

Second World War Defences on St Helena

by Bill Clements

It is, perhaps, not generally appreciated by the people of St Helena that in addition to the eighteenth century fortifications the island boasts a rare collection of twentieth century defences which, sixty years after the end of the Second World War, are now the subject of considerable interest to potential tourists.

On Ladder Hill and Munden's Hill are the remains of two British Army twentieth century gun batteries, while at Lower Munden's you can still see the remains of a number of coast defence searchlight positions. On Ladder Hill the guns still remain, rare survivors and two of the very few such guns 6-inch guns remaining in the Commonwealth.



“Looking towards Ladder Hill from Munden's point D.E.L. station”

The two batteries on Ladder Hill and Munden's Hill were constructed in 1902, each for two 6-inch Breech-loading guns. However, they had

a somewhat chequered history as the British Army garrison was withdrawn from the island in 1906, four years after the batteries were completed, though the guns were left in situ but stripped of their breech blocks and sights. In 1911 the Admiralty took over responsibility for the defences of St Helena from the War Office and a Royal Marine maintenance party comprising one captain and 12 marines arrived to look after the guns which were re-activated in 1912.



“St Helena Corp men, High Knoll Fort”

The Admiralty remained responsible for the St Helena guns until 1938, when the decision was taken to send the guns back to England. Fortunately, there was a delay in sending out the stores required to enable the guns to be dismantled and they were still in place when war broke out on 3 September 1939. On the outbreak of war the St Helena Coast Battery RA was formed and sent to the island, arriving on 22 October 1939.

The War Office, once again responsible for the St Helena defences, re-assessed the battery armament in June 1940, as British troops withdrew from Dunkirk. Because of the imminent threat of invasion, the British Army searched everywhere for additional coast defence

guns to defend Britain. As a result the two guns on Munden's Hill were dismounted and shipped back to England in August 1940. In June 1946 the St Helena Coast Battery RA was disbanded and the breech mechanisms of the guns and other spare parts were ordered to be dumped in deep water off James Town.



The 6-inch guns at Ladder Hill.

Today the gun positions on Ladder Hill remain in relatively good condition though the guns require regular painting and maintenance. One of the underground magazines, however, has become a rubbish tip and the Battery Control Post behind the guns is derelict. On Munden's Hill the gun positions and magazines remain in good condition, with one of the shell hoists in the magazine still working.

Perhaps with the advent of the proposed airport the time has come to look at how these historic structures could be refurbished and put to use as a tourist attraction. It seems to me that St Helena needs to commemorate the part played by the island and the men of the re-formed St Helena Rifles and the St Helena Regiment, and the St Helena Home Guard, in the Second World War. This could be done

by establishing a small museum, as an annex of the St Helena Museum, in the unused magazine at Ladder Hill or in the historic Round Tower.

In the case of the Ladder Hill magazine it should not be too difficult, or too expensive, to clear the unused magazine of rubbish, whitewash the walls, install lighting and doors and when this is done, there would be a number of rooms available in which to display information boards, photographs and artefacts relating to St Helena during the period 1939-1945. One of the artefacts to be displayed could be the rare 'Apparatus Practice Loading 6-inch BL' that, until recently, had been left amongst the rubbish at the back of the Ladder Hill battery. (This is a piece of equipment that allowed the gunners to practice loading a gun at speed without using the actual gun).

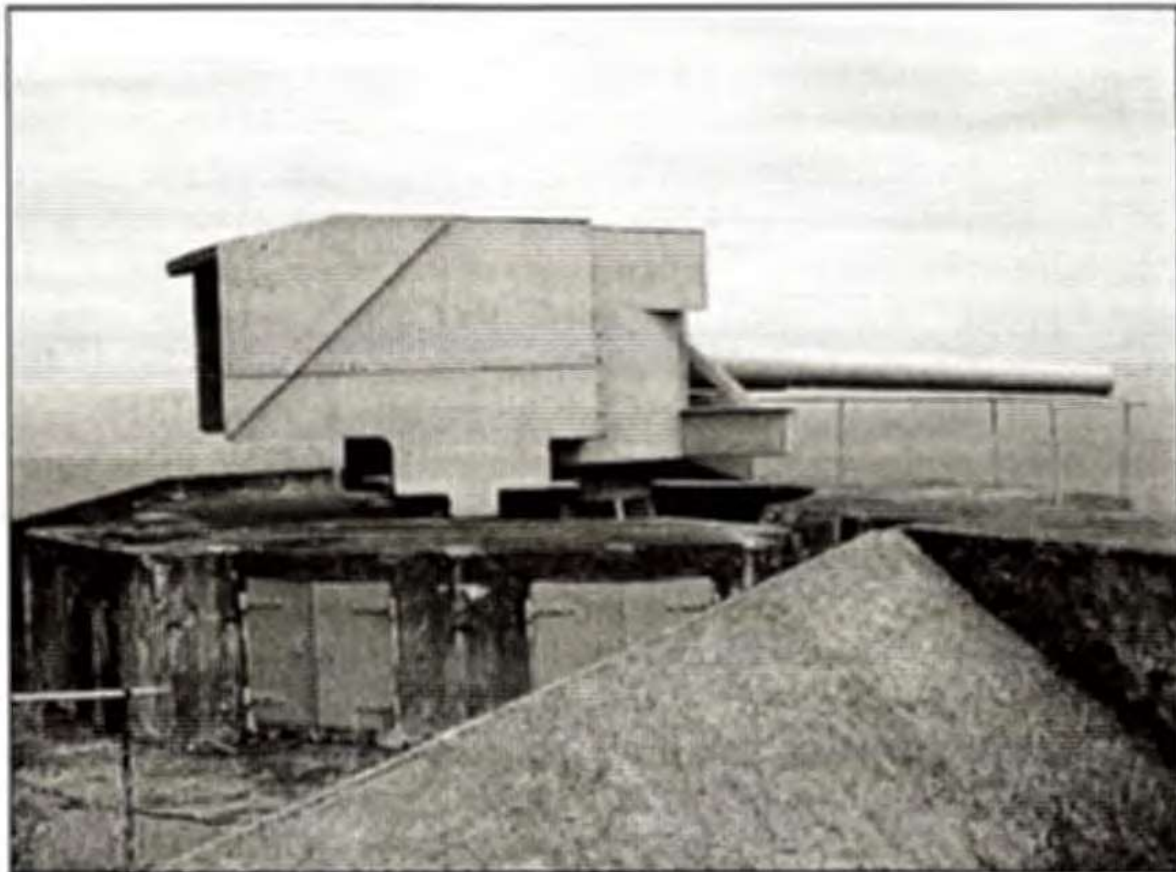
I would expect that other artefacts might be donated by St Helena residents and perhaps there is still time to obtain oral history accounts from those islanders who lived through the Second World War. In addition, the working shell hoist from the magazine on Munden's Hill could also be moved without too much difficulty.



Shell hoist for the 6-inch guns.

One would hope that some of the large commercial organisations with interests in St Helena would be prepared to sponsor the establishment of such a museum and this would be an attraction to the new influx of tourists. Initially it might not be possible to keep a museum at Ladder Hill open on a daily basis, but it would surely be possible to open it for pre-booked parties of tourists, school children and other groups.

In Britain and other European countries there is a growing interest in Second World War defences and other buildings. Many are now being refurbished and opened to the public. On St Helena there is now an opportunity to preserve a unique and interesting part of the island's built heritage. ❧



One of the 6-inch guns at Ladder Hill. *[all photos supplied by Bill Clements]*