Naval & Garrison Towns

Plymouth is possibly unique in the UK in that, at one time, it had all four armed forces stationed in the City, the Royal Navy, the Army, the Royal Marines and the Royal Air Force. The earliest reference to Plymouth’s military history is in 1287 when Edward I used the port as the assembly point for his fleet to carry an army to France. Plymouth Castle was built in the early 1400s. A series of gun platforms and block houses had been added along the waterfront by 1540. Drake’s Hoe Fort of the 1590s was largely replaced by the Royal Citadel after 1665. Across the mouth of the Plym, Mount Batten Tower probably dates from about 1650.

The Naval Dockyard on the River Tamar at Plymouth Dock, later renamed Devonport, was developed from the 1690s. It had its own defences, mostly constructed in the second half of the 18th century. The Plymouth Division of Marines was established in 1755 with the Marine Barracks at Stonehouse being opened in 1783. Much later, in 1916-7, the Royal Naval Air Service became established at Mount Batten and operated seaplanes and flying boats from the Cattewater. This, in turn, became RAF Mount Batten.

The strategic position of Plymouth made it an appropriate location for permanent military establishments including the Royal Citadel and the Naval Dockyard. Further fortifications, victualling facilities, barrack blocks for the men and military hospitals followed; these included the Royal Naval Hospital, the extended Royal Marine Barracks and Royal William Yard, all in Stonehouse. Devonport had the Dock Lines and their associated barracks, plus the Military Hospital. The Dockyard itself steadily developed to the north as far as Weston Mill, with munitions depots beyond at Bull Point, Kinterbury Creek and, eventually, Ernesettle. A chain of mid nineteenth century Victorian fortifications eventually extended from Fort Staddon and The Laira to the River Tamar.

Military Establishment Boundary Stones

Most of the military establishments within the City of Plymouth had their own set of boundary markers. When exactly these were installed is now unclear, but most surviving stones are of nineteenth century date, with some perhaps dating from the late eighteenth century. A notable exception is the Royal Naval Hospital, Stonehouse, completed in 1762. Like many other military establishments, it has a high perimeter wall but there is not a single stone to demark its boundary.

There also seems to have been no attempt to demark newly acquired sites during the 20th century; for example at RAF Mount Batten, established after 1916, or the Royal Naval Armaments Depot at Ernesettle, established in 1926. The Ministry of Defence, established in 1964, erected some markers, but these generally appear to have replaced earlier and missing Admiralty or War Department stones.
Types & Style

The style of engraving on the stones and bollards varies considerably depending on who authorised their installation and where they were located. Possibly the earliest surviving military stones are the ones set into the wall of Richmond Walk, Devonport, built around 1795. The stones bear the characters B↑S with a number or number and letter underneath. An example is stone WDDL 8N (see right). The Government Broad Arrow is the only indication that this is a War Department stone.

Rather simply inscribed at the outset, the marked WD stones did improve a little. The ones at the Military Hospital, dating from 1796, have a W↑D with N○ underneath or alongside, such as N○I (see WDMH 1 pictured left).

The Admiralty however opted for a far more elaborate engraving, but with different variations being used from one location to another. For example, some carried a large A, for Admiralty; whilst others carried the Government Broad Arrow ↑, but in a variety of styles. Nearly all carry a fouled anchor, although the direction of the fouling varies and the anchor can be displayed at different angles; some vertical, some inclined to the right or left, some horizontal. Most Admiralty stones are also numbered (see Ad Turnchapel 6 right).

The Ministry of Defence was established in 1946 and finally took control of the armed services in 1964. The standard pattern boundary marker of this period was made of concrete, with M.O.D. and a number cut, or more likely cast, into the front face as at MODDL 7 (see left). In some locations an effort was made to make them look more distinctive.

Generally, each establishment had its own circuit of stones. For example the area of the Royal Marine Barracks to the south of the original barrack blocks, had just six stones. In contrast, Devonport Lines had over one hundred. The chain of Palmerston Forts, along the then northern outskirts of the Three Towns, had a total of over two hundred and sixty stones. These defences were all interconnected by the associated military road which runs from Plymouth Road, via Laira Battery and Efford Fort, and then becomes Fort Austin Avenue and Crownhill Road to Ernesettle.
Stones at Risk

With the change in the technology of warfare, many of the earlier military establishments were closed down and the land disposed of. When the Palmerston Forts were built as a new circuit of defences for the Devonport Dockyard and the ‘Three Towns’, the Devonport Lines became redundant. The process of abandonment of military establishments has accelerated following the end of Second World War. Many of the green-field areas between the northern forts and batteries were sold for housing. As the dwellings went up and the access roads were improved, many of the military marker stones came under threat and disappeared.

Since the early 1990s, the military have withdrawn from a number of other establishments and areas across the City, including Western King and the Royal William Yard at Stonehouse, Mount Wise, Devonport and Mount Batten. More recently, there have been changes in ownership in the South Yard at Devonport, new developments at Bull Point and, in 2013, the military pulled out of Turnchapel Wharf. A change of ownership, when coupled to new development, is always likely to increase the threat to any surviving boundary stones.