

The history of NCI Felixstowe



Martello Tower P in 2020

The National Coastwatch Institution lookout at Felixstowe on the Suffolk coast, is situated on the top storey (the former gun platform) of a restored Martello Tower.

The surrounding grassed area on which the Tower stands is still referred to as Wireless Green but in recent years, to the rear and each side of the Tower modern housing has been built in Old Fort Road, off Langer Road in Felixstowe.

To the front it gives an uninterrupted view to the North Sea, overlooking a wide promenade and beach. Given good visibility, commercial marine traffic can be observed approaching and leaving the busy container port of Felixstowe, in addition to the vessels using the River Orwell to Ipswich and the River Stour at Harwich.



The Harwich Estuary.

Today, it might seem difficult to understand for what purpose the Tower was built over two hundred years ago. To fully appreciate the history of the Tower, we must look through a late eighteenth and early nineteenth century lens, when many countries in mainland Europe were dominated by Napoleon and his armies; but the one country he particularly loathed and desired to add to his list of victories, was Britain.

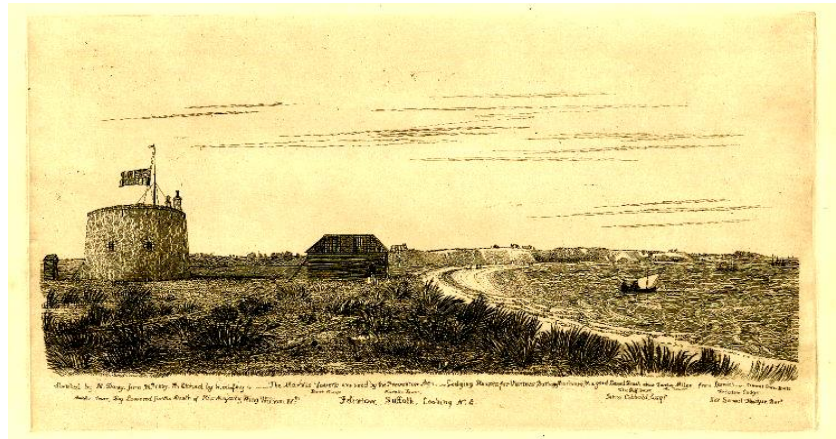
Following three unsuccessful attempts by the French to invade Britain from the west, (twice via Southern Ireland and once via the Welch coast), 50 Martello Towers were constructed at key positions along the coasts of Ireland; however, it became evident that a further invasion attempt was imminent direct from the East. As a result, a chain of 74 defensive Towers were constructed between 1805 and 1808 along the Southern coast of England from Folkestone to Dover. A further 29 Towers were built along the East coast from St. Osyth near Brightlingsea in Essex to Aldeburgh in Suffolk.

They are referred to as Martello Towers, and followed the design of a circular gun tower that stood at Mortella Point in French-occupied Corsica. However the British navy's attempts by two warships to demolish it on 7th February 1794 failed, when their cannonballs simply ricocheted off the rounded wall. In the consequent correspondence that immediately followed the action, Mortella was misspelt as 'Martello', which has remained uncorrected to this day.

For identification purposes, the South Coast Towers were numbered 1-74, but the 29 Towers situated along the East Coast were referred to by letters of the alphabet from A to Z, with Suffolk's three remaining Towers identified as AA, BB, with Tower CC at Aldeburgh. The Tower used today by NCI at Felixstowe was designated as Tower P.

Many Towers were positioned to assist shore batteries, but Tower P stood alone. Besides defending entrances to rivers, the East Coast Towers were to prevent the French army from landing on the flat shingle beaches, which could have allowed their infantry, cavalry, and artillery an easier means to disembark before marching inland to London.

At the Shotley Gate peninsular, Martello Towers J, K, and L defended the entrance to the River Stour, whilst Towers M and N defended the entrance to the River Orwell, supported by Towers O and P at Felixstowe, which during the early nineteenth century was called Walton Beach.



Martello Tower P at Walton Beach, drawn by Henry Davy in 1837.

To the north of Felixstowe, the estuary to the River Deben was defended by Towers T and U to the south at Felixstowe Ferry, and by Towers V and W to the north at Bawdsey.

South coast Towers were smaller than those built along the South East and were completely round,. They were equipped with one 24-pounder anti-ship gun that was effective up to one mile out to sea. The East coast Towers were cam-shaped, and in addition to the 24- pounder gun, had two 5.5-inch side-mounted 18-pounder howitzers. Each gun was capable of being traversed up to 180 degrees to give a wide range of fire.



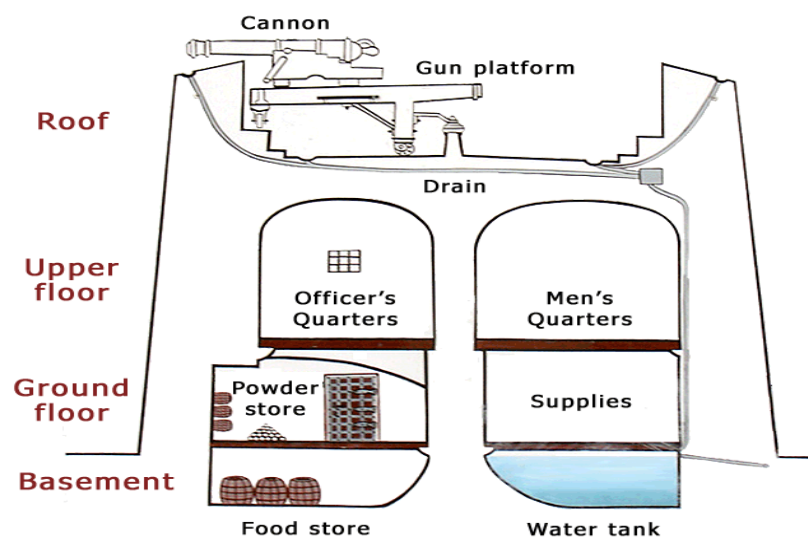
Example of a round South Coast Tower, and a cam- shaped East Coast Tower.

East Coast Towers stood just over thirty feet high, with a base some fifty feet in diameter. The rounded walls were thirteen feet thick on the seaward side, and six feet thick at the rear. Each Tower used approximately 750,000 bricks. The outer bricks were bonded with a hot lime mortar mixture called “*stucco*” that gave added weatherproofing in addition to steel-like protection against any bombardment.

The Towers were purposely spaced, so if the side- howitzers fired at an enemy who had landed, they were unable to hit their neighbouring Towers as they were positioned just beyond their range.

Inside Martello Tower P today, it remains structurally unchanged since it was built; It has three levels, with an entrance door twelve feet above the ground leading to the first floor. It was reached by a ladder that could be withdrawn inside should the Tower come under siege.

The first floor has four narrow windows, and was divided into living quarters for 24 Gunners and an Officer from the Royal Artillery.



Cross- section of a Martello Tower.

In the windowless basement (or ground floor) were the ammunition and gunpowder magazines, reached by ladder through a trapdoor set in the floor. To eliminate the risk of an explosion, the internal walls of the magazines have glazed windows with an inner sill, upon which lanterns were lit and stood to illuminate the inside of the magazines.



Author inside the magazine, showing the glazed window set in the inner wall
(Photo by Chris Gosling).

The gun platform (or roof), is supported by a large round central brick pillar six feet thick, that rises from the Tower's foundations, and spreads out at the top like a mushroom, providing a strong base for the heavy guns mounted above.



View of the first floor, showing the "mushroom" supporting the gun platform and the trapdoor leading to the ground floor.

The former gun platform (upon which today's NCI Look-out office is situated) is reached by two stone stairways, built into the rear wall from the first floor. Rainwater for drinking and cooking was collected from a drain situated in the centre of the gun deck, then passed via a lead pipe to a tank in the basement. The water was available to the soldiers by a hand-operated pump, situated just inside the main entrance on the second floor.

Following the defeat of the French army at Waterloo in 1815, the Towers, which had never fired a shot in anger, became obsolete. Due to their construction they were prone to humidity that causes wooden floors, doors and window frames to rot. An immediate solution was to employ married disabled veterans from the Royal Artillery to move into the

Towers with their families to act as Janitors. They were tasked to air the interior, by keeping alight two fires in the fireplaces set in the wall on the first floor during the winter, and by opening the windows and doors during the warmer summer months. Records held in the National Archives, reveal that Tower P was allotted to a Corporal Michael Lang and his family.

In late 1816 many Towers, including Tower P, were then occupied by members of the Coastguard Service who kept a watch for vessels suspected of smuggling, as the Essex and Suffolk coastline with its river estuaries opening to the North Sea, proved ideal for this activity. However, primary sources reveal that certain important harbour estuaries still needed defending, as the new threat to our shores was Germany; so defences that had previously guarded the Harwich estuary, including Tower P, were re-armed with more effective 4.7-inch 'quick-firing' guns manned by the army, who worked beside the Tower's Coastguards.

In 1895, to ensure an invading enemy met opposition when approaching the Harwich estuary, the Royal Engineers recommended that Martello Towers N, P, and Q at Felixstowe have their 4.7-inch guns replaced by two machine-guns mounted on each Tower.

In 1897, Wireless Telegraphy had been introduced to the Royal Navy by Guglielmo Marconi and Captain H.B. Jackson, RN. In the same year, due to its close proximity to the Royal Navy base at Harwich, the Admiralty selected Martello Tower P to become one of Britain's first W/T Type -'C' shore stations, when it began transmitting on 'S', 'T' and 'U' Tunes with Naval vessels from 1907, and was capable of communicating over 150 miles. Power was provided by a 4.5 horse-power *Gardner* oil-engine supplying a pair of two 2.5-watt generators that gave power to two tall transmitter aerials that were erected on the former gun platform. These aerials were connected to an Extempore 'C'-Tune Mk. 1 set. The four iron guy cable anchors used to support the aerials can still be seen firmly cemented in the ground outside the Tower today.



Author beside one of the original aerial guy cable anchors. (Photo by Chris Gosling).



1. Painting of Martello Tower P in 1897, by F.W.Smith RN.



Early photo of Tower P when in use as a Royal Navy Wireless telegraphy station.

During the First World War, the Tower P wireless station was successful in intercepting messages between enemy warships operating in the North Sea, thus providing vital information to naval intelligence. In addition, the Tower's wireless station became an essential link to the Royal Navy's Destroyer Force based at Harwich, in addition to its Coastguard duties.

In 1917 a report, held today in the National Archives, was drawn up by the sub-committee of the War Cabinet, listing vulnerable targets likely to come under attack by Zeppelins or enemy aircraft. It included the naval base at Harwich, the RNAS marine aircraft station along with Martello Tower P at Felixstowe, declaring that all were to receive anti-aircraft defences, plus a full-time military guard.

In 1919, an Approved Arms Report declared that Martello Towers P and Q should remain armed, by equipping each Tower with a more modern single machine gun.

Suffolk's surviving coastal defences remained unchanged until the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939. By July 1940, only Towers P at Felixstowe and Tower F at Clacton were still manned by the Coastguard service.

No longer a W/T station, Tower P was selected to become a post for the Observer Corps,(which became the Royal Observer Corps in 1941), in addition to its Coastguard duties. Their task was to plot the number, height, speed, and heading of enemy aircraft and V-1 Flying bombs passing overhead using a Micklethwaite Height Corrector, situated on the former gun platform. Tower P was referred to as Post L.3, reporting to Number 18 Group ROC Regional Headquarters at Colchester.



Micklethwaite Height Corrector

In 1953 during the Cold War, Martello Tower P was again selected to become an ROC Post to work alongside the Coastguard service, when it became Post E.3 in Group 4, with its H.Q. in Colchester. Towards the end of the 1950s, the Observers were transferred from the Tower to a new underground ROC post, constructed beside the Tower on Wireless Green. The whole area was then surrounded by a high wire security fence during the time it was operational from 1962 to 1968.



Author standing beside the remains of the underground ROC underground Post.

HMS Ganges, the Royal Navy's shore training establishment situated at Shotley Gate, closed down in 1976, so the naval control of shipping was then transferred to Martello Tower P, where it remained until 1979. In the same that year, a new Coastguard lookout office was constructed on top of the Tower, and on 10 February 1986 Tower P was declared a Grade II listed building.

In 1997, the Tower was sold to Suffolk Coastal District Council (now called East Suffolk Council). The Coastguards remained at the Tower until 26 April 1998, when the service closed down their look-out office in Felixstowe, which for over 160 years had kept a watch on shipping. Their former office on top of the Tower was taken over by the volunteer National Coastwatch Institution. Its Watchkeepers have become the "eyes and ears" of today's H.M.Coastguard Service, operating from a building that has been kept in constant use in the service of this country since the early nineteenth century.

John Fuller, Senior Watchkeeper