

DEFENCE AREA 21

DUNMILL LOCK

1. Area details:

Dunmill Lock is 1 mile E of Hungerford and 9 miles W of Newbury.

County: Berkshire.

Parish: Hungerford.

NGR: centre of area, SU 351682.

1.1 Area Description: [see Map 1].

The defence area lies on the Kennet and Avon Canal, which runs from Bath to Reading. Dunmill Lock is no.75 on the canal: to the east is Wire Lock, no.76. Flowing parallel with the canal to its north is the River Kennet, and to the south is the Newbury - Hungerford railway line. A lane runs south to Dunmill Lock from the main A4 road, passing through the small settlement of Lower Denford just north of the River Kennet. The lane crosses the river, the canal, and the railway by three bridges, the last approached by a sharp left hand bend above the cutting of the canal.



Fig. 1 - Dunmill Lock on the Kennet & Avon Canal. The two anti-tank gun emplacements, UORNs 6479 and 6480, stand behind the trees to the left at the top of the bank of the canal cutting.

A towpath follows the north bank of the canal east towards Wire Lock. Between the canal and the river is an area of thick bushes and undergrowth, with private parkland beyond stretching to the bank of the river. Wire Lock with a hump-backed bridge carrying a track over the canal, marks the east boundary of the defence area. The west



boundary is at a point just beyond the anti-tank gun emplacements that provide the main focus of the defence area

The principal viewshed is from the lane as it rises from the canal towards the anti-tank gun emplacement, UORN 6479, and the railway bridge beyond. The line of the canal, being the main anti-tank obstacle, links the various defence works.

2. Assessment.

2.1 Defences: [see Map 2]

Defence overview -

GHQ Line Blue was constructed from a junction with GHQ Line Green at Whaddon in Wiltshire [see Defence Area 27 - Semington / Whaddon], entirely following the line of the Kennet and Avon Canal to Theale, south-west of Reading, a distance of some fifty miles. The Line was planned in July 1940 by officers from V Corps. It was intended to protect the heartland of England from an advance by enemy forces from the south coast, and to prevent a movement to encircle London from the west. To its rear lay GHQ Line Red, and on its right flank, GHQ Line Green protecting the port of Bristol.

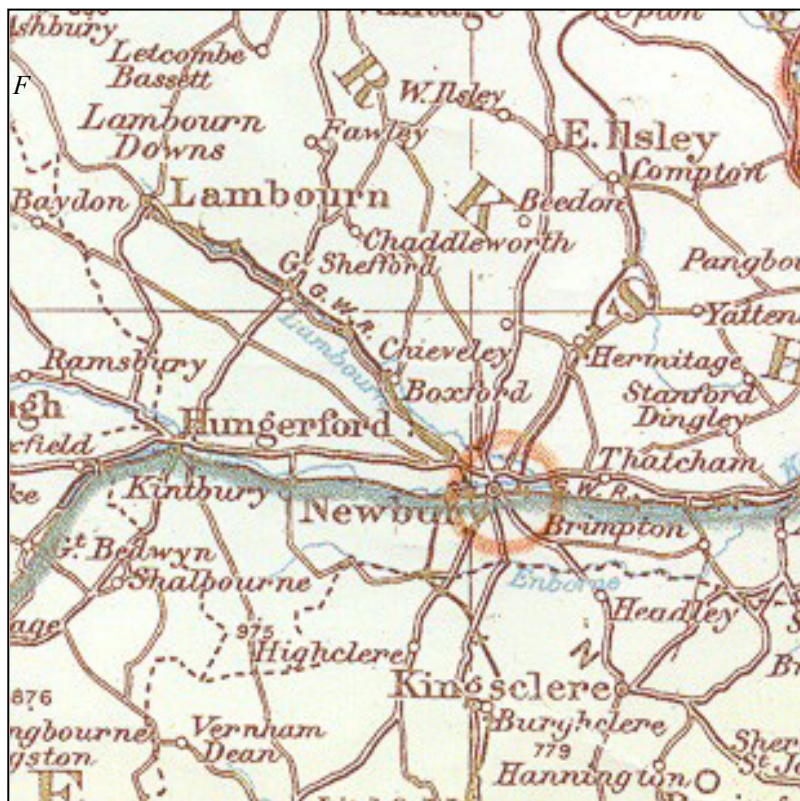


Fig. 2 - 1940 Southern Command map showing the course of the GHQ Line Blue between Hungerford and Newbury. Newbury is circled as an anti-tank island.¹

The Kennet and Avon Canal was to be the Line's principal front-edge anti-tank obstacle, but lengths of artificial anti-tank ditch were also dug behind it to strengthen points where the canal was vulnerable to a crossing by enemy armour. The main emphasis was the defence of the canal's locks, which not only provided bridging points but which, if captured, would allow the canal to be drained. At these places anti-tank gun emplacements were sited, some thirty being built in the section between

¹ Map from PRO WO 199/48.



Hungerford and Reading, and fifty-three planned for the complete length of the Line.² At the locks, roadblocks were set up on the routes that crossed the canal, and the bridges here were prepared for demolition.³ Blocks were also constructed on the railway line that ran for considerable distances parallel with the canal, and pillboxes sited on its embankments. By the autumn of 1940, the defence works on the Line were substantially complete, but it seems that some of those that were planned, including a number of the anti-tank ditches, were never started.

The eastern section of GHQ Line Blue fell within South Midland Area, and its defence was also organised around the nodal point at Hungerford and the anti-tank island at Newbury. In the event of an invasion, troops for the defence of the Line east of Hungerford were to come from the Berkshire Home Guard until such time as Field Army forces arrived to relieve them.⁴

Dunmill Lock, and to its east, Wire Lock, were two of the locks that were defended. Dunmill Lock, where the canal ran in a cutting and was crossed by a road, was considered particularly vulnerable to attack. Two anti-tank gun emplacements were constructed here, with a pillbox protecting the meandering waterways of the River Kennet to the north, and another on the canal towpath to the east. The three bridges were undoubtedly prepared for demolition, and there was a substantial roadblock south of the railway bridge. Probably, there were other earthwork defences, including section posts and infantry trenches. The bridge at Wire Lock was blocked and almost certainly mined, and there appear to have been further blocks on adjacent sluices.

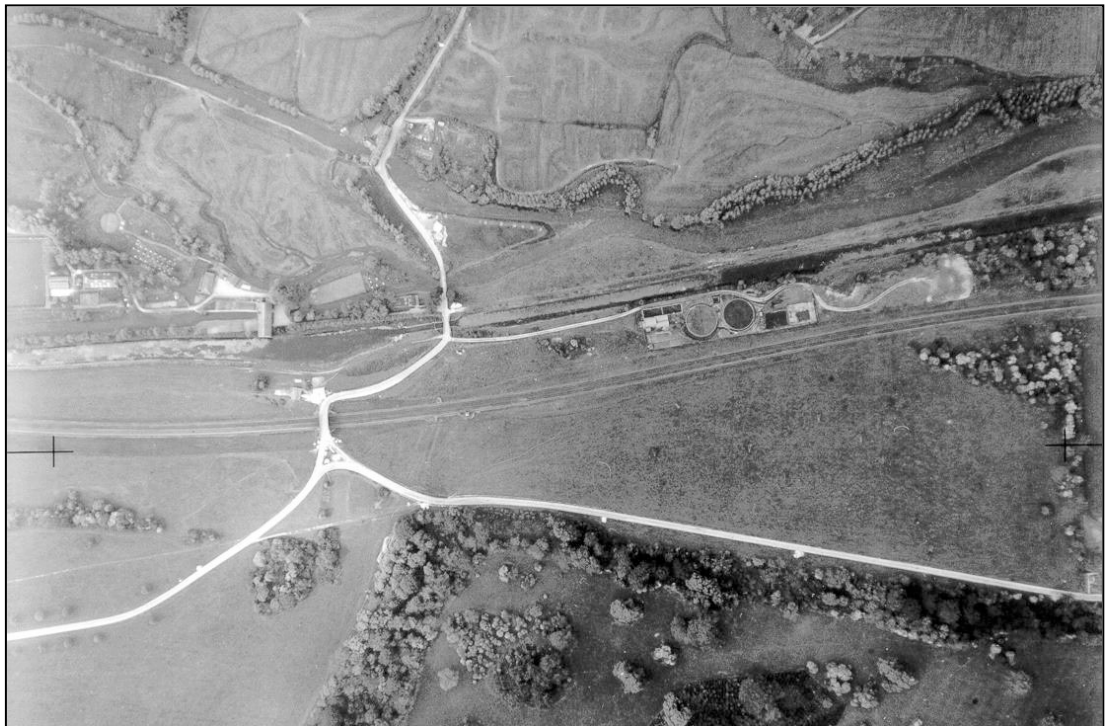


Fig. 3 - An air photograph taken in June 1941 shows Dunmill Lock where the lane crosses the canal. The two anti-tank gun emplacements [UORNs 6479 and 6480] can be seen at the sharp bend in the lane to the south of the canal. They appear to have pitched roofs, probably part of their camouflage scheme. A roadblock is positioned at the triangular junction of roads south of the railway bridge.

² Alexander, 'Ironsides' Line', pp45-48.

³ Because the canal is relatively narrow and shallow, it has been pointed out that the demolished bridges might have formed convenient fords for the Germans to cross - see 'Ironsides' Line', p48.

⁴ TNA: PRO WO 166/1224.



The purpose of a substantial additional defence work [UORN 16725] seen on air photographs to the north-west of Dunmill Lock in Lower Denford, consisting of a circular earthwork, with three parallel rows of concrete blocks [?], is hard to determine. Possibly it was an anti-aircraft gun position. Whether anything of this structure survives on the ground today is unknown.



Fig. 4 - Detail from Fig. 3 of a probable defence work at Lower Denford that is hard to interpret. It appears to consist of a circular earthwork approached by paths, with two square structures alongside. Three straight rows of blocks [?] are positioned close by.

The defence works -

The major defence structures within this area are the two type 28A anti-tank gun emplacements [UORNs 6479 and 6480] situated side by side on top of the southern bank of the canal just west of Dunmill Lock. The eastern of the two, UORN 6479, is the larger, and has twin main embrasures, each pointing in a different direction along the lane that makes a sharp corner at this point. UORN 6480 has a single anti-tank gun embrasure facing west. Both emplacements appear to have been camouflaged and given pitched roofs. They are used as cattle shelters today, and are full of dirt and rubbish.



Fig. 5 - UORN 6479: 2pdr. anti-tank gun emplacement on the south side of Dunmill Lock, protecting crossings of both the canal and the railway.





Fig. 6 - UORN 6479, showing its two anti-tank gun embrasures covering both directions of the road.



Fig. 7 - UORN 6479: interior of the anti-tank gun emplacement showing the dividing wall of the separate LMG chamber to the right. The condition of this structure, although essentially 'Good', is dirty and dilapidated, and it is in urgent need of some protection.

By the lane, to the north of the canal and river bridges, is a much overgrown type 22 pillbox [UORN 6478], which appears to be in good condition if it could be freed of the vegetation growing over it. So overgrown as to be virtually invisible, even within touching distance, is another type 22 pillbox [UORN 8821] at the edge of the towpath between Dunmill Lock and Wire Lock.





Fig. 8 - UORN 6480: 2pdr. anti-tank gun emplacement, with a single main embrasure, adjacent to UORN 6479 and in a similar dirty condition. The northern edge (right hand) of its concrete base is being undermined by the erosion of the bank above the canal on which it stands.



Fig. 9 - UORN 6478: brick-shuttered type 22 pillbox by the lane at Lower Denford. It is considered that the removal of its overgrowth would enhance its historic interest rather than detract from the locality in which it stands.

At Wire Lock, some of the sockets in which vertical rails or posts would have been inserted to form an anti-tank block on the bridge, survive [UORN 8822]. Others must be presumed to be hidden by tarmac. A little to the west, square concrete blocks set flush with the banks by a sluice on the River Kennet [UORN 16757] may represent

some type of blocking of the river here, but this is uncertain and they may have had an entirely non-military purpose.



Fig. 10 - UORN 8822: concrete plugs in the surface of the bridge at Wire Lock, which, when lifted, would reveal square sockets for the insertion of blocking posts or rails.

Fig. 11 - UORN 16757: concrete blocks either side of a sluice may have been used to erect a barrier on the River Kennet, but this is uncertain and they may have a non-military origin.



2.2 Landscape:

The principal changes in the landscape of the defence area since the Second World War relate more to its modern-day use than any physical development. The growth of leisure and tourism has resulted in Dunmill Lock becoming a popular spot for visitors. They come here to watch the canal and the lock, to fish, to walk on the towpath, and also to visit the anti-tank gun emplacements that are set in such a visible location by the lane [see Figs. 5 and 6]. A free car park for these visitors has been created on the east side of the lane between the canal and the railway. It is a short walk from here to the emplacements. There is also a considerable traffic of holidaymakers in long boats on the canal, and both Wire Lock and Dunmill Lock are in constant use, in particular in the summer months. Dunmill Lock, therefore, can become a busy place, and the narrow lane is hardly adequate for the vehicles that now use it.

Planning permission for a recent, imaginative proposal to convert the two anti-tank gun emplacements into a restaurant is believed to have been turned down on the grounds of being an inappropriate development for a rural location. This decision is undoubtedly correct as well in terms of the two affected structures which are important, and relatively rare, monuments from 1940. However, there is unquestionably a need for a modern use that will maintain the emplacements [see 2.3 and 3. below].

All the surviving defence works can be reached from the lane at Dunmill Lock, or from the towpath to Wire Lock.

2.3 Statement of Significance:

The Dunmill Lock defence area provides a good example of the defences of GHQ Line Blue constructed along the line of the Kennet & Avon Canal. The various components of defence are well illustrated - anti-tank gun emplacements, infantry pillboxes, and roadblocks.

The major importance of the area, however, rests in the twin emplacements, UORNs 6479 and 6480. Pairs of type 28A emplacements are relatively rare anywhere in the country, and it is unusual to find them surviving in good (if, admittedly, dilapidated) condition in such a prominent, and publicly accessible, location. The Defence of Britain Project database records seventeen individual type 28A emplacements as surviving in 'Good' condition on GHQ Line Blue, and only a further forty-six in the whole of England. The number of surviving pairs on GHQ Line Blue is not known, but it is probably very few. Most accessible examples come from GHQ Line Red [see Defence Area 7 - Sulham Valley, and Defence Area 59 - Frilford / Fyfield].

This is a good location where information on GHQ Line Blue, and on the defence of Dunmill Lock, could be provided to the public.

3. Recommendations:

1. That the surviving anti-invasion defence works in the Dunmill Lock area be considered of national importance. They enable the defence of this part of GHQ Line Blue 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 removing the overgrowth on pillboxes, UORNs 6478 and 8821.
3. That consideration be given to the future use of anti-tank gun emplacements, UORNs 6479 and 6480, so that they can be maintained and kept clean [see as well 5. below].
4. That further research and fieldwork be carried out, perhaps by a local interested group, into the uncertain defence structure, UORN 16725.
5. That consideration be given, in a possible initiative with Berkshire County Council and the relevant local authority, to providing information for the public on the Dunmill Lock defences as part of GHQ Line Blue. Such information might be displayed alongside, or within, the anti-tank gun emplacements, if their current use as cattle shelters could be curtailed.

4. **Supporting material.**

4.1 **Photographs:**

Figs. 1 and 5-11 - taken (AWF) during field survey, 3.9.2003.
Figs. 3 and 4 - 21OTU/BR352 fr.4 (11.6.1941) - NMR.

4.2 **Documentary Sources:**

'Southern Command Home Defence Programme, 1940' (map from General Headquarters Papers, Defence Works) - TNA: PRO WO 199/48.
South Midland Area HQ War Diary, 1940 - TNA: PRO WO 166/1224.
'Construction of GHQ Zones, defence lines, road blocks, etc', July-October 1940 - TNA: PRO WO 199/1801.
'Construction of Anti-Tank Islands and Centres of Resistance', 1940-1941 - TNA: PRO WO 199/1714.

4.3 **Published Sources:**

Bastions of Berkshire [pamphlet] (Berkshire County Council, n.d.)
Colin Alexander, *Ironside's Line* (Historic Military Press, 1999).

4.4 **Aerial Photographs:**

21OTU/BR352 frs.3-6 (11.6.1941) - NMR.
106G/UK/1648 frs.5002 and 5004 (10.7.1946) - NMR.
106G/UK/1406 frs.3242-3243 (11.4.1946) - NMR.
CPE/UK/1821 fr.5130 (4.11.1946) - NMR.
540/566 fr.3004 (28.7.1951) - NMR.
OS/64160 fr.119 (25.8.1964) - NMR.

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

SU 3468-3568 (1968) - BLML.



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

