



Victorian Forts Network RESOURCES

Topic:	Topic
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Content:	Shifting Lobby Restoration at Steep Holm

1. Background

From PFS Fort Log Bristol 1

The island of Steep Holm was fortified in the 1860s, along with fortifications on Brean Down, Flat Holm and Lavernock Point to provide a defensive line across the Bristol Channel protecting the commercial ports of Bristol, Cardiff and Newport.

Steep Holm is an island of around 49 acres with an average height above sea level of about 200 feet. As its name suggests the island is bordered by steep cliffs with few landing places. In the 1865 the War Department leased seven parcels of land dotted around the coast of the Island to build a series of batteries.

Each of the batteries had its own underground magazine which stored both cartridges and filled shells. These magazines would have originally been fitted with various fixtures and fittings and would have included a "Shifting Lobby". This is a narrow room where soldiers changed out of their uniforms and boots. They donned clothing designed to minimise the risk of sparks and possible explosions such as leather slippers and cotton jackets and trousers.

2. Restoration Project

Steep Holm Trustee and Palmerston Forts Society member Mark Harris has shared with us details of an impressive restoration project that he has carried out on the cartridge stores and shifting lobby of one of the batteries on the island. Mark obtained the permission of the trustees to implement a planned restoration on the condition that costs were kept to a minimum - which in reality meant that most of the labour came from Mark himself.

The first task was detailed research into exactly what arrangements would originally have been in place in the battery. A primary source for this information were the experts and archives at the Palmerston Forts Society. This included field visits to Steep Holm and Fort Nelson.

The first task was to build a new door for the cartridge store from scratch. Fortunately, the original door frame was still in place and was in very good condition complete with hinges.

Mark describes his equipment as limited and his skills as "CSE Woodwork and Metalwork" but he clearly has great skill and patience as can be seen from the results. One challenge was to get timber in the correct Imperial sizes. Fortunately a local sawmill were able to do some custom work for him. A close match for the hinges was found on eBay.

Next were the benches. Two-inch thick timber was needed making it all a little more tricky to manufacture.

The final bit of joinery was the manufacture of coat pegs. Mark had one original peg and one original backboard but he didn't have a lathe to do the turning of the pegs. Mark was able to outsource this job to a company in Bridgewater who did a good job matching the new pegs to the original.

Then everything had to be painted. The original colour is called ochre red and a good match was found with the same name in the Dulux "Heritage" range. That made things easier but the paint was expensive.

eBay came up trumps again with a period solid brass rim lock (including internals) for the door. The key is not original but it looks right.

Quotes for a magazine lighting window frame in brass came in at £8000-£10,000. That was unaffordable so Mark honed his skills (and learnt new ones) and scratch built it with remarkable results.

You can get more details on the materials and techniques used by contacting Mark at Steep Holm or via: enquiries@palmerstonfortssociety.org.uk















