

DEFENCE AREA 10

PERSHORE BRIDGES

1. **Area details:**

The defence area is on the S side of Pershore, 8 miles SE of Worcester and 6 miles W of Evesham.

County: Worcestershire.

Parishes: Pershore / Wick.

NGR: centre of area, SO 953451.

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

The two bridges, side-by-side, crossing the River Avon provide the focal point of the defence area. The western of the two is a concrete structure opened in 1926 that now carries the A44 road, while eighty yards to its east is the fine medieval stone bridge (a scheduled monument) that it superseded. The old bridge is approached by a road that incorporates later flood arches at both its north and south ends.



Fig. 1 - The 'modern' and 'old' bridges crossing the River Avon south of the town of Pershore. The central arch of the old bridge was demolished by the retreating Royalist army during the Civil War, but rebuilt soon afterwards.

To the north of the bridges, the A44 road (Bridge Street) approaches the outlying suburbs of Pershore, while, to the south, the main road curves to the east, making a junction with minor roads. This area on the bank of the river is covered by woods and scrub land which, further east, is intersected by roads south of the junction with the A44. On the western side of the modern bridge, on the north bank side of the



river, is a large open field, crossed by public rights of way, known as Weir Meadow. East of the old bridge, fields stretch away within the flat river plain towards the village of Wick.

As already stated, the bridges are the principal focal point of the area, with a viewshed to the north defined by the southern buildings of the town. To the south, the area is enclosed by woodland, while open views to west and east emphasise the central prominence of the bridges within the river valley. At the southern end of the old bridge a picnic site, with car parking has been laid out. This extends to the area on the river bank on the opposite side of the road.



Fig. 2 - Portion of an air photograph taken in April 1946 showing the defence area, with the two bridges over the Avon at the centre. Weir Meadow stretches away from the bridges to the left [west] of the view.

2. **Assessment.**

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

Defence overview -

Pershore lay within the Worcestershire Sub-Area of the military Central Midland Area, and was part of the Evesham Sector. It also lay within the area of Western Command defended in 1940 by 2 (London) Division [47 Division] of III Corps.¹

¹ TNA: PRO WO 166/566 and TNA: PRO WO 166/1226.



Pershore Bridges themselves formed a defended locality on the Avon Stop Line, which followed the course of the river from its junction at Tewkesbury with the River Severn (also a Command Stop Line), then via Evesham and Stratford-on-Avon to Leamington Spa. Worcester was a designated anti-tank island, and it is probable that Evesham and Pershore towns were nodal points, although the documentary confirmation of this is lacking. Pershore fell within 'L' Sector of the area of responsibility of the 4th Bn. Worcestershire Home Guard, and was defended by its 'C' Coy. In 1942, both the battalion and company headquarters, and their battle headquarters, were situated in Pershore. The Class 'C' Bomber Command aerodrome, RAF Pershore, lay to the north-east of the town, the relief of which in the event of enemy seizure was the responsibility of mobile columns of Field Army and Home Guard troops coming from Worcester and Redditch respectively.²

The Avon Stop Line was constructed by III Corps Troops Engineers, those, for the Worcestershire sections, coming from the 217th Army Field Coy RE.³ The Line was intended to be defended both ways, i.e. from both the west and the east.⁴ Construction work began in August 1940, and was largely completed by the beginning of October. Works built at Pershore Bridges were recorded as 'Trenches, Stent Pillboxes, Molotov Post, 6pdr. gun emplacement, Pimples Road Block, Hairpin Road Block'.⁵

The defence works -

The defence of the Pershore Bridges illustrates that, despite the Second World War being still within living memory, and despite considerable documentary and field evidence coupled with oral testimony, much regarding the lay out of the defence - and indeed what exactly was built - is conjectural. Short of the discovery of an exact Defence Scheme, with map, amongst surviving Home Guard and Field Army records, this is likely to remain the case.

The defences of the Pershore Bridges were built between August-September 1940, but they would have been subject to repeated modification. In particular, after the introduction of the spigot mortar weapon to the Home Guard in the summer of 1941, the defences would have been radically revised. Field Army responsibilities for manning the defended locality in 1940 are likely as well to have been handed entirely to the Home Guard from 1941. The defended locality was designed for the strength of one company of troops.⁶

A summary of the defences, detailing those that survive today, is as follows.

1. The main bridge, and possibly the old bridge, would undoubtedly have been mined for demolition in the event of an enemy advance. However, there is

² TNA: PRO WO 166/1226 and TNA: PRO WO 166/6786.

³ TNA: PRO WO 166/211 and TNA: PRO WO 166/3686.

⁴ C.S. Dobinson, 'Anti-Invasion Defences of WWII' (Vol. II of *Twentieth Century Fortifications in England*), p124 (Council for British Archaeology, 1996).

⁵ TNA: PRO WO 166/3686. 'Stent' is a form of the square type 26 pillbox. There is a surviving example of this type at Eckington Bridge, Worcestershire (SO 922424). [Information from Mick Wilks].

⁶ TNA: PRO WO 166/211.



no documentary source for this, or surviving evidence from the fabric of the bridges. Anti-tank mines are also likely to have been laid in the fields either side of the bridges. It is known that one flame fougasse was positioned by an approach road from the south [UORN 16942], and there were probably others.⁷

2. 6pdr. anti-tank gun emplacement [UORN 9017]. After the war this was converted into a pumping house. Its form is that known as the 'Worcestershire-type', of which one example only survives in a complete condition at Holt Fleet Bridge (SO 825634). In 1940, the gun would have been manned by soldiers from the 62nd Anti-Tank Regiment, but later would have become the responsibility of the Home Guard.⁸ Its main direction of fire was east along the A44 road, but it could also have been traversed to fire north at the bridge.
3. Roadblocks. On both the modern and old bridges, at their north and south ends. Surviving concrete cylinders at the end of the northern approach road to the old bridge have almost certainly been repositioned since the war, perhaps from a roadblock at the south edge of the old bridge itself. 'Hairpin' roadblocks are recorded in documents - one of these, formed of bent rails, was probably where two blocks can be seen in a 1941 air photograph north of the modern bridge [see Fig. 3].

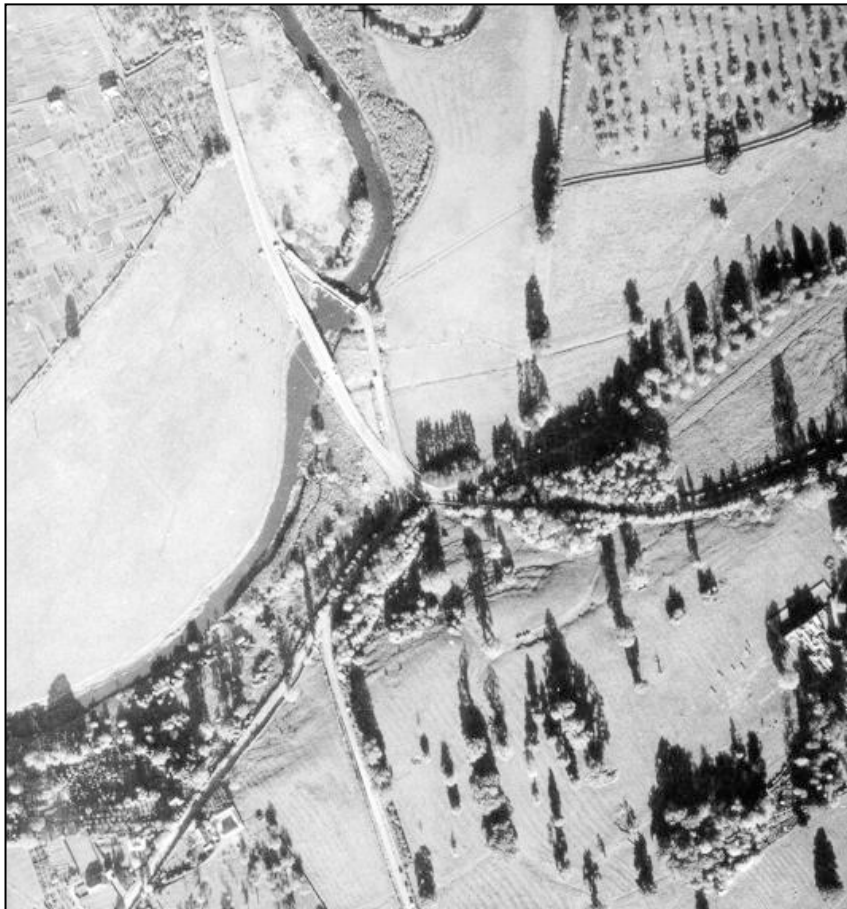


Fig. 3 - Portion of an air photograph taken in November 1941, showing pillboxes on the old bridge, roadblocks in place on both bridges, and the 6pdr. gun emplacement to the south.

⁷ Wilks (1998), pp4-5.

⁸ TNA: PRO WO 166/1634.





Figs. 4 and 5 - UORN 9017: exterior and interior today of the 6pdr. gun emplacement. Its original appearance would have been similar to an unaltered example surviving at Holt Fleet [see Fig. 6 below].



Fig. 6 - Six-pounder anti-tank gun emplacement of the 'Worcestershire-type' near the bridge at Holt Fleet, showing the original appearance of the gun emplacement south of the Pershore Bridges. This is now the only surviving complete example, and its future preservation is thus very important.

4. Pillboxes. Two square pillboxes (a form of the type 26 known as 'Stento') stood on the northern and southern approaches to the old bridge. They were demolished within a few years of the end of the war, but a surviving photograph probably taken in 1946 [see Fig. 8] shows them in position.
5. Spigot mortars. Five sites are known, three totally buried but otherwise believed to be intact. In Weir Meadow, the top of an unusual square pedestal can be seen [UORN 8934] and the stainless steel spigot of another [UORN 16227]. The positions of UORN 8934 and 9177 defending the bridges are interesting because they appear to indicate an anti-tank role for UORN 8934



closer range) whereas the task of UORN 16227 (longer range) may have been anti-personnel.⁹



Fig. 7 - UORN 9021: these concrete cylinders at the north end of the approach road to Pershore old bridge have almost certainly been moved from their original position. This seems to have been done by 1949, and their purpose from that date has been to prevent vehicular access to the bridge. Similar blocks were placed on the southern approach road, but they were removed in recent years when the picnic site was being laid out.



Fig. 8 - Photograph taken possibly in 1946 showing the pillboxes on Pershore old bridge shortly before their demolition

⁹ Home Guard Files, Tenbury Museum.





Fig. 9 - UORN 8934: top of spigot mortar pedestal in Weir Meadow showing the range to the new Pershore Bridge.

6. Weapons pits and slit trenches. The hollow of a slit trench apparently associated with the gun emplacement [UORN 9017] can be seen in woodland to its south. Within Weir Meadow, the circular depression of a weapons pit [UORN 9177] can be made out adjacent to a spigot mortar site. The use of earthworks for defence posts would have been widespread in the defended locality. Requirements for such a locality at a river crossing state that blocks at the crossing should be 'covered by posts in close proximity for defence at night. These posts must be well hidden, [taking] advantage of natural cover such as buildings, hedges etc'.¹⁰
7. Anti-landing obstacles. Weir Meadow was blocked against enemy aircraft landing by wooden posts set across the field in a grid pattern. Some of these can be seen in a 1941 air photograph [see Fig. 3]. Several posts survive reused as fence supports near the old bridge.
8. Home Guard structures. A Home Guard store or Molotov cocktail bombing post [UORN 9415] stood at the south end of the old bridge, but was destroyed immediately after the war. A further Home Guard store [UORN

¹⁰ TNA: PRO WO 166/211.



16253] to the east of Bridge Street survives in 'Fair' condition [see Fig. 11]. Two buildings that were used as Home Guard headquarters still stand in the southern outskirts of Pershore [UORNs 9194 and 9205].



Fig. 10 - Anti-landing post from the defences of Weir Meadow [UORN 9034] reused as a fence support near Pershore Old Bridge.

9.



Fig. 11 - UORN 16253: Home Guard ammunition store made from the corrugated iron framework of an Anderson air raid shelter.

2.2 Landscape:

The landscape surrounding Pershore Bridges is substantially the same as that which prevailed during the Second World War. There has been some housing development at the northern end of Weir Meadow and its adjoining allotments, but the Meadow itself remains as an open area with public access. The woodland on the bank of the river to the south of the bridges is now much more dense than it was sixty years ago. A picnic area has been set out with car parking at the south end of the old bridge. The original approach to the bridge here has been closed off, and a new vehicle access route provided, confusing the original line of the road.



Fig. 12 - The car park on the south bank of the river. The curving approach to the old bridge can be seen to the right. Information boards are lined up in front of the river.

2.3 Statement of Significance:

This is an important defence area as it combines good surviving structures with the results of a detailed study by the Worcestershire Defence of Britain Project.¹¹ It provides an excellent illustration of the defence of a river crossing on a major stop line. Various components of defence can be viewed, including a 6pdr. anti-tank gun emplacement, the individual concrete obstacles of a roadblock, and the emplacements of the Home Guard weapon, the spigot mortar.

The research that has been carried out enables many of the defences that have long since been removed to be reconstructed, and their role in the overall scheme of defence to be interpreted. As already stated, however, some aspects remain conjectural, in particular the exact positions and types of roadblocks, as well as the locations of bombing and section posts.

¹¹ Now the Defence of Worcestershire Project.



Information boards are set up by the car park, with a particular emphasis on the history of the old bridge. Owing to the efforts of the volunteers of the Worcestershire Defence of Britain Project, there are also two information boards (at the north end of the old bridge and near the gun emplacement) on the area's Second World War heritage, one of the first places in the country to provide information on its 1940 anti-invasion defences. Public access to the different parts of the defence area is good, with a former flood arch now converted to a public subway under the main road. Additional information on the defences could be added for the benefit of public interest and education.

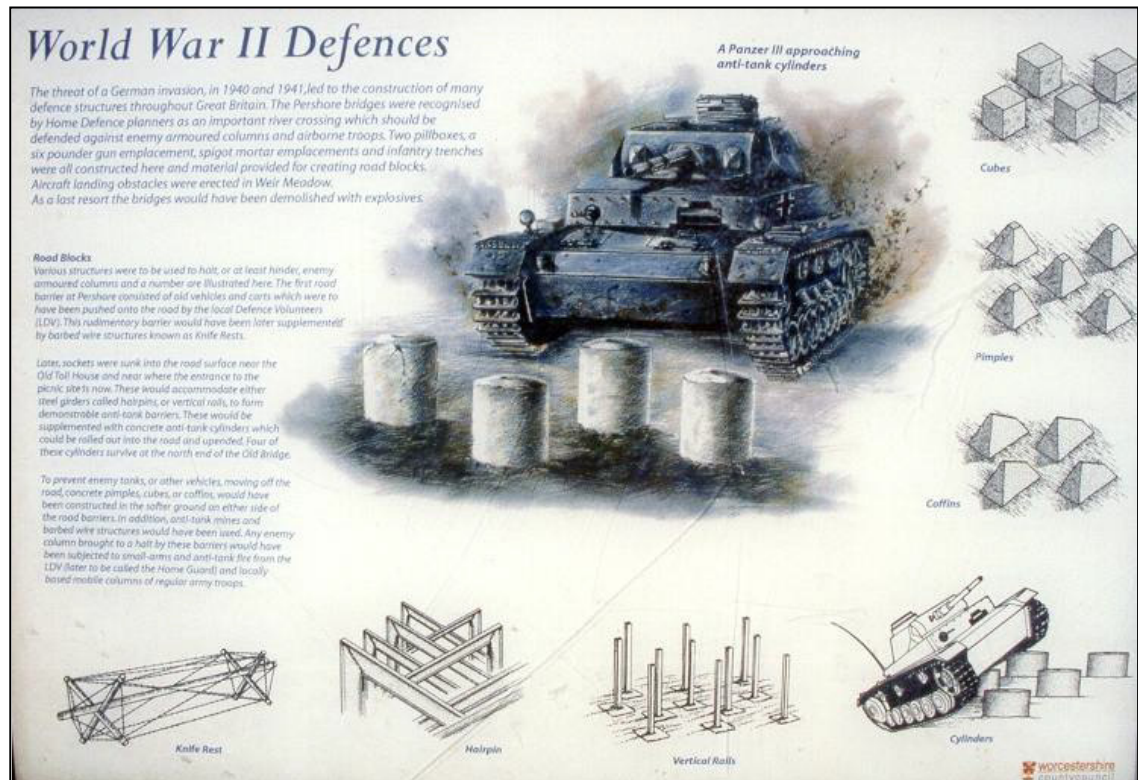


Fig. 13 - One of two information boards set up at Pershore Bridges by Worcestershire County Council on the Second World War history of the area. They result from work by the Worcestershire Defence of Britain Project.

3. Recommendations:

1. That the surviving anti-invasion defence works within the defence area be considered of national importance. They enable the Second World War defence of the Pershore Bridges 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, although outside the defence area, the 6pdr. anti-tank gun emplacement at Holt Fleet Bridge (SO 825634) also be considered of national importance. It is



the only complete surviving example of the type represented within the defence area, in an altered form, by UORN 9017, and enables the latter to be interpreted.

3. That consideration be given to opening up the pumping house [UORN 9017] at set times, or in response to visitor interest, so that the interior of this structure may be inspected [see 2. above].
4. That consideration be given to the excavation of a spigot mortar emplacement [possibly UORN 8934] within Weir Meadow. This would enable more information to be obtained about the form of the emplacement, and provide additional visitor interest.
5. That, in a further initiative with Worcestershire County Council, more information be provided on the Second World War defence of the area, with a map that shows the overall scheme of defence, indicating the sites of surviving structures.

4. **Supporting material.**

4.1 **Photographs:**

Figs. 1, 4, 6-7, 9-10, and 12-13 - taken (AWF) during field survey, 30-31.10.2002.

Fig. 2 - 106G/UK/1354 fr.7276 (2.4.1946) - NMR.

Fig. 3 - 13T/UK767 fr.17 (7.11.1941) - NMR.

Figs. 5 and 11 - copyright: Mick Wilks [Defence of Worcestershire Project archive].

Fig. 8 - reproduced by permission of Marion Freeman [private collection].

4.2 **Documentary Sources:**

'Technical Instructions: Avon Stop Line', 5 August 1940 (Appendix A to III Corps Troops Royal Engineers War Diary, August 1940) - TNA: PRO WO 166/211.

'Organisation of Work', 10 August 1940 (Appendix B to III Corps Troops Royal Engineers War Diary, August 1940) - TNA: PRO WO 166/211.

'2 Lon. Division Home Defence Scheme No.4', August 1940 (from 47 Division 'GS' War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/566.

217th Army Field Company Royal Engineers War Diary, July-October 1940 - TNA: PRO WO 166/3686.

'Central Midland Area Defence Scheme', December 1940 (from Central Midland Area War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/1226.

62nd Anti-Tank Regiment Royal Artillery War Diary, 1940 - TNA: PRO WO 166/1634.

'Operation Instruction No.3', 17.9.1942 (from Worcestershire Sub-Area War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/6786.

'Tactical Handling of A.Tk Weapons', 29.11.1943 (from Home Guard Files) - Tenbury Museum .

Mick Wilks, *An Appraisal of the World War Two Defences around the Pershore Bridges* (Hereford and Worcester County Council, revised



February 1998) - [This is an unpublished work which had a limited distribution - copy in Defence of Britain Project Archive, NMR].

4.3 Published Sources:

The History of the 4th Worcestershire (Evesham) Battalion Home Guard (n.p., n.d.). [Copy held by Worcester City History Centre, 355.351].

Mick Wilks, 'The Defence of Pershore Bridges, 1940-1944' (from *Defence Lines* No.12, 12 July 1999).

4.4 Aerial Photographs:

13T/UK767 frs.16-17 (7.11.1941) - NMR.

106G/UK/1354 fr.7276 (2.4.1946) - NMR.

106G/UK/1345 fr.7321 (1.4.1946) - NMR.

541/410 fr.3031 (2.12.1949) - NMR.

SO9544/11 fr.85 (13.2.1950) - NMR.

4.5 Ordnance Survey 1: 2500 Plans:

SO 9444-9544 (1967) - BLML.

4.6 Worcestershire Sites and Monuments Record:

Worcestershire SMR records (from the Worcestershire Defence of Britain Project) - added to 4.7 below.

4.7 Defence of Britain Project Database:

[see 5. 'Annex'].

