

# Military Activity

There is a long history of military use of Dorset's coast. Historically, the most significant site has been the naval base at Portland, established in the 1840s. The port is now privately owned and managed by Portland Harbour Authority Limited however the Royal Fleet Auxiliary are a major user of the port and other military activities continue including magnetic ranging at Newton's Cove, Weymouth and noise, ranging off Grove Point, Portland. Three significant military facilities, the Army Gunnery School based at Lulworth, the Royal Marines landing craft training wing based at Poole and the Wyke Regis Training Area, remain long term commitments. Offshore, the coastal seas are used for some naval exercises. This topic paper summarises the current position of military activity on the Dorset Coast.

## Use by the Armed Forces

UK defence policy demands the maintenance of capable armed forces, under the responsibility of the Ministry of Defence (MoD). In meeting this requirement, the military require residential bases, and access to adequate facilities for exercise and training. Dorset continues to play its part in fulfilling the MoD's requirements by hosting three significant military establishments, which represent long-term commitments:

**DTE – Lulworth Gunnery School** provides live firing and tactical training to meet the needs of the Army. The ranges cover more than 2,830 hectares of land to the east of Lulworth, and a defined sea danger area which extends up to six nautical miles offshore between Lulworth Cove and St. Aldhelm's (St Alban's) Head. Lulworth Ranges have been a feature of the coast since the First World War.



**Lulworth Ranges taken from Portland. Copyright: Dorset Coast Forum**

**Assault Group Royal Marines, based at Poole** RM Poole is the home of the Landing Craft Specialisation and 148 (Meiktila) Forward Observation Battery Royal Artillery. Their job is to direct from ashore gunfire from Navy ships to ensure maximum accuracy. Royal Marines of all ranks come to Poole to be taught how to operate the boats of the Royal Marines Commandos. The wing use 7.4 metre, fast Rigid Raiders and Landing Craft of 13.5 and 27.4 metres. Most of

the afloat activity takes place within Poole Harbour, although Studland Bay, Lulworth Cove, Worbarrow Bay and Portland Harbour may be used for exercises.

One of the new unit's roles is to parent all the Royal Marine Assault Squadrons: 6 Assault squadron Royal Marines (ASRM) in HMS Albion and 9 ASRM in HMS Ocean.

Historically, the first military development on the site at Poole was in 1942, with the creation of Royal Air Force Hamworthy, Coastal Command. In 1944 the site transferred to Transport Command and was then handed over to the Royal Navy. RAF Station Hamworthy formally ceased to exist on 1st May 1944 and during the Second World War the site was known as HMS Turtle and was used by the Royal Navy for training personnel for the D-Day Landings. In 1954 the site was taken over by the Royal Marines.

**The Wyke Regis Training Area** is part of the Defence Training Estate South West. It comprises three sites:

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1. A small-arms range on the northern side of the Fleet with a safety area that extends across Chesil Beach and out to sea. The range is typically used for 150 days per year and sentries are posted when it is live to police the footpaths and offshore area.
2. A camp and rifle range at Chickerell which is used for marksmanship training and for basic fieldcraft and patrolling exercises.
3. Verne Yeates on Portland which is used for bridging and signals training.

Substantial offshore areas are marked on charts as Navy exercise areas. Dorset's coast has been used for naval training for many years but the closure of the Naval Base and relocation of the Navy's sea training unit has led to a substantial decrease in use. The Navy advises that surface use by warships is much reduced, and the main focus for exercise is now off South Devon and Cornwall extending out to the Atlantic. Ships will be found on passage and continue to conduct independent exercises off the Dorset coast. The Navy advise that submarine exercises are now extremely rare off the Dorset Coast and consider that this aspect can be discounted.

## Defence research

Aside from direct use by the armed forces, parts of the Dorset Coast have been used for defence research and testing for many years. This work previously undertaken by

the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency (DERA) is now undertaken by QinetiQ, a Public Limited Company which operates the MoD Test and Evaluation Ranges under a 25 year Long Term Partnering Agreement (LTPA) with the MoD. QinetiQ, an international defence and security company has offices at Hurn, Winfrith, Christchurch, Bincleaves in Weymouth, Grove Point (Old Coastguard Lookout) and Portland Bill on the Isle of Portland. The Winfrith offices operate the MoD Acoustic and Magnetic Sea Ranges within the limits of Portland Harbour and a The Land Magnetic Facility at Portland Bill. QinetiQ was also involved in sonar and other maritime defence equipment development, but this aspect has now been transferred to Atlas Elektronik, which retains an interest in the Short and Acoustic Ranges on the breakwater in Portland Harbour.

## Navy at Portland: A brief history and current position

Portland offered a natural anchorage for sailing warships since the late 1500s but acquired greater strategic significance in the mid 19th century when the French naval base at Cherbourg was extended. The first of the breakwaters was constructed in 1872 and then, the remaining two were completed in 1894. The improved shelter provided by the breakwaters made Portland harbour an increasingly popular anchorage, particularly for the Channel Fleet. The base remained important throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century until the 1990s, when the Navy opted to close it due to budgetary pressures. Flag Officer Sea Training (FOST) organisation, responsible for co-ordinating the Navy's sea

exercises was relocated to Plymouth in 1995 after over 40 years at Portland. The base closed in 1996 and was sold to Portland Harbour Authority Limited (PHAL). The Navy handed over harbour authority responsibility to PHAL on 1 January 1998.



**Royal Fleet Auxiliary Ship at Portland Harbour. Copyright: Dorset Coast Forum**

Portland Harbour is still used by the military. The Royal Fleet Auxiliary Service (RFA), a civilian manned fleet owned by the Ministry of Defence, supply warships of the Royal Navy at sea with fuel, food, stores and ammunition. The RFA Wave Ruler, RFA Bayleaf and other ships are regularly berthed for maintenance and to collect supplies.

RFA Sir Tristram, an ex-navy warship support vessel, is now permanently moored in Portland Harbour and is used by the military for helicopter, diving and ordnance operations. Royal Naval Reserve (RNR)

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Divers Branch have used RFA Tristram for part of a course specialising in Underwater Force Protection (UWFP) & Search techniques, where they learnt how to lay and carry out underwater searches.

The Noise and Magnetic/ Degaussing Ranges are within the Harbour limits.

## Managing the Impact of Military Activity

Past military activity has had a significant impact on the coast. Reclamation to build the Portland Tank farm was at the expense of the Mere, an area of tidal mudflats. The history of use of hazardous materials means that possible contamination of land and sediments remains an issue, although intrusive Land Quality Assessment Reports and Explosive Ordnance investigations have been routinely carried out by the MoD prior to the sale or release of sites in recent years.

Where military activity continues it has the potential to impact significantly on the coast. Because MoD activity on the Dorset Coast is well-established, its impacts are generally well understood and management arrangements are in place to mitigate them where possible. The most significant impact is that of the RAC Gunnery School at Lulworth. Safety requirements mean that public access to the coast within the ranges is not permitted for much of the year. Access to designated paths (the Range Walks) and beaches is permitted during the main school holiday periods.

Limited public access and reduced agricultural activity within the ranges has had some wildlife benefits through reduced disturbance. A range conservation committee meets on a six-monthly basis to advise the MoD on management practises.



**Military boat in Weymouth Harbour. Copyright: Dorset Coast Forum**

The sea danger areas restrict recreational boating and fishing during weekdays outside the main holiday periods, and during 6 weekends each year. The school maintains an emergency pollution plan, and radar coverage of the offshore danger areas, which is integrated with the Coastguard and HM Customs.

The main possible impact of RM Poole is from the use of fast boats within busy waters in Poole Harbour. The lead responsibility for managing the harbour lies with Poole Harbour Commissioners. Whilst the MoD are not subject to harbour authority powers of direction, good liaison with the managers of the harbour remains

the most effective means of avoiding possible conflicts. Outside the harbour RM Poole give rise to limited impacts in the areas where they operate. MoD consider that the most significant impact is from loading and unloading of vehicles from landing craft. However such operations are rarely carried out in Dorset. Good liaison arrangements exist between the Wyke Regis Training Area and Chesil and the Fleet Nature Reserve.

## Integrating Military Activity within Dorset's Coastal Zone

Military activity need to be integrated with the other uses and activities within the Coastal Zone where possible. Its potential impacts, and the key questions they raise are:

- **Archaeology** - The abandoned village of Tyneham within the Lulworth Ranges is a uniquely interesting site. The use of munitions, the clearance of some wrecks and other military material from the seabed and exercises in general, can result in damage to historical material, if the significance of the site is not recognised.
- **Coastal Defence** - No significant interactions.
- **Educational Use** - No significant interactions.
- **Fishing** - MoD activity may impact on fishing through limiting access within range areas. Surface exercise is a cause of concern due to the potential for propeller damage to fixed fishing gear during vessel manoeuvres. Submarine

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exercise potentially conflicts with the use of trawling gear. The Navy undertakes management of fisheries beyond the 6 nautical mile limit by means of the Fisheries Protection Squadron, which is under the direction of Defra and the MFA.

- **Geology and Geomorphology** - Military activity can restrict access to important geological sites, such as the Fossil Forest at Lulworth.
- **Landscape & Seascape** - Buildings, signage and structures associated with military land use may have impacts on the landscape.
- **Marine Aggregates** - No significant interaction.
- **Maritime Industries** - QinetiQ represents an important part of the maritime industry within Dorset, and has a world class reputation for marine and naval technology.
- **Oil & Gas** - The offshore ranges are a minor constraint on exploration activity.
- **Pollution & Environmental Quality** - MoD establishments have the potential to create pollution in the same way as civilian residential and commercial property, and are required to meet national environmental legislation. The most obvious impact of military activity is noise (from firing, watercraft or helicopters), which is unavoidable, but often mitigated by the timing of activity. The presence of unexploded munitions on the seabed is a further hazard.
- **Ports & Shipping** - Interactions have reduced following the closure of Portland naval base. The Navy remain a potential customer for Dorset's ports, whilst naval shipping in the Channel takes place alongside commercial traffic. Magnetic and noise ranging will also lead to some restrictions on activities.
- **Recreation & Tourism** - Military activity is a constraint on recreational/tourist use of coastal land and water within and adjacent to army and navy property, and within the offshore ranges. Restrictions include that to public access within the Lulworth Ranges, water use within the offshore danger areas, and restrictions on diving and watercraft within some areas around Portland Harbour. Land within the Ranges is, however, a popular attraction to visitors when open, and at these times MoD has an important role in providing visitor facilities and managing pressures.
- **Biodiversity** - Chickerell is designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), as are areas of Verne Yeates. Lulworth ranges are within an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and are also an SSSI. Overall MoD management in Lulworth Ranges is considered to benefit wildlife by providing effective 'reserve' status. Some aspects of conservation management, such as grazing, conflict with military use. Munitions from the ranges are a source of seabed litter. The potential impact of underwater noise from MoD activity is an area of increasing interest. MoD craft add to the pattern of craft disturbance in Poole Harbour, particularly

when navigating in excess of the harbour speed limit.

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