

## Wembury Point

Wembury Point, now safely protected by the National Trust, has had a chequered history. Originally part of the Langdon Estate (covered earlier in this booklet), the Point was bought by a local family when the estate was broken up in 1927. Prior to World War II, two small holiday camps were developed. These brought with them facilities including nearly 200 chalets on the west of the site, concrete buildings – complete with a rooftop roller-skating rink - on the crest of the Point, and a sea water swimming pool on the foreshore. Although badly damaged by the sea, the remains of this pool can still be seen today.

The prewar years also saw the landowner draw up detailed plans to develop the whole of the remainder of the Point for housing. However, only a few properties were built before the war intervened. The entire Point was then taken over for defence purposes, including a radar station and a Royal Navy gunnery facility. For the latter, an important landmark came in autumn 1940 with the installation of a 4” gun to be used for training purposes. In addition to shattering the peace and nerves of local inhabitants, this laid the foundation for what was to become the most important naval gunnery school and firing range in the United Kingdom.

After World War II the Admiralty decided to retain its Wembury facility, and purchased the land in 1948. Included in the sale was the offshore island known as the Mewstone, since this was in the line of fire. The whole of West Country training moved to Wembury in 1956, when the site was officially commissioned as the naval gunnery school and christened HMS Cambridge. The choice of this name recalled an earlier HMS Cambridge used for gunnery training - a warship moored in Plymouth’s Hamoaze between 1856 and 1907.

Pre-war and wartime buildings were now joined by many others as activity expanded. Live firing out to sea was commonplace, and target aircraft frequently circled overhead to the accompaniment of blank volleys from Bofors guns. Eventually, however, the gunnery school was overtaken by defence cuts and the march of technological progress. In the digital era, much of the gunnery training could be accomplished much more cheaply through computerised courses, and justification for the facility waned rapidly. In 2001 HMS Cambridge was decommissioned, ending armed service activity spanning six decades.

Closure brought great uncertainty. Prewar, wartime and postwar construction on the site meant that, in planning terms, it might be declared a brownfield site. In that case development of the entire Point, such as had been planned in the mid-1930s, could not be ruled out. Fortunately, government policy was to require the Ministry of Defence to offer the site, plus the Mewstone, to the National Trust.

The Trust’s approach was initially cautious, a particular concern being that some buildings might be listed for conservation, entailing a substantial long-term financial commitment. However, confirmation that this would not occur led the Trust to make Wembury Point a flagship target for acquisition as part of the celebrations marking the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its Neptune Campaign to purchase and protect the coast. Sufficient was raised for the purchase, for building demolition and land restoration, and for an endowment to generate investment income for future upkeep.

Since acquisition by the Trust in 2006, Wembury Point has been transformed. Although it has been necessary to retain a radar scanner on the site, all other buildings have been cleared and the Trust has begun a far-reaching programme of landscape and nature conservation coupled with public access to its magnificent views. In the late 1930s such an outcome could scarcely have been conceived.