

DEFENCE AREA 23

BARCOMBE MILLS

1. **Area details:**

The defence area is 3½ miles NE of Lewes.

County: East Sussex.

Parish: Barcombe.

NGR: centre of area, TQ 433148.

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

The defence area occupies the broad valley of the River Ouse as it flows south from Isfield through Barcombe Mills to Lewes, and then on to the sea at Newhaven. This is a flat landscape of rich farming land. At several places the river divides into two or more channels, and at Barcombe Mills there is a network of waterways that served the mills that once stood here, the last of which burned down in 1938. The original course of the road crossed the river here by a bridge said to be the oldest toll bridge in the country. It is now by-passed by a road that runs to the south, this road having been constructed before the Second World War. The waterways and surrounding land at Barcombe Mills are managed by the Environment Agency, and visitors are welcome. The village of Barcombe Cross lies on higher land to the west of Barcombe Mills, and there is another settlement of Barcombe (probably the original) to the south-west.

The northern boundary of the area is at The Anchor Inn where the first bridge after Barcombe Mills is situated; to the south, the boundary is an arbitrary line across the river valley; to the west, it is demarcated by a dismantled railway line that once ran between Lewes and Uckfield; and to the east, it is a further arbitrary line running parallel with the river. The focus of the area is Barcombe Mills itself. Viewsheds are formed by the sweep of the valley to north and south following the line of the river.

2. **Assessment.**

2.1 **Defences:** [see Maps 2 and 3]

Defence overview -

Barcombe Mills was a defended locality on the Newhaven - Cliffe branch of the GHQ Line. [For a description of this Line, see Defence Area 17 - Old Lodge Warren]. The GHQ Line formed part of the lettered grid of defence lines or 'fences', defended at their crossing points, by which the Weald was criss-crossed.¹ It ran from Newhaven (WZ), via Lewes (a Category 'A' nodal point) to Uckfield (WS), where it met a west-east Corps Line (XII Corps). A further west-east stop line, the Division Line (in 1940, 45 Division; in 1941, 55 Division) ran mainly parallel with the Corps Line to its south, crossing the GHQ Line at Barcombe Mills.²

¹ TNA: PRO WO 166/1072. For a fuller description of the grid system, see Defence Area 12 - Dorking Gap.

² TNA: PRO WO 166/482.



The GHQ Line north of Lewes followed partly the railway line and partly the River Ouse as far as Barcombe Mills and was defended by infantry pillboxes built between the railway and the west bank of the river. Barcombe Mills was the first crossing of the river from Lewes, and an anti-tank gun emplacement for a 6pdr. gun was constructed here, another being placed close to The Anchor Inn bridge further north. Immediately south of Barcombe Mills, and to its north, the pillboxes were sited close to the river bank which became the principal anti-tank obstacle of the Line.



Fig. 1 - The River Ouse north of Barcombe Mills: this was the westerly of two channels of the river at this point. Pillbox, UORN 715, is just out of sight to the left.

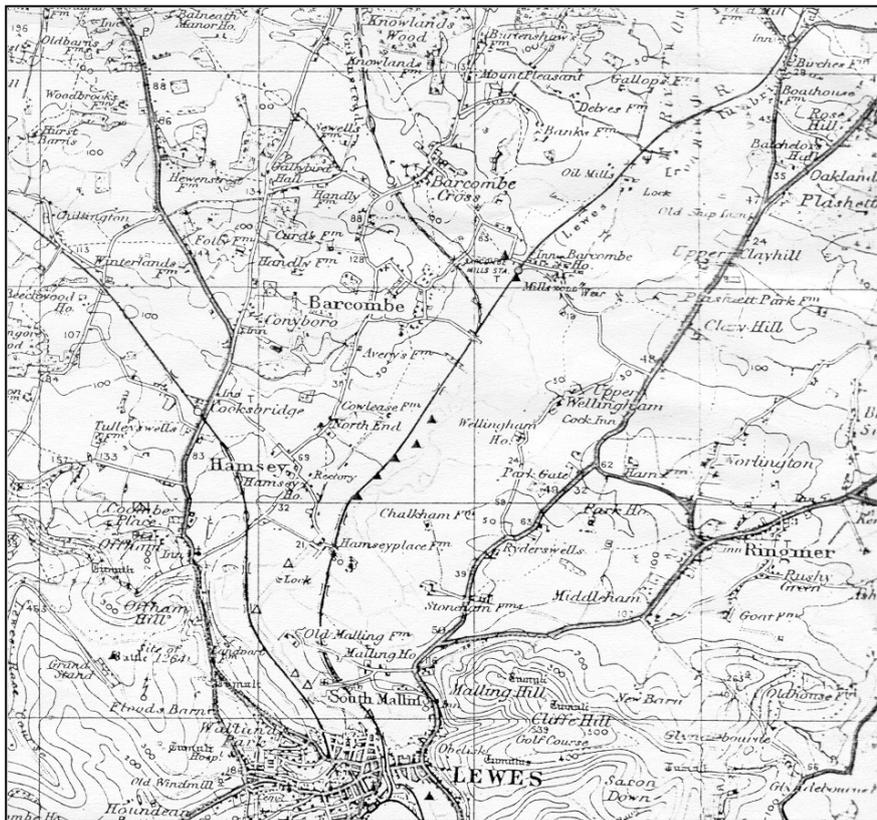


Fig. 2 - Portion of a German map dated June 1941 which shows the pillboxes [black triangles] plotted from aerial reconnaissance following the railway line north of Lewes.³

³ Sheet 134: Befestigungskarte Grossbritannien 1:50,000 (BLML).



At Barcombe Mills, advantage was taken of the complex of waterways to site the defences in what must have been a very strong position, almost entirely surrounded by water [see Map 3]. The anti-tank gun emplacement [UORN 708] and a type 24 pillbox [UORN 707], together with another defence work [UORN 16911 - see under 'The defence works' below], occupied virtually an island facing south and west. To the east, two further pillboxes [UORNs 709 and 712] were built protected by a water channel in front. Undoubtedly, slit trenches and other earthworks were also dug here, providing an all-round perimeter to the defended locality, and the various farm buildings and Barcombe House might have been fortified as well. The whole position would have been ringed with barbed wire, and with roadblocks on the approach roads.



Fig. 3- 1947 air photograph showing the complex of Barcombe Mills at bottom left, with the various channels of the River Ouse twisting to the north [top]. The railway line [running diagonally across the picture] backed the front-edge anti-tank obstacle formed by the river.



Troops manning defences in what was termed the Lewes Gap in September 1940 were from the 5th Bn. Loyal Regiment, which had its battalion headquarters at Barcombe Cross.⁴ In 1941, the brigade responsible for defending the area was the 164th Infantry Brigade. The local Home Guard unit would also undoubtedly have had an important role in manning and maintaining the defences of Barcombe Mills: this was probably 16 Platoon of the 16th (Lewes) Battalion, Sussex Home Guard, which had its battle headquarters at the Royal Oak, Barcombe Cross.⁵

The defence works -

Most of the pillboxes and other defence works at Barcombe Mills, and to its north, can be inspected at close quarters and survive in good condition. Two type 24 pillboxes immediately to the south, however, are on private land to which there is no access, although UORN 705 can be seen clearly from the former station (now a private home) on Barcombe Mills Road.



Fig. 4 - UORN 705: type 24 pillbox by the railway embankment south-west of Barcombe Mills.

A type 24 pillbox, occupying a commanding situation on rising land to the west of the defence line, is UORN 706 which stands by a footpath and can be inspected externally and internally. Its reference number - 'A254' - is stencilled on the interior anti-ricochet wall, and the sequence of these numbers can be followed to the north, showing that no defence structure is missing in the stop line sector represented by this study area.



Fig. 5 - Stencilled pillbox reference number on the interior anti-ricochet wall. 'A250' is type 24 pillbox UORN 712.

⁴ TNA: PRO WO 166/4443.

⁵ TNA: PRO WO 166/1037.



On the 'island' created by the encircling waterways at Barcombe Mills, the anti-tank gun emplacement [UORN 708] survives in good condition but regrettably with its main embrasure and entrance blocked so no interior inspection is possible. Close by, a type 24 pillbox [UORN 707] is similarly blocked. Also occupying the 'island', on its north edge, is an approximate square of concrete, 8ft. x 8ft., with detached chunks of concrete and brickwork lying adjacent, which may be the roof of a buried structure, possibly a command post [UORN16911].



Fig. 6 - The 'island' at Barcombe Mills, fronted by a channel of the River Ouse, with type 24 pillbox [UORN 707] just visible to the left. The anti-tank gun emplacement [UORN 708] is behind the trees to the right.



Fig. 7 - UORN 708: anti-tank gun emplacement at Barcombe Mills, positioned to fire south-west. Interestingly, it has been used as a place of remembrance for a recently deceased war veteran.





Fig. 8 - UORN 16911: this enigmatic structure by the north edge of the 'island' at Barcombe Mills may possibly be part of a buried structure - a command post[?].

The two type 24 pillboxes [UORNs 709 and 712] on the east side of the Barcombe Mills defended locality are in good condition, although the first is subject to flooding.



Fig. 9 - The landscape on the east side of the Barcombe Mills defended locality. Two infantry pillboxes here [UORNs 709 and 712] have waterways on their facing and rear sides. UORN 709 is at the centre of the photograph.





Fig. 10 - UORN 709: this type 24 pillbox guarded the eastern sector of the Barcombe Mills defended locality.

North of Barcombe Mills, six type 24 pillboxes can be seen in the sector of the GHQ Line as far as The Anchor Inn bridge. The southernmost of these [UORN 713] is hidden away in the grounds of Barcombe House and perhaps formed part of the northern perimeter defence of the Barcombe Mills defended locality. The next [UORN 714], positioned at the edge of a field, can be inspected closely, as can both UORNs 16791 and 759 further north. A pillbox dug into the railway embankment close to The Anchor Inn [UORN 1532] can only be viewed from a distance without access permission, which is also the case with the anti-tank gun emplacement lying a little beyond the study defence area [UORN 731].



Fig. 11 - UORN 714: type 24 pillbox standing at the edge of a field some 200 yards from the bank of the River Ouse.

2.2 **Landscape:**

There have been few changes in the immediate landscape of the defence area since the Second World War, although Barcombe Cross has expanded to the west and a large reservoir has been dug on the east side of the River Ouse. The railway line is now dismantled and its route between Barcombe Mills Road and The Anchor Inn has been turned into a public path.

The waterways and adjacent land at Barcombe Mills are managed by the Environment Agency, which provides a car park for visitors. It is possible to walk on the old road across the former toll bridge to gain access to the 'island' where three defence works stand. A footpath also runs to The Anchor Inn, enabling most of the pillboxes in this section of the Line to be inspected at close quarters: a return can be made along the route of the former railway.

2.3 **Statement of Significance:**

The Barcombe Mills defence area provides a very good example of a complete run of infantry pillboxes along part of the course of a stop line [the GHQ Line], as well as an important illustration of how a defended locality was built into the overall stop line defence, making use of the natural topography,

Many of the type 24 pillboxes survive in very good condition, and with good public access. Additionally, an anti-tank gun emplacement can be seen, although there is no access to its interior.

The area represents an excellent survival of 1940 defence works in a landscape little changed and with good public access. It would merit the provision of public information on the anti-invasion defence of the area together with the possible description of a 'pillbox walk'.

3. **Recommendations:**

1. That the surviving anti-invasion defence works at Barcombe Mills, and to its south and north, be considered of national importance. They enable this section of the defence of the Wealden 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 to investigating defence work, UORN 16911, archaeologically to establish whether this is a buried structure.
3. That consideration be given, possibly in collaboration with the local authority, and the Environment Agency, to providing an information board on the anti-invasion defence works at Barcombe Mills as well those along the course of the River Ouse to the north and south. A 'pillbox walk' might also be set out and described in other publicly available literature.



4. **Supporting material.**

4.1 **Photographs:**

Figs. 1 and 4-11 - taken (AWF) during field survey, 9.12.03.
Fig. 3 - CPE/UK/2051 fr.3082 (7.5.1947) - NMR.

4.2 **Documentary Sources:**

219th Infantry Brigade War Diary, 1940 - TNA: PRO WO 166/1072.
5th Bn. Loyal Regiment War Diary - TNA: PRO WO 166/4443.
Befestigungskarte Grossbritannien: 1:50,000 (Sheet 134), 1.6.1941 - BLML 1305(13).
164th Infantry Brigade War Diary, 1941 - TNA: PRO WO 166/1037.
'38 Division Defence Scheme', July 1941 [map] (from 38 Division War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/482.

4.3 **Published Sources:**

Colin Alexander, *Ironsides Line* (Historic Military Press, 1999).
I.D. Greeves, 'The Construction of the GHQ Stop-Line: Eridge to Newhaven, June-November 1940' (from *Fortress* no.16, pp52-61), February 1993.

4.4 **Aerial Photographs:**

3G/TUD/UK/150 fr.5377 (16.4.1946) - NMR.
CPE/UK/2051 frs.3081-3082 (7.5.1947) - NMR.
58/3915 fr.79 (5.11.1960) - NMR.
MAL/74028 fr.219 (9.5.1974) - NMR.

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

TQ 4214-4314 (1976) - BLML.
TQ 4215-4315 (1976) - BLML.
TQ 4416-4516 (1976) - BLML.

4.6 **Defence of Britain Project Database:**

[see 5. 'Annex'].

