

## REPAIR Good Practice Example: Medway, Fort Horsted



***During the middle of the 1900th century considerable alarm was generated in the United Kingdom by the territorial ambitions of Emperor Napoleon III of France, a traditional enemy, and the growing power of imperial Germany.***

*The threat was considered to be so great that a Royal Commission was set up in 1859 to review UK defences and report its findings to parliament, which it did in 1860.*

Some defensive works were already in place at Chatham, such as the impressive Fort Amherst, but the Royal Commission felt the eastern and southern approaches to Chatham were not adequately protected and construction of five new forts began in 1880.

The Royal Commission recommendation was to construct five forts named Darland, Twydall, Luton, Horsted and Bridgewoods to defend the eastern flank of Chatham and the strategically important Chatham Dockyard where the new ironclad warships were to be constructed. Military opinion on the usefulness of these fixed Fortifications was divided, which possibly led to them becoming known as 'Palmerston's follies' after the Prime Minister of the day, Lord Palmerston.

The naval dockyard at Chatham played a crucial role in the construction and maintenance of these new naval leviathans.

By 1889 the building work on Fort Horsted was completed and its role of providing a garrison, munitions store and water supply to Forts Luton and Bridgewoods began along with its role in the defence of Chatham Dockyard. For the next 60 years the Fort remained in military hands with a small garrison from the Royal Ordnance Corps. and later the Royal Artillery in continuous occupation. Although much of the activity during this time is covered by the official secrets act it is known that the Fort was used to manufacture and store ammunition.

Fort Horsted was the largest of the five forts designed to defend Chatham's eastern and southern approaches. Many changes were made to the original design of Horsted since its inception in the 1860's. Most noticeably Fort Horsted does not have caponiers or other exposed external features clearly visible in earlier works such as the Drop Redoubt in Dover. This was due to the development of high explosive shells in the intervening period

between the 1860's and the eventual construction some twenty years later.

Fort Horsted is a polygonal fort, surrounded by a deep ditch revetted in concrete, a relatively new material at that time. Horsted and her companion forts were spaced three miles apart, which was the maximum range of guns at the time. The shape of the fort, almost arrowhead when seen from above, provided angles of fire along which counterscarp galleries within the fort could fire.

The speed of artillery development outstripped fortification building, and on completion guns could fire well beyond this range, nevertheless there is



no question that these forts would have proved to be a major obstacle to an invading force to overcome in order to advance further. Being the largest of the forts, Horsted contained water tanks fed from a reservoir under the rampart of the right flank. These tanks would have ensured supplies of water to the other forts.

In 1902 Fort Horsted was mounted with seven machine guns. During WWII a light anti-aircraft emplacement comprising 3.7 inch gun and Bofors guns were installed at Fort Horsted and controlled from Fort Luton.

On the 15th September 1940, at the height of the Battle for Britain, an observer reported sighting six enemy aircraft being shot down in a 20 minute period.

By the early sixties, the military no longer had a use for Fort Horsted and wanted to release their responsibility for it: the fort was sold for £10,000 to a development company in 1963.

***During the following 34 years the Fort had a variety of owners and tenants including Kent County Council, Ford Motor Company, UK and others.***

## ***History shows that a succession of owners had no idea of what to do with the site or had any intention to properly maintain the integrity of it.***

### ***How could the significance and fabric of the site be maintained at the same time as providing a useful community asset?***

In 1972 an application was made to demolish the Fort and build 120 private homes. A public enquiry led the secretary of State for the Environment to decide that Fort Horsted was an ancient monument of great local interest and the application for Planning Permission was denied.

By 1976 the Fort was owned by a Tyre company, a company registered in Germany, running a business of Tyre remoulding. The Fort became a dump for an estimated 100,000 used tyres in and around the site, in the tunnels and completely filling the moat. Also in 1976, an enormous fire broke out causing a great deal of structural damage. After the blaze the owners gradually ceased trading and a rapid decline in the condition of the site accelerated and units fell into disrepair.

During the early 1990s the Fort was almost deserted, derelict and in need of attention. English Heritage and the Environment Agency issued an enforcement notice on the legal owners with a £1 million liability to clean up the site and remove all the tyres. Instead of obeying this order the owners put the Fort up for auction and Avondale Environmental Services purchased it in 1997.



Avondale Environmental Services came to the conclusion that the future of this Historic monument lay in it being able to sustain itself, in terms of income generation and investment, a business plan was put to English Heritage and the Environment Agency to clear the site but also to develop it into small business units.

By staying within the guidelines for the restoration and renovation of historic sites and keeping all works in character, English Heritage relaxed its normally strict rules and over time the development of Business Incubator Units within the Fort grounds was approved by Medway Council. Income received from these units, plus input from Avondale UK, helps to fund the maintenance of the site, making it a sustainable application.

Over the next few years English Heritage continued to support Avondale as it cleared the tyres and returned the Fort into a habitable condition. Finally, in August 2001 Avondale was able to occupy the Fort and started the next chapter in its long life.

In April 2007, Phase One of Fort Horsted Business Centre was officially opened and 6 refurbished business units became available on flexible lease terms together with state of the art conference facilities and a reception area.

This involved a private investment of £3 million but



was considered of long-term benefit, bringing the whole site into re-use. Avondale were supported in this venture by, among others, Medway Council and Business Link Kent. In this case it is the business acumen of the owner Andy Bach and his strong desire to do the right thing has worked to secure the long-term preservation of this site.

***Close working with Avondale has given local and environment authorities confidence to permit a business oriented rescue plan for the preservation of the Fort.***

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Links

[www.avondaleuk.com](http://www.avondaleuk.com)

<http://www.forthorsted.co.uk/content/history>

<http://www.medway.gov.uk/newsindex/newsmain.htm/newspage?item=33818>

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