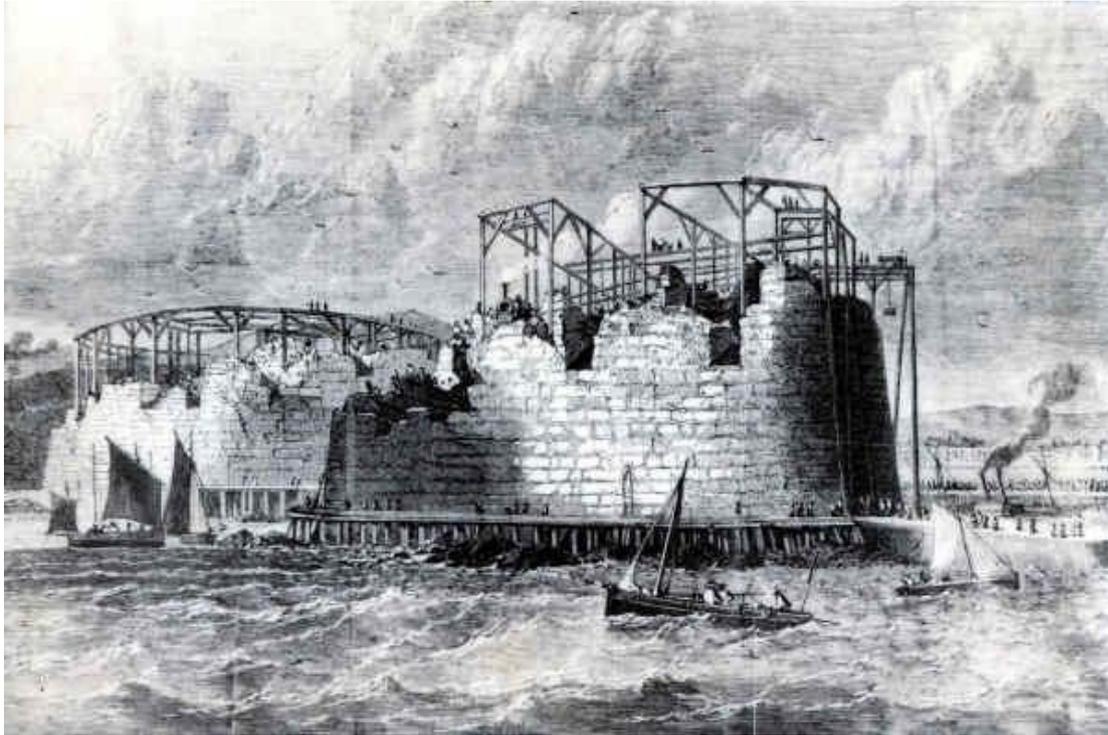


The History of the Fort

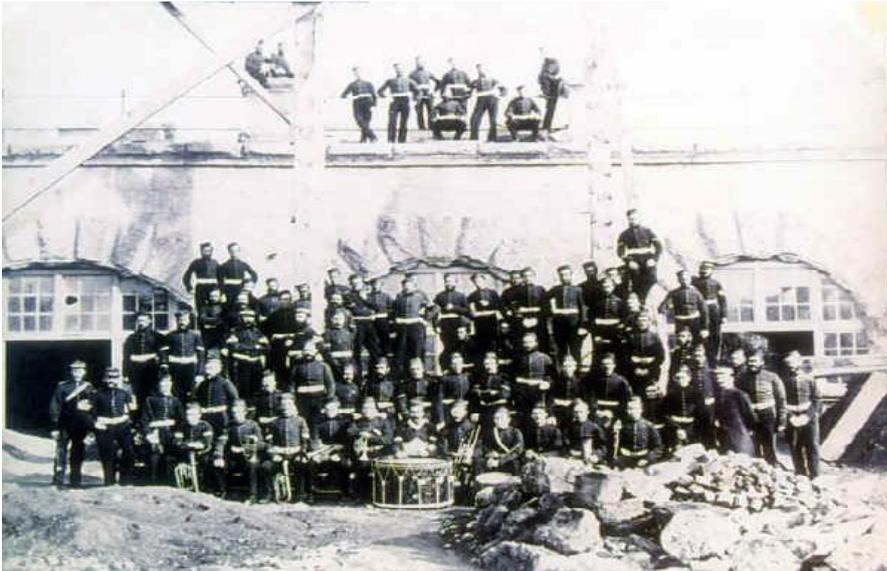


Building the fort

The construction of the Nothe Fort was begun in 1860 by a civilian contractor who soon ran out of money. The job was then given to 26 Company of the Royal Engineers, forerunners of 26 Armoured Assault Squadron. Some fifty sappers completed the task, using a myriad of great twelve-inch-square oak scaffold poles carrying steam gentries and cranes. The original intention was to build an open battery of five 64-pounder guns but a threat developed from the old enemy, the French, who had laid down the world's first purpose built ironclad warship, *La Gloire* and built a new naval base at Cherbourg. So the plan was revised to provide a fortress mounting seventeen heavy guns in two tiers. At an early stage in the construction it was decided that twelve of the

big new rifled guns would suffice and the basement gunports were filled in and earth embanked up to them.

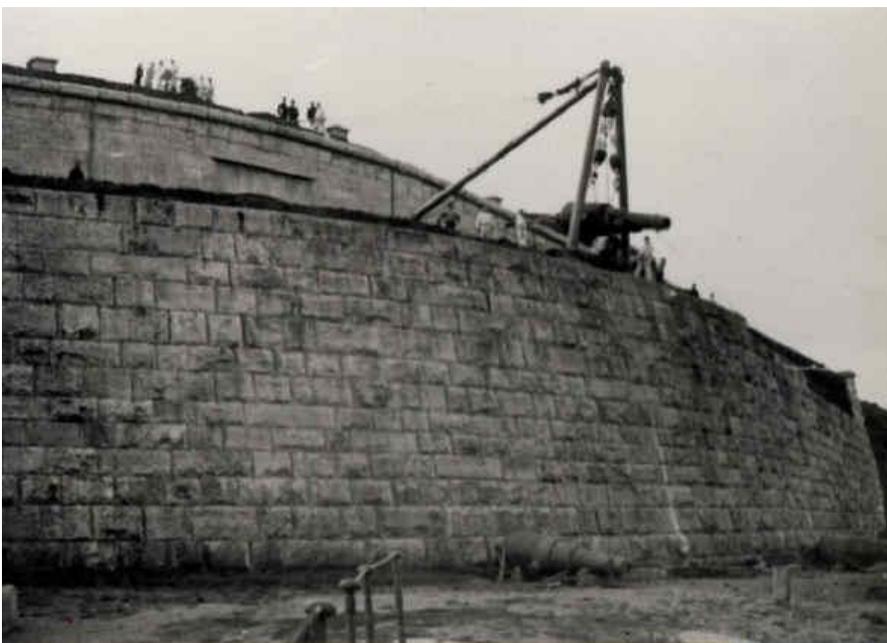
The Men Who Built the Fort



Installing the Guns

The first soldiers to garrison the Fort were No 2 Battery Royal Artillery (Tatton-Brown's), a specialist gun emplacement unit trained in the handling of ordnance up to 18 tons, using vast sheerlegs. They were responsible for hauling and heaving two 64-pounder, four 9-inch and six 10-inch guns into the fort. These were rifled muzzle loaders (RMLs) with spiral grooves cut into the barrel to engage lugs on the shells and impart rotation and thus accuracy in flight. Seven of these guns were replaced in the 1890s by massive 12.5-inch RMLs weighing 38 tons each and capable of firing 800-pound shells over a range of three and a half miles. These shells were propelled by new smokeless powder and they were fitted with soft metal rings at the base instead of lugs to engage the rifling, which eliminated wasteful escape of gas around the sides of the shells. All this was to meet the ever-increasing thickness of armour with which warships were being fitted.

Hoisting a Cannon



As Portland Harbour grew in importance and became the main base of the Channel and later the Atlantic Fleets, so the Nothe remained an important link in the defences of the base. With the advent of breech loading (BL) the RMLs were removed and 6-inch BL guns were emplaced on the ramparts. Rapid advances in technology had produced a situation where two or three of these guns could do the same job as the twelve massive RMLs. Their armour-piercing shells, weighing only 100 pounds, could be fired at a much faster rate to a range of some ten miles.

World War 2

The Nothe Fort did not see action against the enemy until World War 2, when the main threat came from the air. Until then the big guns had mainly been fired in training and in competitive events. However, in July 1940 two mystery ships failed to identify themselves and were fired on. They quickly turned on all their lights to reveal themselves as refugees from the Channel Islands.

Barrack Room - 1940



In 1938 it had been decided to use the fort as a central anti-aircraft ammunition depot and some of the casemates and magazines on the south side were converted for storage. An electrically operated hoist was installed and a loading platform built alongside. Guns as far away as Coventry were supplied from here. The Nothe was also given its own AA guns. A Vickers Pom-pom was placed on a platform built on the north-west corner of the fort: (later to be replaced by a 40mm Bofors), and a battery of four 3.7-inch guns were emplaced on the glacis/gardens (now part of the car park). As that which goes up must come down, the Fort was supplied with large concrete and iron flak shields to protect the gun crews from spent shrapnel.

Post War

Coastal Defence was abandoned in 1956 and the Fort was temporarily used to house naval stores and degaussing equipment. In 1961 it was purchased by Weymouth and Melcombe Regis Council who, at the time, were interested mainly in the military land available and were unable to advance any viable scheme for the use of the Fort. Much more decisive were the hippies and vandals who took over the buildings and who, by 1979, had done immense damage using most of the woodwork for firewood, selling the metal fittings for scrap, mutilating the stonework and using it as a canvas for graffiti. In 1979 the Weymouth Civic Society obtained a licence to restore the fort and to open it to the public. In this the Civic Society received extensive assistance both from the Council and from various government community programmes. Today, the fully restored fort is visited by some fifty or sixty thousand people a year who come to see the impressive architecture and masonry of the Royal Engineers, real and replica guns of the ages, views of the Dorset coastline, and over seventy rooms, many filled with displays of the history of the site, military life in the Fort and wartime life in Weymouth.

