

DEFENCE AREA 16

PENSHURST

1. Area details:

The defence area is 5 miles NW of Tunbridge Wells and 4 miles WSW of Tonbridge.

County: Kent.

Parish: Penshurst.

NGR: centre of area, TQ 526437.

1.1 Area Description: [see Map 1].

Penshurst lies in the broad valley of the rivers Medway and Eden which make a confluence to the south of the village. The river valleys pass through higher wooded land all around, the Eden flowing from the north-west and the Medway from the south towards the north-east. Penshurst Place, ancestral home of the Sidney family, stands on the north side of the village, and its estate is widely spread throughout the parish.



Fig. 1 - Aerial photograph taken in 1947 showing Penshurst village and Penshurst Place [upper left] with the River Medway flowing from the south to the north-east. The River Eden joins the Medway just to the south of the village.

Penshurst village is small and contained, with an inn, a church, and housing that spreads along the B2188 road to the south-west. This road makes a junction with the B2176 at the centre of the village, the latter crossing two channels of the Medway by stone bridges on its way to the east. South of the village, the B2188 crosses the River Eden at Long Bridge.

This is an enclosed Wealden landscape of hills and woods, with large, open arable fields in the wide river valleys and rich pastureland for cattle. The park of Penshurst Place is grazed by sheep. Larger tracts of woodland lie at the northern extent of the park, crossed by the Redhill to Tonbridge railway line, beyond which are flat grass fields on the site of the small RAF airfield of Penshurst. Further extensive woodland lies beyond the study area on the ridge above the Medway to the east.

Viewsheds are formed by the river valleys, backed by the wooded hills around. The principal focus of the area are the meadows immediately to the south of Penshurst village around the confluence of the two rivers.

2. **Assessment.**

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

Defence overview -

Penshurst lay at the junction of two branches of the GHQ Line - that of GHQ Line 'B' running from Farnham in Surrey, following the course of the River Eden on its approach to Penshurst, and the GHQ Newhaven - Cliffe Line, following the course of the River Medway in a loop known as the Ashurst Switch which skirted Tunbridge Wells to the west.¹ Another branch of this Line - the Tunbridge Wells Loop - ran to the east of Tunbridge Wells, which was an important army centre, being a Class 'A' nodal point with a garrison of 710 men and the headquarters of XII Corps defending South East England.² Further adjacent nodal points lay at Penshurst itself, at Tonbridge (termed a 'fortress' with its medieval castle re-fortified), Pembury, Sevenoaks, and Edenbridge.

Penshurst lay in the Tonbridge Sector, Maidstone Sub-Area of the military Home Counties Area (later here termed the Kent Area). A re-organisation late in 1941 appears to have placed it in Invicta Sector of the Gravesend Sub-Area.³ As Class 'B' nodal point N.4, in September 1941 it had a garrison of 57 men from the 21st (Tonbridge) Battalion, Kent Home Guard, with three Boys anti-tank rifles, two Bren guns, and one Northover Projector.⁴ Penshurst Airfield to the north was defended in 1940 by one infantry training company of the 8th Bn. Royal West Kents.⁵ From November 1940, the 922nd Defence Battery RA established its Post 24 with a 6pdr. gun in the anti-tank gun emplacement, UORN 2422: this structure survives in the water meadows to the south-east of Penshurst village, although the machine gun post and trenches around it have long since disappeared.⁶

¹ Alexander, *Ironside's Line*, p74 and TNA: PRO WO 166/1214.

² TNA: WO PRO WO 166/1304.

³ TNA: PRO WO 166/1286.

⁴ TNA: PRO WO 166/1286.

⁵ TNA: PRO WO 166/1214.

⁶ TNA: PRO WO 166/2027.



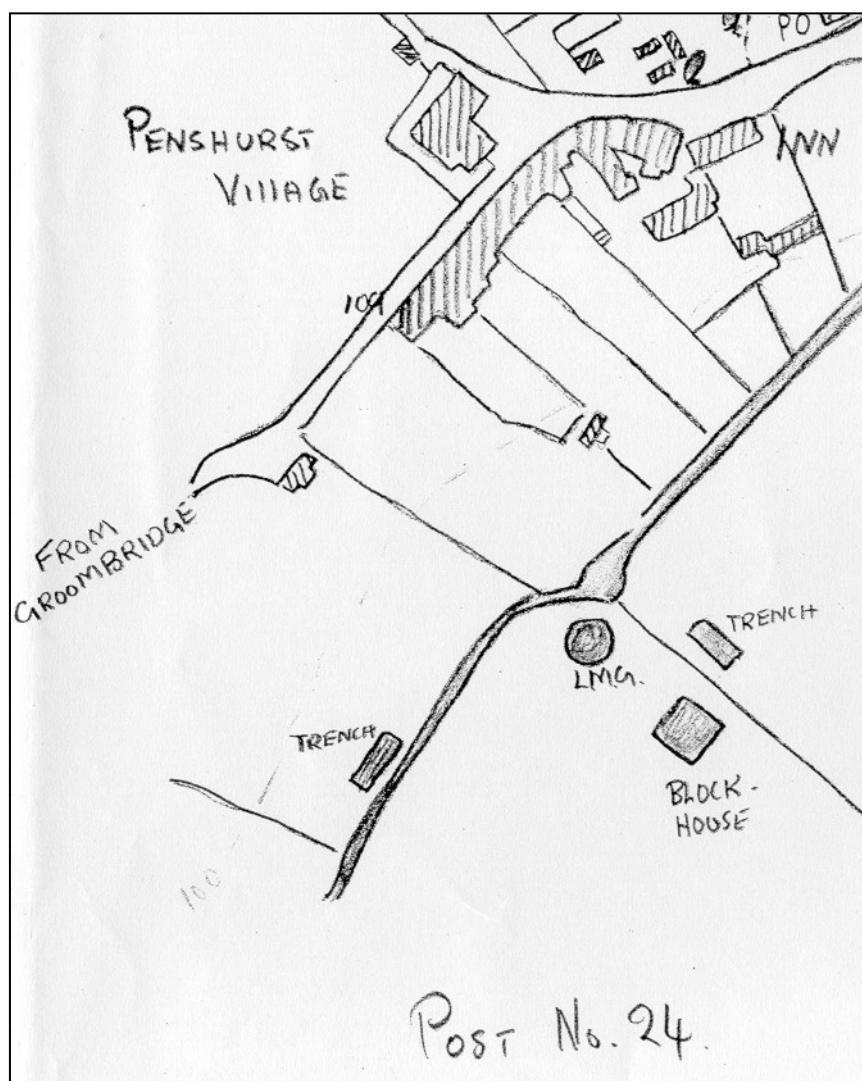


Fig. 2 - Plan of Post 24 of the 922nd Defence Battery RA at Penshurst - one of a series of such plans of other posts of this Battery on the GHQ Line that survive in its War Diary.⁷

The main anti-tank obstacles of the two branches of the GHQ Line were provided by the rivers, which may also have been strengthened in places by cutting their banks vertically. Infantry pillboxes were placed at strategic positions along the river banks, defending the anti-tank line against an expected attack from the east, although the possibility of an attack from the west could not be discounted had the Germans outflanked the line.⁸ Documentary evidence of the building of the defence works does not appear to have survived, but difference in construction between the pillboxes on the two branches of the GHQ Line show that different Royal Engineers field companies, or perhaps more likely civilian contractors, were involved.

The defences of the anti-tank lines merged with those of the nodal point. Unfortunately, no exact documentary source for the defences of Penshurst nodal point has been found, but the surviving defence works, with analogy from other areas [see, for example, Defence Area 15 - Acle], show that there would have been all-round perimeter defence formed of pillboxes and section posts, with bridges mined for demolition, and roads blocked with concrete barriers. Two important strategic points

⁷ TNA: PRO WO 166/2027.

⁸ There is no evidence that the defences were sited to be two-way. However, the ringing of Tunbridge Wells with defences to west and east shows that the danger of this important command centre being enveloped was anticipated.



were undoubtedly the hill top position at The Warren, commanding the loop of the River Eden to the west of the village (the farm buildings here very likely served as command and observation posts, although there is no obvious surviving evidence), and Long Bridge to the south. Two pillboxes at Long Bridge (one by the road undoubtedly overlooking a roadblock) and an anti-tank gun emplacement commanding the bridge show that this was almost certainly a defended locality in its own right. To the east of Penshurst, the northern (and lesser) of the two water channels of the Medway was the one chosen, perhaps surprisingly, to be defended by pillboxes. These stand below the walled gardens of Penshurst Place, the defence use of which at this time is not known. The author and diarist, Katharine Moore, wrote on 1st July 1940, "Very hot.....drove to Penshurst.....Many troops passing through and the beautiful meadow below Penshurst gardens cut up with dug outs, army lorries, etc'.⁹ A single surviving pillbox in Penshurst Place park [UORN 2424], well away from the anti-tank lines, is probably the sole survivor of the northern perimeter defences of the nodal point.



Fig. 3 - RAF aerial photograph taken in September 1941 showing Penshurst Place gardens (bottom left) and the two channels of the River Medway (fringed with trees) flowing to the east.

The defence works -

The characteristic defence work to be found liberally throughout the area is the brick-shuttered type 24 infantry pillbox, most examples of which survive very well, some

⁹ Katharine Moore, *A Family Life 1939-45*.



close to public footpaths enabling them to be inspected both externally and internally. They were either built close to the river banks, often taking advantage of river bluffs, or in the hedgerows of water meadows (now often stranded in the middle of fields opened up since the war).



Fig. 4 - UORN 1883: type 24 pillbox on wooded bluff above the River Medway. The untrimmed bricks projecting at the angle of the faces can be seen.



Fig. 5 - UORN 2428: the 'classic shape' of the type 24 infantry pillbox, with an embrasure each side of the entrance. The soil and grass on the roof is probably from its original camouflage.



Fig. 6 - UORN 2412: concrete firing shelf at an embrasure for a Bren gun. Many of the interiors of the Penshurst area pillboxes are in a clean condition with little evidence of vandalism.

Of the two anti-tank gun emplacements in the defence area [UORNs 2422 and 2434], there is only public access to UORN 2434. This stands in an overgrown condition at the edge of a field beside the B2188 road, and the interior can be entered and the holdfast for the 6pdr gun inspected.



Fig. 7 - UORN 2434: heavily-overgrown type 28 anti-tank gun emplacement to take a 6pdr. gun. It was positioned to fire downhill at the important crossing of the GHQ Line at Long Bridge south of Penshurst village.



Fig. 8 - UORN 2434: the holdfast for the positioning of a 6pdr. gun, with its nine bolts still intact.



Fig. 9 - UORN 10186: virtually hidden by undergrowth, an anti-tank pimple ('dragon's tooth') survives just within the park of Penshurst Place by the B2176 road at the centre of the village. This was almost certainly the site of a roadblock.

2.2 Landscape:

The landscape of the defence area has altered very little over the past sixty years. A handful of houses have been built along the B2188 road to the south-west of Penshurst. Some fields, in particular those in the broad valley south of the confluence of the rivers Eden and Medway, have had hedgerows removed to open them up for arable cultivation, but there have been few other changes.

Numbers of visitors come to Penshurst in the spring and summer months, in particular to visit Penshurst Place, but also to use the village as a base for walks. Numbers of tea shops cater for these visitors.

The area is crossed by lanes, tracks, and footpaths from which many of the defence works can be seen. Of most importance for this purpose is a footpath that runs south from Elliott's Farm along the valley of the Medway, and can be followed beyond the study defence area to Saint's Hill, and on to Colliersland and Chafford bridges, where important concentrations of defence works survive.

Parking at Penshurst is best achieved by using the lay-by on the B2176 road by the public toilets. From here walks to several locations can be made to view the defence works.



Landscape views of the Penshurst defence area -

Fig. 10 (left): UORNs 16786 (foreground) and 2422 with Penshurst village in the background.

Fig. 11 (right): the broad valley of the Eden and Medway south of Penshurst with UORN 2421, once by a hedgerow, now stranded in the centre of a field.

2.3 Statement of Significance:

The Penshurst area provides an excellent example of stop line defence, at a point where two branches of a stop line meet and merge with the defences of a nodal point, a rare combination of defence strategy. The importance of the area is increased by the high survival of many of the defence components, in particular of the stop line infantry pillboxes where a virtually unbroken sequence of these structures can still be seen populating the landscape. The area is also rewarding for a study of its topography and how this was used for the various requirements of defence.

Access to many of the sites is also very good enabling the visitor to see the defence works at close quarters and understand why they were placed here. Good survival of defence works also continues to the west and east, and in particular the south, where further study of the various components of 1940 anti-invasion defence might be made.



An information board providing information on the anti-invasion role of Penshurst in the Second World War, and its place in the overall scheme for the defence of the South-East, could be erected in the village. In addition, a 'pillbox walk' through the area could be drawn up.

3. **Recommendations:**

1. That the surviving anti-invasion defence works in the Penshurst area be considered of national importance. They enable these sections of the defence of the two branches of the GHQ Line to be interpreted, and provide evidence of the articulation of the defence and the inter-relationship of its functionally different components.
2. That consideration be given, possibly in collaboration with Kent County Council and the local authority, to providing an information board on the Second World War defence of Penshurst. This should be sited at the centre of the village so that it can be seen by the many visitors who come here. A 'pillbox walk' could also be drawn up and set out on the board or detailed in other literature.

4. **Supporting material.**

4.1 **Photographs:**

Fig. 1 - CPE/UK/2051 fr.3334 (7.5.1947) - NMR.

Fig. 3 - 26J/UK 1447 (17.9.1941) - NMR.

Figs. 4-11 - taken (AWF) during field survey, 10.1999 and 1-2.12.2003.

4.2 **Documentary Sources:**

922nd Defence Battery RA War Diary, 1940 - TNA: PRO WO 166/2027.

Home Counties Area 'G' War Diary, December 1940 - TNA: PRO WO 166/1214.

Gravesend Sub-Area War Diary, 1941 - TNA: PRO WO 166/1286.

Kent Area HQ War Diary, 1941 - TNA: PRO WO 166/1216.

'Sub-Area Dispositions to Defeat Invasion', 8.6.1941 (from Maidstone Sub-Area HQ War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/1304.

Maidstone Sub-Area HQ War Diary, 1942 - TNA: PRO WO 166/6760.

4.3 **Published Sources:**

Colin Alexander, *Ironsides Line* (Historic Military Press, 1999).

Katharine Moore, *A Family Life 1939-45* (Allison & Busby, 1989).

Andrew Saunders & Victor Smith, *Kent's Defence Heritage: Gazetteer Part Two*, KD 202 'Penshurst Nodal Point' (Report for Kent County Council, December 2001).

4.4 **Aerial Photographs:**

26J/UK 1447 (17.9.1941) - NMR.

106G/UK/1377 fr.7088 (4.4.1946) - NMR.

CPE/UK/2051 fr.3334 (7.5.1947) - NMR.



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

TQ 5043-5143 (1969) - BLML.

TQ 5044-5144 (1969) - BLML.

TQ 5241-5341 (1969) - BLML.

TQ 5242-5342 (1969) - BLML.

TQ 5243-5343 (1969) - BLML.

TQ 5244-5344 (1969) - BLML.

4.6 **Defence of Britain Project Database:**

[see 5. 'Annex'].

