

Trow Point and the Disappearing Gun

The concrete structure in front of you is what remains of an innovative experiment in gun technology. The trial of the 'Hiram Maxim Disappearing Gun' took place here on the 16th December 1887.

Big guns

The late 19th century was an era of huge change in warfare and weaponry that would continue through to the major world wars. Gun technology moved from unreliable, dangerous and erratic cannons to long range, accurate and quick loading weapons. The 'Mark IV 6 inch breech loading gun' was a powerful example of the scale of change. It had a firing range of 30,000ft (9000m), twice that of previous guns, and was capable of punching holes through the iron armour of enemy ships.

Now you see it...now you don't!

What was unique about this gun emplacement at Trow Point was that it trialled a mounting system that would allow the Mark IV 6" gun to be raised and lowered. It could then hide within the concrete emplacement, enabling soldiers to reload out of sight of the enemy before raising the gun back above ground for firing.

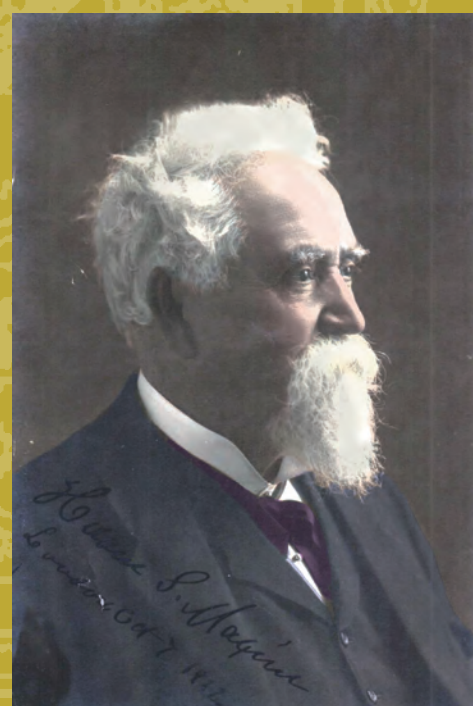
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A novel idea...

Although the gun fired without problem, the water-and-air-pressure powered raising and lowering mechanism was too slow and was never used in combat. It took 8 hours to pressurise the pump before it was operational and in very cold weather the water would freeze, making it impossible to fire at all!

There were other attempts to develop retractable mounts but they never went into widespread service. As the firing range of guns improved there was little need to hide soldiers from the enemy when reloading and it wasn't long before attack from the air replaced the threat from the sea.

The gun and its mounting was removed, leaving just this concrete housing. The gun you see today was placed here in 1987 to commemorate 100 years of the gun trials.



Hiram Stevens Maxim in 1912
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The man behind the machine

Sir Hiram Stevens Maxim (1840–1916) was born in Maine, USA. He moved to the United Kingdom at the age of 41 to manage the London offices of the US Electric Lighting Company. Known mainly for the Maxim Gun – the first portable, fully automatic machine gun – his many inventions included a mousetrap, hair-curling irons, a fire sprinkler and a pocket menthol inhaler. He even laid claim to inventing the lightbulb! He experimented with powered flight and although his large aircraft designs were not successful, a 'Captive Flying Machine' amusement ride, designed to fund his research while generating public interest in flight, was very popular and versions are still in use today.

Keeping it local

The original steel gun platform was made by Rogerson and Co of Wolsingham, in Weardale. After the Maxim design more successful raising/lowering mechanisms were designed and made by Lord Armstrong's Elswick Ordnance company on Tyneside.



Training ground



Artillery practice at Trow Point 21 June 1887 Image from northumbriangunner.blogspot.com

Trow Point has a long history of military training and artillery practice. Durham 3rd Artillery Volunteers (still serving in the British Army today) was formed in 1859 to protect the north east coast against the feared French aggression during the Franco-Prussian War. For decades, volunteers from Durham and East Yorkshire came down at weekends to Frenchman's Lea to the south, and Trow Point, to train in the use of heavy artillery guns.

Just a few metres beyond this emplacement you can see the mountings for earlier 64-pounder rifled muzzle loading guns, including the circular tracer ring that the gun wheels ran on. The twin mountings are too close together for two guns to have been operating side by side, suggesting that this layout was so the volunteer gunners could practise the art of dismounting, moving and remounting guns, a favourite training exercise of the time.

This project has been coordinated by Groundwork NE & Cumbria; Changing Places, Changing Lives - one green step at a time. Find out more at www.groundwork.org.uk/northeast or follow us on Facebook and Twitter.



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This is an historic landmark, part of South Tyneside's heritage, which is why we ask you not to climb on it or damage it - thank you.



Making a positive difference to the unique environment of the Magnesian Limestone area