

FORT NELSON HOBART

Before federation, each of the six colonies organised their own defences under the greater protection of the Imperial Government in London.

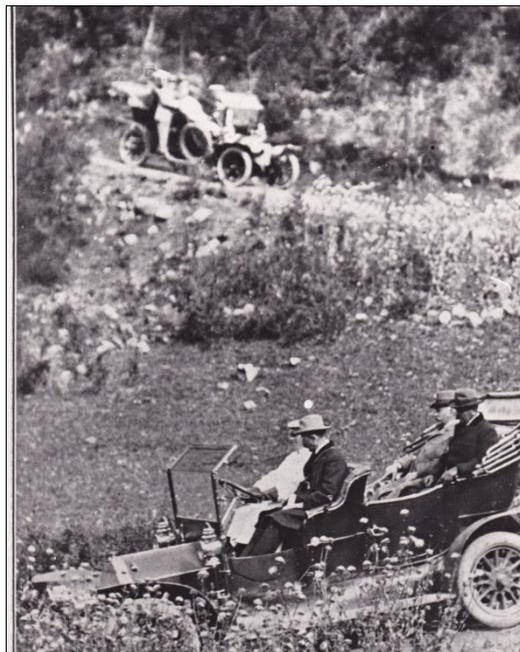
In 1870 British troops withdrew from Tasmania and as a result Tasmania had to organise its own defence as an independent colony.

When Australia federated, 1st January 1901, the Australian Government in Melbourne took over the responsibility of national defence. The Defence Acts of 1903 and 1904 coordinated defence policy for the six colonies, now states.

Tasmania, naturally, was part of the over all defence plan and a number of forts were constructed at the turn of the century to be part of this scheme.

The fort was inspected by Lord Kitchener who was invited to Australia to advise on our defences. The story goes that Kitchener was so impressed with the view he observed little other than that.

Pictured below: Lord Kitchener passenger, back seat returning with the official party after his inspection.



One such fort was Fort Nelson in the south of the island, located in the suburb of Lower Sandy Bay. This substantial fort was constructed in 1907 by the Commonwealth Government. Situated on Porter Hill (about 1,000ft high) it was built overlooking the River Derwent and was designed to play a major part in Hobart's protection. Below and not far from Fort Nelson, was the Alexandra Battery, which today is a reserve.

Fort Nelson was abandoned after World War II and its canons taken to Fort Direction further down the river, which is still occupied by the army. A number of years ago it was planned to

close Fort Direction, but because of public outcry in which I was involved, the Federal Government changed its mind.

Fort Nelson belonged to the Dorney family who possessed close to a hundred acres which included a commanding view, a large house and two cottages plus old buildings of the once fort.

When Edmund Dorney died, there were plans to put the whole hill up for a 78 lot housing subdivision. There was a major outcry and as a result there were a number of public meetings (The Mercury 17th October 2005 – January 18 2006). In 2006 the Hobart City Council (HCC) purchased the estate. While for the time being developers have been stood aside, there is no real future plan for the site which must be costing the HCC quite a bit of annual up-keep.

The fort had two large gun emplacements, two lots of shell stores, magazine room and dressing rooms. A lift in the shell stores took the shells to the guns. Building extensions to the fort continued over the next few decades which included other storage buildings, officer's quarters, barracks, water storage areas, social huts, latrines and caretaker's homes.



Barracks at Fort Nelson

During the late 1980s I rented one of the rear cottages for a period of about 18 months. The cottage was circular which followed the lines of the gun turret. The cottage steps would take me to a lower level to a number of large thick concrete dwellings, one of which was the ammunition/magazine storage area. It was here, as a self-employed journalist, I used as an office. The narrow road leading up to the premises came off Churchill Avenue. Naturally, there were electricity and telephone lines connected to the property. Mobile phones came just a little later.



A younger Reg Watson in his office at Fort Nelson

Besides the cottage I rented (at that time I was married with three children) there was another rented cottage and the large circular Dorney's house, which followed also the line of the gun turret. This was the second Dorney house, as the first, built in 1959 was burnt down in the 1967 fires.



Entrance to the Office

Even then, outside the buildings I have mentioned, there was little left. Their walls were (as said) of thick concrete and the windows use to contain bars, but only the imprints of these were visual. The buildings retained the heat in summer and in winter it was not as chilly as one would have suspected.



Part of the fort which contained my office

The fort was positioned so to blast any invader from the sea. The area has a superb view as far as the Zinc Works in the north, down to Storm Bay at the entrance of the River Derwent. It was so located that if was first fired upon by an enemy ship, the shells would fall harmlessly in the valley below.

In each of the buildings built on the gun emplacements, a sunken section is located. This was where the gun turned in its turret.

There were two six inch guns and contracted to do the work of transporting them in March 16, 1909 was Mr. J. P. Power of Sorell. He used an American manufactured Pitt Traction engine and succeeded in overcoming the many difficulties of the road and the steep gradient of the 1 to 7 to the fort. He landed his final load on the morning of April 8 1909. The total weight of the guns, mounting and accessories was a little short of 50 tons.

The guns were Russian MK VII Rifled, Breech loading. Length 23 feet and weighted 7 and a quarter tons. Projectile weight: 100 lbs. Muzzle velocity: 2,439 feet per second. Firing weight: 6 rounds per minute.



Guns being hauled to the summit

There were practise times for the artillery. On such occasions a red flag was flown from the flagstaff. Shipping were warned to be one mile to the right and left from the line of fire for a distance of 10,000 yards from the battery. (Mercury 31/Jan/1934 P.4)

Fort Nelson should not be confused with the other forts and batteries scattered around the capital. The Bellerive Bluff fort was built during the Russian scare of the late 19th century, while the other forts were from earlier colonial days. Forts such as Fort Pierson at Tinder-Box were constructed during the Second World War and Fort Direction in 1937.

Today aerial bombing and missiles would make the Port Hill fort useless and perhaps that is why it was closed in 1946. It did at the time play a major role in the overall defence plans that the Commonwealth Government had for Tasmania.

It is a steep climb to the top and many a-time I did so, after alighting from a bus. It must have been an ordeal to transport all the necessary equipment and building material to the summit, but succeed they did and Fort Nelson was the result of their efforts.

To construct the fort there must have been massive blasting of the huge rocks and boulders that are in the area. Now it is all part of history, a history that is somewhat neglected and therefore little known.

Where once drills and orders were given, exercises undertaken and flags flown, there is now natural tranquillity, but 15 minutes by car from the city's heart. There were plans in 2016 for the HCC to open up Dorney's house for public use, but I am not aware anything has happened.

Edmund Dorney, the owner and designer, was a well known architect in Hobart. He was once a prisoner of the Japanese during World War Two and escaped from his captivity. I once did an article on his war experiences which was published in a major magazine. The house is often cited as a leading example of architect. On who frequented the house, I saw it had major flaws. In essence, while it looked marvellous, it was not all practical. For instance it was open planned and warming the house was a nightmare. As an example, Mr and Mrs Dorney lived in small a curtained off corner of the house, while the rest lay dormant. Bedrooms led off this massive open-planned area and while it looked spectacular, it did not work.

The fort remains dormant in 2021. The site has so much potential for the benefit of the people of Tasmania, small business people and not for large, overseas developers. For instance the site of the large Dorney house would be an ideal restaurant. The military remains a great asset for visitations. The bush great for walkers. The site is perfect for musical evenings, but please, not rock its noise would destroy the peaceful atmosphere. We must preserve it and it can be sensibly used. I am concerned that as nothing has been done and there are no plans to do so, will it eventually fall into greedy development hands?