

The Spring

Self-led Heritage Walk: A Time of War – a walk around Sinah Common

Our heritage walks are a chance to discover evidence of the past in the modern landscape and, by providing a little explanation and interpretation, enable you to understand what you are looking at – all while enjoying a healthy walk!

This is a circular walk of just over 3 miles that should take around 90 minutes to complete.

Directions are provided together with some information at key points.

The walk starts and finishes at the free car park by the Sinah Common Heavy Anti-Aircraft site on Ferry Road, Hayling Island (PO11 0BY). The car park is a few hundred metres beyond Hayling Golf Club and around 100 metres before Sinah Warren holiday village.

Please note that some areas of the walk are uneven and overgrown so appropriate clothing and footwear is required.

The following information was researched by Barbara Howard and Christine Cope and compiled by Nigel Brown.

Start at Sinah Common Heavy Anti-Aircraft site on Ferry Road, Hayling Island (PO11 0BY)

1 - Hayling Anti-Aircraft site

The large open space in front of you formed part of a substantial Second World War Heavy Anti-Aircraft Battery. Its purpose was to destroy enemy aircraft but also to decoy them away from Portsmouth and its naval base. The site was part of a network of 'Q Sites', forming a ring around Portsmouth, controlled from a bunker on Portsdown Hill. Fires were lit within these sites in an attempt to lure German aircraft away from the city. The concrete roads and scattered concrete structures are what remain of the site. The overgrown brick building to your left, for example, was the control bunker. Other buildings housed a Sergeant's mess, a dining hall and two section huts.

Walk across the grass towards the small lake (created in 1938 by the golf club to supply water) and turn right, making your way to the grassy mounds.

2 - The Gun Emplacements

The battery housed three gun emplacements but only two have been preserved. The guns, placed within the protection of earth and concrete mounds, were capable of firing 8-10 rounds a minute to a height of six miles. The emplacement nearer to the lake contains a memorial plaque to James Bardoes, James Collingbrie, Reginald Knight, James Powel and Leonard Ward, gunners from the 219th Battery Anti Aircraft regiment who lost their lives defending Portsmouth.

They were killed on the night of 17th April, 1941 when over 140 German aircraft attacked Portsmouth. Sadly, 30 bombs dropped directly on the Sinah Decoy site, which was completely flattened. 30 military staff on site were also injured. The air raid caused widespread destruction across south Hayling, with severe damage to shops and houses. The United Reformed Church at the end of Hollow Lane was demolished.

The guns at Sinah were out of action for 6 months. But Sinah was a successful decoy site and was attacked more than 700 times by 1944. Despite this, casualties on Hayling Island were light with 9 civilians killed. By contrast, Portsmouth sustained 3,436 casualties in total with the raid on April 17th killing 1,000 military personnel and civilians.

Now walk to Ferry Road, turn left and walk west towards Portsmouth. Pause when you reach the large area of sea and mud to the right of the road. Follow the small path along the grass verge, some on road walking is required.

3 - Ferry Road

The derelict white-painted building that you have just passed on the right hand side of the road was the site Hayling's first pub ! The Norfolk was established in 1776 or earlier. One of the licensees – a Mr George Spraggs – was also the green keeper at Hayling Golf Club and accounts suggest he was an excellent golfer.

The large bay in front of you is known as The Kench. This is now a locally managed nature reserve but was formerly an area where salting animal skins and fish occurred. The word "kench" refers to a container used for salting of meat and fish.

In 1855, an extension of the Hayling Billy Line to the ferry was proposed. Work started on creating a high shingle embankment for the tracks, but plans were cancelled as the shingle kept washing away in high tides and storms. You may be able to see remains of this bank if the tide is low.

Depending on the season you may see flocks of Brent geese and other sea birds here. There are also clumps of Scurvy grass, so called because sailors would eat it as a prevention and cure for Vitamin C deficiency (which caused Scurvy).

Now continue west along Ferry Road and turn right opposite the pub toward the pontoon and pause here.

4 - Mulberry harbour section

The pontoon in front of you forms the arrival and departure site for the passenger ferry to Eastney. A ferry has operated here since 1901 and started life as a large rowing boat.

To the west you will see the Spinnaker tower in Portsmouth and, looking northwards, you can see a Mulberry Harbour section, abandoned within Langstone harbour. This section broke during construction and was towed and left here.

The Mulberry Harbours were designed to allow rapid off-loading of cargo during the Allied invasion of France, commencing on 6th June 1944. The Dieppe raid in 1942 had proved that attempting to capture heavily-defended ports on the French coast might prove disastrous. However, a temporary harbour, that could be towed into position, might allow cargo to be unloaded on to beaches.

Now walk south, along the beach (or path above the beach if the tide is high) toward the harbour entrance. Pause at the end of the concrete walllike structure fronting the beach, around 400 metres beyond the café kiosk.

5 - Mulberry harbour construction site

These concrete remains mark the site where 164 sections of the Mulberry harbour were built. Mr Travis, a local contractor, employed 600 men to construct what were known as 'Phoenix sections'. Each was 60 metres long, 18 metres high and weighed more than 600 tons. When sections were completed, they were towed to Selsey and were temporarily sunk to hide them from the enemy. When the invasion commenced they were floated across the Channel and used at the Arromanches beach landings. Other units were made separately around southern England and the Thames Estuary.

'Mulberry' is simply a codename for the harbour – part of the secrecy that surrounded the whole of the Normandy landings. Component parts of the harbour were also given code-names – the floating pier and roadway sections were called whales and beetles, for example, and the pier-head parts were known as spuds.

Two harbours were constructed on the coast of Normandy – Mulberry A (on Omaha beach) and Mulberry B (on Gold beach). However, due to incredibly bad luck, a huge storm hit Omaha beach on 19th June, just a day after the harbour was fully installed, destroying Mulberry A. The second harbour survived, however, was used for 10 months and helped land 2.5 million soldiers, 500,000 vehicles and 4 million tons of equipment.

Now walk south along the beach or path above, toward the harbour entrance and stop at the headland when you have good views down the Solent.

6 - The Solent

You are now standing at the narrow harbour entrance. Tides are extremely strong here as the 5,000 acres of the harbour fill and empty twice every day.

As you survey the Solent and the wider Portsmouth area you are looking at a landscape that has been heavily militarised through history. The presence of a sheltered, deep-water port at Portsmouth led to the establishment of a naval base. It was the Romans who established the first naval base, in the third century AD. The Portus Adurni (at the site now known as Porchester castle) was one of a chain of shore forts. Its walls are still standing 1,700 years later ! The first dock at Portsmouth was constructed in 1212, under King John. Henry VIII then arranged for massive fortifications to be constructed to protect the growing dockyard.

An observer standing here might have seen Roman warships sailing up to Porchester, having seen off Saxon raiders, or, in 1338, a French fleet sailing toward Portsmouth and smoke rising as the attackers burnt the town down. In August 1415, the observer might have seen the vessels of Henry V's fleet, sailing out of Portsmouth and towards Agincourt. In 1545, the watcher may have seen the Mary Rose capsizing as she sailed out to meet another French fleet or, later, ships of the Spanish Armada anchored off the Isle of Wight as they fled east along the channel.

Looking out to the Solent you may be able to see three Palmerston forts, constructed at huge cost in the 1880s to guard Portsmouth. Turning north you may be able to see other forts on the top of Portsdown hill, from where guns faced out to sea. These fortifications, built in response to fears of French attack, were never used in anger and were, later, termed 'Palmerston follies'. On the other side of the harbour entrance, at Eastney, was the Fraser Range, a navy gunnery school. For many years the guns were fired three times a week, for one hour, often shooting at a target dragged along by a light aircraft ! 180 officers and men were stationed here. The school closed in 1980. Nearby stands Fort Cumberland, built in 1747 to defend Langstone. It now houses a Centre for Marine archaeology. Further east, Thorney Island served as an airbase from 1938 to 1976. The sound of Hercules aircraft engines being tested at night could be heard across the Hayling for many years.

Now walk along the beach as it turns eastwards until you arrive at the east end of Hayling golf course (established in 1883 by the Sandeman family, famous for their importation of port and wine). Take the path inland, past the large, art deco-style, clubhouse and by the side of the fence until you reach ferry road. Turn left here and cross the golf club entrance road, head into the woodland and follow the track, in around 100 metres you will be back at your start point!