberds, but many of these were also 'unserviceable'. The stores also included armour, powder and shot (iron, stone and lead) along with materials to make fireworks.

As the town had no walls, at times of danger the population were expected to enter the castle or fort for protection, but many had refused, preferring to protect their property. However, by the 1580s, the town did have some protection from gates, with associated walls and ditches, such as a 'newe made' gate at Coxside recorded in 1589. These mainly controlled access into and out of the town, and acted as toll collection booths. There was also some sort of inner defence which included barricades and gates (such as Martyns Gate at Bretonside). However, the town records show that in 1619-20 the wooden town gates were taking down and stored in the 'Steeple & Castle'.

Improvements to the defences were made at times of war, with a tendency to progress from protecting the town to preventing the anchorages from being occupied. The town defences illustrate the bankruptcy of the Tudor and Stuart State, resulting in the hybrid fort never being fully completed, armed or manned, with missing elements (such as a drawbridge) still not implemented by 1620. The fort was never designed to withstand a lengthy siege, but only a surprise attack, whilst waiting for other forces to arrive.

Select Bibliography

Brayshay, M. 1987 'Plymouth's coastal defences in the year of the Spanish Armada', *The Devonshire Association Rep. & Trans*, **119**, 166-196.

Worth, R.N. 1890 *History of Plymouth from the Earliest Period to the Present Time*
<https://archive.org/details/historyplymouth02wortgoog>

Detailed drawing of Hoe Fort in 1602 by Italian military engineer Federico Genibelli
<http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/unvbrit/a/001cotaugi00001u00042000.html>