

# A Brief History of Blyth Battery

Blyth Battery is a First and Second World War anti-invasion coastal defence gun battery, strikingly restored in 2009 with funding from the Heritage Lottery, English Heritage and Blyth Valley Borough Council (now Northumberland County Council). The Magazine building has been refurbished as an exhibition space and one of the Troop Shelters is now an education/reception space.

Blyth Battery was built in 1916 to protect the port of Blyth and its submarine base, *HMS Elfin*, during the First World War. It was upgraded for re-use during the Second World War. During the Inter-War and Post-War years, the buildings were used as beach amenities, cafes, and a base for both lifeguards and the St John Ambulance. The Battery is the most intact and accessible defence battery on the north-east coast, with individual buildings and features of considerable rarity.

Blyth Battery is run by the Blyth Battery Volunteers, a local community group passionate about the site. The Battery is open to the public on Saturdays and Sundays from 1<sup>st</sup> May until 30<sup>th</sup> September, and on additional occasions for special events and group visits.

## Why build a gun battery at Blyth?

The Battery was needed to protect Blyth harbour, its submarine base, known as *HMS Elfin*, and the coal trade. Blyth Battery was also needed to play a part in the defence of the region, with its hugely important naval shipbuilding and weapons industry. Despite this, work on the Battery only started in August 1916. It was not ready for action until February 1918, a few months before the war ended.

## What structures remain at Blyth Battery?

Blyth Battery is unusual as the standard military designs were adapted to cope with the sandy site. It is also unusual because the buildings have survived, in part because of their later re-use as beach amenities.

The **Gun Emplacements** were the most important buildings on the site. Each contained a 6-inch diameter gun with a range of nearly 11 kilometres (7 miles).

The **Magazine** was a store for shells and cartridges. This was normally built underneath the gun emplacements, but at Blyth it was separate because the sand dunes affected construction.

The **Battery Observation Posts** (BOPs) acted as look outs and controlled the direction and distance of fire. The armoured turret on the First World War BOP is believed to be the most intact one of its kind in the world

In addition, two **searchlights** lit up approaching ships for inspection, a **blockhouse** protected the Battery from landward attack, an **engine room** housed the generators for the power supply, and various other buildings acted as **troop shelters, stores** and **workshops**. There were also various encampments around the Battery, housing troops based at the Battery and elsewhere.

The majority of the structures were built in concrete, and the entire site was surrounded by barbed wire fences and entanglements. According to notes on the original plans, it cost around £3000 to build.

### **Why is Blyth Battery painted pink?**

The colour scheme chosen during refurbishment reflects the age of the different buildings. The grey structures were all built during the First World War, the pink indicates Second World War alterations and additions, and is based on paint scrape analysis, and the white indicates post war alterations.

How the Battery was camouflaged in the First World War is unknown, but during the Second World War fake pitched roofs and other domestic features were added to the buildings to disguise them.

### **Who operated Blyth Battery?**

The Battery was manned by 4 officers and 75 men of the Tynemouth Royal Garrison Artillery when it became operational in 1918.

At the start of the Second World War, the Battery was staffed by the Royal Artillery with 10 officers and 110 men. From April 1944, the 6<sup>th</sup> Battalion (Northumberland) Home Guard took over as regular soldiers prepared for the Normandy Landings. The Commanding Officer was Lt Col Parry, Headmaster of Blyth Grammar School.

### **The Battery at Peace**

At the end of the First World War the guns were removed and the Battery was obsolete. In the 1920s and 30s, Blyth Links developed as a leisure facility, with the construction of the bandstand and promenade. The Battery buildings were re-used for First Aid by the St John Ambulance, cafes, storage and a shop and toilets.

After re-use during the Second World War, the guns were again removed in 1949. In the decades that followed, Blyth Links again became a popular beach resort, with new chalets built and the Battery buildings again re-used. The Magazine became storage for the Blyth Kayak Club, and the Second World War BOP became the base for the Blyth Lifeguard and Swimming Club. Other buildings were used as public toilets, chalets and deckchair storage. By the 1980s however, the Battery was in decline, and demolition was considered.