

# DEFENCE AREA 20

## RIVER BRUE: CRIPP'S BRIDGE

### 1. Area details:

Cripp's Bridge is 1 mile E of Bason Bridge and 3 miles SE of Highbridge.

County: Somerset.

Parish: Mark

NGR: centre of area, ST 370451.

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

The defence area follows the canalised course of the River Brue, from a point just west of the footbridge at Cripp's Bridge, as far as River Bridge (a crossing of a minor road) some one and a half miles to the east. The area is part of the Somerset Levels, intersected by many drains and rhynes. This is a fertile farming landscape of mixed arable crops and cattle pasture. There is little tourism here. The traffic on the narrow roads, raised on causeways with sharp angled corners, is mainly local. At the time of the Second World War, a railway running from Highbridge to Glastonbury crossed the river near Cripp's Bridge, but it has long been disused and there is little evidence today of the railway or its bridge.

The focus of the area is the river itself, with viewsheds along its banks from both Cripp's Bridge and River Bridge.



*Fig. 1 - The River Brue looking north-west from River Bridge. The first of the pillboxes in this section is in view on the right-hand [north] bank.*



2.

## 2.1 Defences: [see Map 2]

## Defence overview -

The defences on the River Brue formed part of GHQ Line Green, which ran for some ninety miles from Highbridge on the Bristol Channel to Upper Framilode on the River Severn, curving in a great loop around Bristol for which it formed the outer defences. This Line linked with other stop lines - the GHQ Line Blue at Whaddon, near Semington [see Defence Area 27] and, at Freshford, with a Command Line running to Salisbury and on to Odiham. The initial reconnaissance for GHQ Line Green was carried out in June 1940, with further surveys during July to determine the positions of individual defence works. Initial work was carried out by the 224th Field Company RE, and, from the end of July, by the 246th and 253rd Field Companies.<sup>1</sup> Construction work had probably begun by mid-July, but topographical surveys to determine the course of the Line were still being carried out in September.<sup>2</sup>



*Fig. 2 - The course of GHQ Line Green around Bristol. No.1 [added to the map] represents the position of the River Brue: Cripp's Bridge Defence Area. No.2 is Defence Area 68 (Godney); No.3 is Defence Area 32 (Hog Wood; No.4 is Defence Area 27 (Semington); No.5 is Defence Area 58 (Avening).<sup>3</sup>*

As with other stop lines described in this series of reports, GHQ Line Green was primarily an anti-tank obstacle formed, wherever possible, by natural waterways. If there was no waterway, or if it was considered to be of insufficient width or depth, then the line was continued by the digging of an artificial anti-tank ditch, or by rows of concrete obstacles. Pillboxes were built at regular intervals to command the Line, in particular at the crossing points of roads and railways, which themselves would be set with concrete road and rail blocks. Bridges along the course of the Line were also

<sup>1</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/578; TNA: PRO WO 166/3693; and TNA: PRO WO 166/3715.

<sup>2</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/3781.

<sup>3</sup> Map from TNA: PRO WO 199/48.



prepared for demolition. Chippenham, through which the Line ran, was a designated anti-tank island, as was Bath to the north of the Line and Bristol itself. The nearest anti-tank island to the River Brue section was Bridgwater on the Taunton Stop Line, later designated a Category 'C' nodal point. GHQ Line Green was the responsibility of the 144th Infantry Brigade, part of 48 Division of VIII Corps. Manning of the Line would have been carried out in collaboration with local Home Guard units: in the Cripp's Bridge area this was the Highbridge platoon. A report on the Line in July 1940 stated that to hold it in full sixteen divisions would be required.<sup>4</sup>

#### *The defence works -*

The River Brue section of GHQ Line Green fell within the Burnham sector of the Somerset Sub-Area (part of the military Western Area). The defences faced south, being all built on the north bank of the river. Those which survive within the defence area are exclusively infantry pillboxes, all of an identical design but in varying conditions of survival. However, there were further defence works which have disappeared, in particular road and rail blocks at Cripp's Bridge and a roadblock at River Bridge, which undoubtedly was also mined for destruction in the event of an invasion.



*Fig. 3 - Remarkable low-level air photograph taken in July 1943. The railway and bridge have now disappeared, but the pillbox in the foreground [UORN 8378] survives, as does the one [UORN 8377], covered by vegetation adjacent to the footbridge (Cripp's Bridge). The shape of UORN 8378 in the photograph is something of a mystery as the surviving pillbox is a hexagonal type 24, and here it can be seen as a rectangular shape apparently with embrasures across the corners. Holes in the roof indicate that there may be a camouflage screen over it, but why one shape of pillbox should be disguised as another is unknown. Apparent bent rail structures ('Hairpins') on the south side [bottom edge] of the bridge may be associated with a railblock.*

<sup>4</sup> Green (1999).



The pillboxes are all of the hexagonal type 24, being brick-shuttered with an entrance porch or attached external blast wall. In some examples [e.g. UORNs 13970 and 8379], the porch has collapsed. They are all sited to fire over the canal, although some are also positioned to enfilade it. The three examples nearest to Cripp's Bridge, to which there is public access [UORNs 13969, 8377, and 8378], survive in good condition, and another good example can be seen adjacent to River Bridge [UORN 5667].



*Fig. 4 - Type 24 pillbox, UORN 8378: the river lies to the right. [See also Fig. 3].*



*Fig. 5 - UORN 13970: the brick entrance porch with its concrete roof slab has collapsed.*





*Fig. 6 - UORN 5667: type 24 infantry pillbox at River Bridge.*

## 2.2 Landscape:

Other than for the disappearance of the railway line and the bridge, there have been few changes to the landscape of the defence area. The close-set pattern of drains and rhynes running from the River Brue remains the same, as does the canalised river cutting through the flat landscape. Farms adjacent to Cripp's Bridge have caravan parks, so there is an element of tourism here, probably related to the adjacent towns of Wells and Glastonbury and the coast at Burnham-on-Sea.

The majority of the pillboxes lie in fields to which there is no access: there is no public right of way along the banks of the River Brue. However, at Cripp's Bridge, the footbridge (dangerous, with slats missing) provides access to three pillboxes near the bridge [UORNs 13969, 8377, and 8378]. River Bridge is narrow and with little facility for car parking. Pillbox UORN 5667 can be seen here, as can, in the distance, the first pillbox [UORN 5770] of the line of eleven extending to Cripp's Bridge.



*Fig. 7 - River Bridge lies to the right of this air photograph taken in 1956. The line of pillboxes can be clearly seen along the north bank of the River Brue.*

### 2.3 Statement of Significance:

This defence area is important because it includes a 'complete run' of pillboxes, surviving largely in good condition, between the two points of Cripp's Bridge and River Bridge on GHQ Green Line. None has been destroyed, and their siting in defence of the anti-tank obstacle formed by the river can be understood. Although there is no surviving field evidence, the positions of road and rail blocks at both bridges can also be reconstructed.

Of the total length of GHQ Line Green, over 170 infantry pillboxes survive.<sup>5</sup> Other sectors of the Line represented in this series of reports are Godney (DA 68), Hog Wood (DA 32), and Avening (DA 58).

Although there is no opportunity to establish a full 'pillbox walk' within this area, nevertheless the footbridge at Cripp's Bridge allows access to three pillboxes which can make an instructive and enjoyable riverside visit.

## 3. Recommendations:

1. That the surviving anti-invasion defence works in the River Brue: Cripp's Bridge area be considered of national importance. They enable the defence of this section of GHQ Line Green to be interpreted, and provide evidence of the articulation of the defence and the inter-relationship of its functionally different components.
2. That the footbridge over the River Brue at Cripp's Bridge be repaired and made safe.
3. That consideration be given, in a possible initiative with Somerset County Council, to providing an information board adjacent to the footbridge at Cripp's Bridge that provides details of the River Brue defences and of GHQ Line Green in general.

## 4. Supporting material.

### 4.1 Photographs:

Figs. 1 and 4-6 - taken (AWF) during field survey, 17.1.2003.

Fig. 3 - ST 3645/3 fr.3005 (17.7.1943) - NMR.

Fig. 7 - 58/1976 fr.64 (9.4.1956) - NMR.

### 4.2 Documentary Sources:

224th Field Company Royal Engineers War Diary, 1940 - TNA: PRO WO 166/3693.

246th Field Company Royal Engineers War Diary, 1940 - TNA: PRO WO 166/3715.

516th Corps Field Survey Company Royal Engineers War Diary, 1940 - TNA: PRO WO 166/3781.

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

'Report on Reconnaissance of Outer Bristol Defence Position', 18.6.1940 (from 48 Division 'GS' War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/578.

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<sup>5</sup> Alexander, 'Ironside's Line', p45.



'Somerset Sub-Area Defence Scheme', August 1940 (from Somerset Sub-Area HQ War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/1317.  
'Western Area Defence Scheme', 23.6.1941 (from Western Area HQ War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/1251.  
'Somerset and Bristol Area Defence Scheme', 1943 (from Somerset and Bristol Area War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/10824.

4.3 **Published Sources:**

Colin Alexander, *Ironside's Line* (Historic Military Press, 1999).  
(Major) M. Green, *Warwalks: Stop Line Green* (Reardon Publishing, 1999).

4.4 **Aerial Photographs:**

ST 3645/1 fr.3003 (17.7.1943) - NMR.  
ST 3645/2 fr.3004 (17.7.1943) - NMR.  
ST 3645/3 fr.3005 (17.7.1943)- NMR.  
CPE/UK/1924 fr.3020 (16.1.1947) - NMR.  
58/1976 fr.64 (9.4.1956) - NMR.  
58/3882 fr.59 (28.10.1960) - NMR.

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

ST 3644-3744 (1970) - BLML.  
ST 3645-3745 (1970) - BLML.  
ST 3844-3944 (1970) - BLML.

4.6 **Defence of Britain Project Database:**

[see 5. 'Annex'].

