

Historic Building Appraisal

Mount Davis Battery, Mount Davis, H.K.

High on the western extremity of Hong Kong Island, Mount Davis was the site for a battery built by the British before World War II. Compared with Lyemun, where the eastern approach to Victoria Harbour was a mere 500 yards, the western sealane was much wider – 3600 yards – which was the reason why such heavy artillery fire was needed to safeguard it. Construction of the Mount Davis Battery (摩星嶺炮台) comprising five 9.2 inch guns started in the early 1900s, and was completed in **1912**. Shortly afterwards, the military selected a site near summit of Mount Davis to accommodate the headquarters of the Western Fire Command, which was responsible for artillery positions on the western side of the Island. During the mid-1930s, two of the 9.2-inch guns were moved to Stanley to strengthen the defence of the southern side of the Island.

*Historical
Interest*

After the outbreak of war in 1941, all the three remaining guns saw action. The battery came under heavy and sustained attack from the Japanese. The plotting room, an anti-aircraft position, and a gun located on the upper level were destroyed during these attacks. The Japanese attack on the 14th resulted in a number of deaths amongst the gun crew. Nevertheless, one shell which landed directly on the battery command post proved to be a dud and did not explode, saving the lives of approximately 60 soldiers taking shelter within it. On the 16th a combined force of 62 bombers from the Japanese army and navy took offensive against the battery. The remaining armament and equipment was eventually blown up by its personnel just before the surrender on the 25th.

As the most important battery safeguarding the western entrance of the harbour, five huge gun emplacements were constructed on Mount Davis. All these emplacements still exist with varying degree of damage. At the top of the hill was built the headquarters of Western Fire Command. Most of the battery buildings, the observation posts, and the loopholed wall for local defence can still be seen. Traces of shrapnel damage are clearly visible on the walls.

*Architectural
Merit*

The Mount Davis Battery is spread over a fairly large area and consists of five gun emplacements linked together by an access road (Mount Davis Path) which winds up the western slope of the mountain. A number of ruined buildings exist along the side of the road amongst the trees which would have been originally bunkers, latrines, oil stores, air raid shelters, water tanks, and miscellaneous structures associated with the battery. Opposite the Mount Davis Youth Hostel is the remains of the underground Western Fire Command Centre, now surmounted by a micro-wave station mast. A ramp leads up from the youth hostel to a complex of ammunition stores and bunkers at the east end of the

battery. The area is surrounded by dense undergrowth and mature trees some of which have encroached into the old ruined battery buildings. Old photographs of the battery in the early 1900s show that the site was fairly barren in those days with a good field of fire in all directions. Several modern rain shelters, pavilions, and barbecue pits have been constructed on the site for the benefit of morning walkers and picnickers. There are also several modern micro-wave masts on the upper part of the site. Unfortunately the ruins are littered with lap sap and rubbish left by visitors marring the general appearance of the area. Illegal gardening activities were also observed in several places. Evidence of vandalism was also apparent and the inevitable graffiti can be seen everywhere.

The five gun emplacements are fairly standard in design, each consisting of a circular concrete gun pit surrounded by a concrete slope or skirt which extends from the top of the parapet to ground level. The inside of the circular wall to each gun pit contains a number of recesses which were the expense lockers for shells and would have been fitted with steel doors. All steelwork has long since been removed for scrap, but cropped off holding down bolts can still be seen in the floors of the gun pits. Beneath each emplacement there are underground service chambers consisting of ammunition stores with vertical shafts for hoisting ammunition up to the gun pit, air raid shelters for the gun crew, and other miscellaneous chambers with interconnecting passages angled to reduce the effects of blast from exploding enemy bombs. All five gun emplacements show evidence of war damage, vandalism and the ravages of time, also the surrounding vegetation has encroached in some places.

The Western Fire Command Headquarters consist of massive underground concrete bunker built into the hillside between two gun emplacements with which it appears to be connected by tunnels. The bunker is divided up into a number of separate chambers or cells connected by angled passageways. The complex was not explored at the time of the field trip but is known to have contained besides the Fire Command Post itself, observation posts and plotting rooms fitted with plotting tables, fire direction tables, and battery and signals instruments such as direction finding equipment, encoders and convertors. Ventilation was by means of metal ventilation shafts and ducting which can still be seen in places where it has been exposed by landslips and soil erosion along the road. There is no form of lighting inside the bunker and torches are therefore required to carry out an inspection. A large amount of rubbish has been dumped inside the bunker and would need to be cleaned out before a proper survey could be carried out. One interesting feature on the top of the bunker is a concrete cupola with a cruciform upstand beam formation, the whole structure resembling a giant hot cross bun. An open hatchway in the shell of the cupola reveals that it has been converted into a water tank at some time but its original use has not yet been established. The bunker is a very interesting

structure and very possibly the only one of its kind now left in Hong Kong as the only comparable structure would have been the underground wartime headquarters in Victoria Barracks which now no longer exists.

The ammunition stores are situated on a flat plateau at the eastern end of battery site at a safe distance from the fire command headquarters. A central path leads to the end of the site and the magazines are built along both sides of this path. Side paths and tunnel lead off to further magazines, bunkers and shelters built into the hillside. Although there is evidence of war damage the structures are on the whole still intact and can be explored in safety. Defensive works consist of two small gun emplacements and a defensive wall on the south-east side of the complex. There is also an observation post overlooking the East Lamma Channel. There is a large flat area to the south-west of the magazine complex which does not appear to have had any buildings upon it. This could have been used as a training area and may have been the site of a mobile anti-aircraft battery during the war. Two anti-aircraft guns were deployed to Mount Davis manned by 9AA Battery.

At full strength there would have been about 100 men altogether at Mount Davis including officers, soldiers and other administrative personnel. It is not clear however from the ruined buildings which of them were used as kitchens, messes, bunkhouses and ablutions although latrines are fairly easy to identify. It is possible that many of these buildings have not survived the ravages of time. Further research is needed here.

In order to function the battery would have needed electricity, water, and a drainage system. Several structures are identified on the Hong Kong Govt. 1:1000 ordnance survey as water tanks but no pumphouses or pipelines are shown. Water was essential to the battery for drinking, ablutions and for fire fighting. Generators would have been necessary to produce an electricity supply to work the motors for the guns and ammunition lifts, for lighting the underground bunkers, and for the searchlights. A part of the fire command headquarters is occupied by HKTC and this may have been the main generator house for the battery. The drainage system to the latrines, kitchens and ablutions is not known but probably relied on septic tanks or cesspits and soakaways, or Elasn chemical closets.

Mount Davis Battery should be regarded as having built heritage value as well as historical value. Since the end of the Second World War, many of these relics of war, once a matter of life and death for many of their occupiers, were quietly disappearing.

***Rarity,
Built Heritage
Value &
Authenticity***

The old military structures have a role to play in the defence of Hong Kong. They remain a reminder of Hong Kong's tumultuous days and a corner

***Social Value
& Local***

of serenity amidst the commotion of present day Hong Kong. They are of great *Interest* interest to military historians, and they are well known to the hikers as access to the site is not restricted.

As far as is known there are no plans to redevelop the old battery site so *Adaptive* that the question of adaptive re-use does not arise. *Re-use*