

DEFENCE AREA 19

PAWLETT HILL

1. Area details:

Pawlett Hill is 1 mile W of Pawlett village and 3½ miles N of Bridgwater.

County: Somerset.

Parish: Pawlett.

NGR: centre of area, ST 289434.

1.1 Area Description: [see Map 1].

The defence area is centred on the summit of Pawlett Hill which lies across the base of a west-facing loop of the River Parrett and rises to a height of some 100 feet. To the west of the hill, within the curve of the river, is an area of flat, drained wetland - the Pawlett Hams. The northern and southern slopes of the hill are a farmed landscape, predominantly of pasture fields, falling away to the drains of the encircling Levels. The flat summit of the hill, however, is one large, open arable field. The village of Pawlett stands on the eastern side of the hill, and there are a number of farms and cottages dotted around its slopes connected by narrow, twisting lanes.

The area is defined by Pawlett Hill itself, and the loop of the river within which it lies. Viewsheds are formed by the flat hill summit, and by views of the river both north and south, seen from Gaunts Road which runs along its crest from east to west. The defence area is contained within the visual envelope formed of the hill and the flat countryside around it, on all sides except the east.



Fig. 1 - The summit of Pawlett Hill, looking north from Gaunts Road. The River Parrett can be seen in the distance as it flows into a loop around the hill. At the left centre, pillbox, UORN 306, can just be made out.





Fig. 2 - Pawlett Hill is at the left centre of this aerial view taken in 1947. The southern reach of the River Parrett can be seen, and the village of Pawlett lies to the right. Various defence works can be made out.

2. **Assessment.**

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

Defence overview -

Pawlett Hill was a strongly defended area towards the northern end of the Taunton Stop Line. [For a description of the Taunton Stop Line, see the Report on Defence Area 3 - Weycroft]. The reason for the particular concentration of defences here is set out in the Report on the Taunton Stop Line dated December 1940.¹ There were

¹ TNA: PRO WO 199/1810.



not sufficient troops in the Pawlett area to man the whole of the principal anti-tank obstacle (i.e. the line of the River Parrett). Consequently, observation posts only were sited on the river banks, but the main defence was placed to the rear on Pawlett Hill which commanded the curving loop of the river below.

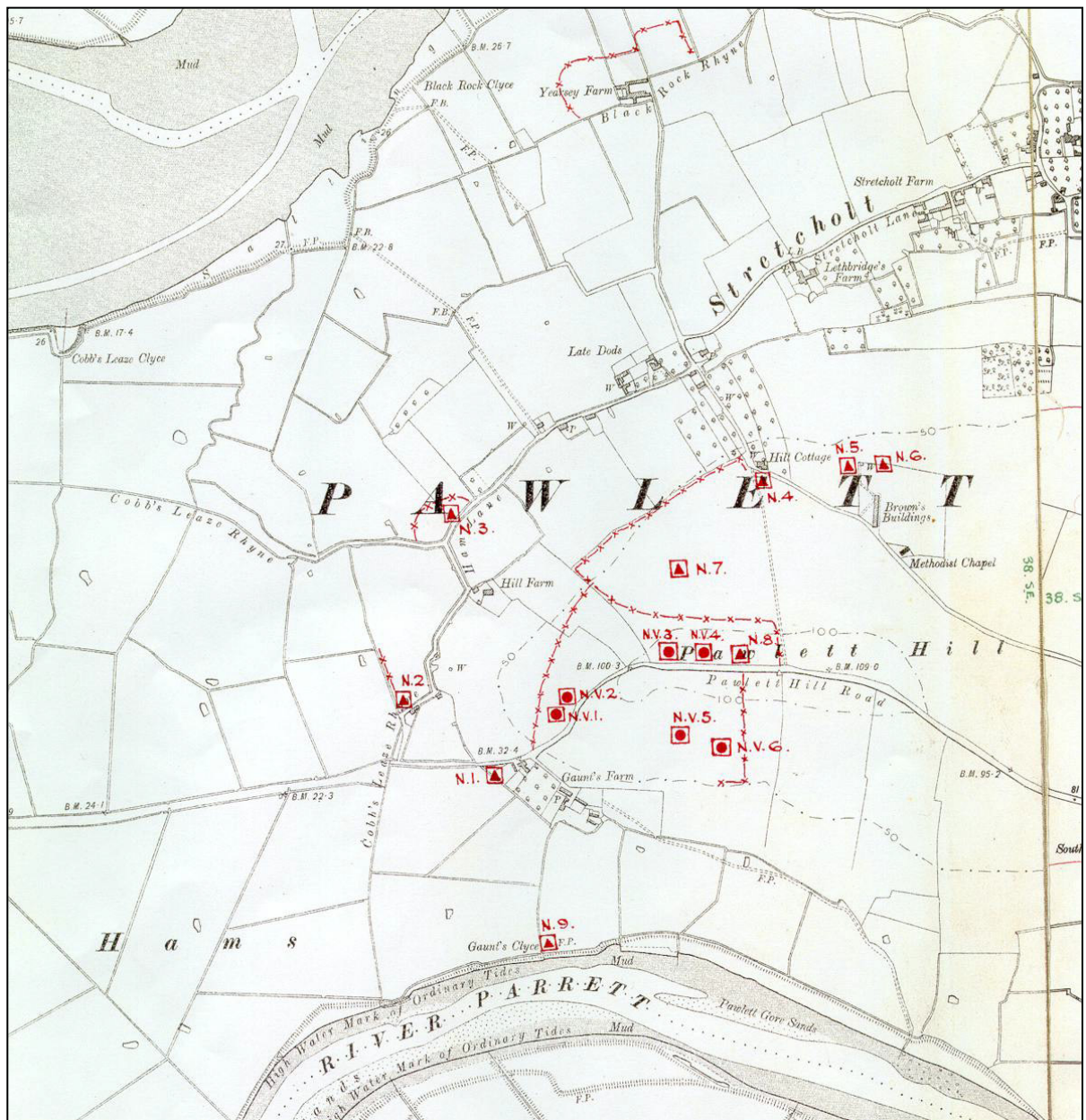


Fig. 3 - Royal Engineers map of 1940 showing the defence works on Pawlett Hill.²

The army units manning the Pawlett Hill defences in July 1940 came from the 144th Infantry Brigade. Home Guard support was provided by the Polden Company of the Somerset Bridgwater Battalion.³

The defence works built at Pawlett Hill were either positioned on its crest, on its northern and southern slopes, or, at the edge of the Levels below its western end. Further south, two pillboxes were positioned on the bank of the River Parrett. Half a mile west of Pawlett Hill, a roadblock was set up on the track leading to Pawlett from

² Royal Engineers record map - Wills Collection, NMR.

³ TNA: PRO WO 166/1007 and TNA: PRO WO 166/1243.



a possible river crossing point opposite Combrich. The defence works on the hill itself were predominantly square emplacements with a massive embrasure for the fire of the Vickers medium machine gun. These emplacements were positioned to face north and south. Type 24 hexagonal infantry pillboxes supplemented the Vickers emplacements, some on the summit of the hill and the rest scattered around the forward slopes and the flat land beneath. The positioning of these defence structures provided the forward defended localities (FDLs) and platoon posts, which were themselves surrounded by barbed wire entanglements. Each Vickers emplacement and pillbox received a comprehensive camouflage scheme.⁴

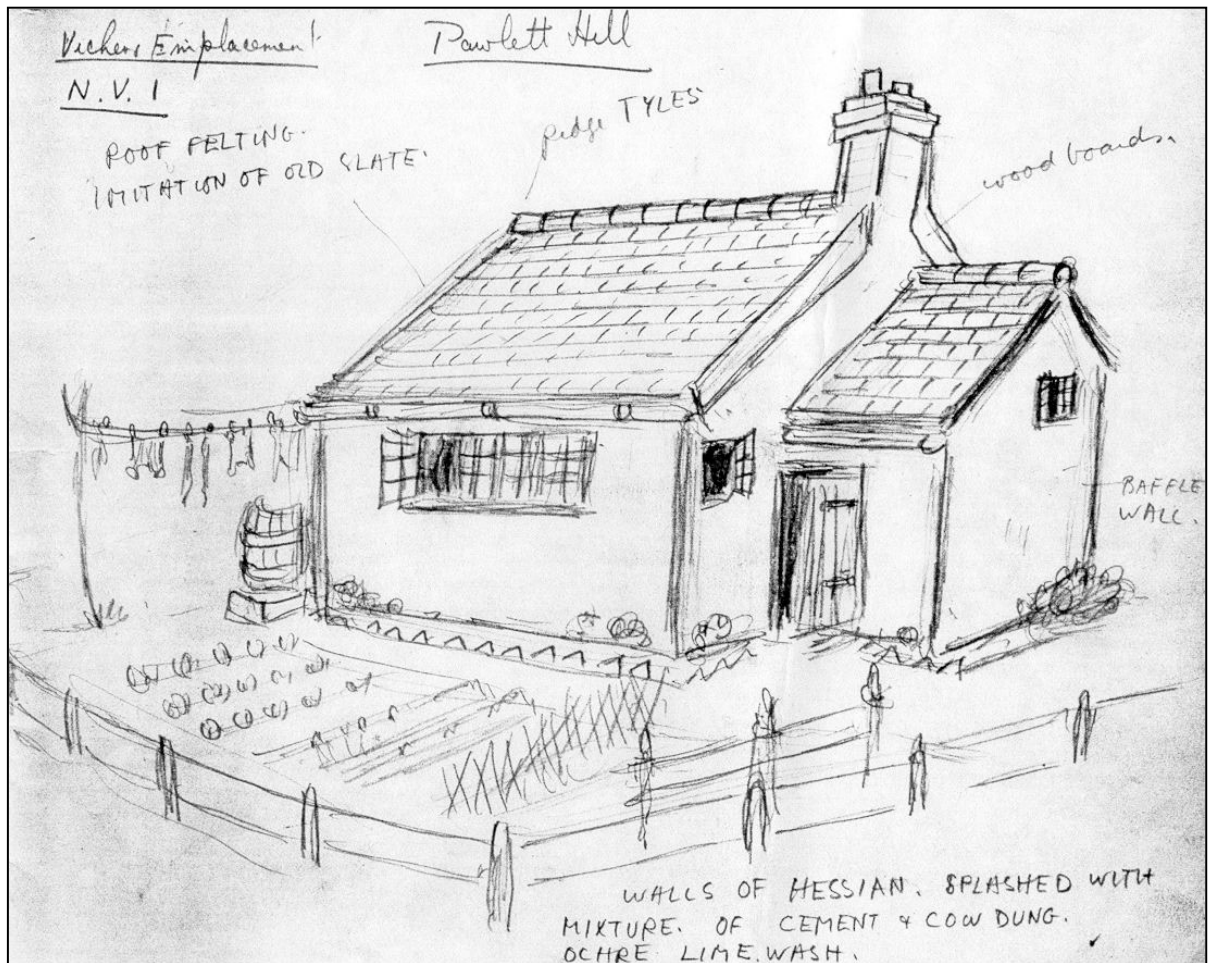


Fig. 4 - Drawing of a remarkable camouflage scheme of a Vickers machine gun emplacement [UORN 16333]. The camouflage would have been removed at the end of the war and the concrete emplacement destroyed shortly afterwards.⁵

Two observation posts for a field artillery battery were also established on Pawlett Hill, although it is not clear from the documentary evidence where the guns themselves were positioned.⁶

Construction work on these defence structures probably begun in the last week of July 1940, and several had yet to be completed by the end of August as they show clearly on air photographs as under construction at that time. There has been some

⁴ Drawings of camouflage schemes have survived within an archive of Messrs. Stansells (see Warren, 2001).

⁵ Archive of Messrs. Stansells.

⁶ TNA: PRO WO 199/1810.



discussion as to whether the two south-facing Vickers emplacements, UORNs 16335 and 16336, were ever in fact built as there is no evidence for them at all on the ground today and apparently no local oral testimony for their construction.⁷ However, all the available documentary evidence records them with Cassini map references, they are shown on the Royal Engineers record mapping (albeit perhaps slightly out of position), there are surviving drawings of their camouflage schemes, and they can be made out, if uncertainly, on both 1940 and 1947 air photographs. Hence, it seems certain that they were built, but probably destroyed within a few years of the end of the war.



Fig. 5 - Portion of an air photograph taken on 31 August 1940, showing at the left margin pillboxes, UORNs 306 and 307, apparently still under construction. There is no sign of UORN 3345, so presumably it had not yet been started.

The defence works -

Some good examples of infantry pillboxes and Vickers machine gun emplacements survive on, and around, Pawlett Hill. The Vickers emplacements, UORNs 289 and 309, are important as they are now the only survivors of six such emplacements within a small group covering the north and south slopes of the hill. There are eight examples of the type 24 pillbox, with the shell-proof, thick-walled, UORN 307, being perhaps the most accessible.



Fig. 6 - UORN 309: the main embrasure of a Vickers machine gun emplacement on Pawlett Hill.

⁷ See Green and Plant, 1995.



Fig. 7 - UORN 307: shell-proof, thick-walled type 24 pillbox positioned to fire north over the summit of Pawlett Hill.

Further type 24 pillboxes that can be inspected close-up are UORNs 3344 and 3345, the former showing evidence for a mounting on its roof for a weapon in an anti-aircraft role, although this would have had to fire through the artificial pitched roof of its camouflage. Isolated in the centre of a large open field, and dominating the top of the hill, is another type 24 pillbox, UORN 306. This cannot be approached, however, owing to its central position in a field under crop.



Fig. 8 - UORN 3344: type 24 pillbox standing below the western slopes of Pawlett Hill at the edge of the Levels.

An unusual sight in a remote location are the remains of the roadblock on White House Road over half a mile west of Pawlett Hill. Here, a strange structure made from concrete 'pimples' connected by brickwork survives at the side of the track, but what the exact form of the roadblock was is unknown.



Fig. 9 - UORN 16330: fragment from a roadblock, consisting of two tetrahedrons ('pimples') set on concrete bases and connected by brickwork. How this related to the main structure of the roadblock, now destroyed, is unknown.



Fig. 10 - UORN 306: type 24 pillbox in solitary splendour on the summit of Pawlett Hill. Air photographs show it was always isolated in this way in the centre of a large, open field, but was camouflaged as a square pitch-roofed building with a sign affixed stating 'Blacksmith'.

2.2 Landscape:

The defence area preserves much of its appearance at the time of the Second World War. There has been no significant building development, and the basic pattern of fields, narrow lanes, and farms and cottages remains the same. The open nature of the fields on the summit of Pawlett Hill, and on its southern slopes, existed in 1940. Possibly there is now more woodland on the margins of Gaunts Road, overgrowing several surviving pillboxes.

The area is predominantly an agricultural landscape, and the lanes are quiet and little used, other than by farmers and local residents. There is no tourist reason to visit here, except perhaps to see the views of the river and the Levels from Pawlett Hill. Car parking is not easy, although there are broad grass verges to Gaunts Road. The circuit of the lanes, and one public footpath crossing Pawlett Hill, provide access to most of the defence works that can either be approached and inspected close-up or viewed from a convenient distance.

2.3 Statement of Significance:

This defence area provides an excellent illustration of a defended locality on the Taunton Stop Line. Although several emplacements and pillboxes have been removed, one at least recently, enough survive, when considered with the documentary evidence, to understand the nature of the defence here and the strategy behind it. The fullness of the surviving documentation, in fact, makes it possible to visualise exactly what was built, and how it was disguised within the landscape. Such a total overview is almost unique in the field of anti-invasion studies, and is important also for an understanding of other comparable areas.

Impressive examples of Vickers medium machine gun emplacements and type 24 infantry pillboxes survive, together with a unique form of roadblock construction. However, it is the number of defence works within such a small compass, understood through the documentary evidence, that makes this area so important. It will be important to ensure that no further structures are removed.

An attractive 'pillbox walk' could readily be established using the circuit of the lanes and the public footpath across the hill.

3. Recommendations:

1. That the surviving anti-invasion defence works in the Pawlett Hill area be considered of national importance. They enable the defence of this defended locality on the Taunton Stop Line 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 extensive available documentary evidence 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 initiative with Somerset County Council and the local authority, to establishing a 'pillbox walk' through the defence area. An information board might also be set up, possibly at a location at



the side of Gaunts Lane, to provide details of the anti-invasion defences of Pawlett Hill and possibly of the Taunton Stop Line in general.

4. **Supporting material.**

4.1 **Photographs:**

Figs. 1 and 6-10 - taken (AWF) during field survey, 15.1.2003.

Fig. 2 - CPE/UK/1944 fr.3187 (23.1.1947) - NMR.

Fig. 5 - 225A/UK854/4 fr.8 (31.8.1940) - NMR.

4.2 **Documentary Sources:**

'Taunton Stop Line' [record map folios of Major F.B. Goodman R.E., D.C.R.E. Taunton], 1940 - Wills Collection, NMR.

'Southern Command Home Defence Programme, 1940' (map from General Headquarters Papers, Defence Works) - TNA: PRO WO 199/48.

144th Infantry Brigade War Diary, 1940 - TNA: PRO WO 166/1007.

'Somerset Sub-Area Defence Scheme', August 1940 (from Somerset Sub-Area War Diary HQ) - TNA: PRO WO 166/1317.

'Home Defence Progress Report: Taunton Line', 30.10.1940 (from General Headquarters Papers, Home Forces) - WO 199/1803.

'Report on Taunton Stop Line', December 1940 (from General Headquarters Papers, Home Defence - Stop Lines) - TNA: PRO WO 199/1810.

'Operation Instruction No.5' - Taunton Stop Line', 4.1.1941 (from Southern Area HQ War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/1243.

'Western Area Defence Scheme', 23.6.1941 (from Western Area HQ War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/1251.

4.3 **Published Sources:**

C.S. Dobinson, 'The Taunton stop-line: component listing' (supporting paper AI/S/3 to *Twentieth Century Fortifications in England, Vol. II: Anti-Invasion Defences of WWII*, Council for British Archaeology, 1996).

(Maj.) M. Green and John Plant, 'The Pawlett Strongpoint' (from *Loopholes* No.12 pp 20-26, June 1995).

Derrick Warren, *Now You See It - Then You Didn't: The Inter-Channel Stop Line of 1940* (Somerset Industrial Archaeological Society, May 2001) - originally produced privately, 1986.

4.4 **Aerial Photographs:**

225D/UK844/1 fr.5 (27.7.40) - NMR.

225A/UK854/4 frs.7-8 (31.8.40) - NMR.

CPE/UK/1924 frs.2009-2010 (16.1.47) - NMR.

CPE/UK/1944 frs.3186-3187 (23.1.47) - NMR.

58/3880 fr.109 (28.10.60) - NMR.

58/3880 frs.152 and 154 (28.10.60) - NMR.

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

ST 2842-2942 (1970) - BLML.

ST 2843-2943 (1969) - BLML.



4.6 **Defence of Britain Project Database:**
[see 5. 'Annex' below].

