

Fort Scratchley *An Historical Chronicle*

The feature on the southern shore at the entrance to Newcastle Harbour and the Hunter River in 2005 is commonly referred to as Fort Scratchley. In earlier days it was known at various times as Braithwaite's Head, Signal Hill and Captain Allen's Hill.

During the 19th century coal was mined under the hill. It was the site where signals were provided for mariners. Guns were sited there to protect the entrance to Newcastle Harbour. With Britain at war with Russia, it was determined that there was a requirement for permanent fortifications. This resulted in the building of Fort Scratchley.

Over the years, there have been many upgrades of the weapons and buildings at Fort Scratchley with a military presence there until 1972.

During World War II on 8 June 1942 a Japanese submarine shelled Newcastle from Stockton Bight and fire was returned from the guns at Fort Scratchley. This is the only recorded occasion when guns on Australian soil have engaged an enemy vessel in time of war.

Fort Scratchley was last occupied by a military unit in 1972. Since 1978, Fort Scratchley has been used as an historical and tourist site.

In 2004, the site was closed to the public pending major restoration works. On completion the Federal Government will hand title over to the City of Newcastle Council.

1797 Coal was discovered at Newcastle in Braithwaite's Head (Fort Scratchley), leading to the setting up of a convict settlement in 1804 to mine coal.

1804 A coal fired beacon was set up on the Hill as a signal for mariners.

1855 Local citizens formed the Newcastle Volunteer Rifle and Artillery Corps as local fears grow as a result of the war which the British were fighting against Russia in the Crimea.

1866 The Newcastle Volunteer Artillery got two, 32 Pounder (pdr) Smooth Bore Muzzle Loader (S.B.) Guns which were placed in earthwork emplacements on Captain Allen's Hill (later Fort Scratchley) to protect the Newcastle Harbour entrance.

1874 Two, 68 pounder smooth bore guns replaced the earlier 32 pounders on Captain Allen's Hill to defence the entrance to the Harbour.

1877 War with Russia appeared certain, so four 80 pounder Rifled Muzzle Loading (R.M.L.) guns were sent to Newcastle to be mounted in earthwork emplacements as an emergency measure. Major General William Jervois and Lieutenant Colonel Peter Scratchley, Royal Engineers, visited Newcastle to inspect possible sites for permanent fortifications to protect the Coaling Station and Harbour Facilities at Newcastle. The preliminary reports were submitted to the New South Wales Parliament and set out what was to become Fort Scratchley to be built on Allen's Hill (Fort Scratchley).

1878 The first plans for the fort were completed.

1880 Plans, drawn up by Mr G Morrell of the Colonial Architect's Department, were approved by Major General Jervois and Lieutenant Colonel Scratchley. The construction contract was signed by James Russell in December.

1881-2 Construction of the fort began in 1881. The gun emplacements and underground powder magazines and shell stores were built, with the last of the main, 9 inch R.M.L. guns installed on 3rd April 1882. Newcastle was then defended by a battery of three, 9 inch R.M.L. Guns mounted "en barbette" to cover the seaward approaches to the port, and three, 80 pounder R.M.L. Guns protecting the harbour entrance from the safety of an underground Casemate Battery. The fourth 80 pounder R.M.L. gun covered the inner harbour and the approaches to the city down the river.

1885-6 The Barracks Buildings, Commandant's Quarters, Dry Ditch and Defensive Wall were constructed, providing protection from enemy landing parties assaulting the fort from the landward side. The fort was named Fort Scratchley after Peter Scratchley's untimely death in New Guinea from Malaria.

1888 New technology resulted in plans to modernize Fort Scratchley with new guns.

1888-94 The three old 9 inch R.M.L. Guns were progressively replaced with 6 inch Breech Loading (B.L.) Guns on Hydro-Pneumatic (H.P.) "Disappearing" mountings. An additional 8 inch B.L. Gun, also on a Disappearing mounting, was added to further increase the fire-power at the fort. A single 1.5 inch 'Nordenfelt' Quick Firing (Q.F.) gun was mounted above the Casemate Battery to counter any attacks by Torpedo Boats which were coming into service with foreign navies.

1898 The three obsolete 80 pounder R.M.L. Guns in the Casemate Battery were replaced with three 1.5 inch Nordenfelt Q.F. Guns.

1907 The last 80 pounder R.M.L. gun was removed from the western barbette.

1910-1 One 1.5 inch Nordenfelt gun was removed and the emplacement was converted to a magazine. The 8 inch and one 6 inch disappearing guns were removed. Two new 6 inch Mark VII B.L. Guns on central pivot mountings replaced the Disappearing guns as the main armament at the Fort.

1914 A new Battery Observation Post (B.O.P.) was built behind the new guns to house a range-finder and command centre for the fort.

1918 The two remaining Nordenfelt guns were removed and sent to Sydney.

1937 The last two disappearing guns were removed from the fort.

1939 The Battery Observation Post had another level added to improve the accuracy of the range-finder and to allow a better view of the seaward approaches to the port.

1942 8th June, the Japanese Submarine I-21 starts shelling Newcastle at 2.17 am. The fort fires at the submarine forcing the Japanese to break off their attack. As a result of the attack, concrete blast walls are added to protect the rear of the main gun emplacements.

1962 In March 1962 the last practice shoot was fired from the Mark VII 6 inch guns.

1965 The 6 inch guns were relocated to a park on near-by Obelisk Hill as memorials to gunners past and present. The unit at the fort is re-equipped with 40 mm 'Bofors' Light Anti-Aircraft Guns.

1972 A Citizen Military Force Artillery Unit, 113 Battery was the last Army unit to occupy the fort. It was relocated to Adamstown Army Depot, ending over 100 years of military use of the site.

1977 The Newcastle Maritime Museum Society moved into Fort Scratchley.

1978 The 6 inch guns were returned from Obelisk Hill to Fort Scratchley. The Newcastle City Council formed a Local Committee

1982 The Fort Scratchley Military Museum Society was formed and later became the Fort Scratchley Historical Society.

1985 One 1.5 inch Nordenfelt Gun was returned to Fort Scratchley.

1992 6 inch Mark VII BL guns fired for special events such as the Queen's Birthday, Australia Day, Mattara Festival, Anzac Day and others.

2002 Dedication of Fort Scratchley to the serving and ex service men and women of Australia by the The Prime Minister, The Honorable John Howard, MP.

2004 Fort Scratchley had been open to the public for some years. This included access to the tunnels. It was closed to the public for restoration by the Commonwealth Government in April when a grant of \$5.6 million had been made for restoration works. The Maritime Museum that had been located within Fort Scratchley for some years was relocated to the Honeysuckle area.

2005 Fort Scratchley was still closed to the public pending restoration. Unforeseen preliminary and decontamination works had resulted in a shortfall of funds.

2005 6 inch Mark VII BL guns were fired for special events such as the Queen's Birthday, Australia Day, Mattara Festival, Anzac Day, Reserve Forces Day and other occasions such as a welcome to passenger cruise vessels entering Newcastle Harbour.