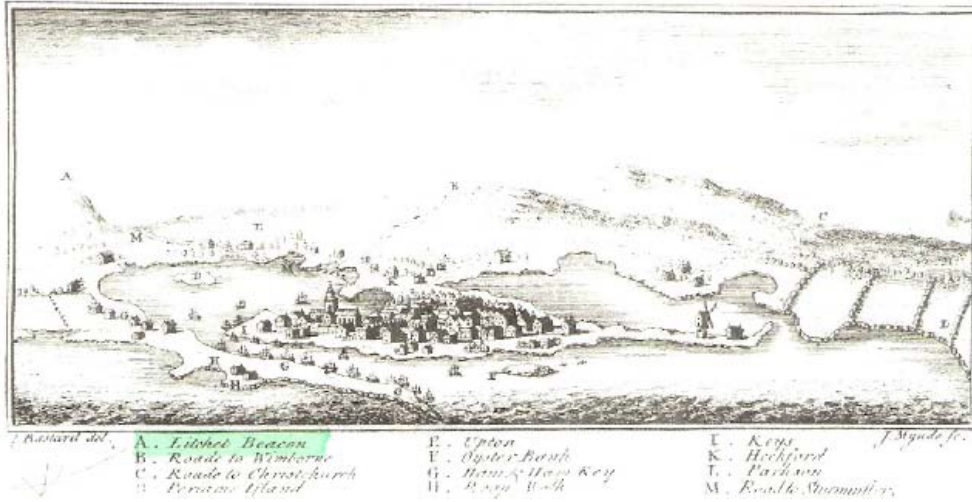


AN ACCOUNT OF THE ROLE OF LYTCHETT BEACON IN DORSET'S DEFENCES

By Stanley Judd & Kim Parker

A Prospect of the Town of POOLE from the West End of BRUNCKSEY ISLAND.



Within the parish of Lytchett Minster, the prominent hill known originally as "Lechiot Beacon", as marked on the 1610 Map of Dorset seen here, has played an important role in Dorset's defences since at least the 14th century. Lytchett Beacon (ONS Map Ref: SY 072 951 GB Grid), or Beacon Hill, as the area is now known, is one of the highest viewpoints in the hinterland of Poole Harbour and takes its name from the beacon once situated there, which would be set alight in warning whenever there was a threat of advancing danger.



The people of the hamlet of Lytchett Beacon were presented with a crest in recognition of their diligence in keeping the beacon manned at all times and of having lit it at the opportune moment when England had been threatened with invasion by the Spanish Armada in 1588. Today the plaque is on display in the Parish Church of Lytchett Minster.

Another Lytchett man who displayed heroism at this critical time was Captain Henry Trenchard. He foiled a cowardly plot by the master of his ship to aid and abet the Spaniards by not fighting, having taken a £10 bribe from a catholic gentleman of Hamworthy. This was the only ship from Lytchett that volunteered to join the fray, but that was one more than from Poole, which pleaded poverty on account of the depredations inflicted by the pirates of Studland and so refused to provide ships to combat the Armada.

Preparations against Napoleonic Invasion 1804

In the early nineteenth century the new threat of invasion came not from the Spaniards but from the French, led by the tyrannical but brilliant Napoleon Bonaparte. A letter from the Lord Lieutenant of Dorset to Mr. Banks at Kingston Lacy on 12 OCT 1803 still survives. In it he requests that Mr. Banks have prepared a beacon on Badbury Rings, sufficient to burn for two hours, to be lit whenever the beacon on St. Catherine's Hill to the east, or those on Lytchett Heath or Woodbury Hill at Bere Regis had been fired. So Beacon Hill was once again called upon to play a part in Dorset's defence and was re-commissioned for the first time since 1607.

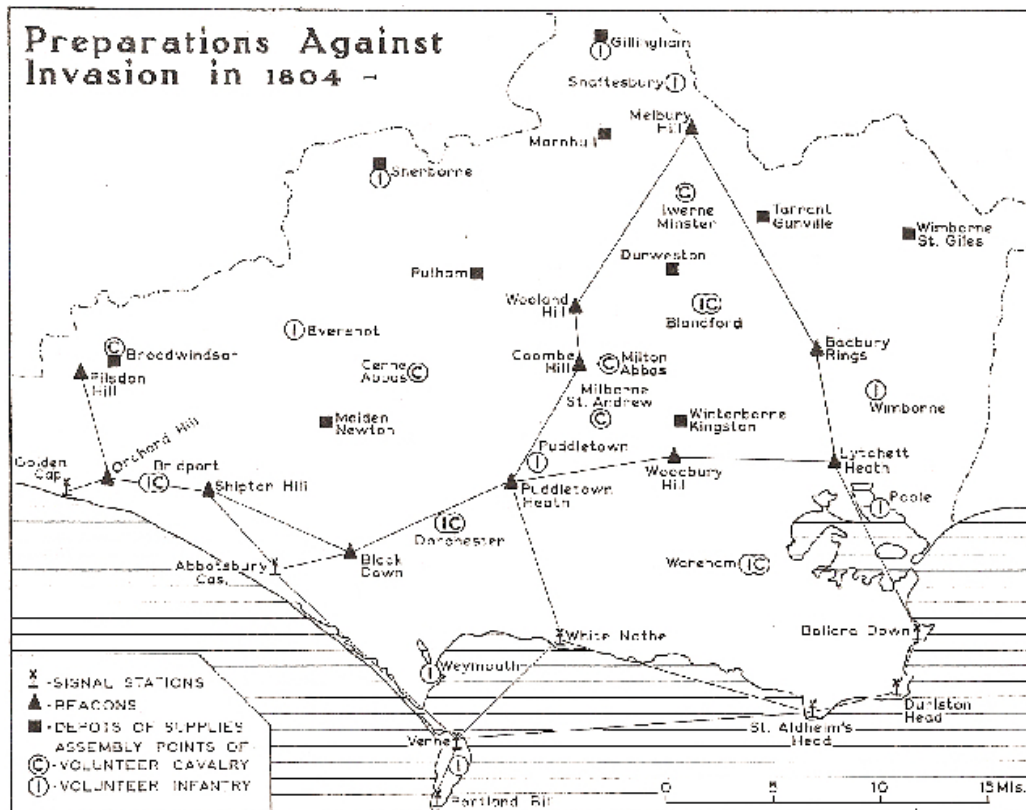
The beacons had to be manned continually, even when mists made them impractical. There were several false alarms when fires in houses or in fields were mistakenly thought to indicate an invasion. However, as Diana Trenchard of the West Dorset History & Genealogical Research Centre has pointed out, the effectiveness of the beacon system was demonstrated on the occasion of Queen Elizabeth II's Silver Jubilee when on the night of 6th June 1977 the lights of beacon fires spread over the whole of the UK within one hour, when no beacon was lit until the previous one was spotted - the only exception being the Channel Isles where a helicopter crew was allowed to spot a mainland beacon.

The following is a direct quote from "***Illustrations of Dorset History***" by R.R. Sellman, published by Methuen, 1960.

"Though the French invasion was expected in the South-East [of England], on the coasts nearest to the great base at Boulogne, careful preparations were made in Dorset and elsewhere to mobilise men and resources. The warning system of signal posts on the most prominent points of the shore-line, and of beacons on the highest hills inland, was designed to alarm the whole county in a few minutes. Back from the coast, places were appointed as depots to which provisions were to be carried; and detailed plans were made so that everyone knew what he had to do and how much transport and supplies each district must provide.

Besides the regular troops and militia encamped on the range of hills behind the coast, a volunteer of 1867 Infantry, 506 Cavalry, and 821 'Sea Fencibles' was ready to assemble at local centres. No large-scale defence schemes like the Military Canal and martello towers of the South-East [of England] were undertaken, but batteries were built or strengthened to protect the harbours at Lyme, Weymouth, and Poole, and the anchorage in Swanage Bay. The alarms and excitements of the period are described in Hardy's "*Trumpet Major*". "

The map below shows Signal Stations to spot the invasion fleet and Beacons within sight of Signal Stations to pass the message on. Most beacons were within sight of two, three or even four other beacons.



From R. R. Sellman's "Illustrations of Dorset History", Methuen 1960

Napoleon never did attempt to invade England. There is a local legend that a Lulworth farmer's wife, who died in 1888, aged 104, saw Napoleon on a cliff-top discussing a possible landing point with a companion. With a verdict of "Impossible!" they returned to their waiting ship.

Lytchett Beacon Cottages and Other Features

Originally there were three cottages on Lytchett Beacon, one of which was used for prayer. These cottages still exist today and incorporate features dating back as much as four centuries. Most of the walls are of cob construction and a recent analysis of one of them revealed children's hand impressions at the very top, so that children were almost certainly employed in their construction.

A track leads from the cottages to the place where the actual beacon was located. Horsemen, or "hoblers" as they were known, used this track to transport the barrels of tar that were used to fuel the flames of the beacon, and of course to get to the beacon to light it in times of need. Today the track is a public right of way and the spectacular views of Poole Harbour in one direction and the tower of Charborough Park in the other are greatly appreciated by ramblers and picnickers.



c1920: A depiction of Fruit Farm Cottage, Lytchett Beacon by an unknown artist

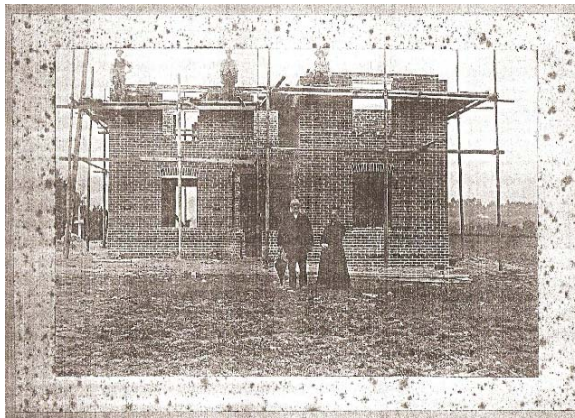
From the clay-pits near Lytchett Beacon very white china clay was dug and exported. In one pit, at a depth of 40 feet, amber was found, possibly the only find in England other than that washed up upon the seashore. Specimens from this find can be seen in the County Museum, Dorchester. Later the clay-pits filled with water, forming two ponds, which are very popular destination for nature-lovers.



POND: Lytchett Beacon 1932

The Lees family enjoying a day out at Lytchett Beacon in 1932

In 1910, ownership of the land passed from the CONWAY family to the ROLES family, who built additional housing. However, even today the area is not built up and the three original cottages have retained their character.



*Mr & Mrs ROLES c1910
Outside their house "Harbour View"
(off Blandford Road North)*



A Lytchett Beacon Cottage in 1976

There is a desire amongst local residents to reinstate Lytchett Beacon hamlet to its original historic status, which some feel has been lost over time, and threatens to disappear altogether due to random acts of officialdom, such as the Post Office deciding to designate it as "Wareham Road, Corfe Mullen, WIMBORNE, BH21". Restoring the name of "Lytchett Beacon" would be a first step in achieving this aim.