



In early 1857 with a heightening fear of an invasion from France, Inspector-General Fortifications John Fox Burgoyne instructed his assistant Major William Jervois to carry out a review of the defences of Portsmouth (which Burgoyne described as “*the principal naval arsenal in the Kingdom*”) and recommend improvements. In July 1857 Jervois submitted his initial report in which he detailed an estimated £487,000 worth of expenditure for the construction of new defences for Portsmouth. £210,000 of this figure was to be spent building three large forts to create the Gosport Advanced Line, linking Forts Gomer and Elson which were at that time under construction. The defensive line, on land already owned by the War Office, would close off the Gosport peninsular from an attack on the Dockyard from the west.

In this initial report each of the three new forts were of the same design being described as a detached bastion 400-yards wide with gaps of 600-yards between each fort (at that time the effective range of smooth bore artillery was 1,000-yards). The two northern forts were to mount twenty guns to the front and fourteen on each flank, that could cover the fronts of the adjacent forts as well as the land between. Beneath the main rampart was to be built the casemated barracks for about 400 men. In the middle of the straight gorge of each fort was to be built an oval shaped self-defensible Keep with more casemated barracks and roof-top earthworks to mount twelve more guns. The fort was to be surrounded by a wet ditch and defended by two caponiers.

Authority to proceed with these new forts was granted in December 1857. By which time Jervois had amended his plan for the Gosport forts to increase the accommodation to 450 men in each fort, he changed the ditch defence to a full caponier and two demi-caponiers, he also altered the alignment of the gorge to an obtuse angle so that gun fire from the Keeps could also cover the gap and rear of each adjacent fort. Finally the design of the Keeps was changed to a smaller circular design. Jervois also revised his estimated cost for the three forts up to £300,000 and the cost for the whole scheme had escalated from £487,000 to £640,000.

### Details

Type	Land Fort
Position	Gosport Advanced Line
National Grid Ref	SU 594011
Ditch	Wet
Barrack Accom.	Designed for 450 1869: 17 Officer, 351 Men 1893: 10 Officer, 218 Men
Total Guns	38 Guns and 4 mortars
Cost	£110,338-18-10

### History

Commenced	31 <sup>st</sup> March 1858
Completed	20 <sup>th</sup> December 1862
Armament	
1864	37 x 8-inch Shell Guns,
1886	16 x 7-inch RBL, 4 x 64pr RML, 13 x 8-inch Shell Guns, 4 x 13-inch mortar.
1891	15 x 7-inch RBL, 9 x 64pr RML, 2 x 64pr RML (training).
1898-1900	8 x 7-inch RBL, 9 x 64pr RML.
1902	2 x machine guns
Subsequent service	RA Depot, RFC, RAF and FAA Base, HMS Siskin, HMS Sultan.
Disposal	n/a
Later use	n/a

### Access

Postcode	PO12 3BD
Condition	Fair although parts derelict & overgrown
Access	Very limited
Website	n/a
Sources	National Archives, BL, HE Archives.
Last updated by	D. Williams 30/8/2024

The contract to clear the land was placed at the end of 1857 and in March 1858 the contractor William Piper was awarded the contract to build all three forts - Fort Rowner, Fort Brockhurst to the north and Fort Grange to the south (Portsmouth 1 & 3) - to the detailed designs drawn-up by Captain William Crossman RE. At Fort Rowner Piper took advantage of the local clay deposits and brought brick making machinery on to the site. This included two pug mills, brick making machines and over sixty brick moulding tables. The bricks would have been clamp fired and were most likely only suitable for the non-facing courses of the masonry structures. But with millions of bricks needed at the three forts it would have been a considerable saving.

In 1859 the defences were reviewed by a Royal Commission Committee appointed to consider the defences of the UK as a whole, in light of the new threat presented by longer ranges of rifled artillery. The committee recommended that three further forts should be built over two miles to the west of the three Gosport Advanced Line forts currently under construction as the current forts were not deemed to be far enough away from the dockyard to provide it with adequate protection from the rifled artillery of an enemy. The committee also recommended that the Gosport Advanced Line forts be connected by a permanent line of rampart & ditch defences. To save £350,000, two of the three proposed forts were removed from the programme (leaving just Fort Fareham - Portsmouth 14) during the first Parliamentary cost cutting review. This was closely followed by a saving of £20,000 by removing the planned permanent ditch & rampart link between the Advanced Line forts. Parliament finally approved the revised fortification programme in 1860.

As built Fort Rowner consisted internally of a six-sided trace, with four sides of casemated barracks and two sides of the rear gorge wall. The barracks were organised with the southern casemates mainly used as officer's accommodation, the two longer western sides providing the accommodation for the men, with the northern side being used to accommodate the senior NCO and senior 'field' officers. In the middle of the two sides forming the gorge was the circular Keep that was additionally protected by an internal wet ditch defended by rifle caponiers. The Keep was designed to mount ten guns on the roof including a gun in a Haxo casemate as well as a further ten guns both internally and externally within the casemates, with further accommodation, stores and ancillary casemates within. At each end of the gorge were small casemates providing ancillary rooms for the officers. In front of both the south & north ranges of casemates were provided nine casemated gun emplacements - for flank defence. At the two shoulders were located the two main magazines. The earth covering of the casemated barracks provided the rampart with a pair of single Haxo casemated gun positions on each of the flanks and room to mount a further thirty-one guns in prepared emplacements. To reach the ramparts, two large gun ramps were provided that also acted as traverses protecting the front of the accommodation casemates from enfilade fire. Surrounding the fort was a wet ditch 112 feet wide by 8 feet deep, defended by two demi-caponiers and a full caponier with positions for artillery and riflemen. To access the fort, three permanent iron bridges with drawbridges were provided - two accessing the fort through the Keep and the main access through the gorge on the northern side. Outside of the fort on the western side was built further earthwork defences of a Covered Way with a Redan in the centre that could be defended by infantry. Because the Covered Way did not extend to the rear, temporary bridges would be erected across the ditch, in time of need, to allow troops to exit Sally Ports either side of the main Caponier to reach these external defences.

Fort Rowner was constructed very quickly compared to many other land defences constructed at the same time. A construction and cost review committee in 1868 stated that the construction of the fort was not without problems. The same clay deposits exploited by William Piper had caused slippage problems during the fort's construction: In September 1861 cracks were identified in the Left Flank Casemates and also in the Keep Casemates, the former were easily repaired and the latter were rectified and reinforced with iron tie rods. In September 1862 and September 1863 sections of the escarp slumped into the ditch. Because the latter occurred after the contractor had handed the completed fort over to the Army, it had to be rectified by military labour at an additional cost to the Army of £1,561. The total actual cost of Fort Rowner was £110,388-18-10 10.4% over the 1858 revised estimate.

The fort was also armed quickly. By 1864 8-inch smooth bore Shell Guns had been installed: four in the rampart Haxo Casemates, eighteen in the Flanking Casemates, ten in the three Caponiers and five within the Keep external flanking casemates. In 1873 a single 8-inch Shell Gun and four 13-inch Mortars were still outstanding and no main armament gun emplacements had been constructed between the already prepared expense magazine traverses on the ramparts. The Haxo casemate on the Keep also remained empty and no emplacements had been formed on the Keep roof. By 1886 some of the armaments had been upgraded to more modern guns. The four rampart Haxo Casemates had been rearmed with 64-pr RML converted guns and the flanking casemates had been upgraded to mount sixteen 7-inch RBL guns. At this time the main ramparts still remained without any armaments, with only the four obsolete 13-inch Mortars positioned on the parade capable of engaging an enemy to the west. The 1886 review recommended that the faces on the ramparts be prepared with five new concrete emplacements to mount 64-pr RML converted guns on blocked-up traversing mountings. They also recommended that two 7-inch RBL guns be installed on the roof of the Keep to flank the gorge. In 1888 approval was given to install a see-saw search-light in a concrete emplacement on the external Redan, to allow the fort to fire at night. In November 1890 the Combined RE & RA Works Committee recommended that the flank defences of Fort Rowner be reduced by half (leaving eight 7-inch RBLs) and the Keep defences replaced with the installation of just two 0.45-inch machine guns. The armament returns show that the 7-inch RBL guns had been reduced to eight by 1898, but no machine guns had been provided. The fort was completely disarmed during 1901, although in 1902 two machine guns on infantry carriages had finally been delivered, but these were gone by 1904.

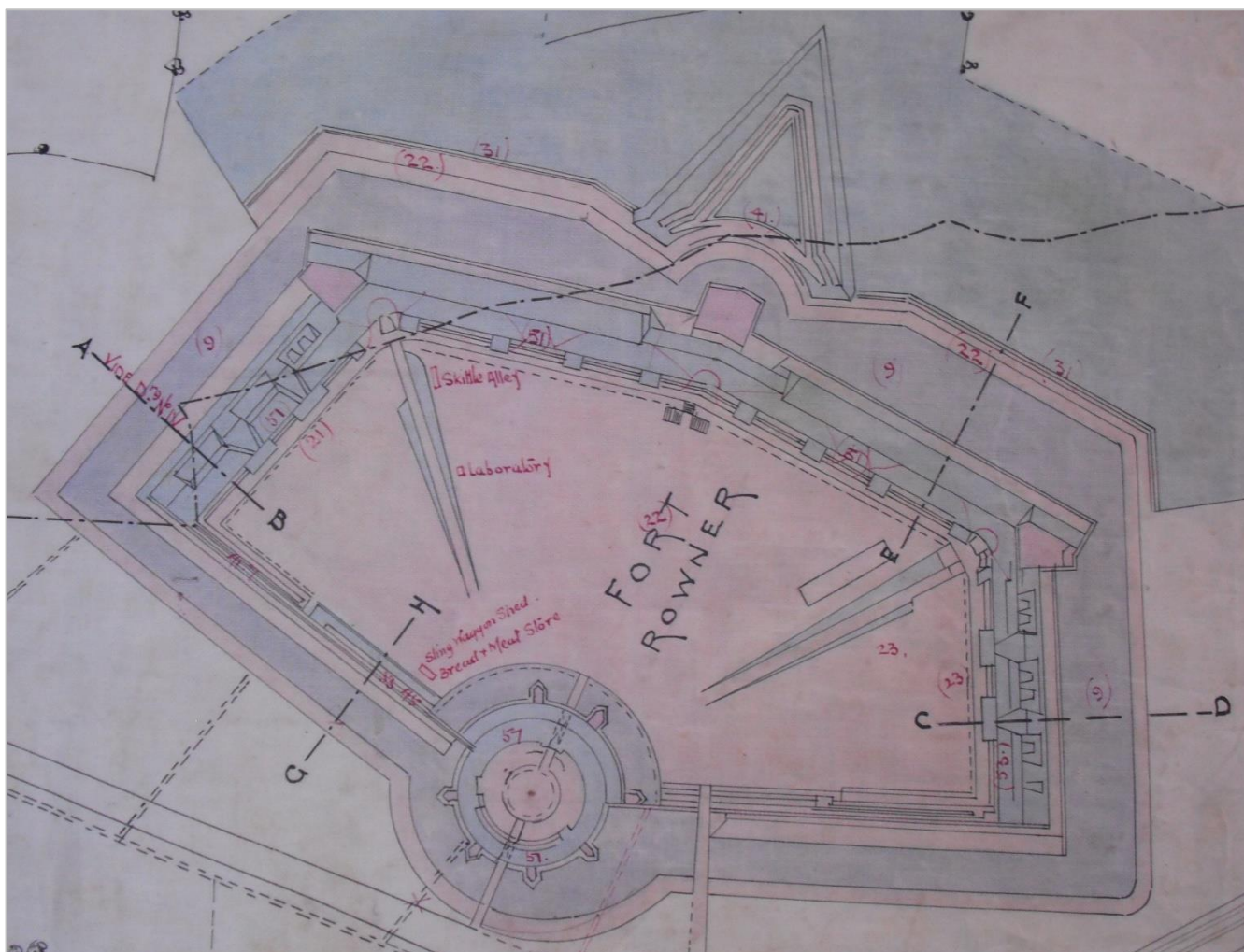
Fort Rowner served much of its life as an army barracks. The original accommodation provision was for two field officers (Major and above), fifteen other officers, seven sergeants and 344 other NCOs and men. The junior Officers were provided with their own kitchens, mess, ante room, billiard room and mess waiters and servants and were initially accommodated two to a casemate. The senior field officers had their own separate facilities and servants and also stabling for four horses. The men (13 men to a room) were provided with their own Cook House, Canteen, Recreation Room, Reading Room, Skittle Alley and School Rooms; together with an eight-bed hospital. From 1863 the fort was lit internally and externally by gas lighting supplied by the local gas company. Although the water supply was initially from wells, this proved inadequate and a water main was installed from the local town supply in 1865.

From 1882 the fort was used as the base for the Southern Division's Garrison Artillery Depot Company. The Depot Company processed new recruits into the Royal Artillery which accounts for the large amount of store rooms allocated to clothing stores. The fort would also have been used to conduct the basic training for the new recruits before they were posted to their Batteries. Fort Rowner was also used as the home of the Hampshire Artillery Militia. At some point in the late 1890s a drill hall was built near the northern gun ramp.

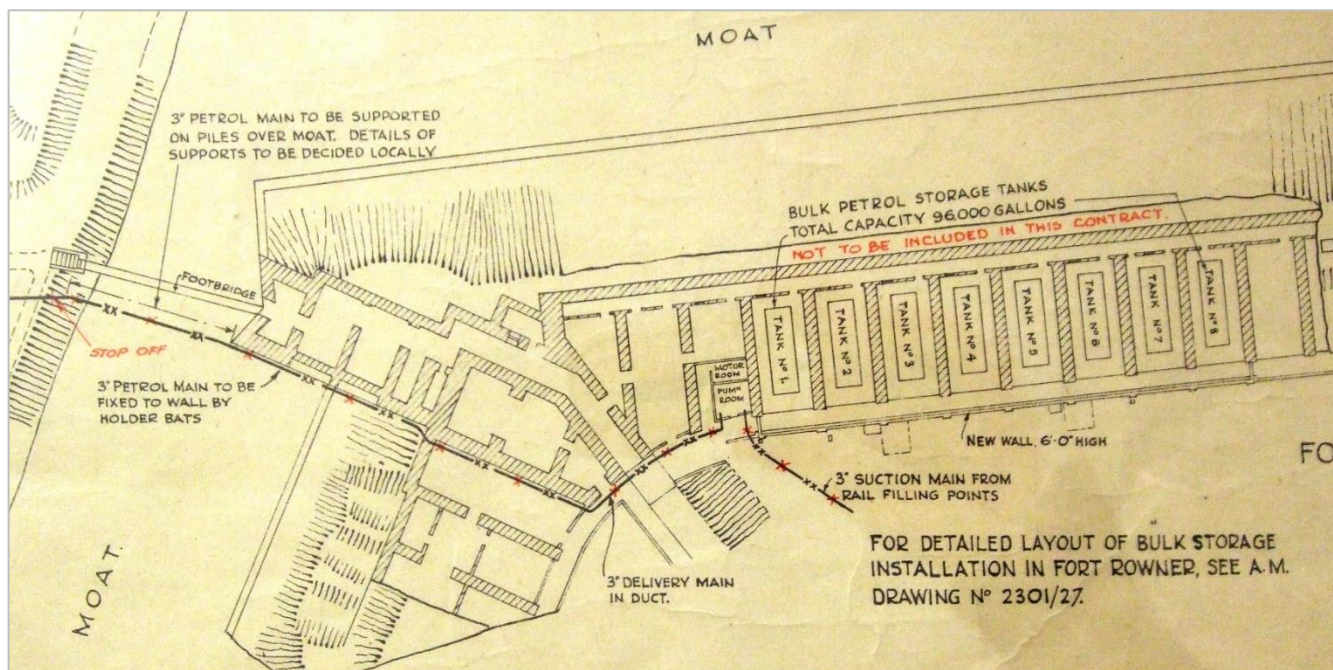
During the First World War an airfield was constructed to the west of Forts Grange and Rowner and was utilised by the Royal Flying Corps. To enable easier access from the fort, a footbridge was put across the moat near the southern caponier and later during the Second World War a roadway was created by punching through one of the officer's casemates and infilling the ditch. With the creation of the RAF in April 1918, the ownership of the fort and airfield passed to the RAF with the airfield being renamed to RAF Gosport. In 1928, nine of the casemates north of the southern caponier were converted into aviation fuel stores with a pump and fuel pipeline linking back to the railway sidings outside of the fort and another pipeline across the moat to the airfield. During the Second World War the fort was occupied by Fleet Air Arm 3502 Servicing Unit. In 1946 the fort then became part of HMS Siskin air base. In 1956 HMS Siskin became HMS Sultan, the Royal Naval marine engineering school. Fort Rowner served for a period as a 'Degaussing Establishment' and as offices for various MOD departments. In 1991 the degaussing establishment closed which marked the last active use of the fort.

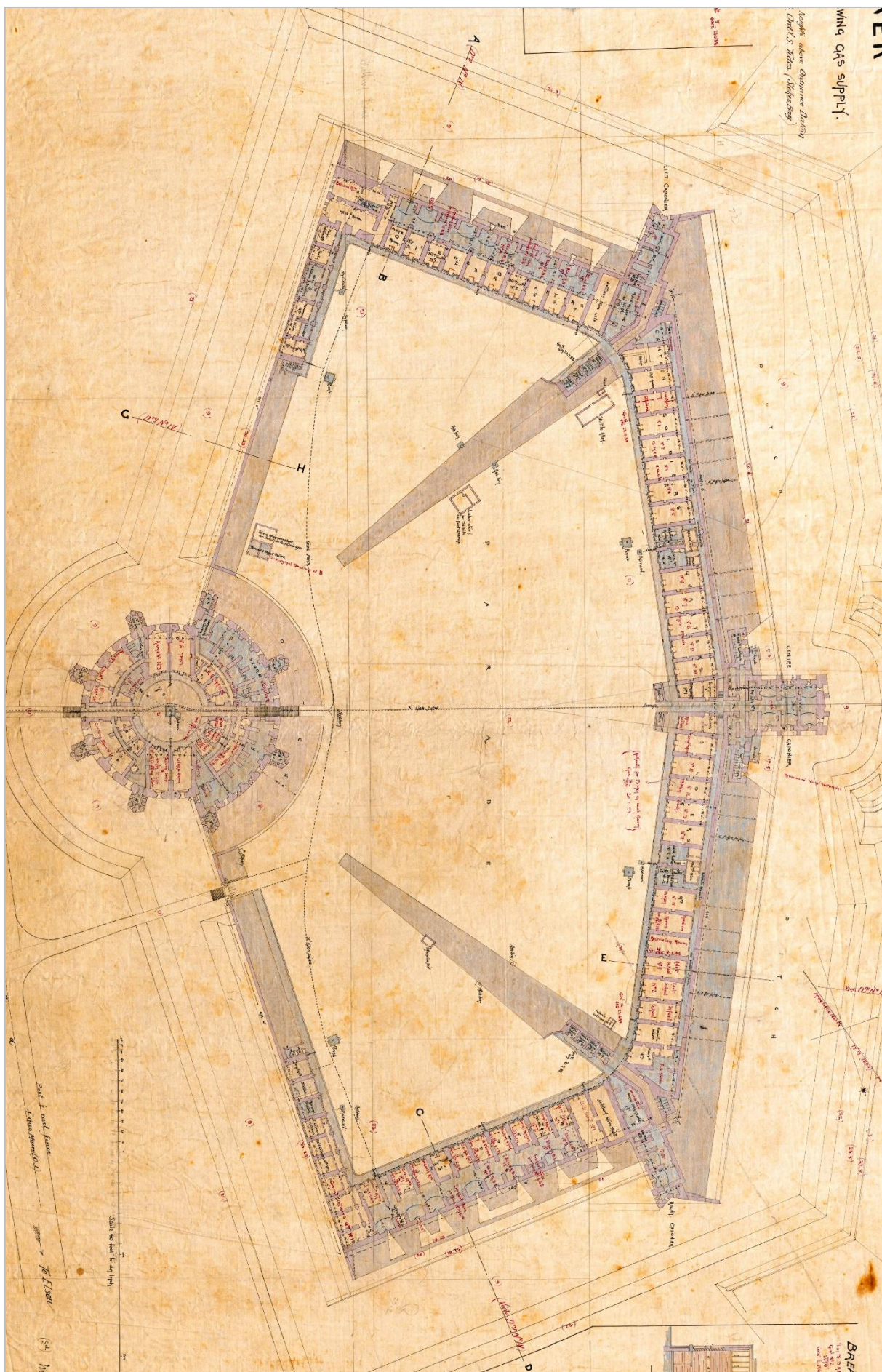
The Fort is now part of the larger site which forms the Naval/RAF engineering training establishment. Some of the rooms are used by various recreational clubs, the parade is a caravan storage site and the wet moat is used by the Royal Naval & Marines Fishing Club. The keep and the north & south flanking casemates are unused and in an overgrown & derelict state. At various times the undergrowth has been removed to reveal the forts

features, but the vegetation soon takes control of this minimal maintenance performed by the MoD. Fort Rowner's Keep is being restored/maintained by a small group of volunteers. The fort is occasionally open to the public on National Heritage open days.



Above: 1869 Plan corrected to 1893 (red) and drill hall added. (NA). Below: Air Ministry plan dated 1928 (HE Archive)





Room allocation plan 1869 corrected to 1893 (NA).