

Historic Information
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North Head Historic Reserve

Strategically located on a headland at the entrance to Auckland's harbour, North Head, or Maungauika, commands sweeping views over the Hauraki Gulf and its islands. It has a long history, first of Maori occupation, and then as a coastal fortification. It is considered the most significant coastal defence site in New Zealand because of the size and variety of its defence installations, which span nearly 120 years and include elements from all periods of New Zealand's coast defence history.

Maori history

Maungauika (the Mountain of Uika) is an important place in traditional history. Before the arrival of Europeans, Maori settled on the Devonport peninsula attracted by the volcanic soils and rich marine environment. The main pa (fortified settlement) appears to have been at nearby Takarunga (Mt Victoria). Maungauika was also occupied by Maori. Early photographs show remnants of Maori gardens on the hill's lower slopes, but there are no signs of the earthwork defences prominent on Auckland's other volcanic cones. European visitors in the 1850s describe a Maori settlement at the foot of North Head with gardens and fish drying racks.

Strategic lookout

Soon after the settlement of Auckland was established in 1840 North Head became the site of the first pilot station, for guiding ships into the harbour. In 1878 the area was set aside as a public reserve on the basis that it be given up for defence purposes if required. After less than seven years North Head was indeed taken for defence purposes. The Russians, it was feared, were on the way.

The Russian scares

From the 1870s onward there was a growing fear that the Russians were planning attacks on the country's ports. This was part of a larger worldwide concern known as the 'Russian

Scares'. In the 1870s the government had purchased large coast defence guns but these had never been installed. In 1885, however, the Russian war fears reached crisis point and a series of forts was hurriedly built around the New Zealand coast. At North Head three large gun batteries were built: North Battery to defend the Rangitoto Channel, South Battery to defend the inner harbour and Summit or Cautley Battery on the top of the hill. These early forts were too hastily built and needed major reconstruction to make them usable.



North Head, 1930s. *Air Logistics*.



Department of Conservation
Te Papa Atawhai

Fort development



*Boom defence system controlled
from North Head, 1930s.
National Archives.*

For the next 25 years up to 40 prisoners were kept busy rebuilding the fortifications at North Head, directed by the Public Works Department. They lived in a prison on the summit created from an army barracks. This building, constructed in 1885, is still in place together with a small stone kitchen block built at the same time. These are the two oldest buildings on

North Head. The prisoners dug tunnels, mixed and poured concrete and laid bricks. Most of the tunnels, searchlights and underground spaces (engine rooms and magazines) we can see today were built at this time.

Other gun emplacements were added at the turn of the century and in the 1930s, with war again possible, parts of the old fort at North Head were modernised. New engines were put into the engine rooms and more searchlights were built. During WWII, North Head was the main administrative centre for Auckland's coast defences. The regimental headquarters was here and a large number of new barracks and offices

were built, some of which survive today.

By the end of the 1950s the coast defence system was scrapped and the army left North Head, which became a reserve in the Hauraki Gulf Maritime Park. The navy, however, remained on the summit where they ran a training school. The navy left in 1996 and now the whole area is administered by the Department of Conservation.

The guns

By 1900 North Head was well defended with three 8 inch Disappearing Guns as its main armament. In 1886 when these guns were made they were the most up to date weapons of their type available. The barrels alone weighed over 13 tons and they were designed to retract underground using the forces generated by the recoil of the gun when it was fired. Once hidden in their pit the guns could be reloaded under cover before being returned to the surface for the next shot. One of the few remaining guns of this type left anywhere in the world can still be seen at South Battery.

Other guns at North Head in 1900 included the earlier Rifled Muzzle Loaders, two of which can be seen in Albert Park, and two new 12 Pounders. In 1905 two 6 inch Mark VII guns arrived from England and were the main armament throughout WWI. But technology advanced and by WWII, with ship's guns able to fire long distances, the old fort was too close to the city it was meant to defend. New batteries were built at Motutapu, Castor Bay, Whangaparaoa and Waiheke Island, and North Head became the centre of administration. The 6 inch guns at North Head were moved to Whangaparaoa and were replaced in 1941 by two old 4 inch guns as part of the 'examination battery' which controlled the entrance to the harbour. During WWII North Head was also the site of the anti-submarine boom, a wire netting barrier covered by two guns at sea level, which protected the harbour from sneak attack by submarine.

Hidden tunnels?

North Head has inspired many stories about hidden tunnels, containing anything from decaying ammunition to two original Boeing aeroplanes. Sadly, archival research and archaeological investigation have shown these to be untrue, but they add to the mountain's mystique.