

DEFENCE AREA 2

SARRE

1. Area details:

The defence area is 8 miles NE of Canterbury and 7 miles SW of Margate.

County: Kent.

Parish: Sarre.

NGR: centre of area, TR 256650.

1.1 Area Description: [see Map 1].

The village of Sarre lies at the western edge of the Isle of Thanet, on a low peninsula that once projected into the Wantsum Channel separating Thanet from the mainland. Remains of a Saxon harbour can be found there, and a Saxon cemetery has been excavated to the east of the village.

The village stands at the junction of the A28 road from Canterbury to Margate with the A253 that crosses the southern edge of Thanet towards Ramsgate. It is a compact settlement with two inns - the Kings Head and the Crown - which have catered over the centuries for the many travellers passing this way to the East Kent ports. A working windmill stands on its eastern side, and a large house, Sarre Court, off the A253 at the centre of the village.



Fig. 1 - West of Sarre the landscape is the flat, drained land of the former Wantsum Channel, intersected by many drains. The A28 road crosses the waterway in this photograph at Sarre Bridge [in the distance]. In 1940, this was set with charges for demolition, as was the bridge on a minor road in the foreground.

On the western and southern sides of Sarre are level pasture fields, intersected by many drainage channels, of the former Wantsum Channel. The A28 road crosses this drained land on a low causeway known as Sarre Wall. To the south, the River Stour flows from west to east. Running roughly parallel with the river on its northern side is the railway line from Canterbury to Thanet.

Sarre is surrounded by rich farming land, with large open fields for arable crops on the higher land of Thanet to



the east. The nearest settlement is St. Nicholas at Wade, one and a quarter miles to the north. The focus of the defence area is the centre of Sarre itself, and the village margins to the north, east, and south serve as area boundaries, with the two road bridges crossing drains to the west forming the boundary in that direction. The circumference of the village forms the principal viewshed.

2. **Assessment.**

2.1 **Defences:** [see Map 2]

Defence overview -

In 1940, Sarre was a Category 'A' nodal point within Eastern Command.¹ It lay within No.7 Sector of 43 Division's Area Defence Scheme for East Kent issued in November 1940.² During the critical invasion danger period of June-September 1940, the 1st (London) Infantry Brigade of 56 Division (formerly the 1st (London) Division) was responsible for the defence of No. 7 Sector. Later in 1940, this brigade was replaced by the 128th Infantry Brigade, which in turn was substituted in 1941 by the 131st Infantry Brigade. Brigade headquarters were established in Sarre, at Sarre Court, but with an underground battle headquarters at a disused quarry nearby off the A28 road.³



Fig. 2 - Sarre Court, headquarters of the infantry brigade defending No.7 Sector. The brigade's battle headquarters were sunk underground in tunnels off a disused quarry [see Figs. 12-14].

Between July and August 1940, Sarre was prepared for all-round defence by B Coy., 1st Canadian Pioneer Battalion from the Canadian VII Corps. The village was divided into a Company HQ with three platoon areas. Many houses and other buildings were fortified by inserted pillboxes, roadblocks were established, and Canadian pipe mines

¹ TNA: PRO WO 199/544.

² TNA: PRO WO 166/508.

³ TNA: PRO WO 166/978; TNA: PRO WO 166/983; and TNA: PRO WO 166/1039-1040. [The 1st (London) Infantry Brigade became the 167th Infantry Brigade later in 1940].



laid which, when blown, would form huge craters.⁴ Sarre Bridge, and a bridge to its north, had already been prepared for demolition.⁵ The defences that were constructed were extremely thorough as they were intended to serve as 'an example of what might be done elsewhere'.⁶

A map with the Canadian VII Corps War Diary provides exact information on the buildings that were fortified, with their fields of fire, and the positions of roadblocks and pipe mines. However, it does not provide details of the innumerable earthworks - slit trenches, weapons pits, and possibly anti-tank ditches - or of the barbed wire perimeter defences that were undoubtedly constructed. By analogy with another nodal point at nearby St. Nicholas at Wade, where a surviving Luftwaffe air photograph shows a profusion of such works around that village, it is reasonable to assume that they would have formed part of Sarre's defences as well.

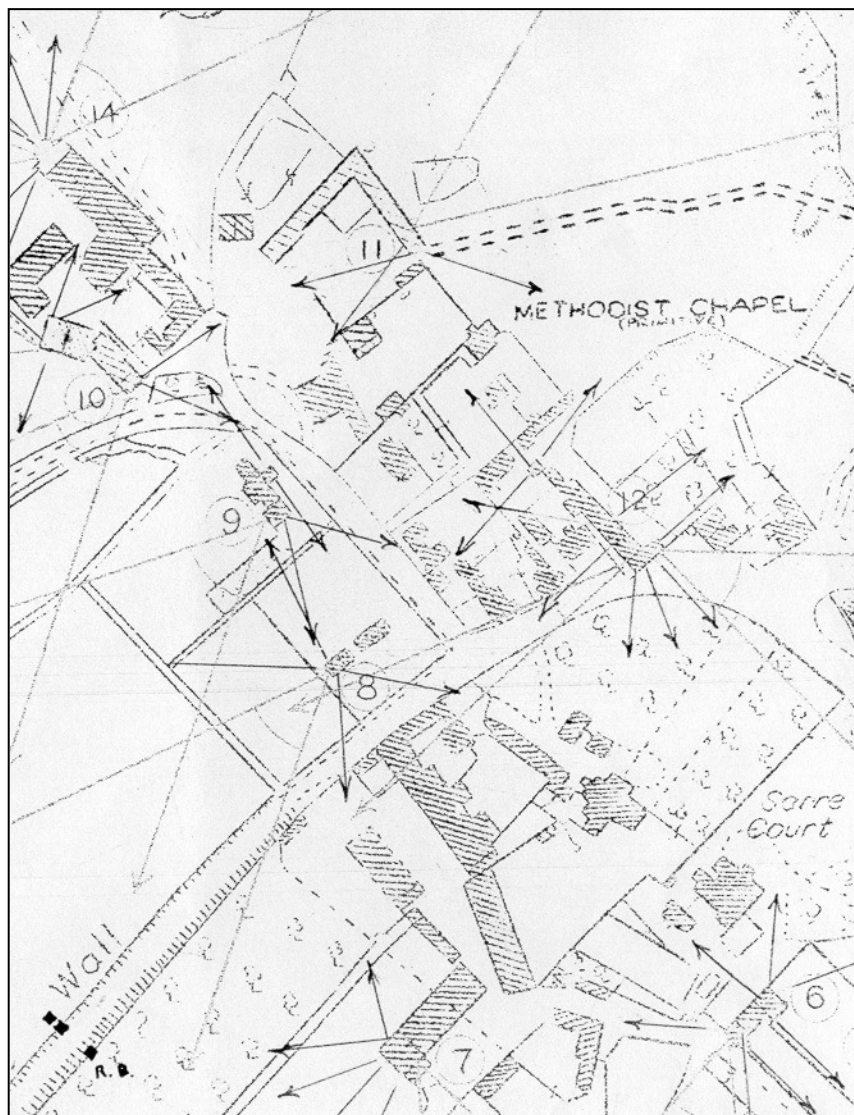


Fig. 3 - Portion of a map drawn by Canadian Engineers showing the defences of Sarre.⁷

Further research amongst unit war diaries at The National Archives would undoubtedly identify the infantry battalions involved in the defence of Sarre in the period 1940/41. Undoubtedly, the Home Guard manned many of the defences, in

particular from later in 1941 when the invasion danger had receded and the Field Army

⁴ TNA PRO WO 179/14 and TNA PRO WO 179/468.

⁵ This had been planned by the 220th Field Company RE from as early as 22.5.1940. Further mining was carried out at Sarre Bridge, and sluice gates removed, on 1 August. When the bridge was replaced in recent years, the demolition explosives were found to be still in place [local information].

⁶ TNA: PRO WO 179/14.

⁷ TNA: PRO WO 179/14.



was slowly being withdrawn from front-line home defence. A record shows that in 1941 the Home Guard unit manning positions at Sarre was E Coy., 6th (Thanet) Bn, Kent Home Guard.⁸

Sarre formed but one of several nodal points and defended villages facing key invasion danger beaches between Margate and Dover. A XII Corps stop line was constructed to their rear running between Dover and Whitstable, and this was partly built as well by Canadian Engineers. These defences linked with a grid system that divided up the Wealden countryside of East Kent between the stop line formed by the Royal Military Canal to the south [see Defence Area 36] and the North Kent coast. [For a fuller description of the purpose of this grid system, see Defence Area 12 - Dorking Gap].



Fig. 4 - A Luftwaffe air photograph [undated, but probably taken in August 1940] showing the defences of St. Nicholas at Wade, just over a mile to the north of Sarre. The extensive perimeter defences of barbed wire [small crosses] and slit trenches [sinuous lines] were probably replicated at Sarre.

⁸ TNA: PRO WO 166/983.



The defence works -

Three pillboxes [possibly four: one adjacent to Sarre Mill could not be located during fieldwork] survive at Sarre. Two to the west of the village [UORNs 1004 and 13475] are type 22s, and must be on, or close to, the outer perimeter defences at this point. The third, so overgrown that it can scarcely be seen, lies by the A28 road just south of Sarre Mill. This is a type 23 variant, with a central well for anti-aircraft fire [UORN 13474], most commonly found in Lincolnshire [See Defences Areas 35 and 55] and very rare in Kent. Another of the type is believed to have been destroyed recently close to the Mill, and a further one perhaps stood to the north of Bolingbroke Farm. An anti-tank gun emplacement was also constructed at some point in Sarre, although it is not known exactly where. It appears to have long since been destroyed.⁹



Fig. 5 - 1946 RAF air photograph showing the village of Sarre bisected by the A28 road, and with the A253 making a junction in the centre of the village. The Canterbury to Thanet railway line runs to the south. The two bridges to the west of the village, the sites of demolition charges and mines, are clear.



Fig. 6 [left] - UORN 1004: a type 22 pillbox protecting Sarre Bridge.

⁹ Source of information: TNA: PRO WO 179/14.





Fig. 7 - UORN 13474: an overgrown type 23 variant pillbox by the A28 road.

Of the various buildings in Sarre that are shown on the Canadian Engineers' map as fortified, there is little external evidence today. New houses adjacent to Bolingbroke Farm may have removed some evidence amongst farm buildings previously there. The commanding position of Sarre House at the corner of the road junction at the centre of Sarre is clear: some wall-paintings by Canadian soldiers are said to have been found in the house in recent years.¹⁰ The Kings Head pub has a sign painted on an external wall which is hard to decipher, but is probably of Army origin. Various soldiers' letters and other artefacts found recently in the pub indicate it had a significant Second World War role, possibly a battalion or other unit headquarters. Bricked up tunnels can be seen leading off the cellars, and these are said to have been sealed by the Army at the end of the war.¹¹



Fig. 8 - Sarre House commands the junction between the A28 and A253 roads. This house was heavily defended in 1940/41, but there is no external evidence of this today.

¹⁰ Local information.

¹¹ Information from the Kings Head landlady - Mrs. Judy Olivier.





Fig. 9 - The Kings Head Inn was probably a unit headquarters during the war. Tunnels, now blocked off, lead from the cellars, but their extent and purpose is not currently known.



Fig. 10 - Military sign on a wall of the Kings Head Inn, which possibly reads 'Pay Office'.

An important point in the eastern defences of Sarre was around the windmill, which almost certainly served as an observation post [UORN 16927]. A number of pillboxes and fortified buildings here, now demolished (although it is possible that one pillbox survives [UORN 13473]), defended a perimeter running between the two roads.



Fig. 11 - Sarre Mill occupying a high point that received all-round defence on the eastern perimeter of Sarre

The brigade underground battle headquarters [UORN 13476] was placed in tunnels drilled into the side of an old quarry on the west side of the A28 road on the northern outskirts of Sarre. Today, the tunnels remain, but they have been sealed off by the landowner and there is no access. An exploration was made, however, in 1998 by the organisation Subterranea Britannica and the tunnels

photographed and planned. Wartime Nissen huts still stand in the quarry, but these are likely to be from the camp of a nearby anti-aircraft battery rather than relating to the 1940 defences.



Fig. 12 - The disused quarry from which the tunnels for the brigade underground battle headquarters were dug. The tunnels survive but are now sealed off. The five Nissen huts are probably the camp site of a nearby anti-aircraft battery.



Fig. 13 - UORN 13476: inside the battle headquarters; a photograph taken in January 1998 by the organisation Subterranea Britannica.

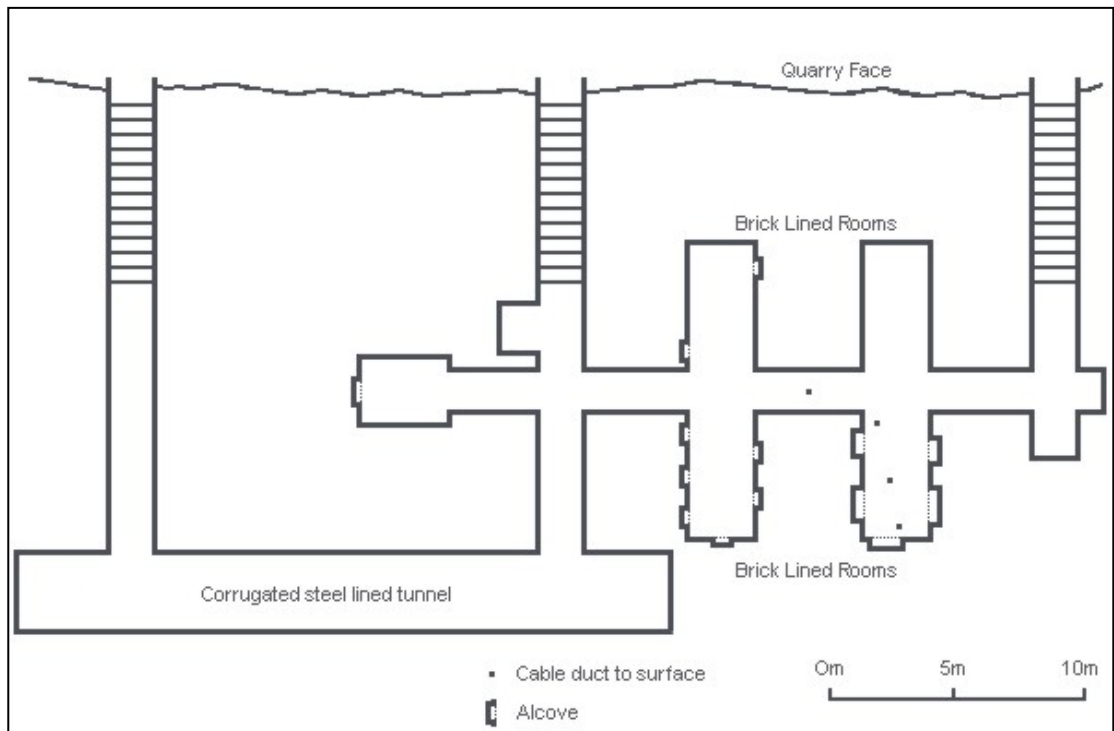


Fig. 14 - UORN 13476: plan of the underground battle headquarters made by Subterranea Britannica in 1998.

2.2 Landscape:

Sarre has remained a surprisingly compact village with very few changes that alter its essential appearance from that of sixty years ago. On its north-west side, a new development of luxury houses now occupies what was an area of farm buildings adjacent to Bolingbroke Farm. Sarre Mill is a working windmill catering for visitors, and a notice board in its parking area proclaims that Sarre stands on the 'St. Augustine Trail'.

Parking is possible in Old Road near Bolingbroke Farm, or in the car parks of the Kings Head and the Crown. The pillbox, UORN 1004, can only be viewed from the edge of the field as a notice proclaims there is no access. There is no access either to the quarry that contains the underground battle headquarters [UORN 13476]. A footpath passes close to pillbox, UORN 13475, and pillbox, UORN 13474, stands in a wooded margin to the road and can be inspected close-up. Other parts of Sarre and its various buildings can be viewed from the roadside.

2.3 Statement of Significance:

This is a remarkable defence area - a nodal point with many unusual features and the potential for much further investigation, both in terms of field and documentary work. Although the great majority of the 1940 defence works have been cleared away, enough sites survive to indicate the character of the defence, and others undoubtedly remain to be discovered. Because of the fullness of the documentary evidence, it is possible to attribute various defence roles to the buildings of the nodal point, emphasising the totality of the defence and how civilian structures were adapted for military purposes. It was the complete landscape that was defended, not just a particular part occupied by the military within it.

The surviving type 23 pillbox is an important structure as this type is rare in Kent. It should be cleared of its overgrowth so it can be seen clearly. Of major importance is the underground battle headquarters, which should be explored and recorded professionally. The significance of this class of defence structure is little appreciated, and, whereas several other examples survive (for example, at Reigate, Canterbury, and Tunbridge Wells), none has been fully surveyed or is available for public inspection. As the Sarre example was the battle headquarters for the infantry brigade in the No.7 Sector of East Kent, it is reasonable to assume that there were comparable battle headquarters for the other brigades defending the remaining six sectors - likely locations would be at Ashford, Dover, Folkestone, and Sandwich. This matter might only be determined by further documentary research.

Whereas there appears to be no obvious external evidence now of the fortification of the houses and other buildings in Sarre, nevertheless documentary evidence shows that considerable internal structural alterations were made and some of these might well survive.¹² If permission could be obtained, the exploration of the tunnels beneath the Kings Head might also yield valuable information as to their purpose. All in all, Sarre village seems an ideal location to gather further oral testimony and field evidence on the 1940 defence of a 'civilian-inhabited nodal point'. The results of such a project might well be made publicly available, and an information board erected in Sarre to

¹² Two foot six inch reinforced concrete walls and roof coverings are mentioned, with loopholes for Brens and anti-tank rifles set as low as possible - TNA: PRO WO 179/14.



describe the village's important role in the Second World War anti-invasion defence of East Kent.

3. **Recommendations:**

1. That the surviving anti-invasion defence works at Sarre be considered of national importance. They enable the defence of the nodal point to be interpreted, and provide evidence of the articulation of the defence and the inter-relationship of its functionally different components. Such interpretation is assisted by the documentary evidence provided in this report of defence structures that were built as part of the overall strategy, but which have now been removed.
2. That a project be set up, possibly run by a local archaeological group, to research aspects of the defence of Sarre, as well as exploring individual sites, in the manner suggested under 'Statement of Significance' above.
3. That pillbox, UORN 13474, be freed of its overgrowth and preserved by the roadside as a memorial to the 1940/41 defence of Sarre.
4. That consideration be given, possibly in an initiative with Kent County Council and the local authority, to providing an information board on the anti-invasion defences of Sarre, and of East Kent in general. Possible positions for such a board would be alongside the 'St. Augustine Trail' board at Sarre Mill or next to pillbox, UORN 13474 [see 3. above].

4. **Supporting material.**

4.1 **Photographs:**

Figs. 1-2, and 6-12 - taken (AWF) during field survey, 10.2.2004.

Fig. 4 - 'Taktisches Luftbildbuch', [? August 1940] - (IWM, uncatalogued).

Fig. 5 - 106G/UK/1378 fr.5088 (4.4.1946) - NMR.

Fig. 13 - Copyright: Subterranea Britannica. Reproduced with permission.

4.2 **Documentary Sources:**

'No.7 Sector (Thanet) Defence Scheme', 1940 (from 128th Infantry Brigade HQ War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/978.

1 Tunnelling Company Royal Canadian Engineers War Diary, 1940 - TNA: PRO WO 179/468.

56 Division CRE War Diary, 1940 - TNA: PRO WO 166/718.

220th Field Company Royal Engineers War Diary, 1940 - TNA: PRO WO 166/3689.

1st (London) Infantry Brigade War Diary, 1940 - TNA: PRO WO 166/1039.

'Defence Instructions No.28', 28.6.1940 (from 167th Infantry Brigade War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/1040.

'Report on Defensive Scheme: Village of Sarre', 14.8.1940 (from Canadian VII Corps CRE War Diary) - TNA PRO WO 179/14.

'List of Nodal Points in Eastern Command', September 1940 (from General Headquarters Papers, Home Forces) - TNA: PRO WO 199/544.

'Taktisches Luftbildbuch', 23.10.1940 (IWM, uncatalogued).



Befestigungskarte Grossbritannien: 1:50,000 (Sheet 117), 20.11.1940 - BLML 1305(13).

'43 Divisional Area Defence Scheme (East Kent)', 27 November 1940 (from 43 Division 'GS' War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/508.

'Plan to Defeat Invasion: No.7 Sector (Isle of Thanet)', 1941 (from 131st Infantry Brigade HQ War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/983.

East Kent District 'G' Branch HQ War Diary, 1943 - TNA: PRO WO 166/10851.

4.3 **Aerial Photographs:**

106G/UK/1378 frs.5087-5088 (4.4.1946) - NMR.

106G/UK/1378 fr.7091 (4.4.1946) - NMR.

106G/UK/1724 fr.3044 (10.9.1946) - NMR.

541/484 fr.3027 (7.4.1950) - NMR.

541/508 frs.4072-4073 (22.4.1950) - NMR.

58/1779 fr.49 (6.6.1955) - NMR.

MAL/69029 fr.205 (5.4.1969) - NMR.

4.4 **Ordnance Survey 1: 2500 Plans:**

TR 2464-2564 (1961) - BLML.

TR 2465-2565 (1970) - BLML.

4.5 **Defence of Britain Project Database:**

[see 5. 'Annex'].

