

# DEFENCE AREA 18

## CRIPP'S CORNER

### 1. Area details:

The defence area is 4 miles NNE of Battle and 8 miles N of Hastings.

County: East Sussex.

Parish: Sedlescombe.

NGR: centre of area, TQ 776212.

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

Cripp's Corner lies within a heavily-wooded area of the Weald, and is a small settlement that has grown up at the junction of north-south and west-east routes, now followed by the B2244, B2089, and B2165 roads, the B2089 being carried over the B2244 here by a viaduct. Around Cripp's Corner there are open areas of grass fields, set in a rolling landscape of narrow steep-banked lanes, thick hedgerows, and dense woodland. The main area of housing, with the White Hart public house and a garage, is by the road junctions at the centre of the settlement and alongside the roads to the east. To the west, the B2089 makes a further junction with lanes at Swaile's Green. Various farms surround the area, and to the south are a saw mill and a vineyard. Cattle, sheep, and horses represent the principal agricultural economy.

Because of the intensely enclosed nature of the landscape, there are various foci to the defence area. Two principal viewsheds lie at Swaile's Green and to the east of the saw mill to the south where the lines of anti-tank blocks forming the 1940 perimeter defences of the area can be clearly seen at a distance against a background of thick woods.



*Fig. 1 - The enclosed nature of the landscape with its steep-sided lanes is shown by this photograph of the lane south of Swaile's Green which followed the outer defence perimeter of the 'fortress' and was considered a sufficient anti-tank obstacle without the need for further fortification.*



## 2. Assessment.

### 2.1 Defences: [see Map 2]

#### *Defence overview -*

In the critical invasion danger period of the summer and autumn of 1940, the East Sussex coast and its hinterland were defended by the 45th Division of XII Corps. The defence scheme of this Division dated October 1940 shows Cripp's Corner to have been a designated 'fortress' within the Rear Sector of 'B' Sub-Area, surrounded by a continuous anti-tank obstacle that was either natural or artificial. Other fortresses in 'B' Sub-Area were at Rye, Northiam, Battle, and Mountfield.<sup>1</sup> Later, in 1941, the 133rd Infantry Brigade of 44 Division had a defence role in the area and the fortresses were re-designated nodal points, with additional sites at Winchelsea and Sedlescombe being added to the list. The long perimeter defences of Cripp's Corner were given to one section of 'T' Coy. of the 22nd (Battle) Battalion, Sussex Home Guard to guard.<sup>2</sup>

Cripp's Corner lay between two west-east stop lines - a Division stop line to the south passing through Battle, and a Corps stop line to the north following the River Rother. These stop lines themselves were built into a grid (a system of 'fences') that divided up much of the Weald to render it impassable to German forces. The fence lettered WL - WM ran to the west of Cripp's Corner. [See Defence Area 12 - Dorking Gap for a fuller description of this system].

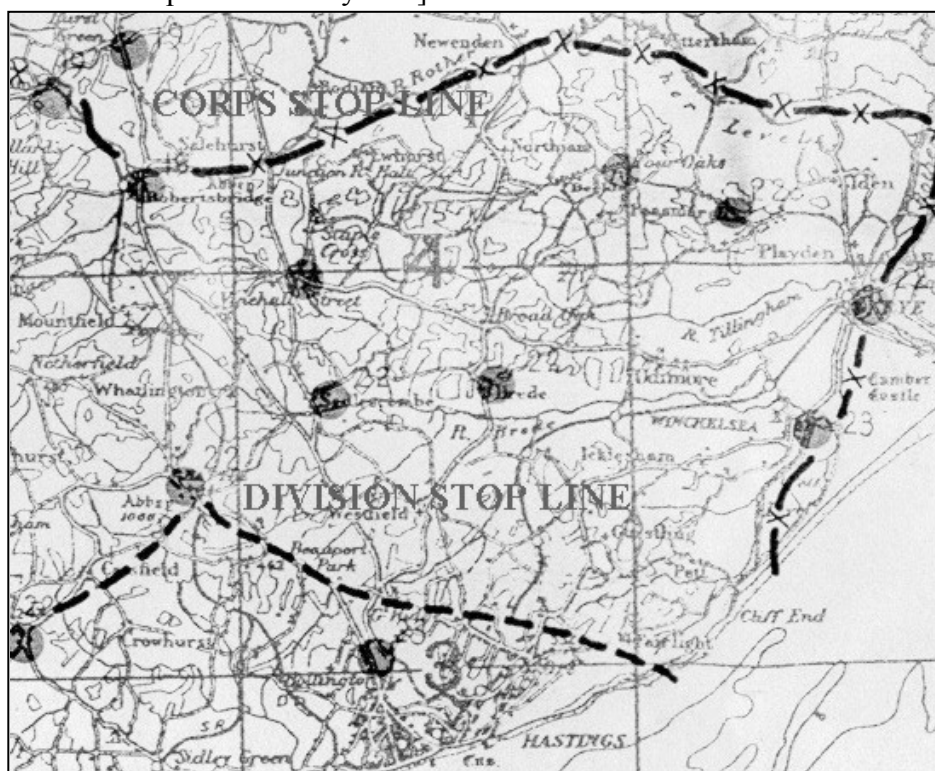


Fig. 2 - Portion of a 1941 map showing the system of defence within East Sussex. The dark circles are 'nodal points', many of which were formerly designated 'fortresses'. Cripp's Corner is represented by the circle below Staple Cross.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/536. The document states that Cripp's Corner had its own defence scheme, but regrettably this was not included in any of the documentation consulted. Cripp's Corner fortress had the code name 'Londonderry' (TNA: PRO WO 166/1051/1).

<sup>2</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/988. In the event of an invasion, it is assumed that elements of the regular field army would have concentrated within the defended area. On 15th August 1940, 'C' Coy, 6th Bn. Somerset Light Infantry 'secured Cripp's Corner fortress' on an exercise - TNA: PRO WO 166/4657.

<sup>3</sup> TNA: WO PRO WO 166/482.





*Fig. 3 - Air photograph taken in 1973 showing the road junctions at Cripp's Corner [right centre] and Swaile's Green to its west [left]. A continuous perimeter of anti-tank blocks ran around much of this central area, leaving only four sectors to the north, south-west and south-east protected by woods.*

The continuous anti-tank perimeter demanded by 45 Division was provided by the construction of some 750 anti-tank blocks placed in single lines to the north of Cripp's Corner, to the west at Swaile's Green, to the south adjacent to the saw mill, and in the north-east between the B2089 and B2165 roads. Areas of woodland were incorporated into the defence perimeter, and appear to have been considered a sufficient defence at these points although probably supported by slit trenches and by trees cut to form an anti-tank obstacle.<sup>4</sup> In addition to the erection of the main anti-tank barrier, roadblocks were set up, pillboxes built, and various houses and other buildings placed in a state of defence. This massive construction programme was carried out by the 205th Field

<sup>4</sup> See video of TV programme, 'History Quest: Cripps Corner' (Screenhouse Productions), 2001.



Company Royal Engineers, with the assistance of several civilian contractors, between 20th August and 19th September 1940.<sup>5</sup>

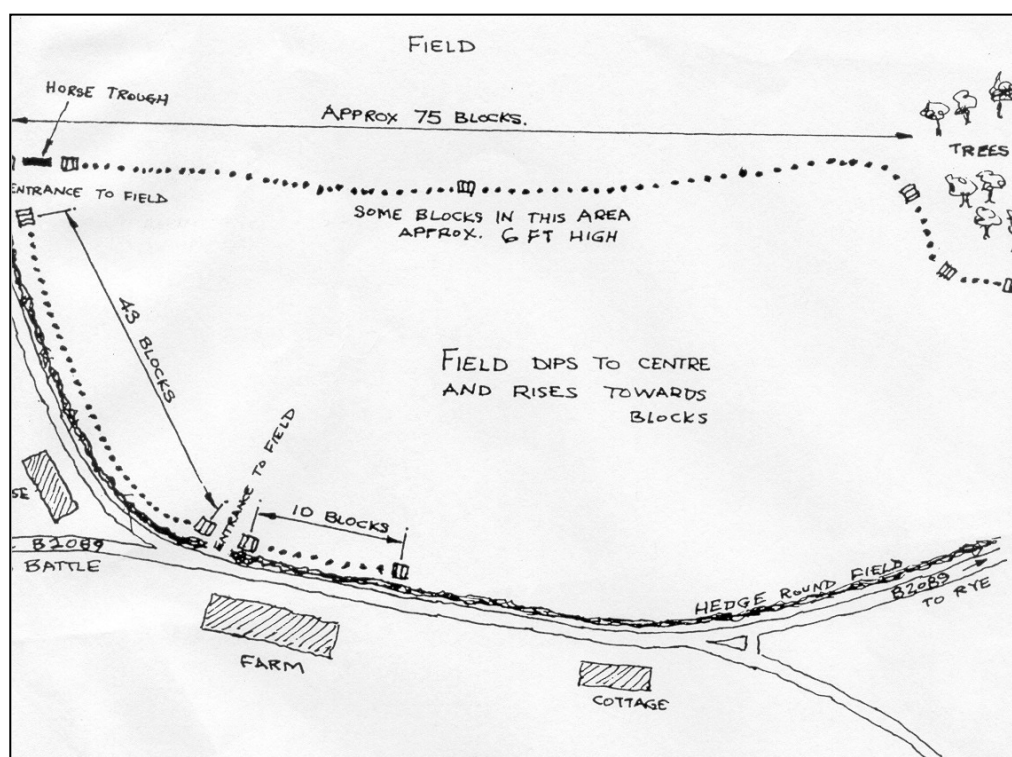


Fig. 4 - Plan of one sector of the concrete anti-tank block perimeter at Swaile's Green west of Cripp's Corner.<sup>6</sup>

#### *The defence works -*

Although the positions of several roadblocks are known from documentary evidence, only two pillboxes appear to have been built, one each alongside the B2244 road at the north and the south of the defence lines, and neither of these is likely to have had an anti-tank capability. A third pillbox is possible just north of the junction of the B2244 road with the south end of Compasses Lane, but its Cassini military grid reference may contain an error and surviving pillbox, UORN 9552, be intended.<sup>7</sup>



Fig. 5 - UORN 9552: brick pillbox of an unusual trapezoidal shape made to fit its site at a corner in the southern line of anti-tank blocks.

<sup>5</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/3675.

<sup>6</sup> Plan by H. Seymour & J. Gerken, from a record submitted to the Defence of Britain Project (Defence of Britain Project Archive - NMR).

<sup>7</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/3675.





*Fig. 6 - UORN 9552: rifle port set at a slant to the pillbox face to enable fire to be directed to the north.*

The second surviving pillbox [UORN 16914] is now just a concrete base to a garden shed in a house garden standing at the end of a line of anti-tank blocks.

The anti-tank blocks (when fully exposed) stand nearly seven feet high, and are five feet square with chamfered sides to their tops, a distinctive type believed unique to East Sussex. Some 750 were set around Cripp's Corner, presumably cast in situ, representing some 131,250 cu. ft. of poured concrete. The digging of the holes alone in which they were set must have been a massive undertaking, much of this probably done manually. Similar lines of blocks were erected around the town of Battle, but it is not known at present whether significant numbers of these survive.



*Fig. 7 - UORN 16915: anti-tank blocks exposed in the bank of Compasses Lane at Swaile's Green, showing their full height of nearly seven feet.*

Possibly the best location to view the lines of blocks, unencumbered by the vegetation that has turned them into hedgerows at other points, is east of the saw mill at the south

of the defence area. Here 135 blocks [UORN 9553] run around three sides of a field, stopping at the edge of Greenden Wood.



*Fig. 8 - The distinctive 'tombstone' shape of the Cripp's Corner anti-tank blocks can be seen from these examples [UORN 9553].*



*Fig. 9 - The line of anti-tank blocks [UORN 9553] can be seen prominently in the winter months from the B2244 road south of Cripp's Corner.*

The lines of blocks can also be viewed from the road at Swaile's Green, running again on three sides of a field, and also, with more difficulty, on the east side of the B2244 road north of Cripp's Corner. East of Cripp's Corner, the blocks survive in remarkably good condition as they pass through private gardens and paddocks, in places now incorporated into hedgerows so that they can only be seen close up. A public footpath here passes between two of the blocks and runs for a short distance beside them [UORN 11679].





*Fig. 10 - UORN 718: anti-tank blocks run around three sides of a field at Swaile's Green.*



*Fig. 11 - UORN 11679 - in the north-east sector of the Cripp's Corner defences, a public footpath passes between two of the anti-tank blocks.*

Although the approximate sites of the various roadblocks around Cripp's Corner are known, there is no surviving in situ evidence of them. However, six 3ft. high cylinders spotted within an East Sussex County Council road maintenance yard beside the B2089 may possibly have come from roadblock, UORN 16846, close by.

## **2.2 Landscape:**

The landscape of the defence area is substantially the same as that of sixty years ago. The only development appears to have been the building of a small number of new houses beside the B2165 and B2089 roads on the eastern side of Cripp's Corner. The tightly enclosed nature of the countryside, with its bands of thick woodland, still prevails, rendering it difficult to move across this landscape other than by the narrow roads. The natural topography adapted for defence made it a strong position.

Several lengths of anti-tank blocks can be viewed from the road. At Swaile's Green, parking is possible near the farm by the junction with Compasses Lane. To see the southern lines of anti-tank blocks [UORN 9553], it is best to walk from a lay-by further to the south on the B2244 road. Although this is private land, there is little hindrance to entering it to view the blocks and pillbox, UORN 9552. In the centre of Cripp's Corner, parking is possible in a lay-by opposite houses on the B2089 road at a short distance from a nearby garage. The car park of the White Hart public house might also be used. A public footpath runs from Beacon Lane to the B2165 road enabling part of this line of blocks to be inspected at close quarters. Some of the blocks alongside the B2244 road can also be seen north of the viaduct, but this road is narrow and there is no pavement, so care should be exercised.

## **2.3 Statement of Significance:**

Cripp's Corner represents the finest surviving example in the country of the concrete anti-tank perimeter defences of a nodal point or other fortified place. Indeed, it appears to survive uniquely, other similar defences at nearby localities such as Rye and Battle having probably been largely destroyed. The sheer amount of construction work in terms of the concrete needed, and the labour required to erect these 750 or so anti-tank blocks (like so many prehistoric 'megaliths'), is extraordinary. The almost complete survival of the various lines of blocks is also remarkable, and can be attributed to the fact that most run at the edge of fields and other land plots where they have become incorporated within hedgerows.

There are still puzzles of interpretation from the Cripp's Corner defences, and more work needs to be done to plot the surviving anti-tank perimeter more exactly and to investigate the woodland gaps for evidence of defensive earthworks.

This is a most important site, second to none in any consideration of the surviving remains of the anti-invasion defence of 1940. Public information should be supplied by means of an information board describing the defence perimeter and its purpose.

## **3. Recommendations:**

1. That the surviving anti-invasion defence works at Cripp's Corner be considered of national importance. They enable the defence of this 'fortress' or nodal 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 to further fieldwork, perhaps by a local archaeological group, to survey the defence perimeter exactly and identify where anti-tank blocks have been removed. Such work could also investigate possible earthwork defences in the woods as well as the preparation of certain houses or other buildings as part of the defence.
  3. That consideration be given to providing public information on the Second World War defence of Cripp's Corner, possibly through the erection of an information board at the centre of the village.
4. **Supporting material.**
- 4.1 **Photographs:**  
Figs. 1 and 5-11 - taken (AWF) during field survey, 12.12.2003 and 12.2.2004.  
Fig. 3 - OS/73182 fr.725 (16.5.1973) - NMR.
  - 4.2 **Documentary Sources:**  
205th Field Company Royal Engineers War Diary - TNA: PRO WO 166/3675.  
'45 Division Defence Scheme', October 1940 (from 45 Division 'G' Branch HQ War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/536.  
'B' Sub-Area Defence Scheme', January 1941 (from the 133rd Infantry Brigade War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/988.  
'Provisional Defence Scheme', 18.2.1941 (from 199th Infantry Brigade War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/1052.  
Befestigungskarte Grossbritannien: 1:50,000 (Sheet 135), 1.6.1941 - BLML 1305(13).  
'38 Division Defence Scheme', July 1941 [map] (from 38 Division War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/482.
  - 4.3 **Published Source:**  
Video from TV programme - 'History Quest: Cripps Corner' (Screenhouse Productions), 2001.
  - 4.4 **Aerial Photographs:**  
3G/TUD/UK/148 fr.5080 (16.4.1946) - NMR.  
541/537 fr.3032 (30.5.1950) - NMR.  
58/2937 fr.459 (15.6.1959) - NMR.  
OS/73182 fr.725 (16.5.1973) - NMR.
  - 4.5 **Ordnance Survey 1: 2500 Plans:**  
TQ 7620-7720 (1976) - BLML.
  - 4.6 **Defence of Britain Project Database:**  
[see 5. 'Annex'].

