

Part of Historic Environment Scotland



CANMORE

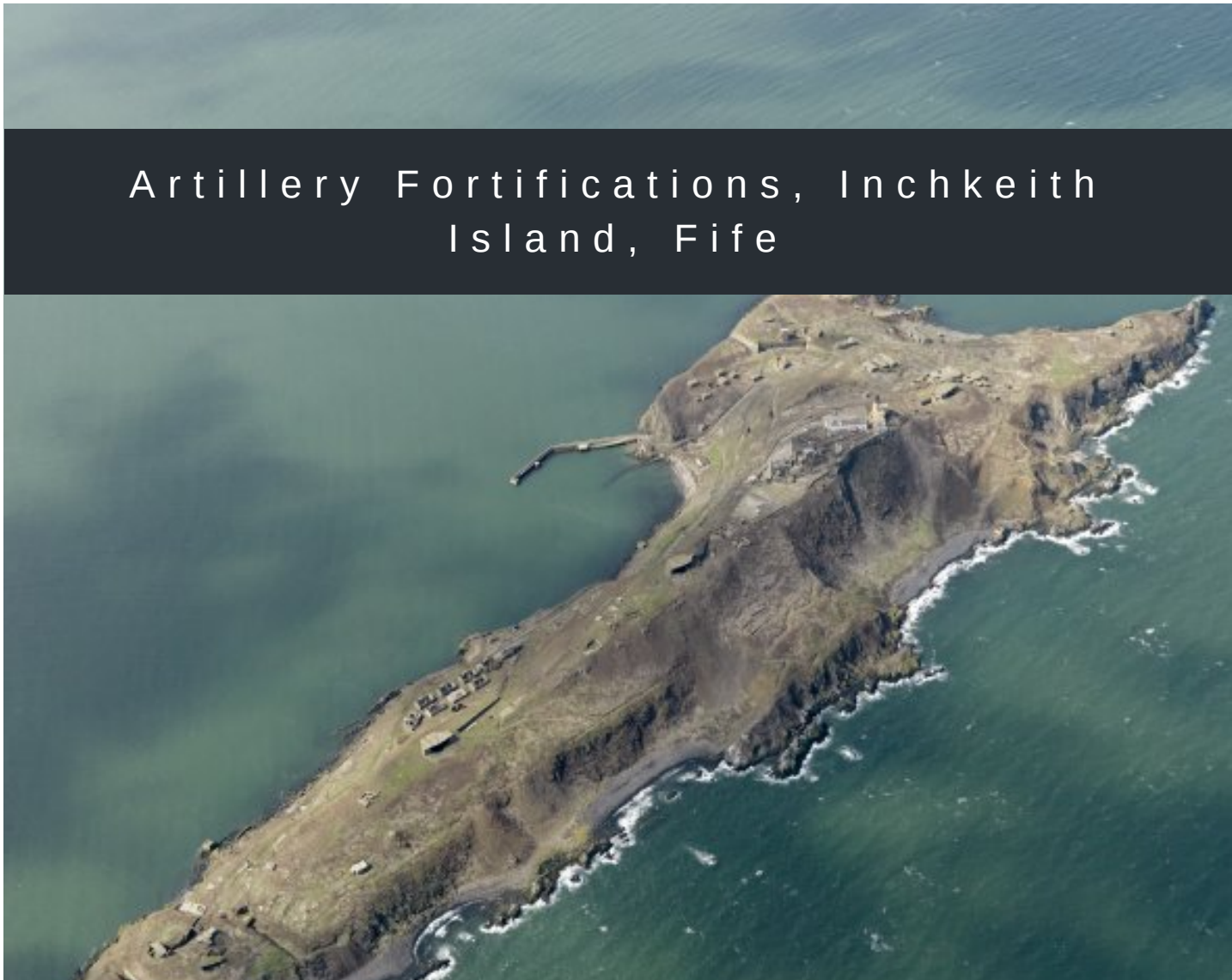
NATIONAL RECORD OF THE HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT



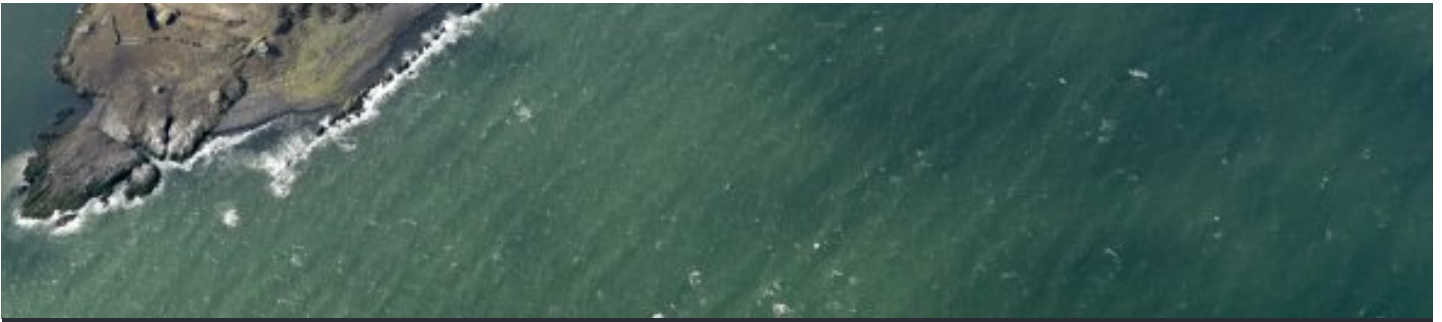
Archaeology InSites



◀ [Return to Archaeology InSites](#)



Artillery Fortifications, Inchkeith Island, Fife



Remembering war

Rushing through a small highland village this weekend in search of a shop, the traffic came to abrupt stop. The sound of a piper could be heard drifting up the glen – a wedding perhaps, a friend suggested. The shop was closed, but only briefly, and after a few minutes the village went back to normal. A handful of people, some in military fatigues, others in fur coats and suits reminiscent of generations past, strolled back down the glen to their homes. It was, of course, Remembrance Sunday. The group had gathered by a memorial to the fallen that I had never noticed before.

*Remembrance Day comes as the autumn leaves fall and the light fades. It brings a chance to reflect and be thankful for those who gave their lives but also to consider the consequences and causes of such total war, as many writers have done. In *The Road to Wigan Pier* George Orwell went so far as to suggest that the experience of wartime Britain had fundamentally damaged the power and prestige of men of authority – no longer would the working man simply do as he was told. In *Sunset Song*, Lewis Grassie Gibbon's masterpiece of rural literature, he crafted characters of admirable qualities, who challenged the idea that there was any sense in sending young men to almost certain death for a struggle they knew nothing about.*

*A battalion of war memorials (more than 2,700) are not the only physical reminder of the great 20th century struggles in Europe. To these can be added the vestiges of barrack blocks, gun emplacements and the strangely named pillboxes (as if they provided a cure) that dot the Scottish countryside. The readers of *Edinburgh*, if they raise their eyes to the northern horizon, can usually see a long narrow island in the Firth of Forth with a silhouette that vaguely recalls a battleship: *Inchkeith*. This distinctive island hosts perhaps Scotland's richest landscape of military archaeology, a palimpsest of some 500 years of fortification and conflict.*





An island battleship

In stark contrast to the battlefields of Europe which have often been ploughed-out of existence, Inchkeith still retains much of its latest military infrastructure – gun emplacements, searchlight batteries, blockhouses, fire trenches, observation posts, and a remarkable rainwater collection system. Military activity on the Island reached its peak in the 20th century. The Victorian forts were re-engineered for modern warfare; pillboxes were erected and trench systems dug to provide close protection for the island. During World War 2 the island acted as the headquarters for the Outer Defences of the Firth of Forth, protecting Edinburgh and the anchorage from bombardment, and preventing access by enemy ships. The island was also vulnerable to attack from the air so overhead protection was constructed on all gun positions and anti-aircraft defences were added. At its peak it has a garrison of over 1,100 men. The men were housed in newly built barracks with associated cook houses, dining and recreational facilities.

The surviving infrastructure from 1945 is in fact the last in series of fortifications of the island, each overlying the other and leaving scars on the fragmentary rock. Beginning in 1878 (just a few years before work on the nearby rail bridge began) the Royal Engineers constructed three artillery forts on the island and improvements to the defences continued until the outbreak of World War 1, such as the addition of new gun emplacements. More than 300 years earlier during the Rough Wooing, a war between Scotland and England, the English had constructed a fort here which later fell into French hands. It is strange to think that the French rebuilt and garrisoned a fort here for more than 10 years, on one occasion firing their cannon at an English ship near their shore.

Little remains of the old fort as much of it was removed in 1803 when a lighthouse was built. A stretch of wall standing to 6m in height marks the eastern wall, and a panel bearing the Royal Arms, the initials M R (for Maria Regina, Mary Queen of Scots) and 1564, has been re-set over the courtyard entrance. The Victorian forts survive in better shape, though buried a jungle of later concrete buildings, and rank vegetation, each was recorded in detail by RCAHMS in 2009.

Inchkeith remains a powerful monument to war. No wreaths are laid there, no roll-call of the dead read out. But each element of its historic landscape speaks to the stories of the men and women that worked there, and to the continental conflicts with which they were involved.

George Geddes, Archaeologist, Survey and Recording





<https://canmore.org.uk/collection/1113644>

<https://canmore.org.uk/collection/458730>

<https://canmore.org.uk/collection/1138088>



#ArchInSites

Please be aware that this site may be on private land. For more information regarding access please consult the [Scottish Outdoor Access Code](#)



[Accessibility Policy](#)
[Buying Images](#)
[Cookie Policy](#)
[Legals](#)
[Glossary](#)
[Contact](#)
[MyCanmore](#)
[Sitemap](#)
[User Guide](#)



SUPPORTING

year of young people
bliadhna na h-òigridh
2018



HISTORIC
ENVIRONMENT
SCOTLAND

ÀRAINNEACHD
EACHDRAIDHEIL
ALBA

© Historic Environment Scotland. Scottish Charity No. SC045925