

DEFENCE AREA 3

WEYCROFT

1. Area details:

Weycroft is 1½ miles N of Axminster and 7 miles NE of Seaton.

County: Devon.

Parish: Axminster.

NGR: centre of area, SY 307999.

1.1 Area Description: [see Map 1].

The defence area is centred on the small settlement of Weycroft, lying within the valley of the River Axe, consisting principally today of Weycroft Hall and Manor, and an adjacent former water-operated flour mill (recently refurbished as dwellings), at the point where the A358 road crosses the river. The Exeter to Yeovil railway line also runs along the valley passing under the road just to the north of Weycroft.

The area is defined by the road, railway, and river crossings, and by viewsheds formed by the broad river meadows to the north-west of the river and the sharply rising hills to the south-east. The focus of the area is the mill, and the adjacent road and river.



Fig. 1 - The Weycroft defence area is at the centre of this air photograph taken in April 1947. The various crossings of the River Axe by road and railway can be clearly seen.



2. Assessment.

2.1 Defences: [see Map 2]

Defence overview -

The anti-invasion defence works at Weycroft formed part of the Taunton Stop Line, which ran from Seaton on the Devon coast to Highbridge on the Bristol Channel, cutting across the waist of the South West peninsula. The stop line followed principally the natural barriers of the River Axe and the River Parrett, as well as the artificial linear features of railway lines (many lengths of which are abandoned today), the Bridgwater - Taunton Canal, and the line of the Chard - Taunton Canal (disused in 1940, but dug out again as an anti-tank obstacle). The purpose of the Taunton Stop Line was to stop an advance from the west, consequent upon a German landing on the Devon, Cornish, or Somerset coasts, penetrating into the heartlands of southern England.¹ A further switch line to stop the left of the line being turned by a landing at Seaton was planned from Axminster to Lyme Regis, but never built.² In the north, a second line was also contemplated running through Langport to join with the Somerset Levels.³



Fig. 2 - Course of the Taunton Stop Line shown on a map of 1940 illustrating Southern Command's home defence programme [The course of the Line has been redrawn].⁴

¹ A Defence Scheme of August 1940 states that the Line was 'ultimately' to be defended from the east as well. There is no evidence that such a plan was ever put into effect - TNA: PRO WO 166/1317.

² TNA: PRO WO 199/1810.

³ Davies (Defence of Britain Project Archive, NMR).

⁴ TNA: PRO WO 199/48.



The survey for the Taunton Stop Line was carried out by 516th Corps Field Survey Company Royal Engineers, and detailed maps prepared.⁵ Work of construction began in mid-July 1940, and was undertaken, in the northern sectors, by 552nd Army Troops Company Royal Engineers, and in the southern, including Axminster, by 551st Army Troops Company Royal Engineers.⁶ Assistance in the re-excavation of the Chard - Taunton Canal was provided by a company of the Auxiliary Military Pioneer Service (made up of many intellectual refugees from Europe). Two civilian contractors were used - John Mowlem and Charles Brand.⁷

Very good documentary evidence, including surviving Royal Engineers' record maps, enable the range of defence works, and their precise positioning, to be reconstructed for the whole length of the Taunton Stop Line.⁸ The Line was defended by anti-tank gun emplacements (2pdr. or 6pdr.), by Vickers [medium machine gun] emplacements, by Bren [light machine gun] emplacements (more popularly termed pillboxes), by artificial anti-tank ditching and scarping, by permanent road and rail blocks, by concrete anti-tank cubes, posts, and tetrahedra ('pimples'), by Dannert wire entanglements, by land mines, and by the prepared demolition of bridges. The defence of the Line was also incorporated with that of twelve anti-tank islands established along its length, prepared for all-round defence.⁹ Taunton itself was a further anti-tank island to the west of the Line to which it gave its name. By 1942, however, all the stop line anti-tank islands had been downgraded to Category 'B' or 'C' nodal points (also termed 'centres of resistance').¹⁰

In 1940, and the early months of 1941, the defences of the Taunton Stop Line were to be manned by units of the Field Army. The Line fell within the military Western Area, and was the responsibility of 48 Division of VIII Corps, the headquarters of which were at Taunton. Based in the Ilminster - Chard area was the 143rd Infantry Brigade Group, and to its north, 144th Infantry Brigade.

The original garrison plan for the Line was that it was to be divided into six brigade sectors, each to be manned with two battalions forward, and one in reserve. Each of these battalions was to have all four companies forward, with no reserve. The defence works were organised by platoon posts (Forward Defended Localities), and by some detached section posts.¹¹ It is doubtful if this level of manning was ever achieved. Certainly, 8th Bn. Somerset Light Infantry alone was given the role of supervising, and reinforcing, all the garrisons of the anti-tank islands on the Line.¹² From the initial planning of the Line, the Home Guard was accorded a role in assisting the Field Army - they were to act as guides, and to take responsibility for stores and keeping the section posts in good order, as well as having a fighting role in the defence of the anti-tank islands. Later, as defence

⁵ TNA: PRO WO 166/3781.

⁶ TNA: PRO WO 166/3789-3790. - work in the Weycroft area was carried out later than 29 July 1940 as an air photograph of that date shows nothing built or under construction.

⁷ Davies (Defence of Britain Project Archive, NMR).

⁸ See, in particular, defence component listings in TNA: PRO WO 199/1803 [transcribed Dobinson] and the record map folios [Wills Collection, NMR].

⁹ Bridgwater, Durston, Creech St. Michael, Wrantage, Ilton, Ilminster, Chard, Forton, Perry Street, Axminster, Whitford, and Colyford - TNA: PRO WO 166/1243.

¹⁰ TNA: PRO WO 166/6775 and TNA: PRO WO 166/6713.

¹¹ TNA: PRO WO 166/1810.

¹² TNA: PRO WO 166/1251.



requirements changed and the Field Army was withdrawn from the Line, the Home Guard took over responsibility for manning all the defence works that were to be retained as part of a system of defence in depth. The unit with responsibility in the Weycroft area was the Axminster Company of the Seaton Battalion, Devon Home Guard.¹³

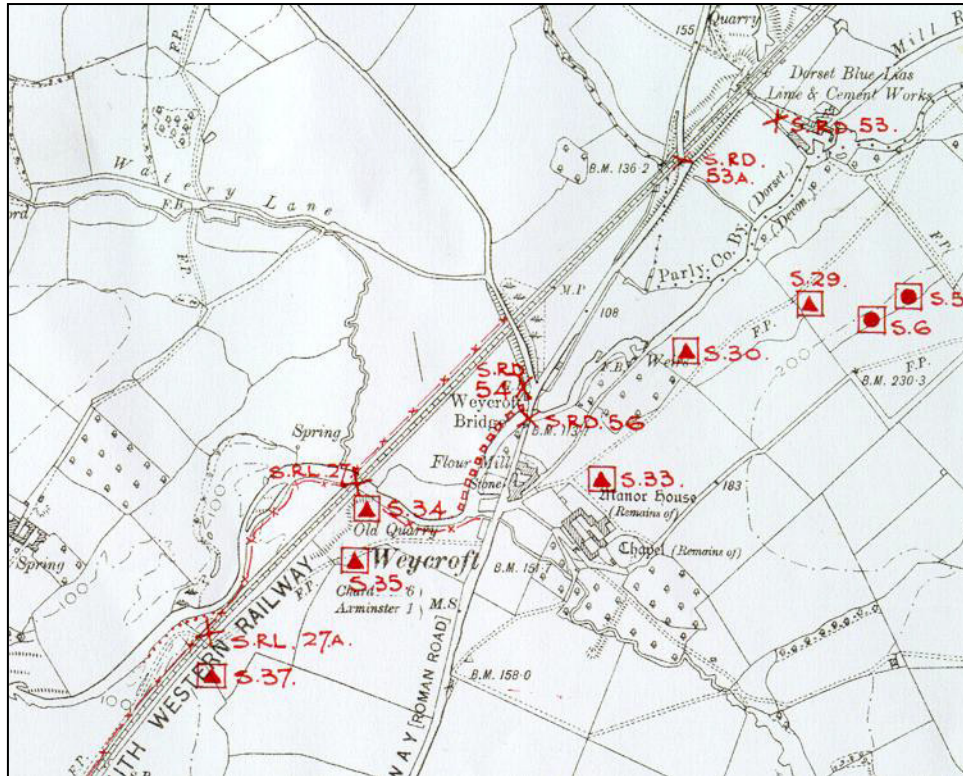


Fig. 3 - Royal Engineers map, made probably in August 1940, showing the defence works constructed in the Weycroft area. Most of these survive today.¹⁴

In the Weycroft area, which lay a short distance from the northernmost perimeter defences of Axminster anti-tank island, the main anti-tank obstacle was the River Axe. The particular requirements were to defend the road and rail crossings of the river and to utilise the heights to the north-east to cover the anti-tank obstacle. At this point, the banks of the river are not very high, and there is some evidence from aerial photographs that they may have been cut back and steepened. Certainly, the river as an obstacle was strengthened by lines of anti-tank cubes in the vicinity of the mill, and by concrete posts and barbed wire to the south-west. Although this is not shown on the Royal Engineers map, an anti-tank ditch was also dug at the foot of a bluff running parallel with the railway line and river, and connecting with a pillbox and a railblock. One additional railblock, and four roadblocks, were also constructed within the area, the latter probably of the vertical rail type, and with surrounding land mines. There is some surviving field evidence that the mill buildings were incorporated in the defences, although there is no documentary reference to this.

The defence works -

Some fine examples of infantry pillboxes and Vickers machine gun emplacements survive within the defence area. In the latter category, two emplacements [UORNs

¹³ TNA: PRO WO 199/1810 and TNA: PRO WO 166/1243.

¹⁴ Taunton Stop Line record map folios (Wills Collection, NMR).



1234 and 16302] stand side by side on the steep hillside above the river. This firepower was supplemented by additional infantry pillboxes above the river as far as the mill. By Weycroft Hall, a type 22 pillbox [one of only two of this type on the Taunton Stop Line - UORN 16346] still retains its stencilled reference code. A wall of the mill facing the road is pierced by a narrow vertical window, which may be a surviving loophole if this building was fortified for defence. Near here, an impressive survival is the line of anti-tank cubes fronting the river, clearly seen from the adjacent road causeway [UORN 1243].



Fig. 4 - UORN 1234: a Vickers emplacement on a bluff overlooking the River Axe.



Fig. 5 - UORN 16346: a type 22 pillbox, one of only two of this type on the Taunton Stop Line.

Other pillboxes lie close to the river to the south-west, one at the foot of the bluff adjacent to the railway bridge over the river [UORN 1220]. From this pillbox can be made out the surviving hollow of the anti-tank ditch that ran as far as the railblock that marks the south-west extent of the study area. The plinths of the railblock [UORN 16430] maintain an impressive presence by the rail track, and are supplemented by anti-tank cubes, some of which have tumbled into the river. Of the concrete posts that once strengthened the river bank near here, only one fragment could be made out during the fieldwork for this survey, although others survive, but in a vulnerable condition, next to the mill race. There is no surviving field evidence for any of the roadblocks, which were presumably cleared away soon after the war.



Fig. 6 - UORN 1243: a fine line of pyramidal-topped anti-tank cubes strengthening the main anti-tank obstacle of the River Axe.



Fig. 7 - More anti-tank cubes by the mill race, with, in the foreground, some concrete posts strengthening the river bank [UORN 16428]. The latter are a rare surviving defence work: others to the south-west have been destroyed in recent years.



Fig. 8 - UORN 16430: one of the two facing concrete plinths of a railblock, a rare survival.

2.2 Landscape:

There have been few changes in the immediate landscape around Weycroft since the Second World War, although the northern suburbs of Axminster have spread close to the area with the development of an industrial estate next to Weycroft Manor Farm on the site of a former army camp. The A358 road bears an ever-increasing load of heavy traffic that has to wait at traffic lights to cross the narrow Weycroft causeway by the mill. The mill itself has recently been refurbished, and new houses are being built within its grounds. The land opposite next to the river, where the line of anti-tank cubes runs, has also been 'dug over' as if some sort of development is planned. The former cement works at the northern edge of the area have long been closed down, and a short line of workers' houses have now been converted to residences - Coaxden Cottages.

The banks of the River Axe are shallow, and there may be a problem with flooding here. Some attempt seems to have been made to use anti-tank blocks as a reinforcement for the river bank at a point where it runs close to the railway line: they were probably moved for this purpose.

Many of the fields within the area closest to the south side of the river are pasture, although they are likely to have been ploughed up for arable crops during the war. Some further generation of woodland to the north-east of the mill has also taken place.

The area is one that the majority of tourists appear to pass by on the busy main road, rather than visit. Access for car parking is not easy, although there is a convenient lay-by just beyond Coaxden Cottages to the north. Public footpaths provide some fine walks to the south of the river, and enable most of the defence works to be visited or viewed at a convenient distance.





Fig. 9 - Anti-tank cubes used as river bank reinforcement [UORN 1242].

2.3 Statement of Significance:

This defence area provides an excellent illustration of the defences of the Taunton Stop Line where these were set on the margins of a river that provided a front-edge anti-tank obstacle, which needed, however, to be strengthened by artificial additions. The line of anti-tank blocks [UORN 1243] forms a major monument today, and has the very rare addition of concrete posts in situ. Surviving lines of concrete obstacles inland are relatively rare, most being found at the coast. Also rare are the plinths of a railblock still beside the tracks they once protected [UORN 16430].

Some excellent examples of two different types of infantry pillbox (types 22 and 24), together with Vickers machine gun emplacements, can be easily inspected. The pillbox, UORN 1220, is in a dramatic position by the railway bridge, and might be missed by the average visitor as it is out of sight at the foot of a steep bank. A visit to it is doubly profitable, for from it can be made out the hollow of an anti-tank ditch running to the south-west. Ground evidence of the many hundreds of miles of anti-tank ditch that were excavated in 1940/41 is rare, as most were infilled by the end of the war, or very soon afterwards. [See in particular Defence Area 32 - Hog Wood].

The testament of a man who helped build the Taunton Stop Line states that his 'lasting impression [is] that it would stop nothing, even temporarily', a view that must be respected from 'one who was there', but which both the documentary evidence, and surviving field evidence, do not bear out [see also Defence Areas 4, 19, and 25].¹⁵

An attractive 'pillbox walk' could be established using the public footpaths that cross the area south of the river.

¹⁵ Davies (Defence of Britain Project Archive, NMR).



3. **Recommendations:**

1. That the surviving anti-invasion defence works in the Weycroft area be considered of national importance. They enable the defence of this section of the Taunton Stop Line 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 extensive available documentary evidence of defence structures that were built as part of the overall strategy, but which have now been removed.
2. That particular consideration be given to the protection of the in situ concrete posts by the mill race that are highly vulnerable to further loss or damage [UORN 16428].
3. That consideration be given, in a possible initiative with Devon County Council and the local authority, to establishing a 'pillbox walk' that would take in the defence works to the north-east and south-west of Weycroft. As the narrow road by Weycroft Mill is dangerous to pedestrians, and parking dangerous, it would be difficult to display an information board here, but appropriate information on the defence area, and on the Taunton Stop Line in general, might be provided in the form of a publicly-available leaflet.

4. **Supporting material.**

4.1 **Photographs:**

Fig. 1 - CPE/UK/1974 fr.1423 (11.4.1947) - NMR.

Figs. 4-9 - taken (AWF) during field survey, 14.1.2003.

4.2 **Documentary Sources:**

'Taunton Stop Line' [record map folios of Major F.B. Goodman R.E., D.C.R.E. Taunton], 1940 - Wills Collection, NMR.

'Southern Command Home Defence Programme, 1940' (map from General Headquarters Papers, Defence Works) - TNA: PRO WO 199/48.

516th Corps Field Survey Company Royal Engineers War Diary, 1940 - TNA: PRO WO 166/3781.

551st Army Troops Company Royal Engineers War Diary, 1940 - TNA: PRO WO 166/3789.

552nd Army Troops Company Royal Engineers War Diary, 1940 - TNA: PRO WO 166/3790.

144th Infantry Brigade War Diary, 1940 - TNA: PRO WO 166/1007.

'Somerset Sub-Area Defence Scheme', August 1940 (from Somerset Sub-Area HQ War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/1317.

'Home Defence Progress Report: Taunton Line', 30.10.1940 (from General Headquarters Papers, Home Forces) - TNA: PRO WO 199/1803.

'Report on Taunton Stop Line', December 1940 (from General Headquarters Papers, Home Defence - Stop Lines) - TNA: PRO WO 199/1810.

'Operation Instruction No.5' - Taunton Stop Line', 4.1.1941 (from Southern Area HQ War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/1243.



'Western Area Defence Scheme', 23.6.1941 (from Western Area HQ War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/1251.

'Somerset and Bristol Area Defence Scheme', 1942 (from Somerset and Bristol Area War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/6713.

'Operation Instruction No.4', 7.3.1942 (from South Somerset Sub-Area War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/6775.

'Somerset Sub-District Defence Scheme', 1943 (from Somerset Sub-District War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/11001.

'Somerset and Bristol Area Defence Scheme', 1943 (from Somerset and Bristol Area War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/10824.

B. Horner, 'Weycroft Mill, Axminster: Features Relating to the 1940 Taunton Stop-Line', 28.4.1997 (unpublished memorandum and plan in Defence of Britain Project Archive, NMR).

[Letter to Defence of Britain Project from Mr. P. Davies - late 552nd Army Troops Company Royal Engineers - re the construction of the Taunton Stop Line], 26.10.1997 (Defence of Britain Project Archive, NMR).

4.3 **Published Sources:**

C.S. Dobinson, 'The Taunton stop-line: component listing' (supporting paper AI/S/3 to *Twentieth Century Fortifications in England, Vol. II: Anti-Invasion Defences of WWII*, Council for British Archaeology, 1996).

John Hellis, 'The Taunton Stop-Line' (from *Fortress*, pp39-47, 1996).

Derrick Warren, *Now You See It - Then You Didn't: The Inter-Channel Stop Line of 1940* (Somerset Industrial Archaeological Society, May 2001) - originally produced privately, 1986.

4.4 **Aerial Photographs:**

225A/UK854/3 frs. 25-27 (29.7.1940) - NMR.

CPE/UK/1974 frs.1423-1424 (11.4.1947) - NMR.

4.5 **Ordnance Survey 1: 2500 Plans:**

ST 3000-3100 (1961) - BLML.

SY 3099-3199 (1959) - BLML.

SY 3099-3199 (1972) - BLML.

4.6 **Defence of Britain Project Database:**

[see 5. 'Annex'].

