

# DEFENCE AREA 9

## SUDBURY

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

Sudbury is 13 miles NW of Colchester and 15 miles S of Bury St. Edmunds.

County: Suffolk.

Parishes: Sudbury / Borley / Foxearth.

NGR: centre of area, TL 864422.

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

The defence area lies in the valley of the River Stour, to the south, west, and north-west of the town of Sudbury. Here, the river bends around the higher land occupied by the town, and has formed a broad-bottomed valley of water meadows intersected by numerous water channels. Much of this land is common land, known as Sudbury Common Lands, and now a local nature reserve of English Nature.

The valley to the north of Sudbury narrows, and there are two large houses and estates (once water mills) by the river - Brundon Hall and Mill and Borley Hall and Mill. The northern boundary of the defence area is at Rod Bridge south of Long Melford, a major road crossing of the river and the now disused railway line.



*Fig. 1 -  
Pillbox, UORN  
6433, amongst  
the Sudbury  
Common  
Lands.*

The route of the railway, which follows a course west of the river, partly in cuttings and, at one point south of Sudbury, on an embankment, is now a designated path - 'The Valley Walk'. At the south of the defence area, the river



bends to the east passing close to the town suburbs. On the town-side bank is an open recreational area known as 'Friar's Meadow'.

The centre - and the focus - of the defence area are the broad water meadows to the west of the town. Here, viewsheds are formed by the enclosing hills to the west, by the town to the east, and by the river valley winding away to north and south. The defence area includes the valley as far as Rod Bridge because, by this, the linear nature of the defence is emphasised, and because the overall survival of the pillboxes is so good.

## 2. **Assessment.**

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

#### *Defence overview -*

From July 1940, a Corps [XI Corps] Stop Line was constructed from the River Colne to Mildenhall in Suffolk, where it fell within the area of II Corps.<sup>1</sup> The course of this fortified line, which was also accompanied by a Corps Demolition Belt,<sup>2</sup> joined the River Stour at Bures, and continued via Sudbury to Long Melford, where it then left the river to follow the route of the railway line to Bury St. Edmunds. As with other such stop lines, it was defended with hardened gun positions [pillboxes for light and heavy machine guns and for rifle fire] and anti-tank gun emplacements. A second line of prepared anti-tank gun positions was prepared to the west of the front line of constructed defence works by the river.<sup>3</sup> Where the Corps Line was crossed by roads or other communication routes, roadblocks were set up and bridges mined for demolition. The main front-edge anti-tank obstacle was the waterway, the banks of which were steepened and revetted in places.

In order that the stop line might also have strength in depth, various towns, villages, and other communication points along its route were declared 'nodal points' and prepared for all-round defence. Much of this defence was entrusted to the Home Guard. In September 1940, Sudbury was a Category 'A' nodal point and Long Melford a Category 'C'<sup>4</sup>, but by 1941 both nodal points were designated as being of 'second priority'.<sup>5</sup> The defence of Sudbury and Long Melford was the responsibility of the 10th Bn. Suffolk Home Guard. The defence works of the Sudbury nodal point, however, are only included in this study area where they are also part of the defence of the stop line.

#### *The defence works -*

A feature of the defence works running on the west side of the river (or, where it turns to the east, its south side) is that without exception they are type 27 pillboxes (octagonal, with a covered entry porch, and a central open well with a mount for an anti-aircraft gun). The positions of all these pillboxes, with their original

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<sup>1</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/1207.

<sup>2</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/6700 (map).

<sup>3</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/1320.

<sup>4</sup> TNA: PRO WO 199/544.

<sup>5</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/1320 and TNA: PRO WO 166/1207.



reference numbers, are known from a documentary source, and there are very few that do not survive.<sup>6</sup>



*Fig. 2 - UORN 6433: a type 27 pillbox with covered entry porch. Almost all the original external brick shuttering has gone.*



*Fig. 3 - UORN 648: type 27 pillbox showing the central AA gun mounting.*

North-west of the Ballingdon road bridge, which it was positioned to defend, is a 6pdr. anti-tank gun emplacement which survives in the back garden of a house. This is a most important structure as such emplacements were placed sparsely along this section of

the stop line. Another at Rod Bridge has not survived, and its exact position is not known.

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<sup>6</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/1320.





Also near Ballingdon Bridge, on the west side of the railway embankment, a very rare Tett Turret, complete with its concrete cupola, survived until recently. The cupola appears now to have been removed, although it is possible that the chamber of the structure still survives dug into the embankment.<sup>7</sup>

Close to pillbox, UORN 6433, at Little Fullingpit Meadow, a number of concrete anti-tank cylinders lie in the bed of a watercourse. It is not clear where these have come from: they may have blocked a pathway over a footbridge at this point or possibly been brought from roadblock sites in Sudbury to strengthen the stream banks.



*Fig. 4 - UORN 11781: anti-tank gun emplacement with mounting for a 6pdr. gun. The main embrasure has been blocked. This is an important structure surviving in a back garden.*



*Fig. 5 - UORN 12081 - concrete cylinders, probably from the adjacent blocking of a small bridge, lying now in the bed of a watercourse, while others are used to strengthen its banks.*

<sup>7</sup> See Wills, 'Pillboxes', p22.





There is no in situ evidence today, however, for any of the roadblocks that are known to have been positioned at Ballingdon Bridge, Brundon Mill, and Rod Bridge, and nor is there any sign of them on post-war aerial photographs. Presumably they were cleared away very soon after the war.

## 2.2 Landscape:

The landscape of the defence area has received few changes over the last sixty years. The most striking alteration is to the course of the River Stour as it is crossed by the railway line south of Sudbury and flows east. Here, it used to run in a series of sharp loops that have now been straightened, almost certainly leading to the loss of one pillbox [UORN 16066] at this time. It is not known why or when this work was carried out.



*Fig. 6 - Aerial photograph taken in 1952, showing the series of river loops to the south of Sudbury that have now been straightened. Various pillboxes can be seen in this photograph, including one that has been destroyed [UORN 16066] which used to lie within the most easterly [right hand] of the river loops.*



Almost all the pillboxes in the defence area stand in attractive surroundings, at the edge of water amidst lush meadows. They can be visited by following 'The Valley Walk', and then by taking smaller footpaths that allow most of them to be inspected at close quarters. Where access to some sites is not possible, the structures can usually be viewed from no great distance, as, for example, with the pillboxes that can be seen from Friar's Meadow on the opposite bank of the river.



*Fig. 7 - Type 27 pillbox [UORN 6411] on the south bank of the Stour, seen from Friar's Meadow.*



*Fig. 8 -  
UORN 6432:  
type 27  
pillbox, with  
cow, near  
Brundon Hall.*



### 2.3 Statement of Significance:

The Sudbury defence area provides an excellent section of a stop line where the hardened defence works survive largely complete. These enable the linear nature of the defences, and their positioning, to be understood within the landscape they were defending. The defence works continue beyond the boundaries of the defence area, both to the north and the south.

Excellent examples of the type 27 pillbox can be inspected, often internally as well as externally - this pillbox type is relatively rare elsewhere in the country [see, for example, Defence Area 61 - Cheshunt]. There is also one very good example of an anti-tank gun emplacement. Most of these defence works can be related to points on the stop line that needed particular defence, in particular at the various crossings of the railway and of roads and tracks. As there is such good documentary evidence, it is possible to reconstruct as well other defence positions that were prepared (often as earthworks) but not built as hardened defence works.

The author, Robert Arbib, served in the American Army in Suffolk. He saw the Sudbury pillboxes in 1942, and wrote of them later in a book of his impressions of wartime England, 'Perhaps they will be left there to gather moss and then grass and then to be split up by the roots of trees, as relics of an age, a strange, incongruous footnote to Suffolk history'.<sup>8</sup> By good fortune the Sudbury pillboxes *have* survived, virtually intact, and they do, as Arbib anticipated, provide an important reminder of the desperate days of 1940.

A 'pillbox walk' could readily be established to cover various points within the valley. This is an attractive, and publicly accessible landscape, the defence heritage of which needs to be emphasised for educational and leisure purposes.

### 3. Recommendations:

1. That the surviving anti-invasion defence works within the valley of the River Stour, south, west, and north-west of Sudbury, be considered of national importance. They enable the defence of the Corps Line at this 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 consideration be given, in a possible collaboration with Suffolk County Council and the local authority, to establishing a 'pillbox walk' along the Stour Valley from Friar's Meadow to Rod Bridge, making use in part of the existing 'The Valley Walk'. Information boards on the anti-invasion defences could also be provided at locations such as Friar's Meadow and the riverfront near St. Gregory's Church. Notes on adjacent and related sites on the stop line beyond the defence area might also be provided.

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<sup>8</sup> Arbib, *Here We Are Together*, p94.



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

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

Figs. 1-5 and 7-8 - taken (AWF) during field survey, 12.6.2002.  
Fig. 6 - 540/706 fr.4098 (9.4.1952) - NMR.

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

'List of Nodal Points in Eastern Command', September 1940 (from General Headquarters Papers, Home Forces) - TNA: PRO WO 199/544.  
XI Corps HQ 'G' War Diary, 1940-1941 - TNA: PRO WO 166/329.  
'Suffolk Sub-Area Defence Scheme', revised 14.11.41 (from Suffolk Sub-Area War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/1320.  
'Hertford Area Defence Scheme', 1941 (from Hertford Area HQ War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/1207.  
'Suffolk Sub-Area Defence Scheme', 1942 (from Suffolk Sub-Area War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/6779.  
'Operation Instruction No.15', 24.7.1942 (from Essex Sub-Area War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/6738.  
'Essex and Suffolk Area Defence Scheme' (with map), 1942 (from Essex and Suffolk Area War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/6700.  
'Operation Instruction No.12', 5.4.1944 (from Essex and Suffolk District War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/14392.

##### 4.3 **Published Sources:**

Robert S. Arbib, Jr., *Here We Are Together: The Notebook of an American Soldier in Britain* (Longmans, 1946).  
Henry Wills, *Pillboxes: A Study of UK Defences 1940* (Leo Cooper, 1985).

##### 4.4 **Aerial Photographs:**

106G/LA/227 frs.2090, 2094-2095 (17.4.1945) - NMR.  
3G/TUD/UK/119 frs.6234-6235 (3.4.1946) - NMR.  
106G/UK/1635 fr.4081 (9.7.1946) - NMR.  
540/706 fr.3095 (9.4.1952) - NMR.  
540/706 fr.4098 (9.4.1952) - NMR.

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

TL 8640-8740 (1970) - BLML.  
TL 8641-8741 (1966) - BLML.  
TL 8642-8742 (1964) - BLML.

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

[see 5. 'Annex'].

