



Southampton and D-Day

Southampton had been earmarked for the Head Quarters (HQ) of the invasion early on in the war. The South Western Hotel was requisitioned as the HQ for Combined Operations Military Movement Control, and was the meeting place of Churchill and Eisenhower on at least one occasion. The secret construction of Mulberry Harbours in the Southampton dry dock began in 1943. The docks which had been closed during the early part of the war, due to frequent heavy bombing, were reopened after the last big 50 bomber raid in June 1942, to receive lend-lease cargoes from America. In February 1944 the Americans took over the port designating it the 14th Major Port of Transportation Corps, United States Army. Southampton became an enormous military camp, with thousands of troops camped on the Common and parks. From February to May 1944 the port was used to discharge US Army cargo – becoming the third largest discharge port in the world at the time.

From mid-May 1944, the port was closed to prepare as marshalling areas C and D for the D-Day invasion. Preparations included the discharge of invasion supplies, Mulberry Harbour construction, converting merchant ships to block ships and making raft barges. The Eastern Docks were used to dock the larger ships. The Western Docks sheltered landing craft and Southampton Town Quay had three separate embarkation points for the troops boarding the landing craft (Figure 4 shows the port full of landing craft in preparation for D-Day). As D-Day approached military vehicles and guns lined the streets hidden by trees and camouflage netting. Soldiers practised urban warfare in the bomb-damaged streets. Barges, motor transport vessels, coasters and tankers were pre-loaded with ammunition, vehicles and supplies and anchored in the inlets and rivers of the Solent prior to D-Day.

After D-Day the port remained in constant use as the wounded returned and prisoners of war arrived. Troops continued to embark to Normandy until the end of the war. During this time, 3.5 million American (2 million), Canadian and British service personnel passed through Southampton Docks.

A plaque to commemorate the role of the US Army in the city was added to the Pilgrim Fathers Mayflower monument on Western Esplanade by the US Army when they left the city in 1947 (please see page 5).

The Wall

The 'D-Day Wall' or 'American Wall' as it has become known, is a 19m length of brick wall at the lower end of Western Esplanade in Southampton. Built c1910, it formed part of the boundary wall of the old Southampton Borough Council Disinfecting Station. During the war it was used by the US army as a medical centre. On this wall, around 100 men (mainly American) carved their names and home towns as they waited to embark to Normandy on D-Day and throughout the latter part of the Second World War.

When this area was redeveloped in 1993, this section of wall was allowed to remain in situ as a memorial and a number of the best carved bricks from other parts of the demolished wall were retained and kept by Southampton Museum Service. Some of these were later rebuilt into a smaller wall behind the original wall. Others still remain in the museum collection warehouse. The wall is recorded on the Southampton Historic Environment Record (MSH4692) and registered with the Imperial War Museum as a war memorial (Graffiti Wall WW2 21636).

Today the wall forms the boundary of the Grand Harbour Hotel car park. If you visit, be sure to look behind to see the smaller wall constructed with inscribed bricks recovered from the demolished section. The bricks are crumbling due to weathering and the inscriptions are eroding. With this year being the 75th anniversary of D-Day, The Maritime Archaeology Trust is carrying out recording of these inscriptions and research into these names so their stories can be told. This recording will form the basis of a 3D model which will ensure the wall and these inscriptions are digitally preserved. This work has been made possible thanks to a grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund.



Proximity to Mayflower sites



The D-Day Wall (1) is very close to the city's West Gate (2). This mid-14th Century gate gave access to the West Quay (until recent land reclamation, the sea came right up to the city walls). It was through this gate that the Pilgrim Fathers embarked on the *Mayflower*. A monument to the Pilgrim Fathers was constructed slightly further along the walls (3). In 1947 A plaque to commemorate the role of the US Army in the city was added. All three sites are publicly accessible from Western Esplanade (SO14 2AZ).



The West Gate and the Tudor West Gate Hall



The Pilgrim Father's Memorial

US Army Plaque added to the Pilgrim Father's Memorial in 1947

1944-1945

This tablet was presented by the 14th Major
Port United States Army in proud tribute
To over two million men and women of the
United States Forces who together with
Their brilliant allies sailed from Southampton
Between D-Day June 6th 1944 and the day of
Victory to liberate the continent of
Europe from aggression in order that
The freedom for which the Pilgrim Fathers
strove should not be lost.

Leo J Meyer, Colonel, TC Deputy Port Commander
Sherman L Kiser, Colonel, TC Port Commander.

<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1179378>

