

Mosman's 1801 Fort

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An address given at the ceremony to unveil a plaque at the site.

At times like this I think of Mosman as having more history than any other Australian suburb. If that seems too grand a claim, just consider the 1801 fort and what it brings to mind about the past. I am thinking of people associated with this part of Sydney like the Aboriginal leader Bungaree, whose clan was settled at Georges Heights by Governor Lachlan Macquarie in his well meant but unsuccessful attempt to make farmers out of them; like Macquarie himself, who visited their Mosman farm; like Matthew Flinders, who took Bungaree to sea with him; like whalers who brought their catches to Archibald Mosman's wharf in Mosman Bay; sealers who anchored in Chowder Bay; the crew of HMS Sirius, who spent six months in Mosman Bay while their flagship was being careened there; and finally, of course, the convicts who built this fort.

Rather than wait for today's opening, I had a sneak preview of the 1801 track last month. And that short walk was almost like being in Dr Who's tardis travelling back to when Sydney was thirteen years of age. Eighteen one was the first of three years during which convicts excavated and built Sydney's first outer fort. Known as the Georges Head Battery, it was not on Georges Head at all, but nearby on the Middle Head side of what would eventually be known as Obelisk Bay.

In March 1801 Governor King informed the Secretary of State for Colonies that a battery was "in forwardness opposite the entrance to the Harbour, which will completely prevent attack from without". Despite that confidence, the job took another two years to finish. And terribly hard work it must have been. With only picks, crowbars, wedges and sledgehammers, a gun pit was cut out of solid sandstone, leaving a curved parapet 80 feet long on the cliff edge about 50 feet above sea level. There were two embrasures or gun openings, but guns could also be fired over the parapet.

The guns - four twelve-pounders and two six-pounders - were landed at Obelisk Beach (then known as Georges Beach) and hauled up through the bush. Also in the gun pit was built a magazine for powder and shot, with stone walls three feet thick.

It was a busy place for those three years. If Dr Who had looked in he would have seen convicts wearing canary yellow, their blue-coated overseers, and a few men of the NSW Corps in scarlet jackets, white breeches, long boots and black shako caps. In July 1803 two of the convict labourers there were sentenced to receive fifty lashes each for idleness. The pressure was on to finish that fort, and three months later the recently established Sydney Gazette reported: "The new battery at Georges Head is completed and the artificers and labourers are recalled".

This was to be Sydney's only outer defence for the next four decades. It is not clear how many gunners were usually stationed there, or whether shots were ever fired for any purpose other than target practice. In its early years the battery's main responsibility was to keep a sharp eye out for French colours during the Napoleonic Wars, and also to prevent unauthorized departures from the harbour, which was to say escaping convicts or American sealers. The Americans, recovering at Chowder Bay after hard months in the Southern Ocean, were banned from sealing in NSW because they were too good at it for the local competitors. A general order in 1805 warned that vessels attempting to pass the Sow and Pigs without being cleared would be fired at from Georges Head.

How regularly the fort was manned after Napoleon's final defeat in 1815 is uncertain, and there is no known record of shots ever having been fired at French or American vessels.

Sometimes, of course, unexpected sails would appear between the Heads, making for the west channel between the Sow and Pigs outcrop and the 1801 battery. One such break in the fort's monotony occurred in 1803, as if to mark the battery's completion. This was Matthew Flinders and Bungaree returning on the Investigator after circumnavigating the continent which was then known only as New Holland, but would soon, on Flinders' suggestion, be named Australia.

Let us now leave Australia's first outer defence, with thanks to the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service and the NSW Department of Planning for making it so accessible, and return to 2010 for the rest of this ceremony.