

South Brent fort

I was intrigued when a member of South Brent Storytellers & Archive's Facebook group said there used to be a barracks on the triangle of land between South Brent's Plymouth and Totnes roads and that some of its walls are still there.

Excited to check it out, I was surprised to realise that the high stone wall on Plymouth Road, which I'd passed countless times and thought little of, matched a stretch of wall on Totnes Road.

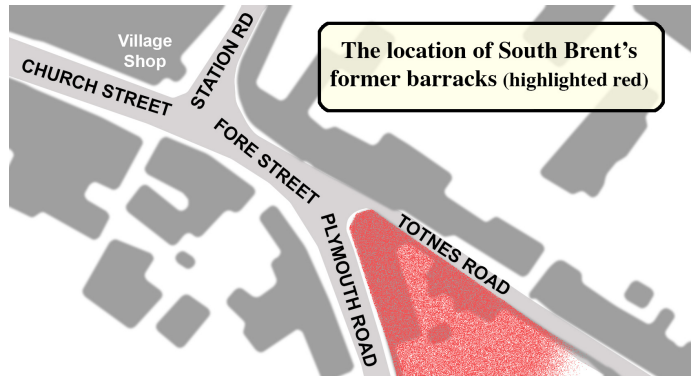
I found a promising lead in a 2010 book entitled *Ivybridge and South Brent Through Time*, which states that South Brent's "former barracks [were] probably demolished in the early nineteenth century... Until about 1920, [Totnes Road] was called Barrack Street."¹

Unfortunately, none of this checks out. Totnes Road is named in every census from 1891 onwards, while earlier censuses provide no street names for South Brent. On top of this, the barracks seems to have been repurposed, not demolished.

Heritage Gateway's website provides more information, saying that the triangle of land between the Old School Community Centre and the junction of Totnes Road and Plymouth Road has a:

*"very strong local tradition of a drill yard [...] It is bounded by a solidly-built wall, mainly of granite river boulders, about 10-12 feet high, and by two blocks of buildings; a barn (now converted to dwelling house) at the east end and a range of dwellings at the west corner. Both are of a curious character ... and could be connected with the drill yard as stables and barracks respectively. What is now 'Totnes Road', is called 'Barracks Road' on the 1843 Tithe Apportionment."*²

The tithe map confirms what Heritage Gateway says (although National Archives dates the map to 1841, not 1843).³



Above: author's map showing the approximate location of the barracks.

Below: the wall on Totnes Road (author's photo February 2023).



¹ Kiste, J. V. der, & Kiste, K. V. der. (2010). *Ivybridge & South Brent Through Time*. Amberley Pub. E-book.

² *Drill yard, South Brent* (no date) *Heritage Gateway*. Available at: https://www.heritagegateway.org.uk/gateway/Results_Single.aspx?uid=MDV121790&resourceID=104 (Accessed: February 25, 2023).

³ *Tithe map of South Brent* (no date) *The National Archives*. Available at: <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C2300102> (Accessed: February 25, 2023)

Records are surprisingly scant for a military structure of this size. An 1807 map of British fortifications shows nothing on South Brent.⁴ There is, however, evidence that it was erected before Britain went to war with revolutionary France in 1793.⁵ Pressure to accommodate massed troops near the naval port of Plymouth led to a survey in the spring of 1794 “of all available quarters within a day’s march of camp (36 miles), so barracks could be provided for the rest.” The survey found that “Brent & Ivybridge” was one of nine locations that had no need for new barracks being constructed, and could accommodate a company of seventy men.⁶ It’s worth adding that there is no trace of any pre-20th century barracks in Ivybridge. In other words, there was a military structure – aka fort ⁷ – in the proximity of South Brent before England’s war with France in 1793.

	companies	men
Plympton and Ridgeway	2	140
Brent & Ivybridge	1	70
Okehampton & Adjacent	2	140
Launceston, Newport & Adj.	4	280
Tavistock & Adj.	4	280
Kellington, Liskeard, Looe, Saltash, St. Germans, cawsand, & Millbrook	8	560
Plymouth Town	8	560
Plymouth Dock Town	8	560

Above: results of a 1794 survey of pre-existing military accommodation near Plymouth.

Fort building in the reign of Charles II



Above: Charles II (Public domain photograph of 17th-century portrait painting, free to use, no copyright restrictions image - Picryl description)

According to a guide published by Historic England, there was no pattern of building inland fortifications in the 18th century before the Napoleonic wars. However, following the turmoil of the English Civil War, between 1660 and 1685:

“Charles II’s reign saw massive expansion of permanent fortification, partly due to naval and mercantile rivalry with the Dutch. Most visible and impressive survivals today are the fortifications protecting the Royal Dockyards of Portsmouth and Plymouth, Thames and Medway.” ⁸

English Heritage says that one purpose of Plymouth’s Royal Citadel was to “keep watch on a recently rebellious town”. ⁹ Wilcuma, a website focused on Anglo-Saxon and English heritage, expands:

“It has often been said that the object of [Plymouth’s] Citadel, like that of a Norman town castle, was as much to overawe Plymouth as to protect it; and Charles may well have had in mind the disastrous effect of local resistance to the royal cause in the recent Civil War. Certainly it completely dominated the town, and no revolt was feasible as long as its garrison remained loyal.” ¹⁰

⁴ *Map of Great Britain, shewing all the barracks, 1807 (no date) National Library of Scotland.* Available at: https://maps.nls.uk/view/216587068?fbclid=IwAR3p-J7LVFEi-1i0RII0it3xOPSp7zA35O7_z6Q6yxrea_EuT2VVOBAeBbo (Accessed: February 25, 2023).

⁵ *The British Navy, 1793-1802 (no date) napoleon.org.* Available at: <https://www.napoleon.org/en/history-of-the-two-empires/articles/the-british-navy-1793-1802/> (Accessed: February 25, 2023).

⁶ Breihan, J.R. (1990) “Army Barracks in Devon during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars,” *The Devonshire Association Report & Transactions*, 122, courtesy of Devon Rural Archive.

⁷ *Fort* (no date) *Cambridge Dictionary.* Available at: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/fort> (Accessed: February 26, 2023).

⁸ *Military structures* (no date) *Historic England.* Available at: <https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/dlsg-military/> (Accessed: February 25, 2023).

⁹ *Royal Citadel, Plymouth* (no date) *English Heritage.* Available at: <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/royal-citadel-plymouth/> (Accessed: February 25, 2023).

¹⁰ *Plymouth Citadel* (no date) *Wilcuma.* Available at: <https://www.wilcuma.org.uk/the-history-of-devon-after-1066/plymouth-citadel/> (Accessed: February 25, 2023).



Above: the walls of Plymouth's citadel which was built during the reign of Charles II as a defence against the rebellious population (Wikimedia creative commons license).

In other words, during the reign of Charles II, forts were built to defend against the Dutch fleet and/or to protect places that were at risk from anti-royalist rebellion.

There'd have been no reason to build a fort in South Brent to defend against the Dutch because it's approximately ten miles from the nearest stretch of coast. However, there was reason to fear rebellion in the village because it had been an anti-royalist stronghold during the English Civil War.

Below: 19th century depiction of Roundheads interrogating the son of a royalist during the English Civil War by William Frederick Yeames via [Wikipedia](#). Creative Commons.



South Brent during the English Civil War

The civil war that raged in England between 1642 and 1651 was fought between Royalists (supporters of Charles I) and Puritan Parliamentarians, also known as Roundheads, who sought common rule and the abolishment of bishops. The account of Reverend John Gandy and his wife given below shows that South Brent was violently anti-Royalist during the Civil War.

According to a 1697¹¹ study by Reverend John Prince, South Brent's vicar, John Gandy, had been a Royalist whose "loyalty and obedience to his prince, King Charles the first [made him]

¹¹ Prince, J. (1701). *Danmonii Orientales Illustres or the Worthies of Devon*. Reprint, Plymouth: Rees and Curtis, 1810. P. xix. Available at: <https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=TWhBAQAAMAAJ>

obnoxious to the rage and malice of those, whose designs were to pull down both the crown and mitre [and] branded as a malignant”.¹²

A 1714 summary of Prince’s report says that about the year 1645, Mrs Gandy had recently given birth, and had her new baby at her breast, when mounted Puritan soldiers stormed to their South Brent home while her husband was in London. They dragged her out by force and, “when she would catch at the staples of the doors to stay herself, or any other thing, they would barbarously knock off her hands ; until at length they forcibly threw her into the streets, with several little children she had, there to beg, or starve”.¹³

Local historian, Peter Taylor, who’s compiling a comprehensive history of South Brent’s parish church, St Petroc’s, believes the Gandys’ former home is a large house near Lydia Bridge, now named The Manor, which was the vicarage from as early as 1601, until 1971.¹⁴ The present-day structure looks Georgian rather than 17th century or Tudor, but it may well have been rebuilt at some point.



Above: montage of, left: re-enactors dressed as Roundhead soldiers © Dave Hitchborne and licensed for reuse under Creative Commons Licence CC BY-SA 2.0. Right: The Manor, South Brent, which was the vicarage the Gandy family are believed to have been evicted from by Puritan militia (author’s photo, February 2023).

This wasn’t the first time the vicarage had been attacked by Roundhead militia: it “was also several times alarm’d and ransack’d by the Parliament Soldiers.” and, “Once more particularly whilst they were committing their outrages, Mrs. Gandy told them she believed some of them might have wives of their own” and asked them not terrify her because she was heavily pregnant. One of the intruders responded by saying she looked more like a “tyrant than like one that would be affrighted”. He pulled a rope out of his pocket and told her, “I will hang up thy husband with this at his gate.”

¹² Ibid. P. 398.

¹³ Walker, J. (1714). An Attempt Towards Recovering an Account of the Numbers and Sufferings of the Clergy of the Church of England. P. 69. Available at: https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/An_Attempt_Towards_Recovering_an_Account/781DAAAAcAAJ (Accessed: February 24, 2023).

¹⁴ Taylor, P. (2023) E-mail to Lily Style, 25 February.

In 1644, Roundhead soldiers captured John Gandy when he left his house to go to the church and carried him to Dartmouth “about eleven or twelve miles away... in his habit, with his Bible in his hand, as they had seized him ; and was there kept under confinement, till he purchased his liberty at the price of one hundred pounds” (approximately £10,350 in today’s money). When John Gandy was taken to his cell in Dartmouth, “he asked for a bed ; whereupon the serving-maid, with a great deal of scorn and insolence, gave him this (or some such) answer ; *That be should have a rope [sic]*”.

The “barbarity of this action” was made worse by the fact that the Puritan preacher the soldiers replaced Gandy with, had fled religious persecution in Germany and, after arriving in “Exeter in a very poor condition” had been taken in and cared for by John Gandy’s father. On top of this, and Mrs Gandy’s eviction with a newborn baby at her breast, “what completes the vilany [sic] is, that the soldier who was most forward in turning the family out of doors, had been released from prison, where he had lain some time for debt, by Mrs. Gandy.” In other words, a man Mrs. Gandy had freed from prison with her own money (not her husband’s) led the gang that threw her, and her tiny children, onto the street when her husband was in London. So, at least one of the soldiers was well-known to her, and the whole militia may have been members of the community. The only one named is “Major W., who had been one of [John Gandy’s] chief persecutors”.¹⁵



Above: Roundhead pikeman. © *Old Man Leica* and licensed for reuse under this Creative Commons Licence: CC BY-NC 2.0.

Was South Brent fort built in the reign of Charles II?

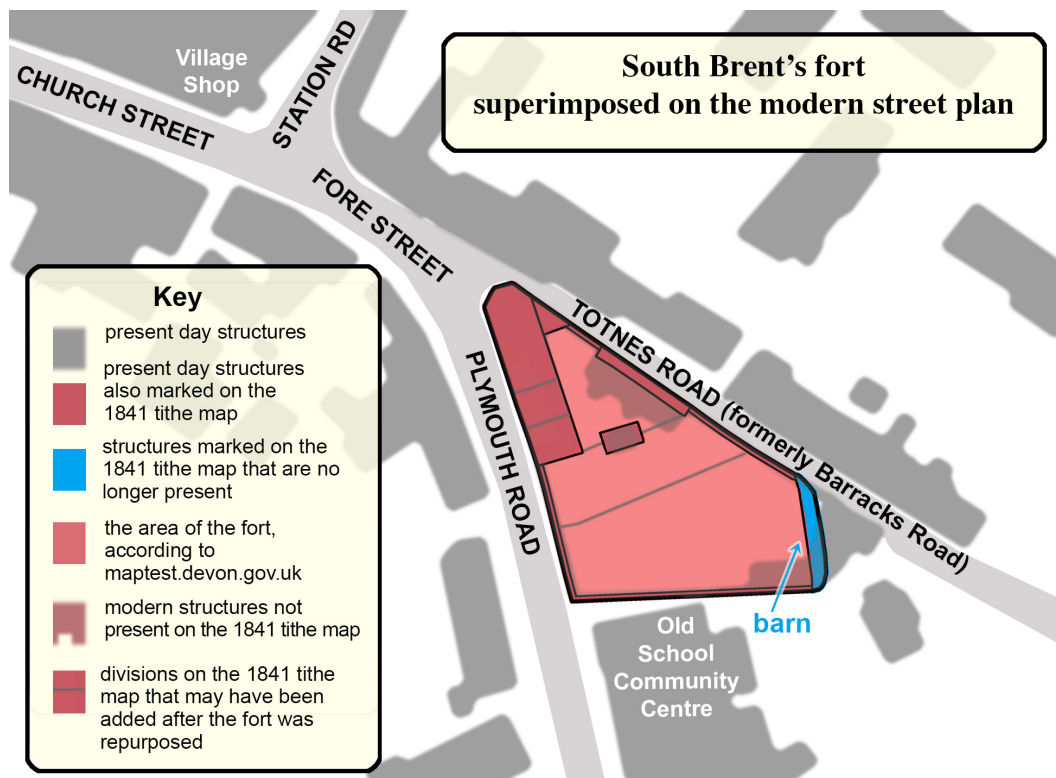
We can’t be certain when South Brent’s fort was constructed, unless an archaeological investigation is carried out, but the little evidence that exists suggests it was built during Charles II’s reign (1660–1685):

- *Extensive fort-like walls around an area of central South Brent which, according to local lore, was once a barracks.*
- *Totnes Road is named Barrack Road in the 1841 tithe apportionment.*
- *A 1794 survey of existing army accommodation near Plymouth found that South Brent & Ivybridge could house 70 men.*
- *There was no pattern of inland fort-building in England during the first nine decades of the 18th century.*
- *Forts were built in anti-Royalist hotspots in the late 1600s.*
- *South Brent was an anti-Royalist hotspot during the English Civil War (1642–1651)*

¹⁵ Walker, J. (1714). *An Attempt Towards Recovering an Account of the Numbers and Sufferings of the Clergy of the Church of England*. P. 69. Available at: https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/An_Attempt_Towards_Recovering_an_Account/781DAAAACAAJ (Accessed: February 24, 2023).

How much of South Brent fort's perimeter survives?

Devon County Council's website has a link to a helpful interactive map with tithe map structures superimposed on the modern landscape. Very usefully, it identifies the area of the former barracks, with pop-up windows providing information about the structures inside it.¹⁶



The map above is based on the interactive one linked on Devon County Council's website, but includes details gleaned from further research which is detailed below.

A walk around the perimeter shows that majority of the fort's wall is intact.

In fact, as I've studied satellite images and maps – both old and new – and explored the walls on foot, more and more of the original structure has become apparent, hidden in plain sight, as it were.

The pink and blue cottages on Totnes Road seem to be the only perimeter buildings that have been altered since the tithe map was surveyed in the 1830s. My partner, Matt, spotted that the top line of the wall extends through them (see photo to the right), suggesting the original fort structure was added to, rather than demolished. The gate



¹⁶ Devon County Council Environment Viewer (no date) ArcGIS web application. Available at:

https://maptest.devon.gov.uk/portaldvl/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=82d17ce243be4ab28091ae1f15970924&extent=280723.7003%2C67952.8502%2C283078.8665%2C69073.3942%2C27700&showLayers=Watermark_3745%3BWatermark_3745_0%3BHistoric_Environment_3349%3BHistoric_Environment_3349_0%3BHistoric_Environment_3349_1%3BHistoric_Environment_3349_2%3BThePolygons_9412%3BThePolygons_9412_0&fbclid=IwAR3NhlUy49X0B0UDTFhINH8jXOoZ0toCjZ61unE7dQJep71JivG5FUSi8 (Accessed: February 25, 2023).

next to the cottages in the photo seems to be the fort's original entrance, still intact.

In fact, the only missing section of the fort's perimeter appears to be in the south-east corner where a barn is shown on the tithe map. Bowling House, the building on the junction of Totnes Road and Plymouth Road, looks modern, but entirely matches the ground plan shown in the 1841 map. Heritage Gateway, which assumes Bowling House is 19th century, says its facade was altered in the 1920s or '30s, and that the block it forms with the cottages next to it on Plymouth Road:

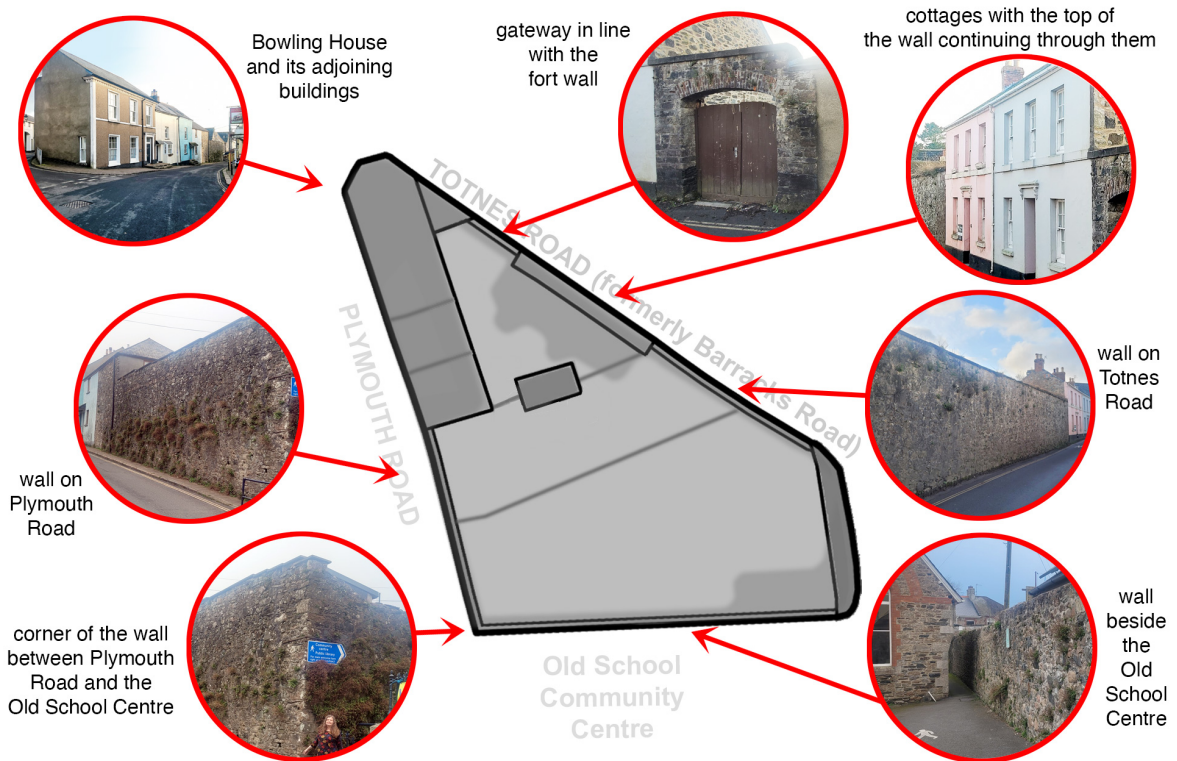
"is unusual and presents problems; the frontages are very tall and the shapes not a true rectangle at the north end where the north gable curves to border the road; the roof line is asymmetrical. A possible explanation for the shape could be that they were originally connected with the drill yard that traditionally occupied the space in the corner between Plymouth Road and the Totnes Road... it is possible that this row of buildings was the barracks".¹⁷



Top of page: Totnes Road: the line of the wall continues through the pink and blue cottages at the level of the upper storey windows.

Above: Bowling House and the cottages on Plymouth Road next to it.

(author's photos, February 2023)



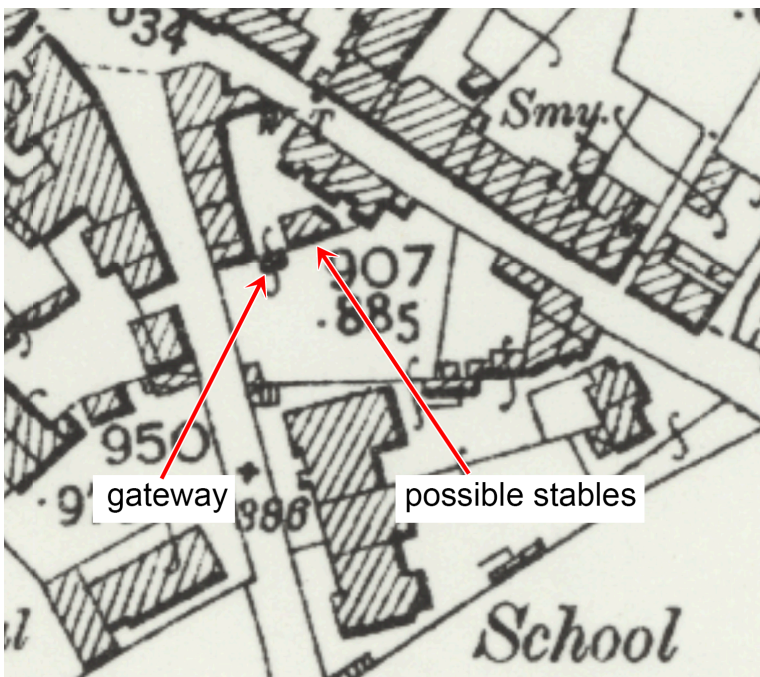
¹⁷ Bowling House, South Brent (no date) Heritage Gateway. Available at: https://www.heritagegateway.org.uk/gateway/Results_Single.aspx?uid=MDV114807&resourceID=104 (Accessed: February 26, 2023).

Inside South Brent fort

Rachel, the current occupier of Bowling House, kindly permitted South Brent Archive to visit her home. Rachel's elderly neighbour, Joan Tribble – who sadly passed away a few years ago – lived in the Plymouth Road cottage immediately next door to Bowling House. She told Rachel that, before refurbishment, Bowling House and the cottages on Plymouth Road had been connected by a series of doors on the ground and second floors. Joan also told Rachel that Bowling House's attic used to have partitions that formed little cubicles. There's still an enormous, ancient fireplace on the attic's end wall.

The courtyard inside the perimeter walls contains intact-seeming architecture from the original fort, including cobbles and what looks like an old stable block with a rusted, corrugated iron roof added at a later date.

There's a high stone wall with an arched gateway on the Plymouth Road side of the structure with the corrugated iron roof (see the photo on the right). The arched gateway looks similar to the one on the Totnes Road stretch of perimeter wall (see bottom left). The small building with the corrugated iron roof is marked on the 1841 tithe map, which also shows a wall where the arched gateway is. The gateway is shown on an early 20th century Ordnance Survey map (below).



Top right: the outhouse that looks like former stables with the arched gateway on the right and cobbles in the foreground (photo by Steph Bradley, 2023)

Below: Ordnance Survey map of Devon CXX.9, Revised: 1904, Published: 1906. Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland.

Below right: internal view of the perimeter gate on Plymouth Road (photo by Steph Bradley, 2023)

Bowling House past and present

In a 1910 photograph (right), the wall of Bowling House facing into Fore Street is un-faced stone, like the perimeter walls. The eastern-most cottage on Plymouth Road has a partially un-faced frontage which joins seamlessly joins the perimeter wall (see photo overleaf). My guess is that the entire block – comprising Bowling House and the row of cottages – was originally un-faced.

The 1910 photo shows doors on either side of Bowling House's un-faced wall. The right-hand one transects the corner with Plymouth Road and is topped with a corniced lintel.

The small attic window at the top of the wall on the right of the chimney is still there today (see photo below right).

The windows on the Plymouth Road side of Bowling House are taller and look Georgian or later in style, and may have been added after the fort was converted into residential dwellings.

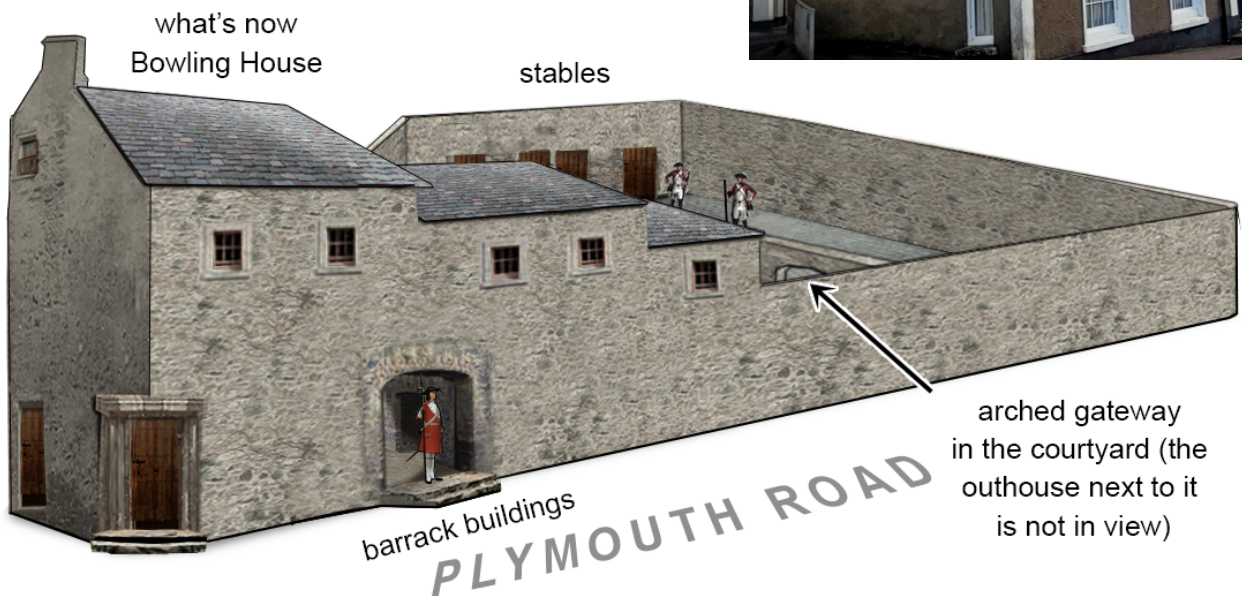
The cornice below the roof on the Plymouth Road side of Bowling House (visible in both photos) may also be a later addition.

My 3D impression (below) is based on the information that's come to light, but involves a lot of guesswork.



Above: detail of Bowling House from a 1910 postcard.
Courtesy of ivybridge-heritage.org

Below: Bowling House today (author's photo, February 2023)



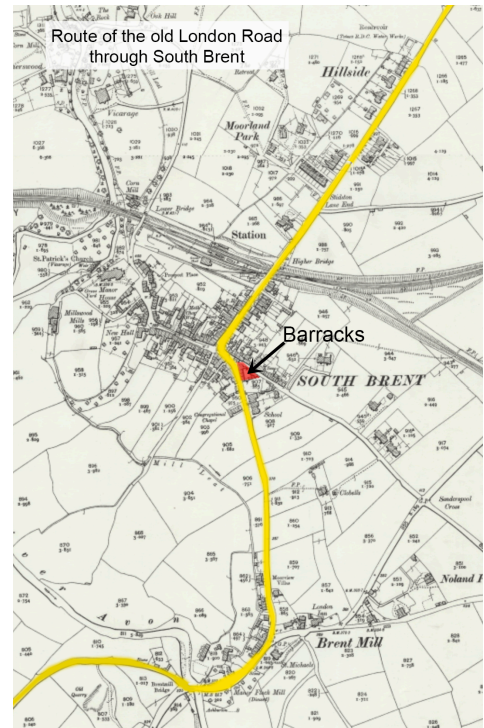
Prime location

Local lore is that the main London–Plymouth road passed through the centre of South Brent and along Plymouth Road. No one would have been able to pass through the village without being seen by the garrison in the fort.

South Brent's market was held where the roads meet between Bowling House and the modern Village Shop. For people who hadn't accepted the restoration of the monarchy, and wanted England's commonwealth state to continue, the fort's garrison may well have felt like an oppressive occupying army.

Right: the route of the old London–Plymouth road superimposed on Ordnance Survey map of Devon CXX.9, Revised: 1904, Published: 1906. Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland.

Below: author's impression of both South Brent's market and passing traffic being dominated by the fort.



Summary

South Brent's fort – named barracks or drill yard in the few records that exist for it – is remarkably intact, both inside and out. The barrack buildings, now occupied by Bowling House and the cottages next to it, used to be joined internally, and at least one attic was partitioned into cubicles.

We can't know when the fort was built without an archaeological investigation, but we do know it had been established before 1794.

Evidence points to it having been constructed in the late 1600s, during the reign of Charles II, to defend the village against the militant Puritans who'd recently persecuted the vicar and his wife.



Above: the author standing on the corner of the fort's wall between Plymouth Road and the grounds of the Old School Community Centre. The cottages on Plymouth Road are visible top right (February 2023)

Acknowledgements

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