

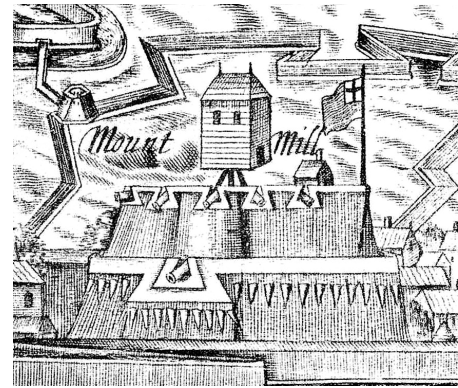
A TALE OF TWO FORTS – LONDON’S HYDE PARK AND ST. GEORGE’S FIELDS FORTS

In March 1661 the Park witnessed a muster of archers, delighting on-lookers with a display of shooting with the longbow. The following year, Charles again reviewed his troops including the Life Guards. Another review followed in July 1664 and the review of 1668 was in honour of the Duke of Monmouth at his appointment as Colonel of the Life Guards. The last Hyde Park review during the reign of Charles II took place in January 1682. In 1714 an encampment was constructed in the Park, apparently to show off the new regiments formed to participate in the War of Spanish Succession. A review in 1799 was reported by the *General Evening Post*,

So large a body of men thus standing forward to surround his Majesty’s person, and on the anniversary of his birth to manifest their resolution to maintain his rights as their own, was certainly the most superb spectacle.²³

To mark the coronation of Queen Victoria in 1838, a further review took place, this one attended by Marshall Soult in his position as ambassador extraordinary to London (the Duke of Wellington reputedly caught him by the arm and exclaimed ‘I have you at last!’)²⁴ By this time,

Figure 7.
A contemporary
impression of
Mount Mill
Fort.
(Harrington)



of course, the cavalry barracks had been established, although these were on the southern edge of Hyde Park, some distance to the west of the site of Hyde Park Fort.

From Hyde Park, the line of the fortifications continued southeastwards, with further forts or lesser features at Chelsea Turnpike and Tothill Fields before crossing the Thames at Vauxhall (was the river guarded by a boom or chain here?) South of the river, after Vauxhall Fort, the defences turned northeastwards before reaching, some 4.6km from Hyde Park, St George’s Fields Fort, the second of this paper’s two forts.

London has been fought over a number of times throughout the City’s history. Yet the most obscure attack



Figure 8. The remains of the defences in Hyde Park as they are today (looking south, towards Hyde Park Corner – Park Lane is to the left). (Photo: David Flintham)

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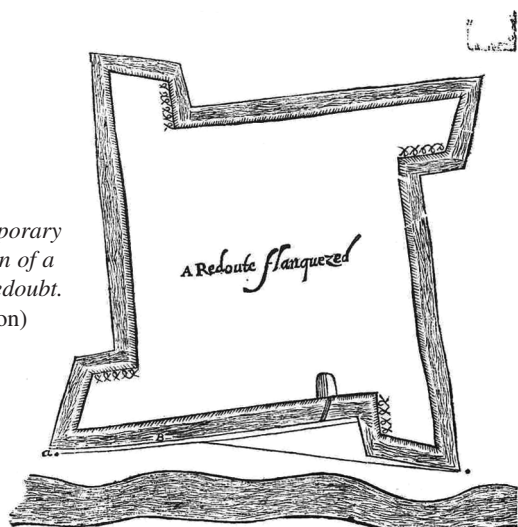
included an event that is recalled in the words of a very well known nursery rhyme – *London Bridge is Falling Down*. This takes as its origins Cnut's 1016 attack on London. But so well defended was London and particularly Southwark and the southern end of London Bridge, the Vikings had to come up with a clever strategy in order to take the City. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* says '[the Vikings] dug a great ditch on the south side and dragged their ships to the west side to the bridge, and afterwards diked the town around so that no one could get in or out and often attacked the town, and they [the English] resolutely withstood them.'²⁵

The land through which the Vikings dug their canal was wet and marshy and at one time covered with water at every high tide of the Thames. The Romans were only able to cross the area by building embanked roads. It is unknown when the area was first drained, but there are references in several parish records about taking measures to repair the banks of the various dykes and drainage ditches. Stow's *Survey* of 1555 describes flooding of the area following 'some great rains'. During the Civil War it is possible that the area was flooded yet again, as the Royalist newssheet, *Mercurius Aulicus* speaks of 'drawing the Thames about Lambeth and Southwark,'²⁶ which would suggest that the area was deliberately flooded for defensive purposes.

Of St. Georges Fields Fort, William Lithgow, in May 1643, said

And then I arrived at the Fort Royall in Georges' Field, which indeed of all the works I have as yet

Figure 9.
A contemporary
impression of a
flanked redoubt.
(Harrington)



If it be palliaded it is the stronger, the principall defence is the Flankes and the third part of the Breth-work, as by the two Lines, one drawn from A to B. the other from B to C. View the Figure.
The next discourse is the use of Artillery, and then after that the duties of Soldiers in Garrisons, shall bee plainly shewd.

made mention of, this is the only rarest and fairest, and contrived and reared after the moderne modell of an impregnant citadale, having foure large bulwarks, every one counterbanding another from flank to flank, and the foure intervening quarters are also interlaced with spacious and defensible midworks; the maine bosome of which, with the incumbent insides of the foure promontories, may easily containe three thousand men, the foure corners being destinated for twenty-foure cannon reall. The exterior works are not as yet accomplished, although fast advancing, but certainly they will be perfyted after the Londonian Forts, as I have newly rehearsed, neither are the trenches done, which are drawn along thence to the top of Southwark, called Nevington Fort.²⁷

St. Georges Fields Fort was built in the Spring of 1643 and was one of just six forts built south of the Thames, compared with 17 north of the river (indicating where Parliament felt the greatest threat to be from). It was undoubtedly a substantial structure, a fort with four half bulwarks (Figure 9), and armed with 24 cannon-royal. In terms of size, based upon the Rocque map (Figure 10), the approximate dimensions were 167m along its southern face, and a depth of 192m.

In 1647, following the Army's occupation of London, orders were given to slight and demolish the defences, a process that seems to have started by the end of September and largely completed by October. However, slighting did not mean complete levelling, but rather the destruction of parapets and the removal of the guns, which were sent to the Tower of London. As a result, traces of the defences could be seen for many years, indeed in some cases, centuries, after the Civil Wars.

In 1660, it was on St. Georges Fields that the Mayor and Aldermen of the City of London met Charles II on his approach to London at his Restoration. According to a contemporary account, tents were erected and a banquet held. Thomas Allen, Lord Mayor of London, knelt and handed the King the sword of the city and was knighted in return. Six years later, according to John Evelyn, the Fields became the temporary home to many of those who had lost their homes to the Great Fire of London.

Later that century, within the confines of the fort's remaining earth-works was built the Dog and Duck Inn. The Inn's original patrons were those who participated in the sport of duck hunting, before becoming a noted place

of amusement for the lower middle classes and ultimately ‘the riff-raff and scum of the town’. Such was its reputation (there are also accounts of it being a regular haunt of thieves) that ultimately magistrates refused to renew its licence and had the place closed down.

Early in the Eighteenth Century, Daniel Defoe described what remained of the defences south of the Thames in his *A Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain*.

from Vaux-Hall Turnpike, towards Newington, there are the remains of the old lines cast up in the times of the Rebellion, to fortify this side of the town; and at that corner was a very large bastion, or rather a fort, and such indeed they call it; which commanded all the pass on that side, and farther on, where the openings near St George’s Fields are, which they now call the Ducking-Pond, there was another. From hence they turned south east, and went to the windmill, at the end of Blackman-street, where they crossed the road, and going to the end of Kent-street, we see another great bastion; and then turning S.E. till they come to the end of Barnaby-street, or rather beyond, among the tanners, there you see another fort, so plain, and so undemolished, the grass growing now over the works, that it is as plain as it was, even when it was thrown down.²⁸

In 1780, St. Georges Fields was the rallying point for the anti-Catholic Gordon Rioters. It is with a degree of satisfaction to learn of the irony that the site where Lord George Gordon rallied has ‘No Popery’ rioters is now occupied by the mid-19th Century Catholic Cathedral of St. George.

Like Whitechapel Mount²⁹, the site of the fort in St Georges Field became the site of a hospital, in this instance, Bethlehem Hospital, which needed to move from its 17th Century home in Moorfields. Designed by James Lewis, building commenced in 1812, with new wings added in 1838. In the 20th century, following the Bethlem Royal Hospital relocation to Beckenham in Kent, the site became the property of Lord Rothermere, who had originally intended to demolish the building entirely in order to provide a public park in what was a severely overcrowded area of London.

Originating in March 1917, the National War Museum was opened in Crystal Palace in June 1920. Its remit expanded to become the Imperial War Museum, it moved

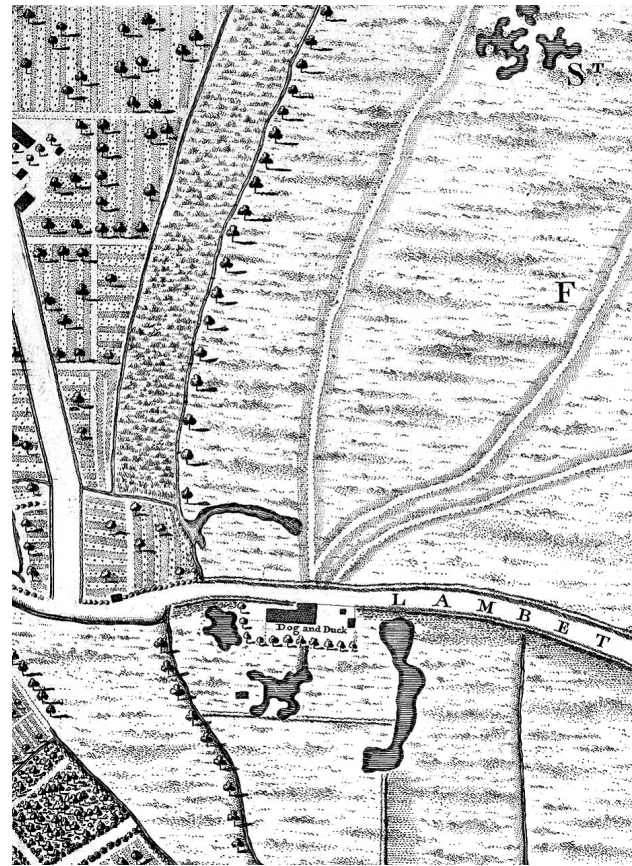


Figure 10. A extract from John Rocque's 1746 map showing the remains of the fort in St. Georges Fields.

to the Imperial Institute building in South Kensington in 1924, but by the 1930s, the site location had become too small and it was agreed to move the Museum to its current location (Figure 11). The central portion of the hospital building was retained while its two extensive wings were removed and the resulting space named Geraldine Mary Harmsworth Park, after Lord Rothermere's mother. Sir Martin Conway, the Museum's first Director-General, described the building as

...a fine building, really quite noble building, with a great portico, a distinguishing dome, and two great wings added to it for the accommodation of lunatics no longer required. This particular building can be made to contain our collection admirably, and we shall preserve from destruction quite a fine building which otherwise will disappear.

Sydney Smirke's 'distinguishing dome' had been added in 1846 and housed the hospital's chapel (and is now the museum's reading room). The museum was reopened by

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Figure 11. The site of St George's Fields fort today, looking south towards the Imperial War Museum. (Photo: David Flintham)

the Duke of York (later King George VI) in its new accommodation on 7 July 1936.

Given that the site of the fort is now occupied by the country's leading museum of military history (whilst a matter of conjecture, the actual site is probably just to the north of the museum building itself), it is surprising that the site of the fort is not commemorated in any way and there is nothing to inform the casual observer of its existence. However, as recently as 1974, surface features were still visible, so noted an enthusiastic archaeologist, David Sturdy.³⁰

Indeed, despite the length of the defences, they are commemorated in just one location – a plaque on the wall of Borough Police Station (Figure 12). Why this particular spot should be the location for this commemoration is something of a mystery given that the site is 500m inside the line of the defences. However, this particular mystery may be solved by reference to Thomas Allen's 1826 engraving of Canute's Trench (Figure 13) which gives the location of Newington Fort not at Elephant and Castle which is its accepted location, but at Stones End, a site which is just 60m away from the Police Station. Whilst the Stones End location is unlikely (it is not backed up by any other evidence, and such a location would require the line of the defences to dog-leg, and extend its frontage by an additional 300m), if Allen was the original reference when

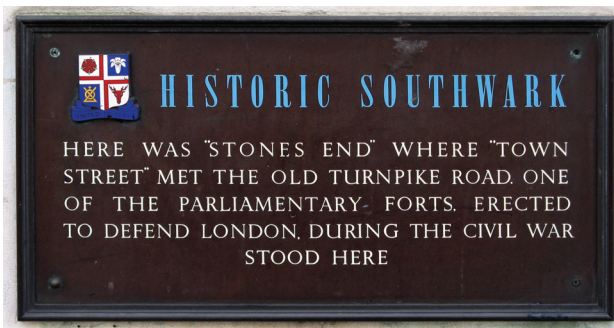


Figure 12. The only memorial to the defences is this one attached to the wall of Borough Police Station. This site, however, is some 500m inside the line of the defences. (Photo: David Flintham)

the plaque was located, it would at least suggest why it was located where it was.

Hyde Park and St. George's Fields forts are both typical examples of the forts constructed in the first year of the English Civil War to protect London. Since London was never attacked, how effective the defences would have been is a matter of pure conjecture. But to view London's defences from a purely military perspective misses the point – they were not constructed solely as a defence against Royalist attack. As well as their defensive function, they also assisted with internal security (Parliament could never be entirely sure that London's support was total, especially when the war was going badly), and as a result, formed a 'restricted zone'. The line of defences blocked the routes in and out of the Capital and those left open were guarded by works such as the forts at Hyde Park and

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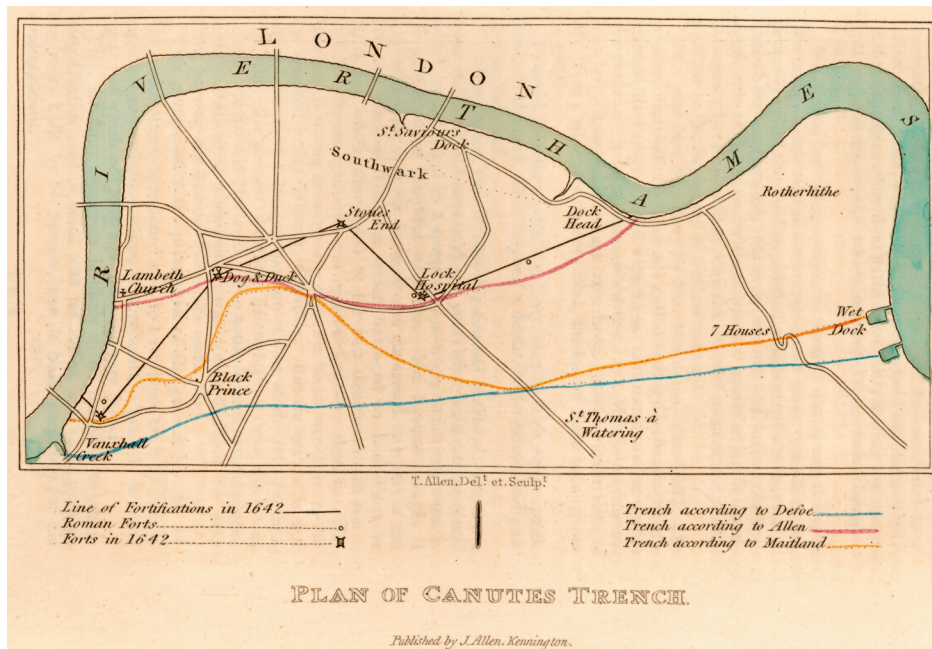


Figure 13. Canute's Trench, an engraving from Thomas Allen's 'History and Antiquities of the Parish of Lambeth'. The engraving shows the possible routes for the trench together with the line of the Civil War defences (compare this with that shown in the Vertue Plan). (By kind permission of Lambeth Archives, London Borough of Lambeth)

St. George's Fields. This enabled the passage of goods, livestock and people in and out of London to be controlled (and no doubt permitted the collection of any toils and duties). Importantly, the existence of the defences sent a message to the rest of the country (and to mainland Europe as well) that London was open for business and was a safe place to trade with. Finally, the defences defined London – in the words of William Lithgow 'London was never truly London till now; for now she sits like a noble lady upon a royall thron, securing all her encroaching pendicles under the wings of a motherly protection.'³¹

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Barren Rocks – Aden and Ascension Island: Two Volcanic Fortresses 1815–1945

Bill Clements

Introduction

Aden and Ascension Island have a number of factors in common, not least the fact that both are extinct volcanoes, rocky and barren and with very little water. Both aspired to varying degrees of importance as coaling stations for the Royal Navy and merchant vessels though with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1863 the importance of Ascension Island declined while that of Aden increased. Both Aden and Ascension achieved further strategic importance in the later years as both became relay stations for the Eastern Telegraph Company which linked London with India, South Africa and the Far East via its network of undersea cables.

From a defence point of view neither Aden nor Ascension came directly under the control of the War Office. Aden was a dependency of the Government of India until 1937 and in the years between the two World Wars the garrison was the responsibility of the Royal Air Force. Ascension Island, on the other hand, was a 'stone frigate' administered by the Admiralty but during the Second World War, from 1942 to 1945, responsibility for its defence passed to the United States Army.

This article describes the fortifications of these two colonies that were built during the period when the British Empire was at the height of its power and through two World Wars.

Aden

Introduction

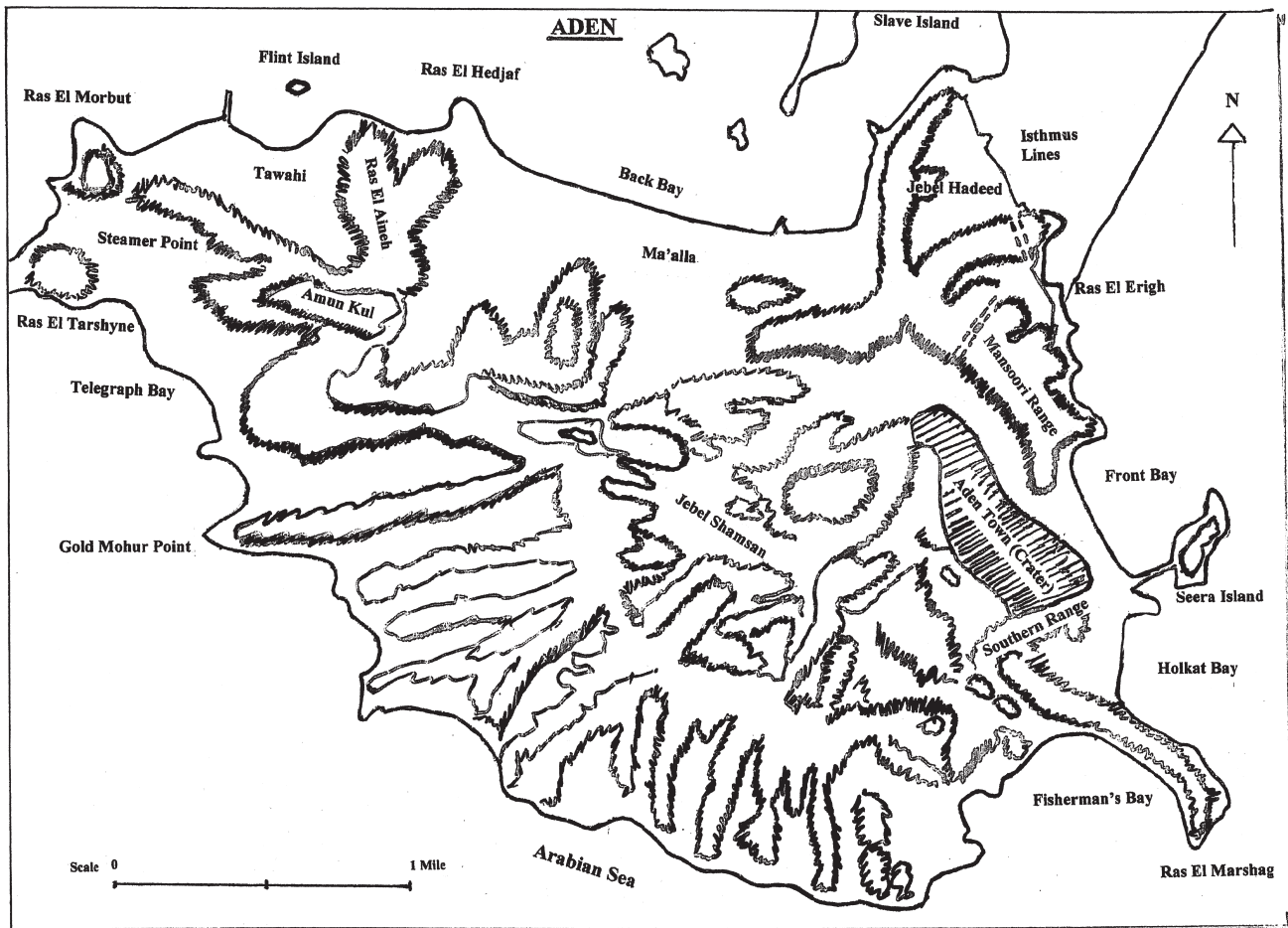
Aden in 1837 was a small settlement of 500 or so inhabitants, the remnants of a once flourishing city that had reached the peak of its prosperity in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Strategically sited at the entrance to the Red Sea the town of Aden is built on an old volcanic peninsula and has an area of 21 square miles (54.4 sq km), most of which is uninhabitable being precipitous hills, the

highest of which is Jebel Shamsan with a height of 1,175 feet (361 m). The peninsula is surrounded by the Arabian Sea to the east, west and south but to the north it is connected to the mainland by an isthmus one and a half miles (2.4 km) long and 1,350 yards (1,247 m) wide. On the eastern side of the peninsula and facing the sea there is a plain formed from the crater of an extinct volcano. The plain is three miles (4.8 km) in circumference and on it stands the modern town of Aden, sometimes known as 'Crater'. Not far offshore, opposite the town, is Seera Island, a triangular-shaped rock, 1,200 yards (1,107 m) long by 700 yards (646 m) wide and 400 feet (123 m) high at its highest point.

During the Middle Ages Aden had been a prosperous entrepot port, strongly fortified and ruled by Arab caliphs. Strong walls and towers had been built on the hills to protect the town from landward attack and these enabled the inhabitants to repel an attack by Portuguese forces under the command of Alfonso d'Albuquerque in 1513. However, after the capture of Aden by the Ottomans in 1538 the town's prosperity gradually declined. Although Aden remained under the titular sovereignty of the Ottomans for the next 300 years Turkish influence waned and the Arabian Peninsula gradually reverted to tribal control and Aden was actually governed by the sultans of various local tribes who warred amongst themselves for control.

British interest in Aden developed during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars with France at the end of the eighteenth and in the early years of the nineteenth centuries, when Napoleon Bonaparte invaded Egypt with the obvious intent of using that country as a stepping stone towards his eventual conquest of British India. A somewhat ineffectual treaty of commerce and friendship, ineffectual since there was little commerce with Aden at that time, was signed in 1798 between

BARREN ROCKS – ADEN AND ASCENSION ISLAND: TWO VOLCANIC FORTRESSES 1815–1945



Map of Aden. (Author)

Captain Sir Home Popham RN representing the British government and the Sultan of Aden with a view to restricting Napoleon's communication with Tippoo Sultan. In 1804 Lord George Anesley, Viscount Valencia, visited Aden on a voyage to India and Ceylon and reported to the Foreign Office that if the old fortifications were repaired and Seera Island garrisoned Aden would become 'the Gibraltar of the East'. The Foreign Office filed the report and quietly forgot about it!

By 1833, however, the political situation had changed once again with the advent of Mohammed Ali as Pasha of Egypt and ruler of Syria, the Hejaj and the Yemen. The British government fearing that Mohammed Ali, a great admirer of France, might permit the French to occupy Aden thus providing them with an important coaling station and control of the entrance to the Red Sea, now considered occupying the port to forestall the French. In 1837 a ship sailing under British colours was seized off Aden, plundered and its crew and passengers mistreated by the local inhabitants. An Indian Navy warship under the

command of Commander Stafford Haines IN was sent to investigate and the Bombay government used the incident to put pressure on the sultan to sign a treaty ceding Aden to Britain. After considerable negotiation the sultan eventually agreed but his son opposed the treaty and Commander Haines was forced to withdraw. The Bombay government, however, took the view that the treaty had been agreed and was legal so in January 1839 Commander Haines returned with two warships, HMS *Volage* and HMS *Cruizer* and a force of 800 troops and forcibly annexed the peninsula.

The Arab Fortifications of Aden

When the British arrived in 1839 the existing Arab fortifications were sited primarily to defend the town from attack from across the isthmus to the north and from across the peninsula to the west. The importance of the approach from the north lay in the fact that this was the only land route from the hinterland but, in addition, the main water supply from the north crossed the isthmus by

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means of a long aqueduct from Sheik Othman some nine miles (12.5 km) from Aden town and ending in a large tank at Jebel Hadeed. This tank was Aden's main water supply apart from a number of smaller tanks around Aden itself so its protection was a major factor in planning the defence of the town.

To defend the isthmus approach walls were built to close off the two valleys between Jebel Hadeed and Jebel al Akhdar across the isthmus. The western wall defended the tank at Jebel Hadeed while further round to the east, just past what the British called Front Bay, another wall ran along the line of the Jebel Manthar (or Southern Range) defending the town from the south east. On the other side of the town the approach from the west of the peninsula was across the rim of the crater north west of the town through a narrow pass now known as Main Pass. This pass had three lines of defences together with three gates and a number of guard forts and there were also walls and towers along the rim of the crater. The sea approach to the town from the east was defended primarily

by the island of Seera on top of which a castle was built and the mole that protected the harbour was defended by a tower and bastion.

The First British Defences

When the British annexed Aden most of the old defences were in ruins and the town was now little more than a fishing village. However, Aden had been annexed against the wishes of the sultan's son and his supporters and an immediate improvement in the defences was very necessary. The view taken by the military authorities in India was that considering the strength of the Royal Navy there was little threat to Aden from the navies of a European power. Aden, however, needed to be defended against attacks by native tribesmen across the isthmus. Lieutenant J. Western was the Executive Engineer attached to the new garrison and he inspected the old Arab defences and immediately recommended the repair of what he called the 'Turkish Wall' that defended the isthmus. In March 1839 Lieutenant Western was



Sketch of the Left Redoubt, Turkish Wall after the British occupation of Aden c.1844. (Author's collection)