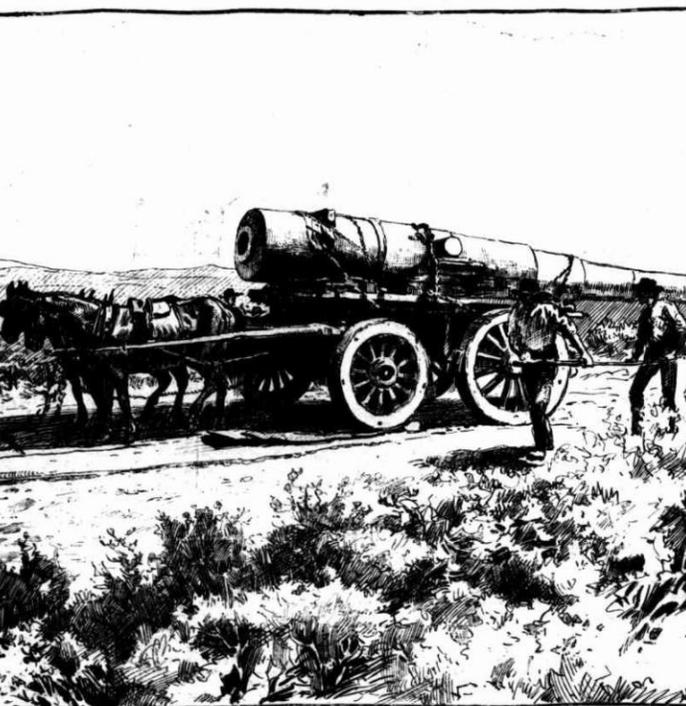


WAVERLEY COUNCIL

BONDI'S BIG GUN

Ben Buckler gun battery

A Waverley Library
Local History Fact Sheet



Images from top:

Hugh Bamford Reserve at Ben Buckler, North Bondi 2019.

Transporting the gun from Victoria Barracks to Ben Buckler. Newspaper illustration, the Sydney Mail 22 April, 1893.

Buried beneath grass and sand at Ben Buckler lies the remains of one of only three disappearing gun batteries built in Sydney. The fortifications were the final link in Sydney's outer defence ring, the development of a naval defence system that had begun in the first days of the new colony. Designed to protect the colony from naval

bombardment by enemy ships, the BL 9.2 inch Mk VI British-made breech loading guns were the largest guns installed in New South Wales. The Australian colonies bought ten of these guns from British manufacturer the Armstrong Company: three for the Sydney batteries plus an extra barrel, four for Victoria, and two for Adelaide. The Ben Buckler gun was cast in 1891.

The three batteries at Signal

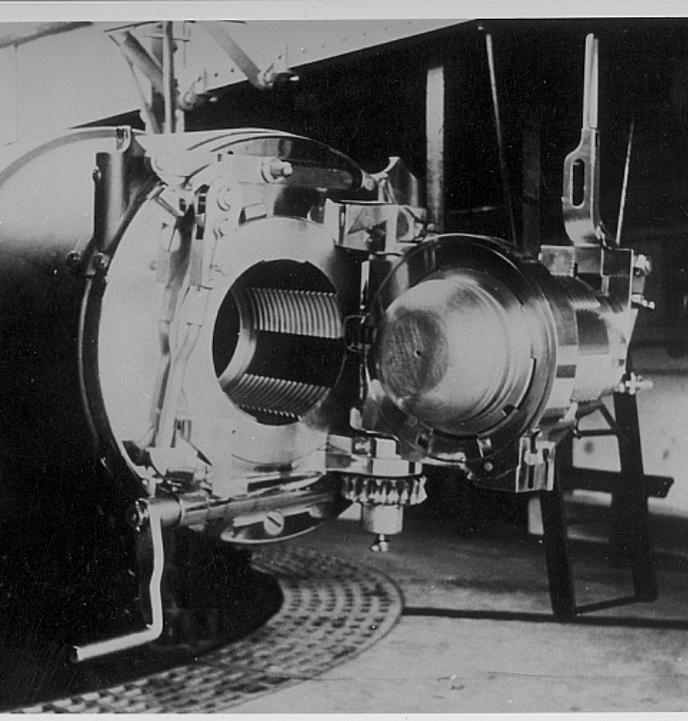
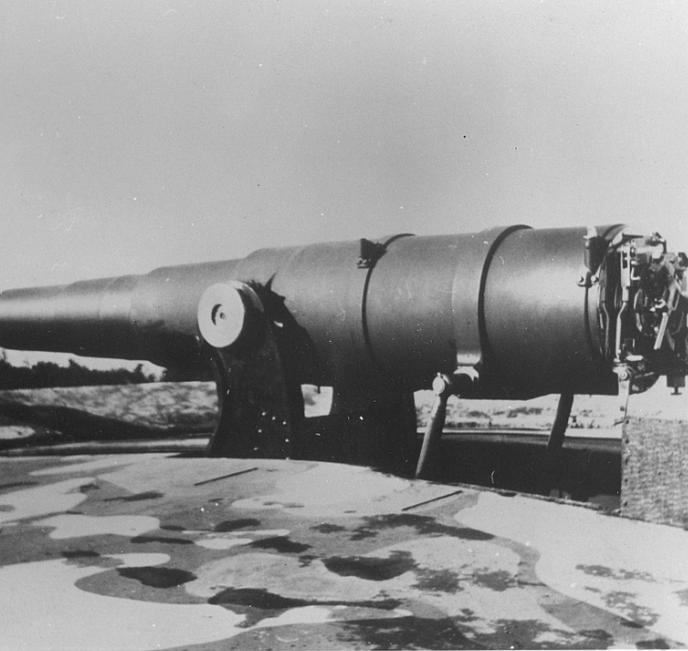
Hill (Vaucluse), Shark Point (Clovelly), and Ben Buckler (North Bondi) were built through the 1890s. The North Bondi coastal defence fortifications were built in 1892, with the gun being placed in the pit in 1893, after a team of 36 horses took three weeks to transport it from Victoria Barracks.

The gun weighed 20 tonnes and was installed on an EOC Hydro-pneumatic Mark 1 disappearing mount operated by hydraulic power. The gun pit was hidden below ground level with reinforced concrete walls reportedly ten metres thick. An iron shield covered the pit, and when fired the hydro-pneumatic action popped the gun barrel forward and up through a slot in the shield. The gun could fire a 172kg armour piercing round to a range of 8.2km. After firing,

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Images from top:

North Bondi's big gun in situ at Ben Buckler gun battery,

North Bondi's big gun.

its recoil pushed it back down below the ground again. This was intended to protect the gun crew and make the gun a very difficult target for an enemy ship to hit.

In practice, the performance of this system was disappointing. The hydraulic pressure generated was often inadequate to get the gun barrel all the way up. The sweating crew had to hand crank it the rest of the way, which inspired its own brand of humour.

In April 1908 a military board of enquiry was launched after the great gun prematurely fired during artillery practice. Reports in the *Sydney Morning Herald* give the reason as a defective lock, and the enquiry recommended that the district commandant would inspect the lock and if defective "the locks on these guns will be converted to the newer type, which does not contain the defect. It is believed that this improvement can be carried out locally."

To house the master gunner

and his family, a weatherboard cottage was built below the fort off Military Road. The great gun was kept in regular service, though new batteries at North Head and La Perouse in the 1920s saw the Ben Buckler gun become obsolete. Held in reserve through World War II, the federal military disposal program saw the majority of the coastal gun fortifications dismantled. By the 1950s the army had vacated the Ben Buckler battery and the government was unable to find a scrap metal buyer to take the gun away. The gun site was then covered with sand, allegedly at the direction of Waverley Council and complete with its hydraulic raising mechanism and concrete emplacement works. The site was then incorporated into public grasslands, and became part of Hugh Bamford Reserve.

The gun's existence was forgotten until excavation trench works by the Water Board Authority were carried out for Bondi sewerage treatment works in 1984. The rediscovered fortification was

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Images from top:

Waterboard Authority excavation of the interior of the Ben Buckler battery site, 1984. Image courtesy of Waterboard Authority, Robert Dick and the NSW Heritage Office.

Waterboard Authority excavation of the Ben Buckler battery site, 1984. Image courtesy of Waterboard Authority, Robert Dick and the NSW Heritage Office.

photographed and surveyed by Water Board Authority engineers before then being covered up again with sand and soil. The site was added to Waverley Council's Heritage Study in 1990, with the approximate location of the site added to a modern plan of Hugh Bamford Reserve.

Based on surviving records, the NSW Heritage Office led a remote magnetometer search of the site on 6 April 2005, and the gun battery was added to the State Heritage Register in 2006. The Heritage listing describes the site as

"a unique coastal defence battery of the late-Victorian era. Apart from comprising a rare intact concrete 1890's emplacement specifically developed for the then new 'disappearing guns' common to the period, the site retains significant archaeological potential due to the probable retention of the original 9.2-inch naval gun and mounting the only complete 9.2-inch example

to exist in Australia."

Although unconfirmed, it is believed that the entire gun and mechanism has been retained within the buried pit. As such, the site has the potential to

"...provide significant insights into late-Victorian defence technologies. The value of the site lies in its burial and retention, in comparison to the two (2) other NSW sites, and those in Queensland, Victoria and South Australia, that have more commonly been decommissioned and stripped of armaments and fittings. In world terms, the Ben Buckler site is important as a comparative example to other British defence facilities established throughout its colonies in the late 1870's - turn of the century."

The Ben Buckler gun site survives as a buried archaeological feature and is protected by the Heritage Office.