

# DEFENCE AREA 5

## RIVER LARK: JUDE'S FERRY BRIDGE

### 1. **Area details:**

Jude's Ferry Bridge is on the S side of West Row village, 2½ miles W of Mildenhall.

County: Suffolk.

Parishes: Worlington / Freckenham.

NGR: centre of area, TL 677748.

### 1.1 **Area Description:** [see Map 1].

The defence area lies in the floodplain of the River Lark as it flows west from Mildenhall, and then curves north to join eventually the River Ouse south of Littleport. South of the village of West Row, the river is crossed by a minor road at Jude's Ferry Bridge.

The focal point of the area is the bridge, and viewsheds are formed within the flat landscape both to the west and east of it following the winding course of the river. The surviving defence works are all on the south side of the river. The borders of the area are determined by the course of the river from east to west, by the village of Worlington to the east, and by an arbitrary line beyond the furthest pillbox [UORN 6388] to the west.

### 2. **Assessment.**

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

*Defence overview -*

In the period June - September 1940, a Corps Line [stop line] between II Corps and XI Corps was constructed from the River Colne (south of Bures in Essex) to Barton Mills (south of Mildenhall), following principally the courses of the Rivers Stour and Lark. It then continued as the Command Line [Eastern Command], still following the River Lark, via Jude's Ferry Bridge to join the River Great Stour south of Littleport, and thence to King's Lynn.<sup>1</sup>

This River Lark stop line was fortified with infantry pillboxes and anti-tank gun emplacements, which often had wired, and sometimes mined, perimeter defences. Crossing points of the line were protected by roadblocks, which were often part of a defended locality or check point. A related system of nodal points and other defended areas extended the depth of the defence. Demolition belts, categorised as

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<sup>1</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/6728.



of first and second priority, also followed the course of the stop line. Road and rail bridges were prepared for destruction with chambers to hold explosives being drilled within their structures. Jude's Ferry Bridge was mined in this way: the area of the bridge being a designated 'check point'.<sup>2</sup> Barton Mills, some two miles to the east, was a nodal point.<sup>3</sup> In September 1940, responsibility for the defence of the stop line lay with 52 Division of II Corps, although it is unlikely that Field Army troops ever took up position on the line. As with other prepared stop lines, the defence works were largely given to the Home Guard to man and maintain. In 1942, for instance, the Jude's Ferry Bridge roadblocks were being manned by the 2nd Bn. Cambridgeshire Home Guard.<sup>4</sup>



*Fig. 1 - Aerial photograph showing the River Lark winding from west to east. Jude's Ferry Bridge is towards the upper left. The anti-tank gun emplacement [UORN 6440] can be clearly seen to the south of the bridge, as can other pillboxes on the south bank of the river.*

Some forty-four pillboxes were built in the Suffolk section of the stop line, of which a very high percentage survive today. All the seven pillboxes that were built in the study defence area have survived, the numbers constructed being known from a documentary source.<sup>5</sup> Jude's Ferry Bridge was defended by two roadblocks, one opposite the Jude's Ferry public house and the other probably on the south side of the bridge. No evidence of these roadblocks, which were of two-way horizontal steel rails slotted into concrete plinths, survives. The roadblocks must have been cleared away very soon after the war, for an RAF aerial

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<sup>2</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/6728 and TNA: PRO WO 166/189 (map).

<sup>3</sup> TNA: PRO WO 199/544.

<sup>4</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/6728.

<sup>5</sup> 'Defence Works Progress Reports', August 1940 - TNA: PRO WO 166/3709.



photograph taken in June 1946 shows no sign of them, although the pillboxes following the course of the River Lark can be clearly seen [see Fig. 1].

*The defence works -*

To the south-east of Jude's Ferry Bridge is a type 28 anti-tank gun emplacement [UORN 6440], and, on the river bank to the south-west, a type 24 infantry pillbox. These two structures are in good condition and are now highly visible in the landscape. However, a further pillbox [UORN 6334] that stands close to the bridge itself is so overgrown that it can only be seen close-up. A most unusual pillbox is the type 24 variant [UORN 6388] standing on the south bank of the river to the west: this has a concrete roof with a thin overhang at the hexagonal corners, forming a square shape when seen from above, possibly part of its original camouflage scheme. The other three pillboxes in the area are type 24s.

The general condition of the surviving structures is 'good', although all are overgrown to a greater or lesser extent. Some have doorways and embrasures that have been blocked up since the war. Almost all them have to be viewed from a distance because they stand on private land within cultivated fields. However, the anti-tank gun emplacement [UORN 6440] is accessible via a track (not a public right of way) from the adjacent road, and the interior may also be inspected.



*Fig. 2 - UORN 6440: brick-shuttered anti-tank gun emplacement south-east of Jude's Ferry Bridge. The holdfast survives inside to mount a 6pdr. anti-tank gun firing towards the bridge.*







*Fig. 3 - Jude's Ferry Bridge (replaced in 1999) with anti-tank gun emplacement, UORN 6440, commanding it to the south-east.*



*Fig. 4 - UORN 6388: type 24 pillbox, with distinctive and highly unusual overhanging roof.*





*Fig. 5 - UORN 6392: type 24 concrete-faced pillbox, with chamfered roof edge to deflect incoming shells.*

## 2.2 Landscape:

Aerial photographs of the late 1940s show that the modern landscape differs little from that which prevailed during the war. Some fields, both north and south of the river, have been 'opened up' and field divisions removed, but there has been no other development, and the pattern of fields and woodland is substantially the same. The fact that several pillboxes appear to 'stand high', with their concrete bases exposed, shows the effect of the shrinkage of the underlying peat over the last sixty years.

The Jude's Ferry public house is situated as it was in 1940, when it was termed a 'hotel'. The bridge, however, has been replaced by a modern structure in the same position opened in January 1999.

Footpaths follow the north bank of the river both west and east of Jude's Ferry Bridge. These provide access to a riverine environment of great attraction, from which the majority of the defence structures can be viewed.

## 2.3 Statement of Significance:

This area provides a good example of a section of stop line where the hardened defence works survive almost in their entirety. Differing types of structures and their methods of construction can be seen, from an anti-tank gun emplacement (brick-shuttered) to type 22 and type 24 pillboxes (wood-shuttered), and an





interesting variant pillbox with evidence of original camouflage. The relation of these defence works to the anti-tank obstacle provided by the River Lark can be understood, as can the check point at Jude's Ferry with its defence works grouped to command the bridge.

A 'pillbox walk' could be established using the existing public footpaths on the north bank of the river. In the east of the area at Kings Staunch Cottage, the path crosses the river by a footbridge on its way to Worlington. The walker can return to Jude's Ferry Bridge by a track on the south side of the river that enables three of the defence structures to be viewed at much closer quarters. This track, however, is not a public footpath, although there appears to be ready access to it.

This area provides a well-preserved section of a stop line, with good access to defence structures from one central location. It should be emphasised as well that the defence works continue, both to the west and east beyond the study area, where they may be viewed at various additional points on the course of the stop line.

### 3. **Recommendations:**

1. That the surviving anti-invasion defence works at Jude's Ferry Bridge be considered of national importance. They enable the Second World War defence of the bridge 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 consideration be given to removing the overgrowth on the pillbox at the bridge [UORN 6334] so that it can be seen more clearly for the purpose of 1. above. Aerial photographs show that the pillbox has only become overgrown since the mid-1970s.
3. That the surviving anti-invasion defence works to the west and east of Jude's Ferry Bridge, within the limits of the defined defence area, also be considered of national importance. They enable the linear nature of the stop line, formed by the anti-tank barrier of the River Lark, to be readily appreciated.
4. That 1. and 3. above be considered as part of a 'pillbox walk', in a possible initiative with Suffolk County Council and the local authority, and that an information board be provided at Jude's Ferry Bridge. Notes on adjacent and related sites beyond the defence area might also be included with such information.



#### 4. **Supporting material.**

##### 4.1 **Photographs:**

Fig. 1 - 106G/UK/1589 fr.6090 (21.6.1946) - NMR.

Figs. 2-5 - taken (AWF) during field survey, 18.6.2002.

##### 4.2 **Documentary Sources:**

'II Corps Defence Scheme', 1940 (from II Corps CRE War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/194.

'Demolitions Progress Report', 10 August 1940 (from 240th Army Field Company Royal Engineers War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/3709.

'Defence Works Progress Report', 11 August 1940 (from 240th Army Field Company Royal Engineers War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/3709.

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

'Operation Instruction No. 41', 6.8.1941 (from II Corps 'G' War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/189.

'Operation Instruction No.12', 18 December 1941 (from Cambridge Area War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/1193.

'Cambridge Sub-Area Defence Scheme', 1942 (from Cambridge Sub-Area War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/6728.

##### 4.3 **Aerial Photographs:**

106G/UK/1589 fr.6090 (21.6.1946) - NMR.

58/1971 fr.109 (27.3.1956) - NMR.

543/2409 fr.159 (16.9.1963) - NMR.

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

TL 6874-6974 (1978) - BLML.

##### 4.5 **Defence of Britain Project Database:**

[see 5. 'Annex'].

