



## BUILDING ■ Military intervention: Pringle Richards Sharratt at Fort Nelson

*A sequence of robust new additions cleverly engages with the historic Royal Armouries site, says Thom Gorst. Photos: Edmund Sumner.*

Here, on the chalk downs above the Solent, is the intersection of three narratives about one building. The first is the narrative of a historic structure that was never of much use. The second is the narrative of contemporary museography and heritage management. And the third is that of an architectural intervention which seeks to respect the old building, to reflect today's heritage values, and yet

which speaks of contemporariness in architecture – an abstract notion that might or might not be a separately definable entity.

First, however, we must consider the redundant historic structure that provides the armature for today's intervention. Palmerston's so-called 'follies' were thrown up around the British coastline in the 1860s to guard against an anticipated French

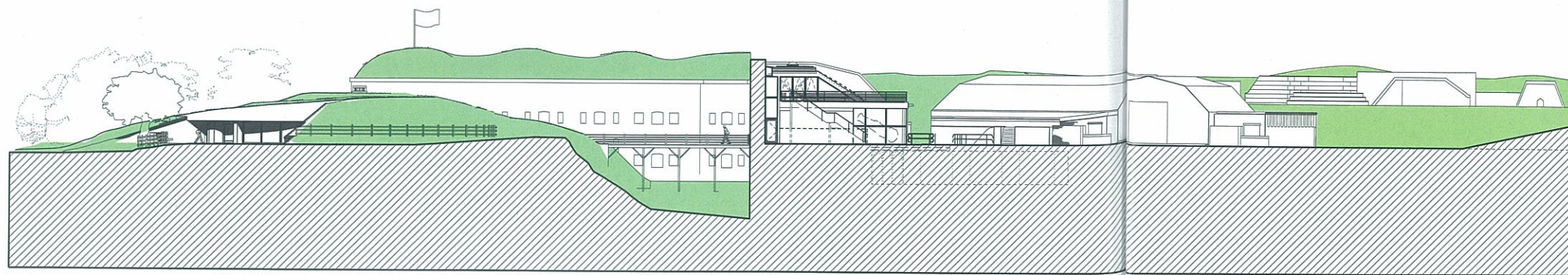
assault. Portsmouth, at the time the centre of the defence of the empire, was encircled by a series of sea and land forts, the latter protecting against attack from inland. That is to say, their guns faced away from the sea, on the assumption that the French would land on beaches to the east and west.

The forts were never used as such; the political situation changed, the technologies of gunnery moved on, and Fort Nelson remained more or less as built. Used contingently as this or that by the military for more than a century, it eventually became a scheduled ancient monument and was acquired by Hampshire County Council for care and conversion to a heritage attraction. Soon afterwards, however, the Royal Armouries took on the site, installed its collection of military hardware, and opened it to public display. Although the name sounds like it is dripping with heritage, the Royal Armouries is a contemporary organisation that looks after three sites: the White Tower in the Tower of London, a major museum in Leeds, designed by Derek Walker in 1998, and Fort Nelson.

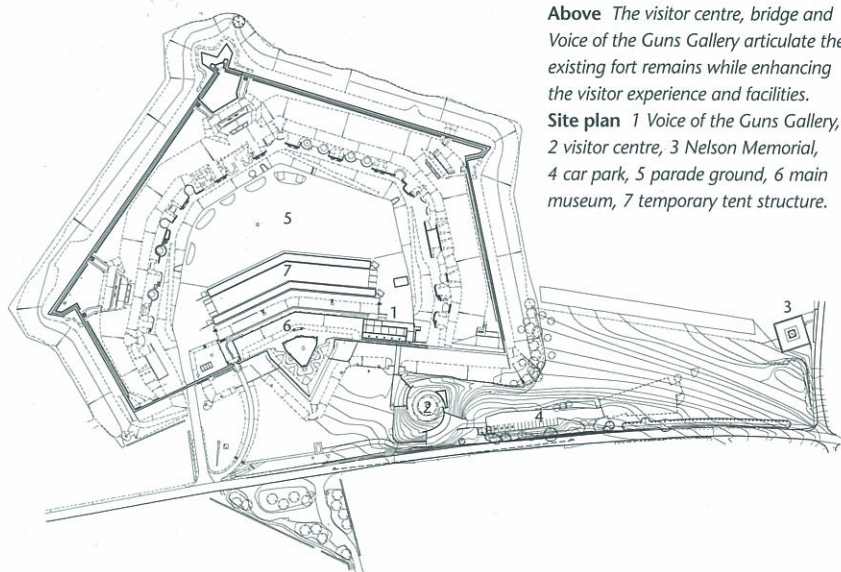
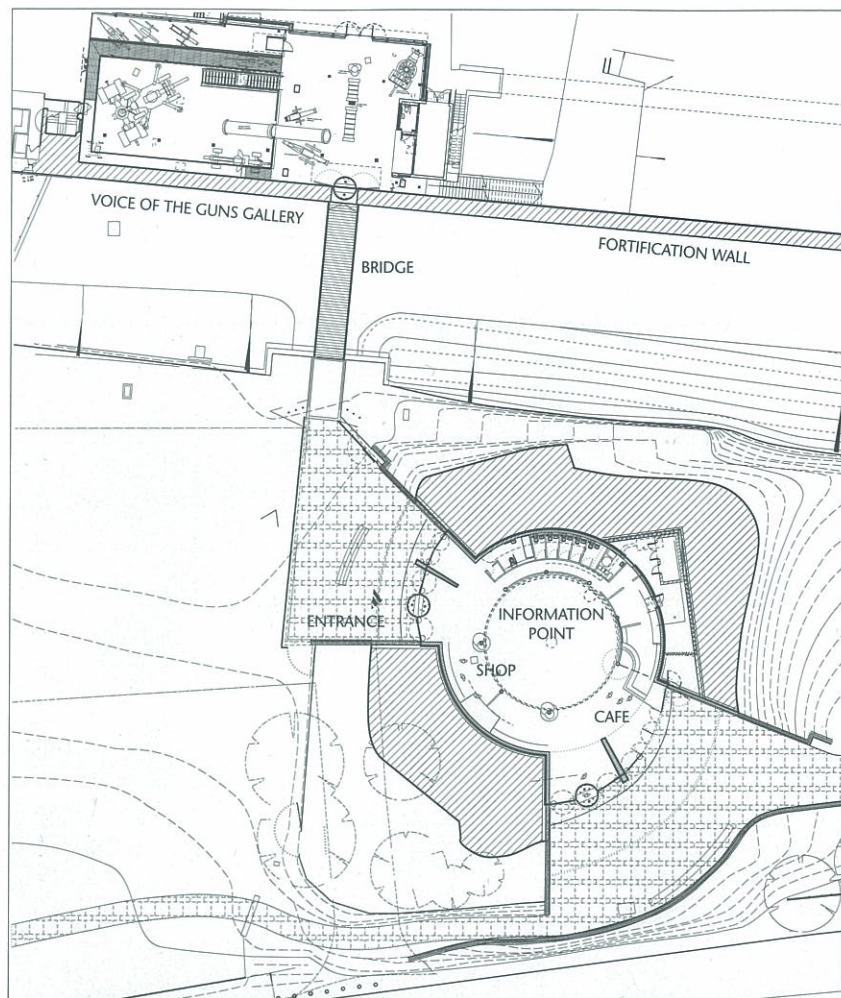
Thematically, it sounds like a good fit – an important collection of guns displayed within one of Palmerston's Follies – though in reality it was anything but. The nineteenth-century structure, with its tunnels and embrasures and wonderfully French-sounding things like caponiers and demi-caponiers is actually no place for heritage trails around big guns at maximum elevation, let alone two sections of Saddam Hussein's 'supergun', cast in Sheffield and famously intercepted on their way to Iraq by UK customs. The only place for all this hardware was in a temporary linear structure out on the old parade ground. And since today's heritage doctrine demands 'experiences', 'discoveries' and 'trails' that involve a tactile relationship with the artefacts, this 'tent' was entirely inadequate. The word 'trail' implies 'route', and this was incoherent before this most recent intervention. Visitors were expected to park on the wrong side of a busy road, to find their way to an unsignalled entrance through a hacked-out breach in the fort



**Above** The new Voice of the Guns Gallery, located within the perimeter walls of the fort, is accessed from a new bridge through a reopened portal; a mezzanine level provides additional display and viewing areas. **Below** The new entrance bridge structure comprises timber columns and struts and steel bracing. **Section** Despite their discrete presence, the new grass-roofed visitor centre and Voice of the Guns Gallery provide a completely new arrival sequence to the fort, together with up-to-date visitor facilities.







**Above** The visitor centre, bridge and Voice of the Guns Gallery articulate the existing fort remains while enhancing the visitor experience and facilities.

**Site plan** 1 Voice of the Guns Gallery, 2 visitor centre, 3 Nelson Memorial, 4 car park, 5 parade ground, 6 main museum, 7 temporary tent structure.

wall, then to the linear 'tent', and out again, but to where?

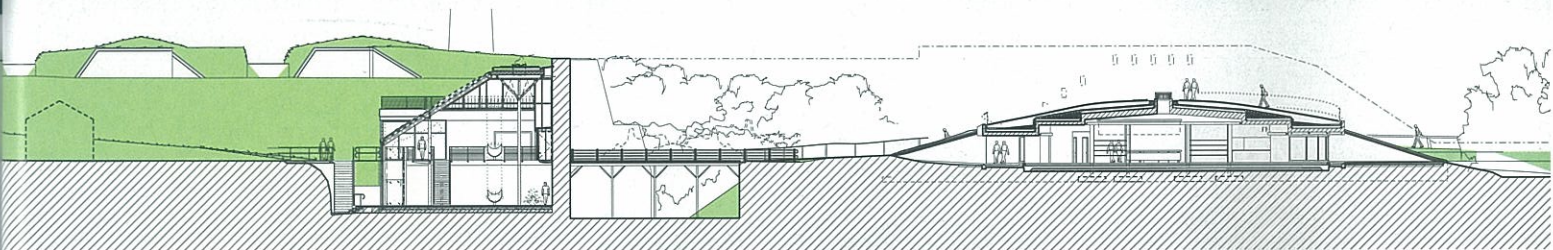
Pringle Richards Sharratt's work is the culmination of a sequence of studies begun in 2006, which involved working with the Royal Armouries, Hampshire County Council and the Heritage Lottery Fund. While this must be regarded as a first intervention, hopefully to be followed by second and obvious follow-up, it has dealt with the most pressing issues, including the entrance route, the welcoming of visitors, and the curation of some of the key artefacts, including Saddam's gun. What is especially impressive is the way this has resolved two key aspects of the brief with very different demands: to tell the story of Fort Nelson, and to display the artefacts, which originate from entirely different places and times to the fort itself.

Strategically, the scheme has entirely revised the entrance route, repositioning the car park on the 'correct' side of the road, and placing a new entrance hall in a visible place (where the commanding officer's bungalow once stood). This new structure is circular in plan and sunk into the landscape, disguised by grassed earth in the same way as much of the original fort. It is military-esque: a new embrasure with concrete overhead, and brick retaining arms



reaching out, but here the architecture of deterrence has skilfully been turned into an architecture of welcome. Inside we find a small shop and cafeteria, articulated by timber fittings, a ring of concrete columns, and a central lantern which pierces the mounded landscape above. Passing through, the visitor crosses an iron bridge over a substantial moat, and then through a handsome Victorian doorway through the walls of the fort. The original bridge and doorway had gone when the moat was filled in and the entrance widened during the second world war. It is only through their reinstatement that it has been possible to move the entrance to the fort from one side of the old barracks block to the other, and use the historic features to properly signal the route.





**Above, right** The visitor centre doubles as a landscaped hillock.  
**Below** The new gallery is tucked behind the defensive wall.

Passing through the massive brick and flint fort wall, the visitor arrives in the second major intervention, an entirely new gallery which acts as an 'orienteur'. This space houses many of the museum's most significant exhibits, and serves as a pivot to guide visitors on into the triangular barrack block where some of the smaller exhibits are housed. Within the new gallery, PRS chose an architectural language based on timber, which offers an aesthetic contrast to the muscular brick and iron of the original structure, while empathising with its tectonic clarity. It is, in essence, a lean-to against the inner face of the fort wall, in which two rows of glulam columns support glulam beams. The lower portion of the roof is glazed and its upper part is earth-covered. The inner, taller row of columns supports this flat part, branching out unceremoniously to do so. Visitors enter the gallery at mezzanine level where some major exhibits, such as an ancient bronze







bombard, are placed. The mezzanine encircles the lower space with a small balcony with a cross-laminated timber upstand balustrade – a thoughtful and sustainable choice of material which represents integrity as well as value for money. A broad staircase leads the visitor down to the lower level, running parallel to the two sections of the Saddam supergun, installed at its intended angle of elevation, and occupying the building's full height. Interestingly, this monstrous gun still rests on the pivoted cradle used by curators to enable its installation here when moved in from the parade ground. Also on the lower level are more large exhibits and an arched opening which leads visitors on to the old barracks.

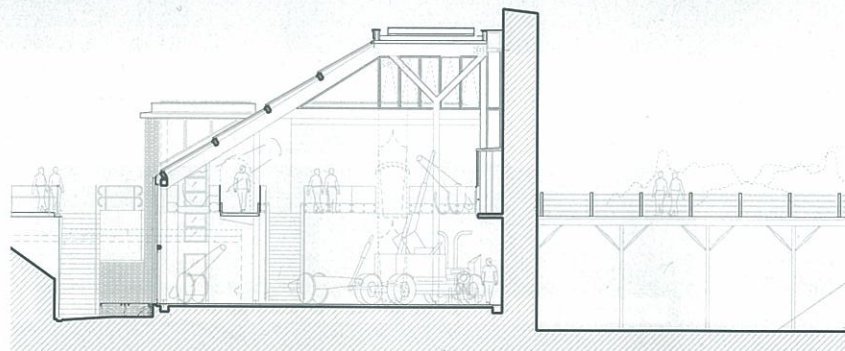
The barrack block is located centrally on the fort's south side, opposite the former position of the north-facing guns, and consists of a triangular ring of accommodation on two principal floors. The entire lower floor is devoted to exhibition space, while the upper floor is not accessible to the public at present. At the core of this ring is an external 'grand court' which is currently unused, yet it is clearly visible from each of the gallery-rooms in the triangular block. With a comparable floor area to the new gallery, this is the obvious space for a second phase of intervention, which is hoped for but not yet in train. If given a transparent roof, it would offer a significant and appropriate place for displaying more major artefacts.

The highly successful first stage at Fort Nelson has been made possible by an experienced architect working closely and constructively with an engaged and informed client team, who have two different interests at heart: the Victorian fort, and the collection of armaments from elsewhere. In being its own thing, both in terms of planning and materiality, this new architectural intervention – this third narrative – has effectively respected the integrity of both the others, and yet drawn them convincingly together.

*Thom Gorst teaches at UWE Bristol; he completed a doctorate, on contemporary maritime ruins, at Glasgow School of Art in 2011.*

**Above left** Visitors enter *The Voice of the Guns Gallery* at mezzanine level, from where a wide staircase leads down to the exhibits. The glulam timber structure supports a flat green roof and canted glazing over the double-height space.

**Left** Part of Saddam Hussein's 'supergun' occupies centre stage.



**Pringle Richards Sharratt**  
Founded in 1996 by John Pringle, Penny Richards and Ian Sharratt, PRS has built work in sectors ranging from arts and culture through education to housing and infrastructure. Its award-winning buildings include Hull History Centre, Sheffield Millennium Galleries and Winter Garden, and West Ham bus garage. Simon Hart, Malcolm McGregor (left), Gordon Abbott and Dorcas Bushara became directors of PRS in 2005.

**Project team**  
Architect: Pringle Richards Sharratt; design team: John Pringle, Malcolm McGregor, Andrew Reader, Simone Ruschmeier, Katherine Graham; structural, services, ecological, archaeological and highways engineer: Ramboll; quantity surveyor, project manager: Greenwood; client: Royal Armouries; fort owner: Hampshire County Council; principal sponsor: Heritage Lottery Fund.

**Selected suppliers and subcontractors**  
Contractor: Mansell Construction Services; services: Lowe & Oliver; timber structure: KLH; roof glazing: Vitral; circular glass doors: Geze; green roof: Bauder; metal roof: Rheinzink; bricks: Chamwood Forest, Michelmers; drylining: British Gypsum; sanitaryware: Keramag, Ideal Standard, Armitage Shanks; ironmongery: Yannedis; suspended lighting: Whitecroft; windows: Velfac; glass balustrades: Sapphire Southern; dpm: Cetco; insulation: Kingspan; concrete floors: Ecofloor.