

DEFENCE AREA 4

WADBROOK

1. **Area details:**
Wadbrook is 3 miles NE of Axminster.
County: Devon.
Parish: Hawkchurch.
NGR: centre of area, ST 325018.

- 1.1 **Area Description:** [see Map 1].
The defence area, which is a couple of miles north of Defence Area 3 -Weycroft, lies predominantly to the north and south of the small farming community of Wadbrook. This is an agricultural landscape, in the main on the east side of the River Axe where low hills rise from the river plain. It is crossed by a network of narrow, winding lanes, and, on its western side, by the line of the Exeter - Yeovil railway. Just to the north of the area is the western tip of the county of Dorset.

The area is defined to the north by the county border that follows the course of the Blackwater River, to the south by woodland, to the west by the River Axe and the



railway line, and to the east by the summit of the hills flanking the river valley. The whole forms a single viewshed where, from the river valley below Axe Bridge, the eye can sweep over all the topographical features and appreciate their significance in the siting of the 1940 defence works.

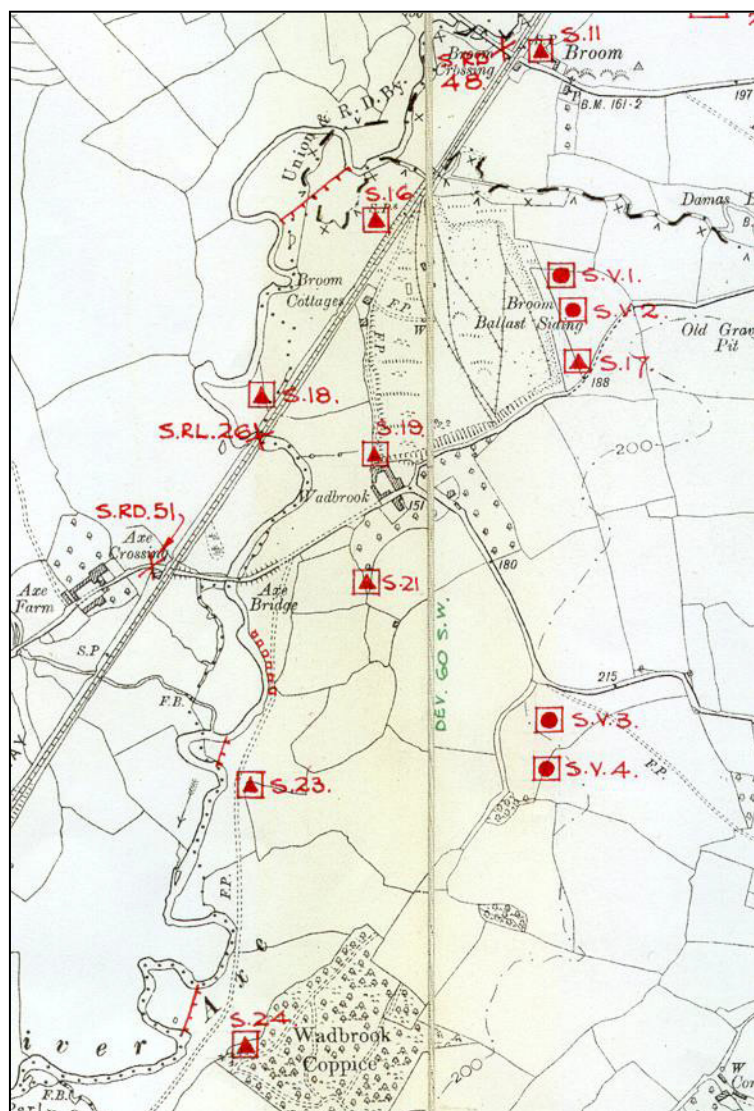
Fig. 1 - The Wadbrook defence area, showing the twisting course of the River Axe and the straight line of the railway. The river is crossed by a lane at Axe Bridge. Several loops of the river were strengthened by the digging of anti-tank ditches across their base, and some of these can be made out in this 1947 air photograph.

2. Assessment.

2.1 Defences: [see Map 2]

Defence overview -

The anti-invasion defence works at Wadbrook 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. [For further details of this stop line and the form and purpose of its defences, see the description under 'Defence summary' as part of the report on Defence Area 3 - Weycroft].



*Fig. 2 - Royal Engineers map made in 1940 showing the defence works constructed in the Wadbrook area, the majority of which survive today. The anti-tank ditches cutting off the river loops are indicated - compare with Fig. 1.*¹

The main anti-tank obstacle at Wadbrook was the River Axe, the banks of which were cut back and steepened, with short lengths of anti-tank ditch added to the river obstacle to reinforce its outward facing loops. At one point just south of Axe Bridge, a row of anti-tank cubes was erected on an earth platform to strengthen the river bank as an anti-tank obstacle. Road and rail blocks were set up at river crossings, and at Axe Bridge this was a block of the horizontal rail type. Roadblocks were also established on the lanes winding through the high land to the east of the river.

¹ Taunton Stop Line record map folios (Wills Collection, NMR).



Fig. 3 - The earth bank on which anti-tank cubes were positioned by the River Axe can still be seen, although the cubes themselves have long since been removed.

From a position within the valley, it is possible to appreciate at a glance how lighter infantry pillboxes (for Bren light machine gun and rifle fire) were positioned close to the river, while the heavier Vickers machine gun emplacements crowned the hills behind. Earthworks were also prepared at two points on these heights as firing positions for 2pdr. anti-tank guns. This is an opposite strategy to that which prevailed in Defence Area 8 - Hartford End, for example, where the large shell-proof pillboxes were placed on the river bank while smaller, thinner-walled pillboxes were arranged to the rear to command the hill slopes with interlocking fire. There is some evidence from air photographs that construction of certain of the defence structures in the Wadbrook area was under way before the end of July 1940.

As with Defence Area 3 - Weycroft, the Home Guard unit responsible for manning and maintaining the defence works, once the Taunton Stop Line had been abandoned as a defence strategy for the Field Army, was the Axminster Company of the Seaton Battalion, Devon Home Guard.²

The defence works -

Some fine examples of the Vickers medium machine gun emplacement survive within the area. Two such emplacements, with their large main embrasures, stand close together on the brow of the hill overlooking the river, and are in good condition [UORNs 1314 and 1315]. The concrete tables on which the weapons were placed are intact. Two further emplacements stand together to the north, but are more overgrown and less accessible than the first. Examples of type 24 infantry pillboxes can also be found, although in the main these are all either badly overgrown or unapproachable (without permission) on private land. The plinths of the horizontal rail roadblock are a fine survival, as these were usually removed as an obstruction soon after the end of the war [UORN 1339]. Some sites, in particular the two type 26 pillboxes built on the west side of the railway line, could not be inspected because of their public inaccessibility.

² TNA: PRO WO 199/1810 and TNA: PRO WO 166/1243.





Fig. 4 - UORN 1315: powerful-looking Vickers machine gun emplacement, with large stepped embrasure and detached blast wall covering the entrance. The breeze-block shuttering is falling away in part.



Fig. 5 - UORN 1314: concrete table for the positioning of the Vickers medium machine gun, seen through the main embrasure.



Fig. 6 - UORN 1334: type 24 pillbox in very overgrown condition.



Fig. 7 - UORN 1339: fine examples of roadblock plinths to take horizontal steel beams at Axe Bridge. The rising land beyond the river can be seen: this was defended by infantry pillboxes and Vickers machine gun emplacements.

2.2 Landscape:

The countryside of the Wadbrook defence area remains very substantially as it was in 1940. Aerial photographs show that a number of hedgerows of fields that lay within the river plain have been removed, but the essential pattern of small fields, woods, and narrow lanes, in a rolling landscape above the river valley, still remains. An area marked on the 1940 map as the 'Broom ballast siding' is now a deep disused gravel pit, near the eastern edge of which three defence works are situated.

This is a working agricultural landscape, and there is 'little room' for car-borne visitors. The lanes are frequented by tractors and other farm vehicles, and there are few passing places. Visitors would be well advised to walk to the area from a distance beyond it. A footpath running along the eastern bank of the river provides views that enable the topography and the particular defence requirements of the area to be understood, as well as providing access to several sites.

2.3 Statement of Significance:

The defence area provides an excellent illustration of the defences of the Taunton Stop Line where these are set on the margins of a river that provided the main anti-tank obstacle, albeit supplemented by artificial additions. A walk along the river bank enables an understanding to be gained of the specific requirements of the stop line as an anti-tank barrier. The area is also important in showing the different layers of the linear defence, in particular how the concrete gun emplacements were placed in two lines according to the strength of their firepower, using the natural topography to great advantage.

Some excellent examples of Vickers machine gun emplacements can be inspected, including interior access, although it is advisable to gain permission from the



nearby farms to do so. The horizontal roadblock plinths at Axe Bridge are an important survival, and it is advisable to approach the defence area across this bridge to appreciate best how its defences were sited, making use of the line of the river and the railway with the rising land beyond.

A 'pillbox walk' could readily be established, using the public footpaths and the lanes south and east of Axe Bridge, although some sites cannot be approached without permission.

3. **Recommendations:**

1. That the surviving anti-invasion works in the Wadbrook defence 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 further fieldwork be carried out, with the permission of the landowner/s, to check the surviving condition of UORNs 1293, 1321, and 1322.
3. That consideration be given, in a possible initiative with Devon County Council and the local authority, to establishing a 'pillbox walk' through the area. As car-borne visitors could create problems in the narrow lanes, and there is no scope to display an information board, this would best be done as part of a walk originating outside the area. The appropriate information might be provided in the form of a leaflet.

4. **Supporting material.**

4.1 **Photographs:**

Fig. 1 - CPE/UK/1974 fr.4323 (11.4.1947) - NMR.

Figs. 3-7 - 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.

'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.



[Letter to Defence of Britain Project from Mr. P. Davies - late 552 Army Troops Coy RE - 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).

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/UK854/1 frs.27-28 (28.7.1940) - NMR.

CPE/UK/1974 frs.4322-4323 (11.4.1947) - NMR.

OS/HSL/82046 fr.1117 (28.8.1982) - NMR.

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

ST 3201-3301 (1961) - BLML.

ST 3202-3302 (1961) - BLML.

4.6 **Defence of Britain Project Database:**

[see 5. 'Annex'].

