

## **THE BIRTH OF GREY POINT FORT**

A Royal Commission of 1859 followed a War Office report on the defences of the commercial harbours in the UK three years earlier. The first review had recognised the feeble defences of Carrickfergus Castle and proposed to establish both a battery for four heavy muzzle-loading guns at Grey Point and another battery for three guns on a spit of sand south of Holywood. The Royal Commission only dealt with Cork in Ireland, and it was not until another committee reported on 29 August 1870 that the defence of Belfast Lough was returned to, reiterating the 1856 recommendations for Grey Point and Holywood. Some members of the committee however had reservations about Grey Point, commenting that:

*'It yet remains a point for grave consideration whether any great expense should be incurred in the erection of the works, bearing in mind the probability of a sufficiently powerful portion of the British Fleet being (during war) available at some not very distant part of the coast, which might be called on for its assistance in repelling an attack of magnitude'.*

In the 1880s further consideration was given to coastal defences by the RA and RE Works Committee which reported in a memorandum of 4 July 1888 entitled "the Revision of Armaments – Belfast" that consideration should be given to 2 batteries of 6 inch breech-loading guns, one at Kilroot and the other most opposite at Grey Point. In addition Grey Point was to have a second battery of four 9 inch muzzle-loading guns on long-range mountings, though this second battery was later deleted on reconsideration by the same committee in 1895.

Belfast had of course by this time become important particularly in commercial terms, with its linen mills, rope works and in particular the shipbuilding and ship-repairing industry. The population in 1901 was just on 350,000 (compared to 87,000 50 years earlier). Another significant development was that by 1905 it was becoming clear to British policymakers that the major threat to Britain's naval supremacy was no longer France but Germany.

In 1904 Britain and France signed the Entente Cordiale. In 1905 the Admiralty in the War Office as a joint committee to "report what additions or alterations, if any, are necessary to the existing fixed defences of all defended ports at home to suit modern conditions". This was led by General Owen with four other members from the Army and Royal Navy. It took as its premise the fact that the ports of the United Kingdom might be subject to 3 classes of naval attack – class A – attack by battleship; class B – attack by armoured cruisers; class C – attack by on armoured cruisers, torpedo boats or block ships. Belfast Lough was identified as class C, whereas Cork and Lough Swilly were class B. The defence against class A and B were 9.2 inch or even 12 inch guns, but for class C, the rapidity of fire pointed to the 6 inch breech-loading 6 inch Mark VII gun. It was also thought not necessary to provide searchlights for the defence of Belfast Lough. (This seems curious given that – admittedly a couple of years later – the creation of the Thomson Graving Dock used for the Titanic and the Olympic allowed the latest British Naval Dreadnoughts to be serviced in Belfast.)

However, prior to the Owen committee's being set up, the Belfast District Defence Scheme had been revised to 1 January 1904. The decision had finally been taken, and already plans had been drawn up for a fort at Grey Point (and indeed Kilroot). The Owen Committee was satisfied, and recommended no changes.

Grey Point was built as a pentagonal fort between 1904 and 1907 on land bought from the Marquess of Dufferin and Ava for £8,400. The construction work was undertaken, for a similar sum, by Messrs W.J. Campbell & Son of Ravenhill Road, Belfast who had recently completed the Lough Swilly forts. Two six-inch Mark VII breech-loading guns, built by Vickers Sons and Maxim Ltd., were mounted and tested during May 1907. They had a maximum elevation of 15 degrees (and were first produced in 1898). The barrel of each gun was 23 foot long, and weighed 7 tons. The guns, with a cordite charge of 22lbs were capable of firing shells weighing about 100 pounds a distance of up to 7 miles. A 10 person crew was required for each gun. The Grey Point guns covered a range from the Inner Channel entrance to the Copelands.

Grey Point Fort was basically completed in 1907, though the workshops and other stores were completed in the following 2 to 3 years, and Kilroot by 1910. Both consisted of two concrete gun positions for the barbette mountings of the 6 inch guns with a magazine, shell store and shelter built underneath, with a manual hoist.

Grey Point was pentagonal in shape and faced north-east towards the Lough entrance. It was surrounded by a wall on top of which was an "unclimbable" Palisade. The original Battery Command post was sited on a slight rise behind the guns. Immediately inside the main entrance the fort was a stall for the movable armament of three .303 inch Maxim machine guns on field carriages. Kilroot was diamond shaped, with two blockhouses protecting it from landward attack. After a review in 1912, one each of the machine guns from Grey Point and Kilroot were relocated in a new facility at East Twin Island protecting Belfast harbour.

In 1913 plans were drawn up for concrete blockhouses protecting the land fronts of Grey Point and the Swilly forts, though these had not been built by 1914. A Port War Signal Station was created at Orlock to identify warships approaching the Lough and advising naval headquarters and the Army fortress commander by telephone. The Battery Command Post was erected in March 1916 at Grey Point Fort.

The garrisons for Grey Point and Kilroot were formed from the 15<sup>th</sup> Company Royal Garrison Artillery and the Antrim Royal Garrison Artillery (Special Reserve), the new title in 1907 of the previous Antrim Artillery Militia. Elsewhere in the United Kingdom, the Territorial Army had come into force following the 1904 Act taken through Parliament by Lord Haldane. Ireland alone retained its traditional militia, though with the change in nomenclature.

On the declaration of war on 4 August 1914, a company from the Special Reserve at Carrickfergus Castle was moved to Grey Point. Unlike the Second World War, Kilroot was the examination battery. This linked in with the Examination Service that was established in every defended port with the role of controlling the entry into it of all merchant shipping and other vessels. If required, all non-naval vessels had to anchor under the guns of the examination battery.

At Grey Point, three diamond-shaped blockhouses were constructed to improve the land-front defence of the Fort. One was built at the centre of the northern wall with the other two at the Fort's East and West corners. The fort was completely surrounded by a wide barbed wire entanglement and the blockhouses acted as caponiers enabling rifle fire to be directed against an enemy attempting to break through the barbed wire.

During World War 1, Belfast was used primarily as a trawler base by the Royal Navy, largely to maintain the anti-submarine nets closing the North Channel between the Northern Ireland coast and Scotland. A private house to the south-east of the battery was used as the officer's mess from 1914 to 1918. None of the Northern Irish forts or batteries fired a shot in anger during the whole of the war. On the other hand, the guns provided a successful deterrent against attacks by both German surface warships and submarines on the two Loughs which provided bases so vital to success in the Naval War.

The coastal defences of Belfast continued being garrisoned by regular troops even after a review carried out by the War Office in 1926. However the review resulted in the responsibility for manning the forts to be transferred initially to the 17<sup>th</sup> Heavy Battery Royal Artillery. A further review, given the continuing absence of the Territorial Army in Northern Ireland, transferred Grey Point and Kilroot to the responsibility of the Lancashire and Cheshire Heavy Brigade RA (TA) and the Renfrew Fortress Company RE (TA). These units attended annual camps in Belfast for a number of years.

Consideration was occasionally given to raising a Territorial Army in Northern Ireland, but it was not until the Chief of the Imperial General Staff formed an Auxiliary Air Force squadron there that steps were taken, with the worsening political situation in Europe, to form two new units – 188th (Antrim) Heavy Battery RA (TA) and the Antrim Fortress Company RE (TA). The role of the latter was to operate the searchlights two of which had been installed at Grey Point in 1936, and to maintain the engines provided power for them. Recruiting began in August 1937, and both units were briefly mobilised at Grey Point during the Munich crisis in 1938. In June 1938 the first camp of the new Territorial Army unit, 188 (Antrim) Heavy Battery Royal Artillery, was held at Grey Point. The tents were successfully erected in spite of gale force winds, and the advance party was catered for there satisfactorily by the Sandes Soldiers Home from Holywood Palace Barracks. The RUC Band played at the sports meeting during the camp. The keenness displayed by all ranks was 'most refreshing' according to the official account. An open day for families was also held, that year, as Mrs Patton recalled visiting the Fort where her husband was posted.

The unit was mobilised for a fortnight during the Munich Crisis from 26 September 1938. On that first night most of the men were billeted in St John's Church Hall, with the permission of Canon Capsey. Although they set up tents the next day, within a week many had blown down.

Following a further two-week camp in June 1939 during which the Battery fired full calibre ammunition for the first time, they were again mobilised on 24 August 1939, two weeks before war was declared. The establishment of the unit which at this time also covered the Kilroot Fort was set at 6 officers and 179 other ranks.

The Royal Navy planned anti-submarine mines being anchored in a line between Carrickfergus and Lobster Rock near Grey Point, with the fort acting as the control post for the minefield. In the event, it is understood that a boom was placed across the lough.

On 24 August 1939, at 4 pm, the headquarters of the 188th at the drill Hall in Great Victoria Street in Belfast received a telegram from the War Office ordering all coastal defences to be manned for war routine as soon as possible. By 22.40 hours that night Grey Point Fort was reported as fully manned.

During the Second War, as in the First, the role of Grey Point Fort was to protect Belfast Lough from naval attack. When a ship entered the Lough it would have been contacted by the coastal defence and asked to make itself known. If there was no answer the ship would be signalled to 'Heave to or be sunk.' If the ship still maintained its course or again failed to reply, a plugged round would have been fired across the ships bows. If there was still no response the next round to be fired would have been a high explosive shell. During the war the gunners carried out regular target practice. A tug from the Clyde towed a barge a mile behind with a chequered target. Twice a week the gunners fired at the target. Ahead of this, local residents had to be warned to open their windows and doors to prevent damage due to the blast. The gun crew were warned to keep their mouths open, when the shot was fired, to prevent internal damage from blast waves. Reports from those stationed at the Fort would suggest that the target was usually missed.

Two days after the outbreak of the Second World War, a merchant ship, the 'E Hayward,' entered Belfast Lough apparently unaware of the change in conditions. When it failed to respond to a recognition signal, a plugged round was fired across her bows. Interestingly the local newspaper of the day reported that two shells were fired over the bows, one of which ricochet of the water in front of the E. Hayward and hit a walled enclosure of a nunnery just off the Beltoy Road in Kilroot.

The 188th had by December 1939 a strength of 214 all ranks under the command of Lt Colonel OB Graham, OC Fixed Defences Belfast Lough. (On 14 July 1940, the title of the 188<sup>th</sup> was changed to 525 (Antrim) Coast Regiment RA.) The Examination Service was established for Belfast Lough on 1 September 1939 with Grey Point as the examination battery. On the same day, the regular Army infantry platoon which had acted since 24 August as garrison for Grey Point Fort was replaced by a detachment of the National Defence Corps. (This detachment came from NDC companies which were raised between 1936 and 1939 by local TA Associations. Their role was the defence of vulnerable points and the personnel recruited all had previous war experience;

Defence against the threat from the air became a high priority, and the decision was taken to protect coastal defence guns by providing them with concrete overhead covers. Work started on constructing the concrete gun houses at Grey Point Fort and Kilroot during the winter of 1939/40 and was completed by June 1940. A rectangular-shaped concrete cover was built over each gun position to protect the guns in the immediate crew working area. The roof was 3 feet thick supported by concrete cross beams. The entrance to the underground magazine however was not protected and remained vulnerable. Instructions to the gun crew were passed from the Battery Observation Post by Tannoy installed in summer 1939; originally a subaltern stood half way between the guns to get the orders from the battery Commander in the Battery Observation Post. Additional accommodation was erected in summer 1939 including Barrack huts, an officer's mess, a Sergeants mess and two cook houses.

There were sleeping quarters for those manning the guns, although from April 1941 onwards, the West basement was used for WRNS personnel.

Over the years, the Fort had some distinguished visitors. Anthony Eden, then Secretary of State for War visited the Fort on 24 July 1940, accompanied by the Chief Controller of the ATS. This was immediately after the

completion of the anti-aircraft shields for the main guns. Just four days earlier the 'SS Troutpool', with a cargo of grain all the way from Argentina, hit a mine off Strickland's Glen and sank. Eleven people were killed. For some time her superstructure was still visible. (A Dutch coaster, the 'Santa Lucia', had also struck a mine in Belfast Lough and sank in November 1940.)

Anti-aircraft defence was provided by the deployment of one 3 inch anti-aircraft gun at each fort. The gun for Grey Point was mounted on the fairway of the second hole at Helen's Bay golf course. (There was also a single Lewis gun at the Fort itself.) On 1 February 1941, by which time two 6 inch guns were in place there, Orlock took over the examination battery role from Grey Point. There were three main raids by German bombers over Belfast – 7/8 April, 15/16 April and the largest raid on 5 May 1941.

Aware of the need to make manpower savings, Lieutenant-Colonel Graham was determined to use ATS personnel to operate rangefinders, range transmitters and searchlights. Supported by the senior ATS officer in Northern Ireland, who was his wife, he obtained the necessary War Office authority and the 525<sup>th</sup> Coast Regiment RA became the only coastal defence Regiment in the Army where female personnel were employed on operational roles.

By August 1943, the decision was made to put the guns at Grey Point into a state of care and maintenance. In December that year, the battery at Grey Point was placed on a care and maintenance basis, and the fort was now only used as the headquarters of the 525<sup>th</sup> (Antrim) Coast Regiment RA and as a naval signal station.

In spring 1944, in preparation for the D-Day landings, many naval ships of different nationalities, including three American battleships, the Arkansas, Nevada and Texas, were moored in Belfast Lough. It is estimated that the total number of officers and sailors on board was around 30,000. The Belfast Lough ships were a major part of the bombardment fleet in support of the landings and left on 3 June. General Eisenhower had earlier visited the fleet while it was off Bangor.

After the war, the two forts at Grey Point and Kilroot were retained in a state of care and maintenance under the supervision of 270th Independent Maintenance Battery RA while the War Office considered their future. In 1947, the new Coast Regiment, 429<sup>th</sup> (Antrim) Coast Regiment RA (TA) was formed, commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Shearer. His successor was Lieutenant-Colonel Bertram Cotton. This was manned entirely by volunteers. As the National Service Act did not apply to Northern Ireland there was however a small cadre of regular Army personnel, and the fort came under the Regiment which was part of the 150th Coast Brigade RA based in Scotland. The guns remained as they had been, though in 1954 mobile radar (AA No 3 Mark 2/7) was installed in both Grey Point and Kilroot. This was used to provide range and bearing to the target for the guns. Less than two years later, on 17<sup>th</sup> February 1956, the Ministry of Defence announced the end of coast artillery. The 429th was transferred to the newly-formed 146th Field Engineer Regiment RA (TA) in a ceremony in Ripon. This became in 1961 the 74<sup>th</sup> (Antrim Artillery) Engineer Regiment RE (Volunteers) and it was finally disbanded in 1998. The 270<sup>th</sup> was disbanded in January 1957.

On 26 May 1956 the hatted accommodation at the rear of Grey Point Fort was taken over by the headquarters of 39th Infantry Brigade, the Garrison Brigade in Northern Ireland. In September 1956, the saluting battery for 25 pounder guns was returned to Kinnegar, and later that month the Fort Record Books were dispatched to the War Office Records Centre. Queen's University OTC also used the site at weekends. A farewell ceremonial parade, inspected by the GOC, with the lowering of the union Jack, and a ceremonial march around the camp perimeter to the tune of Imperial Echoes, was held at "Grey Point Camp, Helen's Bay" on 24 March 1960. Spectators were invited to take tea in the NAAFI with the officers and soldiers on parade after the march past.