

THE SPLENDID WARREN SUMMER HOUSE AT HENGISTBURY HEAD

By W. A. Hoodless

A substantially constructed two-storey summer house existed on the very top of Warren Hill, at least as far back as the eighteenth century. It is easy to imagine family gatherings for days out and picnics in such an idyllic spot. Many must have struggled to reach it, only to be caught out by a typically sudden change in Hengistbury's weather! Quite apart from such recreational use, it was also an important military lookout. The first illustration is an interpretation by Christopher Hollick of how the building may have looked based on available information.

Prehistory

A 1969 county record, at Dorchester, indicates the "probable" remains of a Bronze Age bowl barrow, not shown on the Ordnance Survey. The barrow is described as at the highest point of the headland, being a mound nearly 100 feet diameter and about 4 feet 3 inches high. The record states that not only was it "littered with building materials," but also that this was indeed the site of the old Warren Summerhouse. In view of its sheer size and the cost of removing everything after demolition, this gives an alternative explanation of the raised ground, i.e. it could be simply rubble, which has been grassed over. It seems that, in 1969, the 1926 Coastguard hut was still on the site.



Hence, the mound, which lies just south of the viewing tablet, may be either the remnants of the Summer House or a tumulus from the period 1700 BC to 700 BC. If it is a tumulus, it would be one of a number from an era when the Head was mainly used as a burial site, in between the New Stone Age settlement and the Iron Age town. We should also not discount the possibility that there was both a burial site and debris from the building in this spot.

Who Built the Summer House?

The earliest depiction of the building was on Isaac Taylor's 1759 map. Prior to that date, there exists a complex recorded background of ownership and inheritance. Hoping that my sources make this an accurate account, the story now follows.

Richard Fenn, a London alderman, who appears to have had a brother, Sir Robert Fenn, bought the Manor in 1630. Sir Robert was Lord Mayor of London in 1638. Richard's nephew, also Richard and doubtless the son of Sir Robert, inherited and died in 1683. The nephew's sister, Jane, inherited in turn. Now she was the widow of John Tregonwell (1598 to 1680). Jane conveyed the Manor to her beautiful daughter, Mary Luttrell, in 1690. After the death of her husband, Colonel Luttrell of Dunster Castle, Mary moved to London, where her house burnt down. Sir Jacob Banckes of Milton Abbas rescued her from the flames and became her second husband. His son, also Jacob, inherited in 1724 and sold on to Edward Lisle of Moyles Court, Ellingham in 1736. In 1754, James Willis of Ringwood purchased the Manor, passed it on to his son John, who in turn bequeathed it in his will, dated 1776, to his nephew, John Compton. The latter sold to Gustavus Brander in 1782.

Assuming that the Summer House would not have been older than 1630, it might perhaps have been built by Richard Fenn, his nephew (also Richard Fenn), Jane Tregonwell, Mary Luttrell, Jacob Banckes, Edward Lisle or James Willis. I wonder if any reader knows which of these seven owners built the Summer House!

Map Evidence

The 1759 map shows the Summer House, but accuracy is limited. Lieutenant Mackenzie's 1785 naval map shows Warren Summerhouse in the same place, but due to the small scale, his sketch of the building remains diagrammatic. One reason he shows it is to help ships steer clear of the Ledge, by "keeping Christ Church Tower just open to the westward of Warren Summer House." In 1791, a map by Milne shows the "Summer Ho." and indeed "Brander." The name on the map is indicative of ownership. Gustavus Brander is known to have bought the subsidiary Manor of Christchurch, Twynham (the church property) in, as noted above, 1782. He died five years later and his family sold the Manor to the Meyricks in 1830.

In 1797, an unpublished Ordnance Survey map shows a Signal House indicated as two structures. The northern one is in the same position as shown in previous maps. The other one is about 400 feet to the south-south-east. In 1826, Greenwood repeats the name as "Signal Ho.", again showing two structures on the summit in the same position as the 1797 map. As one overlooked the whole of the sea and the other the whole of the harbour, it may have been necessary to have two military lookouts to liaise with each other, at a time when the headland was so much wider. Another explanation could be that one was a beacon structure only.

Commander Sheringham's 1846 map of the harbour extends to the summit of the Head. A small building is marked there as "**CoGd Watch Ho** Built on the site of the old Warren Summer House". The map does not extend far enough to the south to show whether or not the southern structure remained in 1846. However, this shows that the Summer House had certainly been demolished by 1846. Later, there was only one building on the top of the Head, described on the 1870 Ordnance Survey as the "Watch House (Coastguard Service)".

By 1870, the southern structure appearing in 1797 would have been on the cliff edge and probably long since removed. There is a flagstaff shown in 1870 about 100 feet to the south-east in a nearby enclosure 140 feet by 40 feet.

The second illustration shows a current view of the site. The Ordnance Survey triangulation point is on the left, the viewing tablet on the north edge of the mound and the top of the existing Coastguard station visible above its centre.

Who would ever imagine that pagan burial rites from the Bronze Age, and military signals and lookouts may have been operational from this tranquil spot against the risks of invasion?



Other Evidence

In 1811, Elizabeth Fanshawe painted a watercolour showing a substantial building on Warren Hill together with what appears to be an even higher flagstaff, placed on lower ground to the east. In 1818, an unknown artist sketched a length of the south coast. The artist's drawing, done from the harbour, clearly shows the same building painted by Elizabeth Fanshawe and shown by Mackenzie in 1785. No separate flagstaff is shown on this sketch. In 1836, the Signal House appears in Sylvester's report about harbour improvement.

In 1935, a Mrs. E.A. Jones, born 1851, was reported as remembering (from the time she was a small girl) the blasting operations of the mining company. Her father, Coastguard Captain Dowling, was stationed there at the "Old Watch House", which was described by Mrs. Jones as "one great room with four windows". Many happy days were spent there by the family and their pet jackdaw, "who stole anything". We could reasonably place this woman's recollection at about 1860 and deduce that this Watch House on the 1846 naval map and the 1870 Ordnance Survey map was single storey and much smaller than the Summer House, which it replaced. Indeed, scaling of the 1870 map shows it to have been about 18 feet by 13 feet average, and this is consistent with the 1846 map.

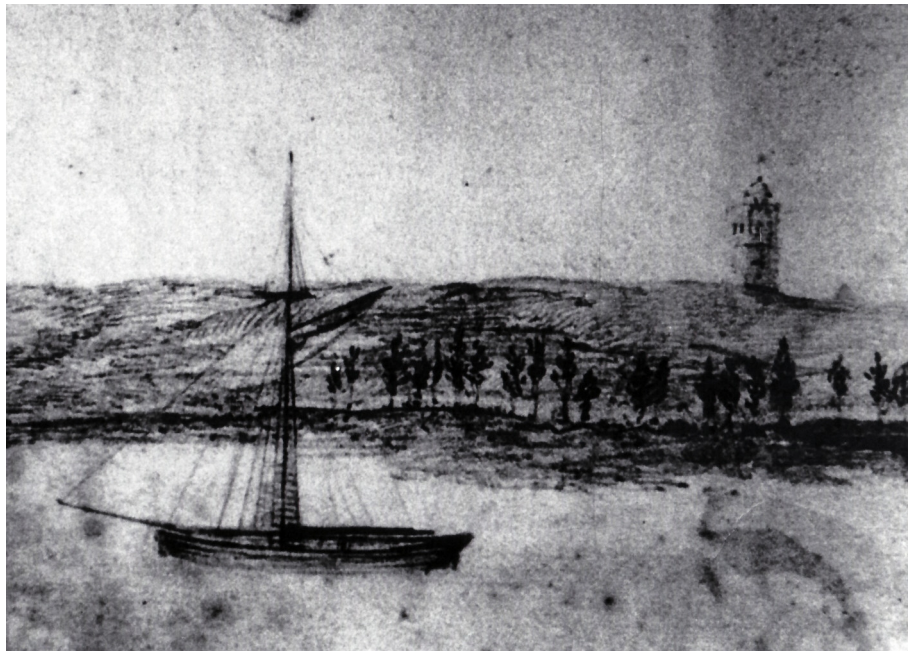
Visit to Hengistbury Head by John Constable (1776 – 1837)

An extraordinary recent discovery is that this English painter must have drawn a picture incorporating the Warren Summer House in the first part of the nineteenth century. As reported in the Bournemouth Echo, a collection of some 2,000 photographs of artist's work were going to auction on 7 April 2007. They included one of Constable's sketch of the harbour, with the Priory Church in the distance and the Summer House much closer. His viewpoint was from part way along the eastern, lower part of the headland. I believe that he made some relatively local visits, to Weymouth in 1816, to Salisbury in 1823 and 1831, and to Gillingham 1826.

Whatever the date of his visit, the sketch confirms the general appearance of the Summer House and its setting, as shown by the unknown artist of 1818. For example, both show the gently rounded hillside to the north of the building, in contrast to the sharp, rough slope of today, as caused by the open cast mining, which took place after its demolition. They also both show the line of trees at the harbour's edge. Considering the age and stress, which this 1818 sketch would have suffered, the quality of this third illustration is surprisingly good.

Conclusions

The Summer House, Warren Summerhouse and Signal House are one and the same building, apparently used for a mixture of recreation and lookout purposes until demolished. The lookout or signal use would have been partly for the military to monitor invasion risks and partly for the coastguard service and its various functions. The building existed from before 1759 until at least 1836. By 1846, it had been replaced by the Watch House, a smaller single-storey building. By the time of the 1932 Ordnance Survey, a Coastguard lookout hut, erected in 1926, had replaced the Watch House. In 1975, a new Coastguard hut was built about 100 yards to the east of the old Summer House site.



My view is that it comprised a substantial two-storey structure having a square plan with sides of 16 to 20 feet length. Each of the four sides appears to have had two windows at first floor level. The height to the top of the first floor would have been 40 to 50 feet and above this seems to have been an inset dome or cupola, having a central flagpole. Since it was inset, a walkway must have existed, approached by an internal staircase, allowing magnificent 360-degree views from the top. Were it still there, it is easy to imagine it now being classified as a typical early eighteenth century folly and having the status of a listed building.