

Ireland's Emergency Fortress

Fort Shannon, County Kerry

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Photos by author and Ken Mooney



A view above the searchlight chamber.

During the Second World War a vast range of forts and military defence installations were constructed across the European war zone. These included, for example, the German Atlantic Wall that stretched from Spain to Norway, which was laid out to guard the coast against an Allied invasion, or the British defence system built to defend the country against a possible German attack. Here an equally extensive range of gun emplacements, anti-invasion obstacles, and forts were constructed in coastal, estuarial and inland positions. During the same war time period, the Irish government built only a single large-scale military installation: Fort Shannon on the County Kerry side of the Shannon Estuary. The Irish government was concerned that an invasion force could strike up the Shannon to Limerick and quickly reach the interior of the country.

Coast Defence Artillery

As Ireland took a neutral position in the war, it was felt that such an attack could originate from Germany or Britain. The government established a number

of coastal defence forts around the coastline around the same time, but these were essentially the nineteenth century structures that the British authorities had kept under the Anglo/Irish Treaty. The forts were handed over to the Irish government in 1938.

When World War II broke out the coastal defence installations became vital to the defence of Ireland's deep-water ports. There were five Coast Defence Artillery installations in the Southern Command and two installations in the Western Command. Manned by the Artillery Corps, Coast Defence Artillery Detachments were deployed as follows:

Southern Command

Forts Westmoreland, Carlisle and Templebreedy in Cork Harbour, Co. Cork. Fort Berehaven in Bantry Bay, Co. Cork. Fort Shannon on the Shannon estuary, Co. Kerry, from 1942.

Western Command

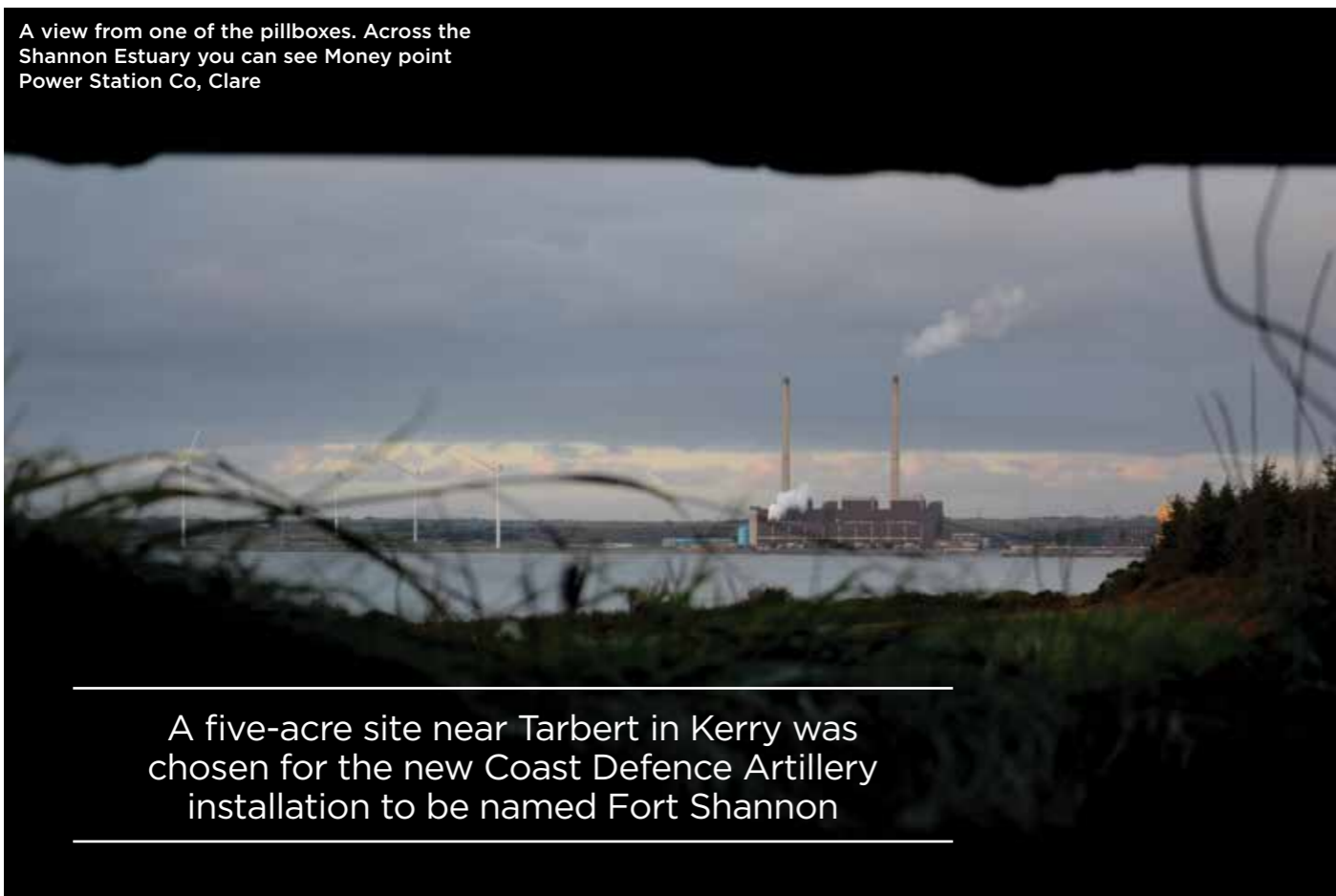
Forts Dunree and Lenan in Lough Swilly, Co. Donegal. Armaments varied between installations.

They included some 26 coastal artillery pieces: 9.2", 6", 4.7", 60-pounders with a number of naval 12-pounders and Hotchkiss 3-pounders.

The forts and their guns were manned 24/7 all year round. They had a primary role of the defence of the respective harbour. Furthermore, these harbours were deemed 'controlled ports'. This gave Coast Defence Artillery a secondary role of 'Control of Examination Anchorage'. This meant that all ships entering the harbours had to be searched and deemed 'Safe' by the Examination Service.

The Coast Defence Artillery installations were supported by the Corps of Engineers Coast Defence Company. Headquartered at Fort Camden in Cork Harbour, the unit consisted of 232 all ranks. Its main task was the engineering support of the coastal defence installations and the provision of seventeen searchlights. The engineers were deployed to all coastal installations except Fort Lenan which had no searchlights.

The installations were further augmented by detachments of the regular Army, Local Defence Force and the Marine Service/Marine Inscription Service.



A view from one of the pillboxes. Across the Shannon Estuary you can see Money point Power Station Co, Clare

A five-acre site near Tarbert in Kerry was chosen for the new Coast Defence Artillery installation to be named Fort Shannon

Fort Shannon

In 1941, it was decided that the Examination Service for the Shannon estuary, based at the port of Cappa on the Clare side, would need artillery support. A five-acre site near Tarbert in Kerry was chosen for the new Coast Defence Artillery installation to be named Fort Shannon. It was to be armed with a battery of 6" guns, a machine gun platoon and a searchlight detachment.

Commandant Mick Sugrue came from Fort Carlisle (now Fort David) to assume command and oversee the construction. Gunners were dispatched from Kildare Barracks and the Cork Harbour Forts. Land was bought and leased. Communication by day and night across the estuary was assured by the building of Look Out Posts (LOPs), and augmenting these with wireless and telephone. Thus, Loop Head, Kilcraudaun Head and the Examination Service on the north shore were linked with Doon Head, Scattery Island and Fort Shannon. Close liaison was maintained with

the Harbour Master at Limerick, who held a naval rank of Lieutenant Commander. He was responsible for movement of all shipping in and out of the estuary.

Fort Shannon was not a fort in the strict military sense, but a pair of coastal defence guns positioned at Ardmore Point, overlooking the Shannon estuary, a short distance down river from Tarbert. The site is roughly oval in plan, set on a broad ledge high above the estuary, with the largely undefined boundaries swinging along the southern inland boundary. The terrain rises sharply from the water to an approximately level position - although it could easily be scaled in an assault - and rises slightly again a little further inland; with a farm-style gateway on both the east and west sides. The site for the fort was, however, carefully chosen. Ardmore Point projects into the estuary and faces downstream to cover a point where the width of the navigable channel is limited between Scattery Island on the north bank and Carrig Island on

the opposite side. Consequently, an enemy vessel seeking to pass between the islands is forced to present its bow, or front, directly to the fort so that it can engage only its forward armament in an attack.

Today Fort Shannon is very overgrown with trees and shrubs. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify the main military elements. The two gun emplacements can be seen overlooking the estuary: one near the east side of the oval, the other in a more central position. West of these is a pair of searchlight enclosures near the river edge, with the Power House and Communications Building on the higher level behind, while three machine gun pillboxes can be seen stretching along the curved southern boundary. The Power House and Communications Centre is a single story domestic looking stone-built building with a galvanised steel hipped roof and four large rectangular windows facing the estuary. The doorway to the interior is on the landward side.



An aerial view in which you can clearly see the remains of one of the Fort Shannon gun emplacements, with the open gun chamber, overhead beam, gun mounting, parapet, and the entrance to the magazine passage at the rear.

Gun Emplacements

The two gun emplacements in the centre of the site are the most obvious features of the fort. Each consists of a gun chamber, behind which an underground passageway provides a link to the magazine. The gun emplacements in both cases were built with mass concrete sides and roof, inside which the gun chamber was open to the estuary, except for a low parapet behind which the gun was positioned. Overhead a heavy metal beam remains built into the underside of the roof, which allowed the gun to be manoeuvred into position on its mounting that still remains. There are two stores at the rear of the gun chamber with the entrance to the magazine access passage between. The dogleg route of the access passage leads to the magazine. This was also provided with an external concrete stairs leading to ground level near, the doorway to the magazine chamber. The inclusion of the dogleg was presumably to minimise the force of a blast from an artillery or air

strike, on either the gun chamber or the magazine. Both magazines were of mass concrete construction and were completely underground. They were given no windows, but each had small roof apertures to provide some degree of ventilation. During the construction period it seems as if the top soil of the site was stripped away and once the concrete structures were completed the soil was returned to partially cover the sides and roofs of the emplacement and magazine for camouflage purposes.

The Guns

Both guns were 6" Breach Loading (BL), Mk VII, coastal defence guns, manufactured by Vickers between 1902 and 1903. Although the manufacture of these guns dates from the early twentieth century, they were the standard British coastal defence weapon of the period and remained so for the duration of the war. Initially each of the Shannon guns was supplied with 120 rounds and it took a ten man crew to load, operate and



Emblem of the 7th Field Engineer Company, with date, built into the wall of the underground bunker.

fire each gun with a capacity of eight rounds per minute. Today the Shannon Fort guns are no longer present, but seem to have been transferred to Fort Dunree Museum in Co. Donegal where they have been partially restored and are on display.

Searchlights

The two anti-aircraft searchlights were housed in a pair of flat roofed concrete structure, each with a wide aperture that allowed the searchlight to be directed across

LOCAL HISTORY



A 6 inch Mk VII coastal defence gun, similar to those that existed in Fort Shannon, being test fired in Grey Point Fort Museum, Helen's Bay, County Down in 2014.



A restored Ordnance QF (Quick Firing) 4.7 inch coastal defence gun. These guns were used on Bere island and Fort Dunree. This gun is on display in Fort Mitchell Museum, Spike Island.

and down the estuary. The positioning of the lights would have provided sufficient scope to illuminate any would-be attacker attempting to sail up the estuary, under the cover of darkness. Today the concrete structure, the rusted metal drum of the lamp, and the parts of the concrete housing is all that survives.

Pillboxes

The three flat roofed mass concrete pillboxes placed on the raised ground around the landward perimeter overlook the site. Each of the boxes is set into the ground with a square plan a small entrance doorway and narrow vertical slot on each of the four faces. The purpose of the pillboxes was presumably to provide machine gun cover against a direct assault from either the river or the landward side.

In the case of an attack, the defence capabilities of Fort Shannon would have been restricted, not least by the limited stock of ammunition held. Furthermore, the rate of fire of the two guns would have been slow and the concrete structures would not have been sufficient to withstand a concentrated bombardment.

Called into action

Throughout the Emergency years the gunners and engineers of Fort Shannon guarded their posts. The only shots fired were during practise. Its personnel were called out on one occasion however. According to an article on Coast Defence Artillery in *An Cosantóir*, November 1973, by Commandant J. E. Dawson and Lieutenant C. Lawler, the men of Fort Shannon went to the rescue of the Merchant Vessel E.D.J. after

it went aground near Cappa during a gale. Thankfully no lives were lost.

The fort closes

The fort experienced only a limited lifespan. It was abandoned at the end of the Emergency in 1946, when Commandant Mick Sugrue evacuated the fort on May 31st, 1946. Only a small skeleton crew remained behind for a short period after. Today the fort lies abandoned and derelict. Whatever wooden support buildings that originally existed have now disappeared. Fortunately, a restored example of the Fort Shannon gun-types can be seen in Fort Mitchell (Fort Westmorland) Museum on Spike Island, while in Grey Point Fort Museum in Co. Down, a pair of similar guns is maintained in working order, one of which was successfully test fired as recently as 2014. Nevertheless, Fort Shannon remains an important feature of Irish military history and today the dilapidated and neglected state of the site reflects poorly on the authorities responsible for its upkeep. This is particularly so, when contrasted with other similar fortifications around the Irish coastline, such as the museums at Fort Dundee, Fort Mitchell and Gray Point Fort, where restored and heavy and light weaponry are clearly and attractively presented to visitors.