

DEFENCE AREA 15

ACLE

1. **Area details:**

Acle is 11 miles E of Norwich and 8 miles W of Great Yarmouth.

County: Norfolk.

Parishes: Acle / Upton with Fishley.

NGR: centre of area, TG 401105.

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

This defence area consists of the small town of Acle and its immediate hinterland, as well as a detached area to the north-east at Acle Bridge on the River Bure. The boundaries of the area are defined by the extent of the known defence works. The focus of the defences is the open area (The Street) at the centre of the town, and from that point roads radiate to the countryside beyond. For the detached defence area at Acle Bridge, the focus is the bridge itself. Particular viewsheds are formed by rising land to the west, by the railway embankment and new road to the south, and by the flat marshlands to the east.

2. **Assessment.**

2.1 **Defences:** [see Maps 2 and 3].

Defence overview -

Acle was a Category 'A' nodal point within No. 4 region of Eastern Command¹. In 1940/41, it was in a position of high invasion danger, being behind the coastal crust defences but in direct line of a German breakout from the beaches (had Operation Sea Lion been directed against the Norfolk / Suffolk coast). The definition of a Category 'A' level of defence preparedness was that the town should contain supplies to hold out for seven days, with water for four days. It was also required to have an all-round defence perimeter including anti-tank obstacles where possible, either natural or artificial.

Acle also lay in Norfolk Defence Sector 'B', defended by 213th Infantry Brigade, which had its battle headquarters at the town.² In 1940, Acle's defences were manned by the 14th Bn. South Staffordshire Regiment, but this battalion was replaced in 1941 by the 9th Bn. Royal Berkshire Regiment. The defence of the nodal point was also the responsibility of the 6th Bn. Norfolk Home Guard. Two 25pdr. artillery guns were positioned to the west of the town manned by the 238th Battery of 115th Field Regiment RA, as well as at least one 6pdr. anti-tank gun in the town itself.³ Numerous defence works were built in and around Acle,

¹ TNA: PRO WO 199/544 and TNA: PRO WO 166/464 [see Fig. 3 of Defence Area 56].

² TNA: PRO WO 166/1066 and TNA: PRO WO 166/464.

³ TNA: PRO WO 166/4528 and TNA: PRO WO 166/10881 (map).



including pillboxes, roadblocks, and spigot mortar emplacements. Some of these works survive, although all evidence of roadblocks has been removed. The Sector was backed by a II Corps stop line running from Beccles in Suffolk to the Norfolk coast between Wells-next-the-Sea and Stiffkey.⁴

Wey Bridge (as Acle Bridge was termed at this time) was on II Corps Demolition Line FII which ran roughly west-east from Aylsham to Great Yarmouth, and was a Forward Defended Locality (FDL) of the 9th Bn. Berkshire Regiment, manned by one platoon and a section of the battalion's anti-tank company. Nineteen bridges were prepared for demolition on this Demolition Line, including Wey Bridge itself. A Home Guard unit, the Broads Flotilla, consisting of three boats with two Lewis guns, also operated from Wey Bridge and Acle Dike.⁵

The defence works -

Of prime importance amongst the surviving defence works is the pillbox attached to the Manor House in the centre of the town, which is camouflaged as an outbuilding [UORN 5479 - see Fig. 1]. This is an outstanding survival, and should be protected as part of what is presumably a listed building. The north-west of the town was defended by at least three pillboxes, two of which survive [UORNs 5474 and 13686]. A surviving pillbox of the north-east defences [UORN 5477] stands in a small paddock by the new bypass road, and would seem to be in a position where housing development is likely. The southern perimeter of the defences is likely to have been the railway line, which runs on an embankment immediately south of the town: this may have been reinforced by anti-tank blocks that appear to show on aerial photographs but for which there is now no confirming field evidence [see UORN 14828]. Where the embankment ends to the south-east of the town there were at least two pillboxes on the north side of the line, one of which survives complete [UORN 5476].



Fig. 1 - UORN 5479: pillbox disguised as an outbuilding (now used as a boiler room) attached to the Manor House in the centre of Acle. The embrasures would have enabled fire to be directed down The Street as well as Old Road.

⁴ TNA: PRO WO 166/189 (map).

⁵ TNA: PRO WO 166/1066 and TNA: PRO WO 166/464.





Fig. 2 - UORN 13686: type 22 pillbox at the extreme north-west point of the Acle outer perimeter defences. It was originally brick-shuttered, but most of the brick work has fallen away revealing the reinforced concrete core.

The centre of the town was defended by pillboxes, roadblocks, spigot mortar emplacements, and by at least one length of loopholed wall. Pillbox, UORN 5479, has already been mentioned, but it had a companion [UORN 15944] close by on the green. There were two prepared anti-tank gun positions within the town, as well as artillery positions to the west [beyond the study area].

The positions of all pillboxes and roadblocks are known from documentary sources. Most structures in the town were removed immediately after the war, which makes the survival of pillbox, UORN 5479, even more remarkable. Individual defence works were generally surrounded by barbed wire perimeter defences, and pillboxes in a rural setting were often accompanied by slit trenches and weapons pits. It is possible as well that the outer perimeter defences of the town were reinforced by anti-tank ditches and barbed wire entanglements, but there is no documentary evidence for this.

Wey Bridge was heavily defended by pillboxes and infantry posts on its north-east side (removed post-war), and by four spigot mortar emplacements to the south-west and south-east, three of the massive pedestals of which survive [see Fig. 3]. The demolition chambers on the underside of the bridge could be seen until the mid-1990s when the bridge was replaced by a modern steel version. Barbed wire entanglements would have surrounded the defended locality of Wey Bridge.





Fig. 3 - UORN 5470: spigot mortar pedestal on the south bank of the River Bure in the garden of the Bridge Inn.



Fig. 4 - UORN 5474: type 22 pillbox on the north-west outskirts of Acle. It has been stripped of its exterior brick shuttering.

2.2 Landscape:

In 1940, Acle was a small, compact town, with a central market area and few suburbs other than for a straggle of housing following the lines of the principal roads from the town [see Fig. 5]. Since the war, there has been a spread of housing development, principally to the north-west and north-east of the town, and a new bypass road was constructed c.1988 to the south. However, essentially the town remains the close set community it has been for centuries, and still forms a part urban and part rural landscape against which its system of wartime defence can be readily understood. The River Bure provided strong protection to the east, as did the marshland, with its chequer-work of dykes, that stretches away parallel with the river to the coast. On the western sides of the town, the countryside is more undulating. Today, it is an intensively farmed landscape with large, open fields created since the war. The two surviving pillboxes to the north-west both stand at the edge of public rights of way and can be viewed at close quarters.





Fig. 5 - Aerial photograph of Acle taken in 1946 showing the compact nature of the town at the time of the Second World War. The Manor House pillbox [see Fig. 1] defended the open central area. The southern perimeter defences followed the curving railway line. Acle Bridge lies off the top right of the photograph.

Acle Bridge has been much developed as a mooring point for holiday boating traffic; indeed, the area is known as the 'Gateway to the Broads'. Two of the spigot mortar emplacements (one in the garden of the Bridge Inn) can be easily viewed. The other lies in a small private field to which there is no access without permission.



2.3 **Statement of Significance:**

The Acle defences provide a very good example of nodal point defence, with some structures surviving in an urban context, an occurrence which is relatively rare and makes their future preservation particularly important. There are some good examples (one, outstanding) of the different categories of defence works, and it is possible to reconstruct, in part at least, the perimeter defences and particular defended localities.

The surviving works should be added to the town's historical presentation from which they are currently absent. A wall plaque, for instance, describes the Manor House but makes no mention of its Second World War addition, and two signposted walks exclude any reference to the town's Second World War history and the surviving defence works.

The process of the steady removal of defence works during the sixty years since the war can also be understood from a study of Acle. It would be a pity if more were now lost, removing the physical evidence for the town's role in the anti-invasion defence of 1940/41.

3. **Recommendations:**

1. That the surviving anti-invasion defence works within the built up area of Acle, and its immediate rural hinterland, be considered of national importance. They enable the defence of the town 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 the surviving anti-invasion defence works at Acle Bridge also be considered of national importance. They enable the importance of the defence of this river crossing to be readily appreciated, and in particular the use of the spigot mortar within a 'forward defended locality'.
3. That 1. and 2. above be considered as areas for a 'pillbox walk'. It might be possible to establish such a walk in collaboration with the local authority and Norfolk County Council. On-site interpretation could be provided, or existing town information boards upgraded.

4. **Supporting material.**

4.1 **Photographs:**

Figs. 1-4 taken (AWF) during field survey, 27.6.2001.
Fig. 5 - 106G/UK/1634 fr.2019 (9.7.1946) - NMR.

4.2 **Documentary Sources:**

'II Corps Defence Scheme', 1940 (from II Corps CRE War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/194.
18 Division 'GS' War Diary, June 1940 - TNA: PRO WO 166/464.



'List of Nodal Points in Eastern Command', September 1940 (from General Headquarters Papers, Home Forces) - TNA: PRO WO 199/544.
II Corps 'G' War Diary, 1941 - TNA: PRO WO 166/189.
'A' Sector Defence Scheme', 15.7.1941 (from 213th Infantry Brigade War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/1066.
'9th Bn. Royal Berkshire Regiment Defence Scheme', 15.7.1941 (from 9th Bn. Royal Berkshire Regiment War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/4528.
Norfolk and Cambridge District HQ War Diary, 1943 - TNA: PRO WO 166/10881.
Files categorising military defence works for maintenance of demolition, 1949-50: Acle - Norfolk Record Office, C/P 8/1/2.

4.3 **Published Source:**

Christopher Bird, *Silent Sentinels: The Story of Norfolk's Fixed Defences during the Twentieth Century* (The Larks Press, 1999).

4.4 **Oral Testimony:**

Information through Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service from Acle Home Guard veteran, Mr. Brian Grist.

4.5 **Aerial Photographs:**

106G/UK/1634 fr.2019 (9.7.1946) - NMR.
3G/TUD/UK/70 fr.5009 (28.2.1946) - NMR.

4.6 **Ordnance Survey 1:2500 Plans** - BLML.

4.7 **Defence of Britain Project Database:**

[see 5. 'Annex'].

