

# Saint Helena's Batteries



**Left and above:** Cockburn's battery.  
**Below:** Cockburn's battery kiln for heating shots.



From the beginning of the East India Company's (EIC) settlement of the island in 1659, the little James Fort which has since become The Castle was considered to be sufficient to protect the island. The best defences were seen as the coast itself with its high cliffs and lack of safe landing places. But, after the Dutch invasion by 1673, the opinion rapidly changed and it was decided to build batteries all around the island, sometimes in very inaccessible places and most of all along the coastline. No doubt the isolation of the island and its numerous batteries were among the main reasons for deciding to send the Emperor Napoleon to St. Helena.

Initially, the most important fortification was James Fort itself. It was built under the direction of Captain John Dutton, the first governor of St Helena. The fort was made of three bastions constituting a triangle, with two of these near the sea front equipped with seven guns each, while a third bastion at the rear had four. There were two small batteries separate to the fort with two guns each. The Fort seems originally to have been called York Fort, but was later renamed James Fort in honour of James II.

In the beginning, the soldiers came from different regiments, but the St. Helena Artillery and Infantry regiments were then set up. As the number of soldiers was not sufficient to defend

the island, land grants to settlers were given upon the condition that they supported a local militia with a given number of soldiers per acre of land. This force was the St Helena Militia. A lot of batteries can still be seen all around the island as well as walls of other fortifications. Many of them were built during the 18<sup>th</sup> century and improved later. But by the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, they were not in use anymore. The development of new cannon rendered some of the older batteries obsolete. Some situated on the cliffs were replaced by new ones like those on Munden's Hill - Sampson's and Saddle batteries. The ones in the valleys simply stopped being used, the defence becoming the charge of fortresses such as High Knoll and Ladder Hill Forts.

One of the older battery complexes is Cockburn's battery located on Egg Island. The latter was one of the only batteries built during the exile of Napoleon and is the only one built on an offshore island.

Close to the battery, there are relics of a little kiln for heating shot and there are the ruins of a circular battery that must have contained one gun. The position is very steep and difficult to access and the battery was known for accidents. One of them was George Singer who died when serving here. There is a

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**Left:** The old platform **Right:** Half Moon Battery

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**Left:** Repulse Point Battery, **Above:** Path leading to the Lower Batteries, **Below:** Arch of the lowest part of Lower Batteries



commemorative plaque in St. James Church which records that Mr Singer “met his death by being accidentally precipitated from off Egg Island when faithfully serving his employers. To whom this tablet is erected as a mark of respect to a worthy good servant”.

Today, Egg Island is still difficult to access, not so much due to the steepness but more because of the Brown Noddies flying everywhere and dive-bombing human intruders!

Another interesting group of batteries is located between Banks Valley and Sugar Loaf and is known as “Banks Lines”. The necessity to build an important battery complex here was because the South-Easterly trade winds forced the sailing ships close inshore as they rounded Sugar Loaf and headed towards the anchorage in James Bay. Yachts arriving here today including those taking part in the Governor’s Cup Yacht Race still use this route.

On the 1<sup>st</sup> June 1706, two ships flying Dutch colours, arrived close to Banks Battery sailing towards Jamestown. According to the custom, the battery was to fire a salute and the ships were supposed to fire five times in reply. At this time the Dutch were England’s allies. The two vessels ignored the signal and went on to attack and board two EIC vessels: the *Queen* and the *Dover*. They lowered the Dutch colours and ran up the French flag but the battery garrison, when ordered to fire on them, found that sponges did not fit the barrels and there was not sufficient powder to fire the guns! The French made off with their two prizes. After this tragedy, Governor Poirier ordered that each ship reaching Bank’s Battery must send a boat asking for permission to land and we can only assume that there was some work done to ensure that the battery was brought up to standard.

According to Mellis, Bank’s Battery Platform had forty-four guns. It is still possible to see it and many other ruins of buildings as a lime kilns and old magazines. The platform is near total collapse and without repair work this feature may soon disappear.

Continuing further on along the coast in the Sugar Loaf direction, is a large building known as Half Moon Battery (there is another Half Moon battery at Lemon Valley). Half Moon Battery is the largest one in the complex and was used over a

longer time than Banks platform probably because of its higher position and greater range for the guns.

Continuing to the North, we come to Middle Point and Repulse Point Batteries. Probably built in 1778, they would have contained one gun each.

The last battery on the top is Buttermilk Point. According to the Records, it was built in 1778 as well. Although this battery is quite large – semicircular, with one long wall – it was probably equipped with one gun only. It was also the place where the message “Send Your Boat” was displayed. Alongside the battery is the ruin of the guard house.

The most attractive fortification is probably Lower Battery situated under Buttermilk and accessible via a slope leading from Repulse Point Battery down a staircase. This battery has two levels. It is possible to see a little building in which spiral steps lead towards a room with an opening in the roof. Opposite the steps a ladder leads about 3 meters down to a little platform where a gun was probably placed in each of the two corners. The platform is very well built with a remarkable arch and gargoyles.

Sugar Loaf itself was used as an observation post. On the top of this cliff, the watcher could see the ships coming from a distance of some 40 miles on a clear day and had a view from Flagstaff to Jamestown as well as to Buttermilk and Half Moon Batteries. A military telegraph system was installed there at the beginning of the 1800s. It was possible to send a message very quickly to Ladder Hill and Jamestown or vice-versa. The St Helena National Trust is currently seeking funding under the Small Heritage Projects within the Tourism vote to have urgent restoration done on Banks’ platform and the Half Moon Battery.

Bibliography- “South Atlantic Fortress” by Ken Denholm. “St Helena 1502-1938” by Philip Gosse. “Extracts from the St Helena Records and Chronicles of Cape Commanders “ by Hudson R Janisch. Photographs - Stéphane Van de Velde. Thanks are extended to the Archives and Public Library staff for their assistance with research; to Linda Clemett for leading me on the walk to Sugar Loaf and Banks; and to Graham Sim for taking me to Egg Island.

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