

BOMARSUND

Outpost of Empire



Graham Robins

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Bomarsund

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This brochure focuses on the Bomarsund period in Åland's history, a period which began with war and ended with war. Both times Åland was dragged into a tumult caused by Europe's warring empires – amongst others, Russia, France, Great Britain and Turkey. The emperors played “the Great Game” and Åland became a trophy that was cast from one to the other.

From a Russian perspective Åland would become a military outpost, the westernmost part of the far-flung empire. This meant the fortification of the islands and a permanent garrison numbered in thousands. For the first time Åland was governed by a military commander, a senior officer in the Russian army. The presence of the military coloured the lives of many Ålanders but it is important to bear in mind that this period was not dominated by war. For 45 years Ålanders lived side-by-side with the Russian military, the consequences of which have left their mark even on today's Åland.



The Russian Period

The Russian period on Åland, from 1809 to 1918, can be divided into three. The first period (1809-1854) was dominated by the presence of the Russian military, the second (1855-1905) by their absence. During the third period (1906-1918) Åland was re-militarised. The first two periods created quite different conditions for Ålanders, both socially and economically, which is reflected by the respective population centres that developed: during the first period, Bomarsund, fortress and garrison town. During the second period, Mariehamn, harbour, trading port and capital of the demilitarised Åland Islands.

*The Russian eagle on a cannon from Bomarsund.
Photograph: Augusto Mendez*



War 1808-09

It is said that Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte of France, during peace talks at Tilsit in 1807, “gave” Finland and Åland to Alexander, Russia’s Supreme Tsar. That was how things were done in those days. The reason behind this gentleman’s agreement was that Sweden had refused to join the alliance (the Continental System), led by France against Great Britain. The war of 1808-1809 was Sweden’s punishment.

At the beginning of the war the Åland Islands lay in the middle of the Swedish kingdom, with the wealthy trading centres of Turku to the east and Stockholm to the west. The last time that war had visited Åland was during the Little Northern War of 1741-1743. Since then three generations of Ålanders had lived on these peaceful islands, living off fishing, farming and coastal trading. Militarily speaking, Åland had little or no significance for Sweden, lying as it did in the centre of the kingdom. There was not a single soldier on Åland. One year later 4000 elite Russian soldiers would stand on Åland’s soil. This time they had come to stay.

Russian Troops Invade

In the beginning of April 1808 Åland was overrun by Russian troops. Cossacks patrolled the countryside. The Russians established their headquarters on the island of Kumlinge and the Tsar's orders were read out from the pulpit. But Russian orders did not find fertile ground amongst the Åland farmers and the whispers of unrest soon grew to a storm wind that, in the summer, drove back the invaders. The Åland population rose against their new rulers and soon managed to capture all of the Russians on Åland's main island. Following this, the Russian headquarters on Kumlinge were attacked by Åland's bravest, together with a small Swedish flotilla. The battle was short and resulted in nearly 500 Russian prisoners.

The acclamation was great. The Swedish king landed at Kastelholm Castle and for the time being the future seemed bright. But despite the presence of the King, the generals, and thousands of soldiers, unease dominated on Åland. The villages of the archipelago were burnt to the ground in order to hinder a Russian advance. An attack was expected. *In the bleak midwinter, Frosty wind made moan, Earth stood hard as iron, Water like a stone.* The sea between Åland's 6000 islands began to freeze. The ice road lay open. Everyone held their breath and listened.

Then they came, 15000, so it is said. Prince Bagration and the great generals, Kulneff with his Cossacks, Stroganoff, Demidoff, Schepeleff, Tutschkoff, Knorring. The ice thundered and the Swedes retreated. Åland was taken.

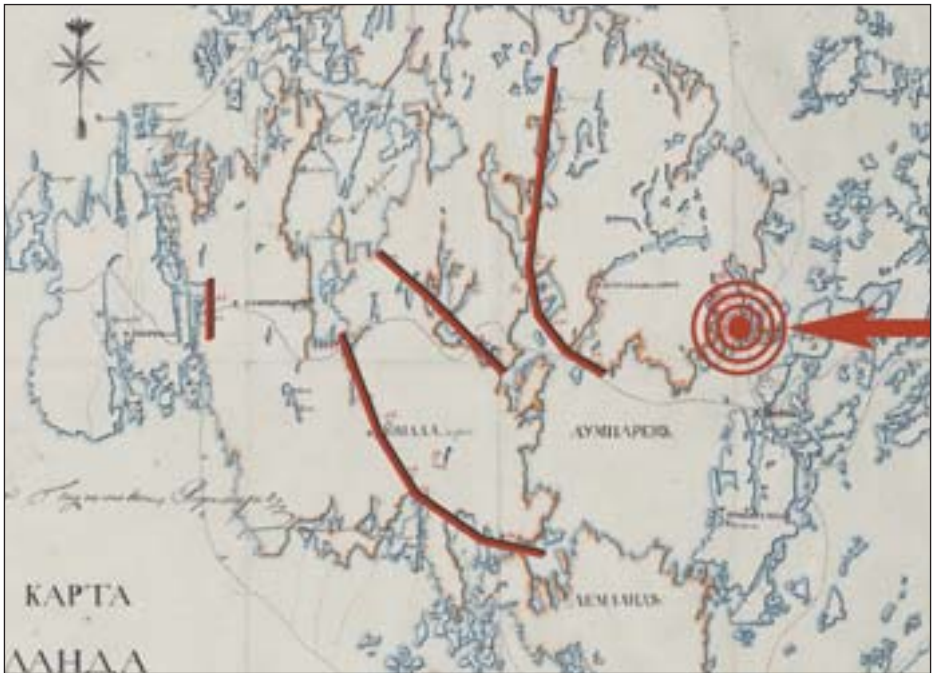
Peace talks were held in Hamina and on the 17th September 1809 it was over. Åland together with Finland had got a Grand Duke, none other than Tsar Alexander himself.



The Russians are coming! Detail from a painting by V A Sam

Bomarsund is Planned

During the peace talks Sweden had pressed for Åland to be demilitarised, but it was Russia that had won and they would decide. Already during 1809 Russian engineers were on Åland, mapping and drawing up a fortification strategy. The Russians expected that an attack would come from the west, so they built successive lines of cannon batteries to guard the main route across Åland. On the eastern side of the main island they planned a great fortification. This would serve as a bridgehead, a fortified point that could



The defence of Åland, Museovirasto. Revision: Graham Robins

withstand a long siege and be reinforced by Russian forces in Finland. The location also dominated all of the three channels leading into the bay of Lumparn, which gave the fortress control over this natural harbour. One of the channels was called Bomarsund.

During the 1810s preparations were made to begin building the fortress of Bomarsund; plans were drawn up, a military hospital was built on the island of Prästö and woodland was cleared. But when the project's director,

Major General Barclay de Tolly, died in 1819 everything ground to a halt. During a visit in 1820 Nicholas Pavlovich, then Grand Duke and inspector of fortresses, decided that the old plans should be abandoned. It would be eight years before Nicholas, then Russia's tsar, ordered new plans to be drawn up for Bomarsund's fortification.

The Russian Engineers' Drawings

During the 1920s a large number of original drawings of fortifications in Finland were found at Suomenlinna, outside Helsinki, amongst them over 1000 concerning Bomarsund. These hand drawn and coloured masterpieces are also planning documents that, amongst other things, provide detailed views of different stages in the building programme, who lived where in the area, and how work on the fortification was proceeding every year. The series covers the entire period but we are aware that an unknown number of drawings are missing. This series constitutes the single most important source of information regarding the Bomarsund period.



Façade and Section of Prästö Tower, Museovirasto





The faint red lines represent the first plan to fortify Bomarsund, detail from Museovirasto's map

The First Plan

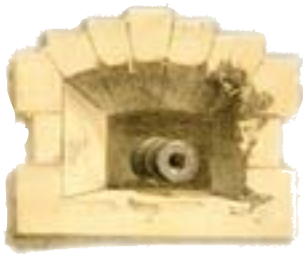
The first fortification of the Bomarsund area was based on bastions, a defensive system that began its development during the 1500s in southern Europe and which by 1800 was generally considered outdated. New ideas began to emerge toward the end of the 1700s but it took time before the old, proven methods began to be replaced. A bastion fortification was based on the principle of depth of defence, that is, multiple layers of ditches and earthen ramparts. If the enemy should manage to capture the first line, the defence could be continued from the second line, and so on. The ramparts were built in the form of arrowheads in order to reduce the risk of the defender coming under flanking fire, while also minimising the zone immediately under the walls where an attacker could take cover. The resulting geometrical forms were complicated and their architects often received the criticism that they knew little of the realities of warfare.



*The fortification that was never built.
The red line represents the modern road.
Revision: Graham Robins*

The Second Plan

As the use of explosive projectiles increased it became important to provide shelter for a fortress's defenders. The French fortifications engineer, Le Marquis René de Montalembert, viewed a siege as a duel with cannon. The side with the most cannon and the best position would win. He therefore, toward the end of the 1700s, drew fortresses where all of the cannon and crews were placed in bomb-safe rooms built of brick. Prior to this cannon had often been mounted on top of the ramparts. Cannon were also mounted in buildings consisting of several storeys so that the number of cannon along a given front of fortification could be doubled or even tripled. Montalembert's system required enormous installations with hundreds of cannon, which in turn demanded a garrison of many thousands. The cost of building these impressive works was high. When the new drawings for Bomarsund's fortification were drawn up toward the end of the 1820s they followed Montalembert's defensive principles.



The fortress of Bomarsund needed to be able to resist attacks from both the sea and the land. This required two different defensive strategies. Against ships it was best to employ many cannon in a number of separate batteries. This meant that the ships could never attack all of the defensive works at once. Cannon fired from a land battery had an advantage over ships' cannon because the gun platform was more stable and red-hot shot could be used.

It was almost impossible to successfully attack a well-built land battery with a ship.

Against an army the defender needed to deal with the attacker's batteries and hinder the advance of foot soldiers. This demanded a defensive wall with a glacis, a slope that protected the wall from direct cannon fire. Once again the principle was that the greater the number of defensive works the better the area in front of the defences could be covered, while minimising the risk that the attack could be focused on any one point.

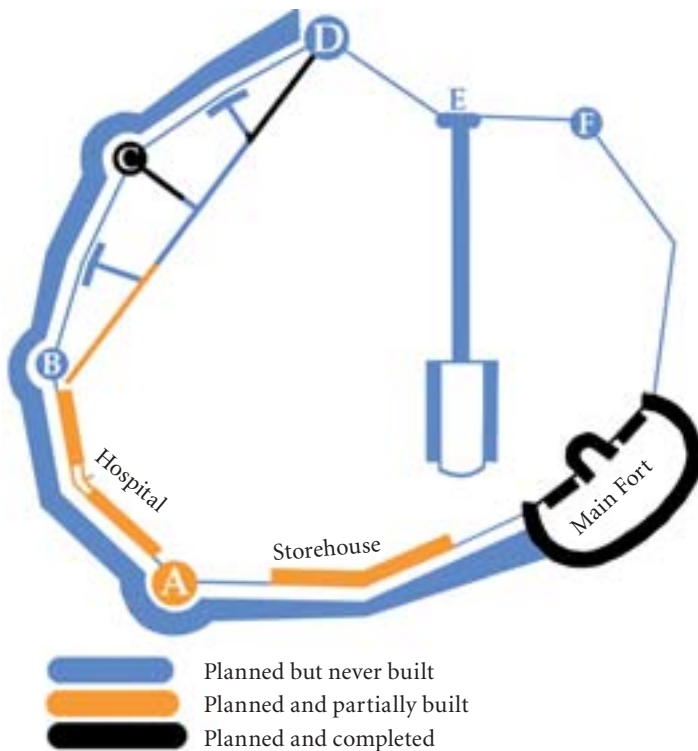


*From the early 1800s fortifications became large, armoured buildings.
Computer simulation: Henrik Juslin*

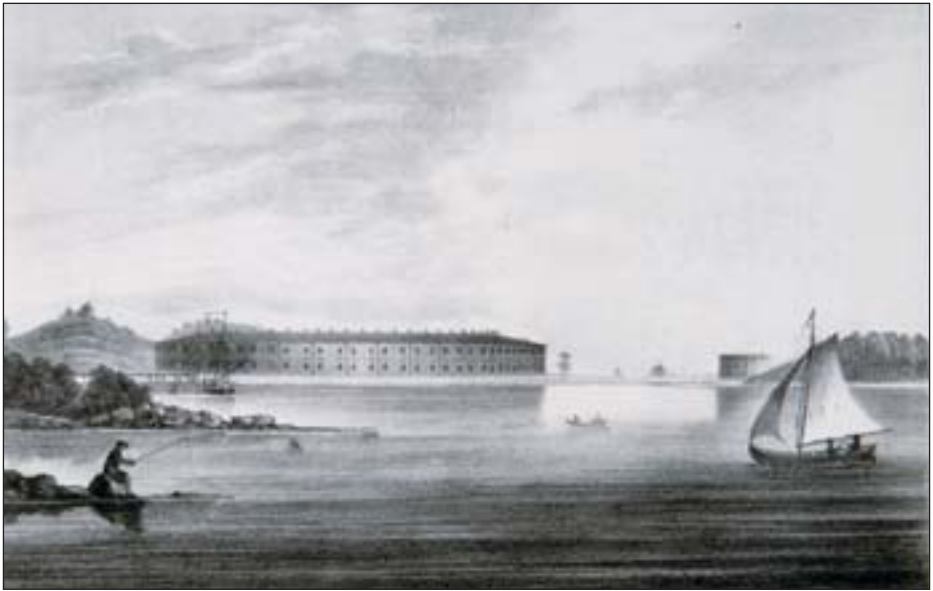
The Planning of Bomarsund

- The location of Bomarsund was deemed good both for defence and attack and should therefore be fortified.
- The fortress should comprise individual defensive works that would together create a complete defensive system.
- All of the military buildings, such as barracks, hospital and storehouses, must be fortified with cannon.
- No harbour facilities would be built, except for the repairing of ships and the over-wintering of 100 gunboats.
- The fortress's garrison should number between 4000 and 5000 men.
- The building of a fortified barracks for the garrison would be prioritised. A hospital and storehouses would be built out as the fortress grew in size.
- Naval facilities would be built only when all of the landward defences were completed, with the exception of the towers covering the channels in to Bomarsund.

This is the largest building project ever planned on Åland. The central works would consist of a defensive girdle, a great fortified circle 1100 metres in diameter and over 3000 metres long. From the Main Fort in the southeast, clockwise, came first a 300 metre long, fortified storehouse, then Tower A, the fortified hospital (also 300 metres long), Tower B, a cannon battery en barbette (mounted on the walls), Tower C, another cannon battery en barbette, Tower D, a third battery, E, at the end of a large barrack block, and finally Tower F. Each separate defensive work was to be connected by a wall and beyond the wall a glacis, which would shield both the wall and buildings from cannon fire. Each fortified buildings was two storeys high, while the defensive towers were given a third storey, thus increasing by 50% the number of cannon that could be directed against an attacker from these works. The total number of cannon was planned to be 350.



Planned and built works in the defensive perimeter. Map: Graham Robins



“Bomarsund including Skarpan's fortified barracks”, J Knutson (circa 1845)

North and east of the central work a further seven defensive towers with a total of 150 cannon were planned. These would protect the area from a fleet assault from the north and also a hostile landing on Prästö.

Quartering of Troops

During three decades (1809 – 1839) several thousand soldiers were quartered on the Åland population. This created problems, everything from the over usage of firewood to rape and murder. It would have been more effective, militarily, if the garrison had been quartered in a central barracks. This would also have reduced the friction between the military and the general public. But everything to do with the quartering of soldiers was not negative. Lighter moments also existed, as evidenced by the fact that several hundred Åland girls married Russian soldiers during this period. Many moved away from Åland to far distant parts of the Russian Empire. Today, somewhere to the east, there are families with stories that have come down through the generations of distant relatives on a little island called Åland.

The Fortress of Bomarsund

Work began in 1830 with the building of wooden barracks and other buildings for the military working companies and prisoners that would work at Bomarsund (a total of around 1000 men). The Main Fort was begun in 1832 and work continued for 12 years. By 1839 it was possible for the 11th Finland Line Battalion to begin moving in. The final years were mainly given over to finishing work, amongst other things the decoration of the beautiful Orthodox church.



The Russian Orthodox church in the Main Fort. Computer simulation: Henrik Juslin

In 1842 work was begun on Prästö Tower and two years later preparations were begun for the building of Notvik Tower. These two towers would defend Bomarsund above all else against a naval assault from the north. Up to this point nothing of the great defensive perimeter on the landward side had been built. It was only in 1846 that work was begun with the



A defensive tower. Computer simulation: Henrik Juslin

fortified hospital and storehouses. During the following seven years various elements of the hospital, the storehouses, Tower A, Tower B and Tower D were built, but only Tower C (Brännklint Tower) was completed by the end of the building season, 1853. By 1854 it was too late. War had returned to Åland.



Notvik Tower in section. Computer simulation: Henrik Juslin

BOMARSUND – A GUIDE



*The Main Fort in Bomarsund.
Computer simulation: Henrik Juslin/ aerial photograph: Sebba Södergård*

The Main Fort

The fortress of Bomarsund was to represent the Russian Empire on Åland. The Main Fort would be Bomarsund's showpiece. The foundation slowly took form and visitors could only gaze in wonder at its incredible size. Above the foundation stones, brick vaults, on two floors, were built to withstand the heaviest bombardment. The building received a façade of granite blocks, which gave it both strength and beauty.

The Main Fort consisted of 162 casemates (arched rooms), of which 115 were intended to house a cannon and its crew of eight to ten men. In other rooms there were kitchens, stores, ammunition magazines and offices. Churches for various faiths were established, the finest of them being the Orthodox church. Toilets were placed under the ramps that led up to the first floor. There were also wells for the provision of drinking water. Two

wings with a total of 84 rooms were given over to officers and their families. The total floor space was at least 18000 square metres, which makes the Main Fort Åland's largest building ever.

It is impossible to say just how many working days were expended on the building of the Main Fort. Millions of bricks were made by hand, granite blocks were quarried and finished by hand, frames to windows and doors were made and painted. Besides the military working companies and the prisoners, soldiers of the Åland garrison also laboured, a possible total of about 2000 men. It is likely that the majority of them were employed on the building of the Main Fort.

The Towers on Prästö and Notvik

Twelve round towers were planned for Bomarsund but only three of them were built. The towers on Prästö and the Notvik headland were built during the mid-1840s and would provide defence against a naval assault from the north. Similarly to the Main Fort, these towers functioned both as defensive works and as barracks. They were each planned for 125 men. The fact that these two towers were prioritised demonstrates a shift in the Russian's planning, which had originally been for three large towers (for between 250 and 300 men) on this northern front. An official document from 1841 reveals that the Russians planned to scale-down the works at Bomarsund. After only ten years there were clear indications that the great and grandiose plan would never be fully realised.

The prioritisation of the various works at Bomarsund reveals a new thought process amongst the Russian planners. Who was it though that they thought to defend themselves against? The Main Fort was prioritised so that the military on Åland would have a base and the garrison a barracks. But the prioritisation of the towers reveals that the Russians feared an assault from the north, in other words a naval assault. The only nation with a fleet powerful enough to attack Russia in the Baltic Sea region was Great Britain, whose military commanders and politicians had shown an interest in the building of Bomarsund during the 1830s. The British feared

BOMARSUND

1. Main Fort
2. Uncompleted buildings
3. Brännklint Tower
4. The Devil's Rock
5. Notvik Tower
6. New Skarpans
7. Old Skarpans
8. Skarpans suburb (Förstaden)
9. Prästö Tower
10. Burial grounds
11. Burial grounds
12. Military Hospital
13. Grinkarudden



*Illustration:
Anna-Maaret
Pitkänen-Darmark*



Пламчаво

Пламчаво

Прества

Симонапена





Prästö Tower. Computer simulation: Henrik Juslin

that Bomarsund would become a major fleet base and affect trade around the Baltic Sea, a trade dominated by Britain, thanks primarily to her naval power.

The third channel, Ängösund to the southeast of Bomarsund, was not navigable for the larger sailing ships of the day and could easily be defended with gunboats. If the efforts put into building the northern front's defences are compared with the landward side's defences it is possible to conclude that the Russians did not fear an attack from the west. 15 years after work was begun in Bomarsund nothing of this long defensive perimeter had been built.

The defensive perimeter's inner façade as drawn in 1837, Museovirasto



The Defensive Perimeter

Fortification plans were drawn up by educated engineers and based on mathematical principles. It was also important to adapt these principles to the local terrain. Bomarsund's defences toward the landward side would stretch along a rocky ridge from the heights of the Devil's Rock in a long curve down to the coast of Lumparn. Where the terrain was flatter the defensive perimeter was reinforced by powerfully fortified buildings, a hospital and a storehouse. It would require an extremely persistent enemy to overrun this defensive line.

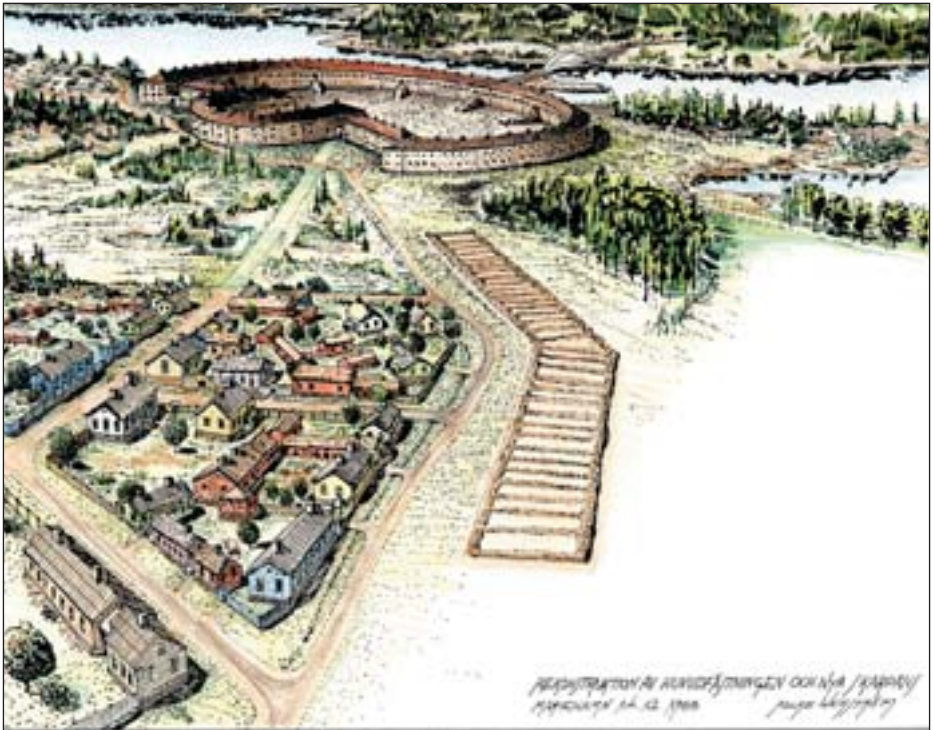
But the majority of works never got further than the foundations. Only Tower C (Brännklint Tower) was completed, in 1852. This was a tower similar in dimensions to the two towers that had been built during the 1840s. But an important difference was that Brännklint Tower had cannon openings only toward the north and west. Toward the inside of the defensive perimeter the tower had ordinary windows. This was understandable, considering that the tower was built as one element of a larger defensive work, but because nothing of the wall or other works had been completed when Bomarsund was assaulted, the tower was isolated and vulnerable.



*Section through a defensive tower.
Computer simulation: Henrik Juslin*

The hilly area to the north of Brännklint Tower would have been fortified according to the first plan. But the creators of the second plan clearly believed this to be unnecessary, despite the fact that the hill forms one of





New Skarpans. Illustration: Folke Wickström
the highest points in the area.

Skarpans: a Garrison Town

The garrison town of Skarpans grew up both inside and outside Bomarsund's defensive perimeter. The first development, Old Skarpans, was not planned. It was here that the engineers established their offices and houses at the very beginning of the period. The name comes from the farm, Skarpans, that had existed at this location before the Russian state bought the land. Toward the end of the 1830s and during the 1840s two new areas were planned, this time with a regular layout and broad, straight roads: New Skarpans and the outlying suburb of Förstaden. Both military and civilians lived here and in 1842 the post office opened, a school followed in 1845, as well as a chemist, shops and other services. The buildings were of wooden construction, often with yellow, blue or grey painted facades. The Empire style of architecture was new for Åland and awoke great interest.

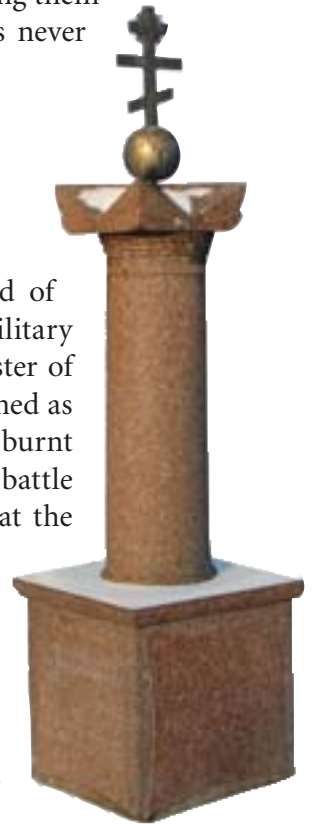
Those who had the opportunity to visit the area have described the town environment in Bomarsund with appreciative words. The social life in Bomarsund, on the other hand, was not appreciated to the same degree, at least not by Åland's church ministers. One of the inhabitants of this little town wrote: "At the fortress of Bomarsund a life was lived that followed the pattern of the outside world.... Grand balls and parties attracted well-to-do Ålanders to Skarpan." "

During the spring of 1854, fearing an attack, the population of Skarpan prepared for an evacuation and little by little the town was emptied of people. Two companies of Finnish sharpshooters moved in to the empty buildings. Then on the 3rd August 1854 all of the buildings were burnt to the ground in an attempt to prevent the enemy from using them as cover during an assault. The town of Skarpan was never again rebuilt.

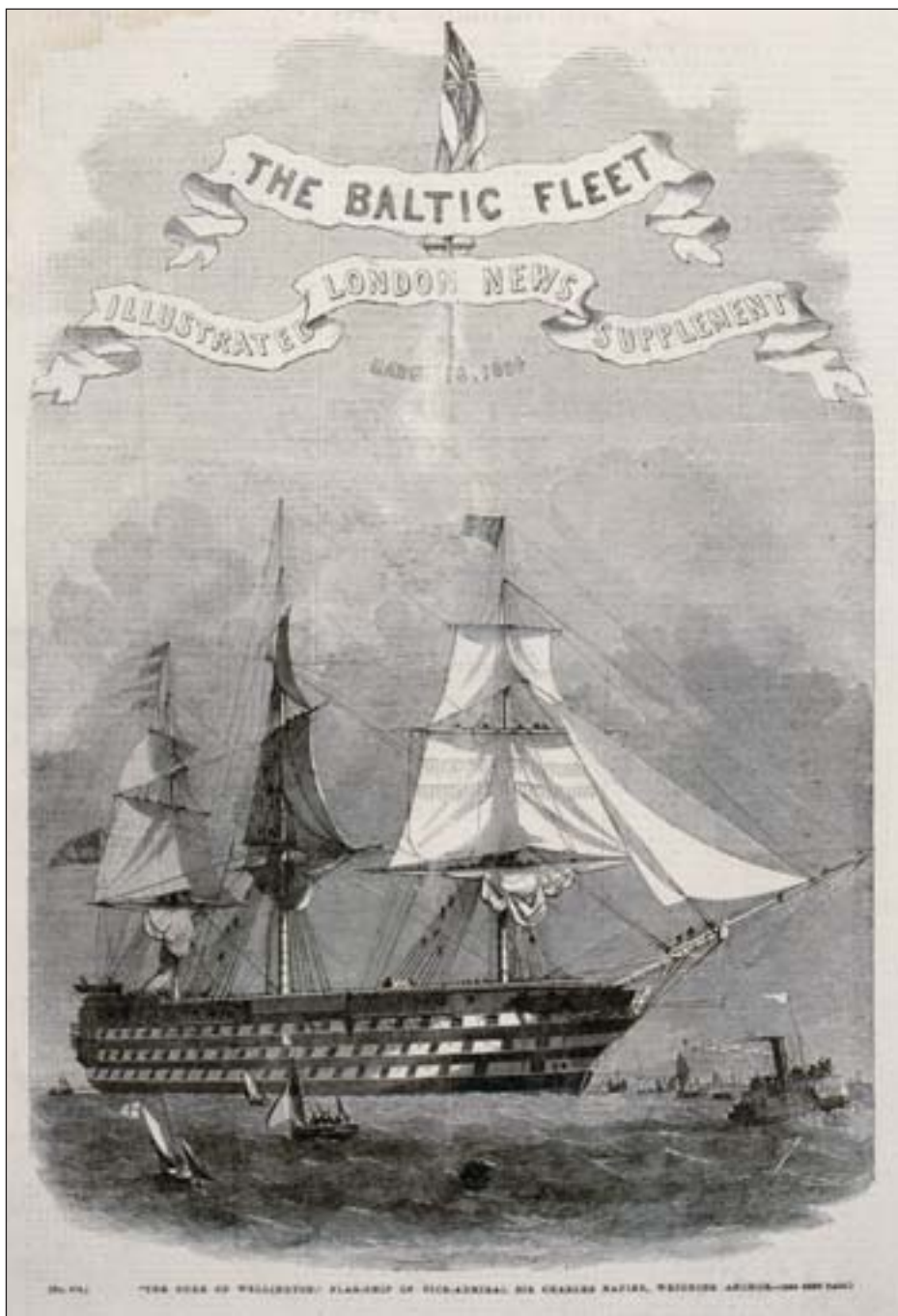
Prästö

At the beginning of the Bomarsund period the island of Prästö was the location for various activities. A military hospital was built here and became the focus for a cluster of about 30 private buildings, though Prästö is not mentioned as one of Bomarsund's suburbs. All of the buildings were burnt to the ground by the Russians themselves just before the battle of 1854. Captain Sullivan, of the British fleet, wrote that the buildings on Prästö were the finest in the whole area and he was saddened by their destruction.

Prästö was also named "The Island of the Dead" due to the fact that six burial grounds were established here. A Russian Orthodox burial ground, located on the western side of the island, was the first to be established, followed by Jewish and Muslim burial grounds in the vicinity. Toward the end of the 1840s new burial grounds were established on the eastern side of the island, Russian Orthodox, Lutheran and Catholic. The enormous scale



A Russian Orthodox gravestone. Photograph: Graham Robins



The front cover of the Illustrated London News Supplement, 18th March, 1854

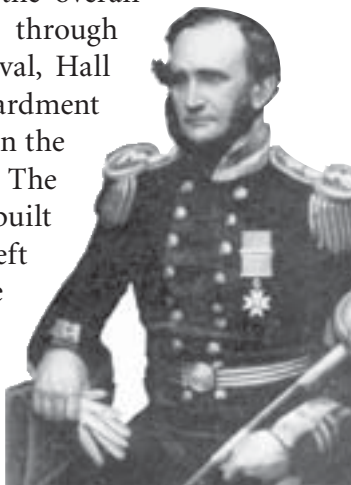
of these new burial grounds reveals the planners' vision of Bomarsund's future scale and permanence.

War in the Baltic Sea

Once again Åland was dragged into a war created by political decision makers far from these shores. This war would later receive the title "Crimean War". The Baltic Sea became, during 1854, a British-French sea, patrolled by the world's most powerful fleet. Not a single Russian battleship dared to leave harbour. By early spring Åland was blockaded and the skilled fleet hydrographer, Captain Bartholomew James Sullivan, soon found the channel through Ängösund to Lumparn and Bomarsund. The British now had steam-powered ships that could more easily navigate through the narrow channel. The isolated and half-completed fortification at Bomarsund was a tempting target for the politicians, who thirsted after success. The decision was made in London and in Paris: Bomarsund was to be attacked by a combined force of ships and troops.

Midsummer 1854

On the 21st June three British ships under the overall command of Captain Hall steamed in through Ängösund. Without Admiral Napier's approval, Hall planned to test Bomarsund's mettle. The bombardment continued into the night and ceased only when the ships had used up most of their ammunition. The Main Fort replied, together with a newly built battery on Grinkarudden. Finally, the ships left Lumparn and both sides claimed a decisive victory. Bomarsund's commander, Bodisco, was promoted to Major General, medals were dealt out and the entire garrison received a reward of one rubel per man. Captain Hall was harshly received by his admiral but was much better received by



*Captain Bartholomew
James Sullivan*

the British newspapers. During the bombardment, Charles Lucas, acting mate on board "Hecla", saved many lives by throwing a live shell overboard. The shell exploded before hitting the water. Lucas' heroic action was the first to be rewarded with Great



Charles Lucas' brave act, Edwin T Dolby

Britain's highest military award, the Victoria Cross.

The Assault

At the end of July the combined fleet began to move up to Bomarsund through Ängösund and eventually 25 battleships surrounded the fortress. Only then did the Russian high command realise that Bomarsund might need reinforcements in the form of gunboats. But it was too late. The fortress was surrounded and the allies waited only for the arrival of the troops.

In early August a force of 10000 French soldiers arrived to Lumparn. They



Troops landing at Tranvik, 8th August, 1854, Edwin T Dolby

landed on the 8th August, together with a British force, almost 11000 men in total. 24 hours later Bomarsund was surrounded on the landward side also. The defenders, totalling about 2200 Russian soldiers, Finnish sharpshooters and labourers, had withdrawn behind the walls of the various forts. They had also burnt to the ground all of the wooden buildings in the vicinity of the forts in an attempt to hinder the enemy from finding cover. Smoke

Brännklint Tower is bombarded from the French battery, Antoine L Morel-Fatio





“The Face of War”, Notvik Tower, Edwin T Dolby

filled the air and Bomarsund’s fate was sealed.

The assault began at 4 am on the 13th August. Brännklint Tower was bombarded from a French battery of four field cannon and four mortars. Spread out over the rocky terrain were hundreds of French light infantry. It soon became clear that the defenders had difficulty firing their cannon because the rooms filled with smoke after every shot and the cannon became extremely hot. The French mortars rained explosive shells onto the tower and the Finnish sharpshooters were driven down from their rooftop positions. This gave the opportunity for the French light infantry to creep even closer and to maintain a hail of bullets aimed at the cannon openings. The marks left by bullets and shot on the tower’s façade are a reminder even today of these terrible hours.

The defenders realised that the situation was hopeless and the commander, Captain Tesche, decided to blow up the tower. The cannon were spiked and under the protection of darkness the majority of the garrison retreated to



The Battle, 11:30 am, 15th August, 1854, Oswald W Brierly

the Main Fort. The remainder prepared the charges. At 1 am the French began firing again but receiving no reply they decided to send in troops. A small force managed to gain access to the tower before the defenders could light the fuses and Tesche, together with 34 others, was made prisoner.

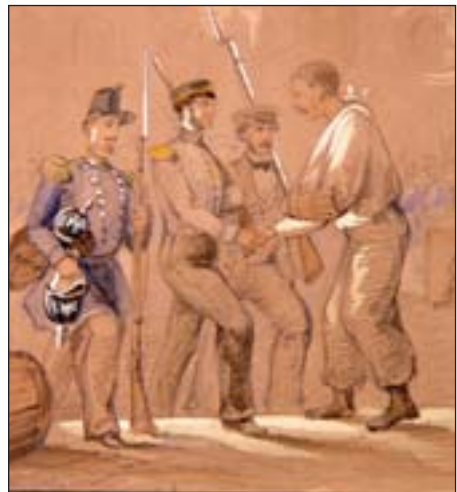
Brännklint Tower was now in French hands and represented a danger to the Russians. They therefore began to bombard the tower with heavy mortars from the Main Fort. Later that evening the tower began

to burn and by 11:30 the following morning the flames reached the powder magazine. The tower exploded in a great cloud of dust.

That same day, 15th August, the battle thundered up at Notvik Tower. British forces had established a battery of three cannon (heavy 32 pounders) on the hill directly west of the tower. The bombardment continued eight hours and by the end the British had managed to shoot a gaping breach through the tower's granite façade. One by one the defenders' cannon were destroyed and the defence wiped out. The tower's commander had no option but to surrender.

A curious event then took place, something that has been confirmed by eye-witnesses from both sides. After the bombardment officers of the opposing sides sat down together in the tower and held a tea party.

Men, who had only hours earlier been trying to kill each other now sat and



The victors greet the defeated, Edwin T Dolby



Notvik Tower is captured, Illustrated London News, Oswald W Brierly

toasted each other “Good Health!”.

The 15th August also saw the beginning of the assault on the Main Fort. French forces had moved their battery to the hospital foundation and from there began to bombard the rear of the Main Fort. Ships from the fleet moved in to maximum range and, together with a British battery established on Grinkarudden, began to bombard the fortress with large calibre cannon. The defenders had few opportunities to reply, primarily because their cannon and powder were in poor condition. Prästö Tower was also bombarded by three ships.

The bombardment continued into the following day, 16th August. The Russians later said how they wished that the attackers would try to storm the fortress and give them a chance to die fighting hand to hand. But it was clear to the fortress commander, Major General Bodisco, that the bombardment would continue until there was nothing left but smouldering rubble. Therefore, to spare the lives of his garrison, Bodisco decided to raise the white flag. At 1 pm British and French officers accepted the unconditional surrender of Bomarsund.

That which had taken 22 years to build fell after just four days of battle.

The Aftermath

Approximately 2000 Russian and Finnish troops were taken prisoner at Bomarsund and immediately transported to prisons in France and Britain. The victors offered Åland to Sweden but Sweden was unwilling to take over what was still Russian territory. As neither France nor Great Britain deemed it possible to maintain a force in the Baltic region during the winter there was little else to do but damage the Russian military's ambitions as much



Bomarsund following its demolition, J J Reinberg



Photograph: Graham Robins

as possible. Therefore the decision was made to demolish the fortress.

After the fall of Bomarsund the ruins were used as a source of building materials. In May of 1876 an auction was held of “remaining building materials (quarried stone and broken bricks plus 1 200 000 whole bricks) from two towers and a wall of what was Bomarsund’s fortress on Åland”. Bricks and stone were reused in both private and state buildings on Åland and mainland Finland, amongst others the Uspenski Cathedral and the Alexander Theatre in Helsinki.

Bomarsund was a fortress planned and built according to the period’s latest principles. Those who ordered the building of the fortress invested in an enormous project at a time when technological development was progressing at an ever-increasing rate, especially with regard to weapons technology. These changes were occurring all around the world and by the 1860s the age of the stonewalled fortress had come to

an end. Bomarsund was a dinosaur that was quite simply too enormous to keep abreast of change.

Bomarsund and the Ålanders

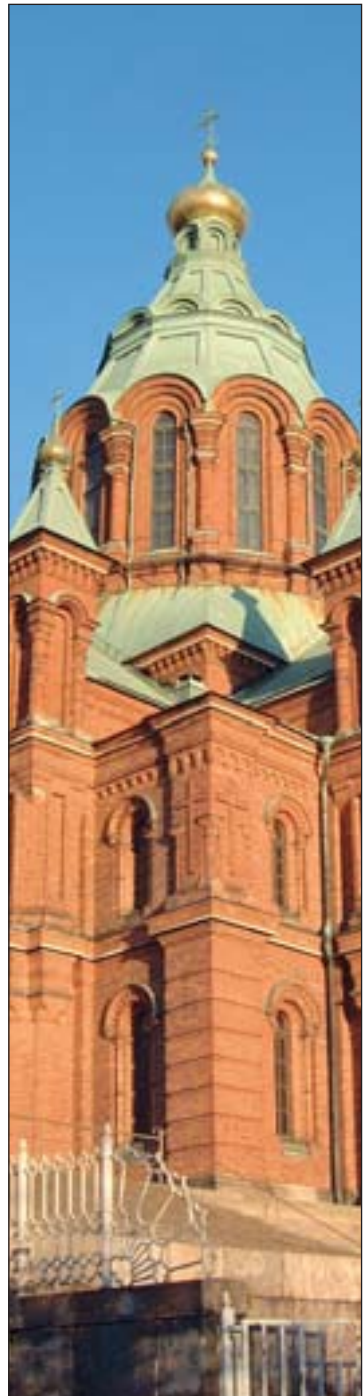
How did the fortress of Bomarsund affect Ålanders during its 45-year history? It was one of the largest building projects undertaken in the Grand Duchy of Finland, with thousands of labourers employed as well as many others: including tradesmen, civil servants and farmers. However, few Ålanders were directly involved, either economically or socially, in Bomarsund. During the latter part of the Bomarsund period there was a great demand for brick, something that meant that farmers could easily

find a market for their production. In 1829 one Åland farmer sold 1500 bricks to Bomarsund. However, the total requirement for building materials was enormous, evidenced by an advertisement one year for 1.7 million bricks. Firewood was also sold to the military and civilians at Bomarsund. The majority of food and clothing for use at Bomarsund was however shipped in from Finland or Russia.

In the wake of the war came other problems to Åland. A large quantity of locally owned shipping, up to 25% in certain parishes, was destroyed by the British forces. Despite the fact that few Ålanders were directly affected by the battle there were darker consequences for the future. Cholera killed hundreds of French soldiers during August 1854. The church records reveal that hundreds of Ålanders also died of this feared illness during the following years.

The feeling one gets from this history is that Ålanders did not play a major role in the building of Bomarsund, nor were they active in its destruction. The negative consequences of the fact that Åland was absorbed into the Russian Empire and experienced a long military occupation have faded with time.

What significance has this 150-year old



*The Uspenski Cathedral, Helsinki.
Photograph: Graham Robins*



The Main Fort today. Photograph: Sebba Södergård

history for Ålanders today?

The Demilitarised Åland Islands

The Russian period on Åland has been referred to as a parenthesis in Åland's history. It can also be seen as an important and integrated episode in Åland's recent history, because it was during the Bomarsund period that many changes were initiated that would form the basis of modern Åland. If Bomarsund's stately buildings once represented the presence of the Russian military on Åland, a region governed from the capital of a foreign power, then their ruins symbolise the opposite, the demilitarised and autonomous Åland Islands.

How to find Bomarsund

