



# Plymouth

**Matt Leonard** explores the military history etched into the townscape of Plymouth.

**A**s the Spanish Armada approached Plymouth on the evening of 20 July 1588, the English fleet lay in wait off the Devon coast. The next morning, Lord Howard of Effingham, along with Sir Francis Drake – his game of bowls complete – led the fleet into a battle that would echo through history.

That first day of fighting was indecisive, but Drake, Howard, Hawkins, and many others would ensure the rise of England's power on the world stage. A new era was dawning, and it was one in which Plymouth would play a vital role.

## Navy town

Plymouth was to become the hub of Britain's naval empire, a home for the fleet, and, as the city's importance grew, an increasingly tempting target for the country's enemies. As a result, more and more defences sprang up along the coast, and by the outbreak of the Second World War, Plymouth was one of the most heavily defended cities in the country.

But this was also the conflict that would signal the beginning of the end for Plymouth. Mercilessly bombed by the *Luftwaffe*, the city was almost completely destroyed, and as Britain's

empire dwindled, so did Plymouth's military importance.

In the centre of the modern city is the Anglican Charles Cross Church, now just a shell, the building having been blown apart during the Blitz. It is a reminder that the military significance of Plymouth was to extract a high toll from the city's inhabitants. Today, the church is swamped by a new shopping complex (named after Sir Francis Drake), but the impact of the

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**Above** Ship of war: HMS *Northumberland* lies docked in Devonport. The impressive refit facility can be seen in the background.

church is not diminished by this onset of modernity. On the contrary, the church and its surroundings paint a picture of how the city, and the battlefield, has changed over the decades.

Long before Drake and Hawkins were terrorising the Spanish Main and the Armada's attack set in motion a chain of events that was to determine the global order for centuries, Plymouth was already a notable English town. In the 13th century, for example, it was the base for raids and counter-raids against pirates operating out of Brittany.

These pirates were a serious problem for English merchantmen, and attacks on coastal towns were common. The bus station is situated at Bretonside – an area of the city centre so named in memory of a raid by the Bretons on the fledgling city.

Through the succeeding centuries, Plymouth continued to be a centre of military importance, as well as a trading port of some note. But as the years rolled by, the trading ships began to disappear. It became more cost-effective to use other ports closer to France and mainland Europe.



As trade diminished, the military stepped in. In 1690, the dockyard opened, the first of its kind. A small conurbation, known as Devonport, grew up around – and to service – the new dockyard. It was not long before ‘Devonport’ began to rival Plymouth in size, yet it was not officially part of the city.

### Hub of empire

By the start of the Seven Years’ War (1756–1763), Plymouth was at the forefront of England’s naval might. The small coastal village of Cawsand, about 8 miles away, was the designated bad weather anchorage for the Western Squadron of the English fleet, tasked with blockading the French ports of Brest, Rochefort, and La Rochelle.

Under the command of Admiral Anson – who famously circumnavigated the world between 1740 and 1744 – the squadron pioneered the tactic of replenishment at sea. Food (including livestock), water, ammunition, and spare parts were all shipped out of Plymouth and transferred to warships at sea. This tactic enabled the Navy to spend longer on operations, which in turn meant that the blockades of foreign ports were far more effective.

The ships of the Royal Navy would become ubiquitous, an ever-visible presence on the oceans of the world. Anson’s ideas were further developed during the Napoleonic Wars, and replenishment at sea is a common practice today, used by navies the world over.

During the Seven Years’ War, work was started on the Royal Naval Hospital at

Stonehouse. Until the mid 18th century, the navy had no dedicated hospitals, but the increasing size of the fleet coupled with the ferocity of modern combat dictated that this should change. The first hospital was built at Haslar, near Portsmouth, and the Royal Naval Hospital, Stonehouse, Plymouth, came shortly afterwards.

It was built on a 26-acre site, designed to be primarily accessible from the water. Near the hospital is the Royal William Yard, created as a purpose-built stores complex for supporting the fleet stationed off the French coast at Brest. These complexes, which used to define Plymouth as a major naval base, have been reconfigured to define the new Plymouth that is now emerging, having become expensive apartments and small office complexes. As Britain’s military might

diminishes, Plymouth is preparing for a very different future, and this is reflected throughout the city.

### Steam power

By the middle of the 19th century, there was a real fear that the new French steamships would be able to elude the ageing, and mostly sail-powered, Royal Navy. To combat the perceived threat, the government built a chain of Palmerston forts from Bovisand to Tregantle, as well as the impressive breakwater that protects Plymouth Sound from the elements.

These were enormous building projects, and, despite Lord Palmerston’s insistence that they were essential to the defence of Britain, they were a largely unnecessary undertaking. The Admiralty had advised the government that the French threat was overstated. France had

**Above** A Trafalgar Class attack submarine (SSN) lies off the Plymouth breakwater, guarded by a police launch.

**Below** ‘Bretonside’ bus station, Plymouth’s new shopping complex, and the Charles Church all share the same space, vying for identity and telling of the city’s rich and varied history.







**Above** The refit facility and dry-dock at Devonport, now used for military and commercial purposes.

**Right** A photograph of Union Street in Plymouth before the Second World War.

relatively few of the new steamships, and in any case, the British shipbuilding industry could easily outpace the French, which they proceeded to do.

Many of these forts are still *in situ* today, and although their importance, or necessity, is debateable, they are an undoubted part of the area's heritage, a tribute to the quality of British engineering, and a glimpse into an era when Plymouth was a very different city.

Towards the end of the 19th century, Devonport became a major shipbuilding and repair facility. Ships had been built at the dockyard since before the time of Nelson – indeed, one of the slips used to launch ships for Nelson's fleet is still in existence today. But the dockyard went on to build the legendary Dreadnought battleships, and the last warship to be constructed there was the frigate *Scylla*,

The oil-tank farm at Wilcove includes a huge twisted tank which burned for days after a Heinkel bombed it in 1941.



launched in 1968. After completing her service, *Scylla* was eventually scuttled in Whitsand Bay as an artificial reef for divers – creating another relic, this one lying beneath the tempestuous battlefield.

Devonport is still used as a warship refit facility now. The impressive complex allows for up to three frigates or destroyers to be dry-docked at once, under cover, saving a fortune in taxpayers' money. The dockyard also services the super-yachts of the rich and famous. These vast pleasure-cruisers can be seen moored alongside the warships, highlighting again the way in which Plymouth is adapting its traditional role in order to survive.

## World wars

The 20th century marked the beginning of the end for Plymouth as a military stronghold. During the First World War, Devonport played a major role in the

convoy battles, as Britain continually fed the military juggernaut in Flanders and northern France. Most of the fleet was evacuated to Scapa Flow, but Plymouth remained important for escort ships and the movement of troops to and from the frontlines in Europe. Flying boats operated from Mount Batten during both World Wars, and the hangars and slipways are still here today.

It was the Second World War that changed the city forever. Plymouth was a major target for the *Luftwaffe*. During what was to become known as the 'Plymouth Blitz', the city was severely bombed. The scars of the battle are not hard to find. The oil-tank farm at Wilcove, opposite the dockyard, still includes a huge twisted tank, which burned for days after a Heinkel bombed it in 1941. The Church at Charles Cross also stands as a defiant monument to the civilian dead, refusing to bow to the post-1945 world.





**Left** An original slip at Devonport, once used to launch the ships of Nelson's navy.

**Below** Fort Picklecombe: once part of Palmerston's defensive system that supported the dockyard, today the fort is home to the wealthy.



But these individual reminders perhaps detract from the larger price the city paid. A visit to the modern city centre reveals little of its ancient past. The centre is largely concrete: a new vision of society, designed by Abercrombie, and built on the ashes of the war. The only original parts that still exist are the Citadel, which today houses the 29 Commando Regiment, and the Barbican, its small, claustrophobic streets and tall houses offering a taste of what life was like in the time of Sir Francis Drake – a time before Plymouth became a victim of its own success.

### Post-war Plymouth

After the Second World War, the dockyard continued to operate. It refitted aircraft carriers such as the

*Ark Royal*, and was the last dockyard in Britain able to refuel nuclear submarines; a facility no longer required, as modern submarines have reactor cores that last as long as the boat's hull. The dockyard is still the Headquarters of the Royal Navy's Sea Training Organisation, which trains ship's crews from other navies.

Although Plymouth has a predominantly military heritage, it is also famous for other seafaring achievements. The Pilgrim Fathers set sail from the city in the *Mayflower*, bound for the New World. A small plaque, lost in the hustle and bustle of the tourists visiting the Barbican and the Hoe, marks the location of their departure.

Sir Francis Drake's circumnavigation of the world also began and ended at

Plymouth. Many modern-day adventurers and countless long-distance yacht races follow in his footsteps every year.

Despite the cutbacks in defence and the demise of the country's once great Navy, Plymouth has adapted well to a changing world. Today it is a modern city, changing its character in order to survive. Sailing boats, luxury apartments, and idyllic beaches may now be the focus of this seemingly pleasant, seaside city, but beneath the modern landscape lies a bruised, bloodied, and proud battlefield, which, as the Charles Cross church stoically professes, refuses to be forgotten. 🚩

### Further information

For more from Matt Leonard, visit [www.modernconflictarchaeology.com](http://www.modernconflictarchaeology.com).

