

= Mersea Fort =

Mersea Fort , also known as Cudmore Grove Blockhouse , was an artillery fort established by Henry VIII on the East Mersea coast in 1543 . It formed part of the King 's Device programme to protect against invasion from France and the Holy Roman Empire , and defended the River Colne that led to the town of Colchester . It was triangular in shape , with earthwork walls and three bastions to hold artillery . It was demobilised in 1552 , but was brought back into use several times over the next century and saw service during the Second English Civil War of 1648 . The fort hosted an admiralty court to oversee the local oyster trade , until the dilapidation of the site forced the court to move to the Moot Hall in Colchester in the middle of the 18th century . A new gun battery was built at the fort during the Napoleonic Wars , but the fortification then fell into decline and was extensively damaged by the construction of a sea wall along the coast . The remains of the earthworks were excavated by archaeologists between 2002 and 2003 .

= = History = =

= = = 16th ? 17th centuries = = =

Mersea Fort was built as a consequence of international tensions between England , France and the Holy Roman Empire in the final years of the reign of King Henry VIII . Traditionally the Crown had left coastal defences to local lords and communities , only taking a modest role in building and maintaining fortifications , and while France and the Empire remained in conflict , maritime raids were common but an actual invasion of England seemed unlikely . Modest defences based around simple blockhouses and towers existed in the south @-@ west and along the Sussex coast , with a few more impressive works in the north of England , but in general the fortifications were limited in scale .

In 1533 , Henry broke with Pope Paul III over the annulment of his long @-@ standing marriage to Catherine of Aragon . Catherine was the aunt of Charles V , the Holy Roman Emperor , who took the annulment as a personal insult . This resulted in France and the Empire declaring an alliance against Henry in 1538 , and the Pope encouraging the two countries to attack England . An invasion of England appeared certain . In response , Henry issued an order , called a " device " , in 1539 , giving instructions for the " defence of the realm in time of invasion " and the construction of forts along the English coastline .

The county of Essex was not a priority for new investment , but the town of Harwich was reinforced in 1539 and further new fortifications , including Mersea Fort , were built along the coast in 1543 , under the direction of Richard Lee and Richard Cawarden , at an estimated total cost of £ 2 @,@ 717 . The fort was positioned on salt marshland on the south side of the River Colne , and would have protected the entrance to the estuary , working together with the new blockhouses built at St Osyth and Brightlingsea . Mersea was triangular , with earthwork walls between approximately 300 feet (91 m) long , further protected by " maunds " , round baskets filled with earth , and a defensive ditch with a drawbridge . On each of the three corners was a circular bastion housing up to four guns . Buildings in the courtyard would have housed the garrison , which comprised a captain , a lieutenant , two soldiers , a porter and between three and six artillery gunners . There was a nearby jetty , probably for use by the fort .

In 1552 the fort was decommissioned , but was subsequently recommissioned by Mary I. In addition to the fort 's military role , it hosted a court to oversee the oysterfields along the East Mersea coast , which were particularly lucrative but at risk of overfishing . In 1566 , Colchester introduced new rules to govern the oyster trade , which were enforced by an admiralty court , held when necessary in Mersea Fort ; the location was chosen so as to demonstrate the town 's authority all the way up to the top of the estuary . A survey in 1586 showed the fort had been abandoned by the military once again : the defences were in a poor state , the guns ' barrels were clogged with dirt and the site had been occupied by an elderly woman . It was brought back into use in 1588 and 1631 to defend

against first the Spanish Armada and then the Dunkirk privateers .

=== English Civil War and Interregnum ===

During the First English Civil War between the supporters of King Charles I and Parliament , Mersea Fort saw no action ; after the victory of Parliament in 1646 , the fort 's garrison was demobilised . Conflict flared again in 1648 with the outbreak of the Second English Civil War , and Colchester was taken by the Royalists . The town was immediately besieged by General Thomas Fairfax , who quickly seized Mersea Fort , which controlled the supply route by river into Colchester , before the Royalists could do so . The fort had contained five pieces of artillery : two culverins , two sakers and one drake . A Royalist raiding party of 300 soldiers was sent to recapture the fort , but without success .

Mersea Fort was placed under the command of Captain William Burrell . Guns and ammunition were kept there in case of a fresh rebellion , with a garrison of 36 men , which was temporarily reinforced by an additional squadron of horsemen and 50 foot soldiers in July 1650 . Repairs were made from 1651 onwards , and new accommodation was constructed for the fort 's gunners . After an invasion scare in 1655 , Mersea was temporarily used to imprison Royalists suspected of planning an insurgency against Oliver Cromwell 's Commonwealth government . The fort was then demobilised by Cromwell as part of his efforts to reduce defence costs ; Burrell was ordered to dismantle the fort but the order was never carried out , partially because of the practical difficulties and because of opposition from the owner of the land . The admiralty court continued to be held in the fort , although it proved much harder to enforce the fishery rules because of the political turmoil .

=== 18th ? 21st centuries ===

By the 18th century , Mersea Fort was in ruins . The fishery rules were reinforced by fresh legislation in 1758 , which created a court of conservancy to oversee the oyster stocks . Officially , this court was supposed to sit at the fort , but rather than using the now dilapidated earthworks , it began to meet in Colchester 's Moot Hall . Instead , a ceremony began to take place each year at the Mersea Stone , near to the fort , involving local dignitaries and extensive eating and drinking . The fort was recommissioned during the Napoleonic Wars at the start of the 19th century , and a new gun battery was constructed overlooking the sea , equipped with six 24 @-@ pounder (10 @.@ 9 kg) guns . After this the fort was abandoned once again . A sea wall was built along the coast early in the century , cutting through the south @-@ east side of the fort . The legislation on oysters was reformed by Parliament in 1870 , which disbanded the previous court structure and severed the historic link with Mersea Fort . A defensive pill @-@ box was constructed at the castle during the Second World War .

In the 21st century , the remains of the site are protected under UK law as a scheduled monument . The site was surveyed in 1982 and excavations were carried out between 2002 and 2003 , analysing surviving timber structures that had been exposed by coastal erosion .