

# DEFENCE AREA 25

## ILTON

### 1. Area details:

Ilton is 2½ miles N of Ilminster and 10 miles SE of Taunton.

County: Somerset.

Parish: Ilton.

NGR: centre of area, ST 346170.

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

The defence area, an anti-tank island on the Taunton Stop Line, lies to the south-west and south of Ilton, bisected by the former Chard Canal (long out of use and infilled in 1940) and the Chard to Taunton railway line, now disused. It is bordered to the north by Merryfield Airfield (now HMS Heron, but during the war used by the United States Army Air Force). The embankment of the railway line acts as the western border of the area and also provides a link to further defence works to the south. To the east are the buildings of Ilton and its small suburb of Cad Green.

Viewsheds are formed by the flat fields between Cad Road and Merryfield Lane, with the two diverging lines of the railway and the canal taking the eye from the southern to the northern perimeter defences of the anti-tank island. The focus of the area is on the western side of Cad Green where some outstanding defence structures survive.



*Fig. 1 - Air photograph taken in 1944 showing the area of the Ilton anti-tank island. The line of the railway is to the left with that of the infilled canal to its right. The anti-tank ditch forming part of the eastern perimeter defences can be clearly seen.*



## 2. Assessment.

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

#### *Defence overview -*

Concurrent with the building of the Taunton Stop Line from mid-July 1940 [see description under Defence Area 3 - Weycroft], twelve anti-tank islands were created at regular intervals along its length. One of these was at Ilton, where the aim was not to defend this small town itself but an area to its south-west at a junction of communication routes. Here, the diverging lines of a railway and a derelict canal also provided earthworks that could be incorporated in the defences. To the north, the stop line followed the course of the canal, and to the south, that of the railway and canal now running side by side, so that the anti-tank island defences had a resemblance to a bead on a chain.

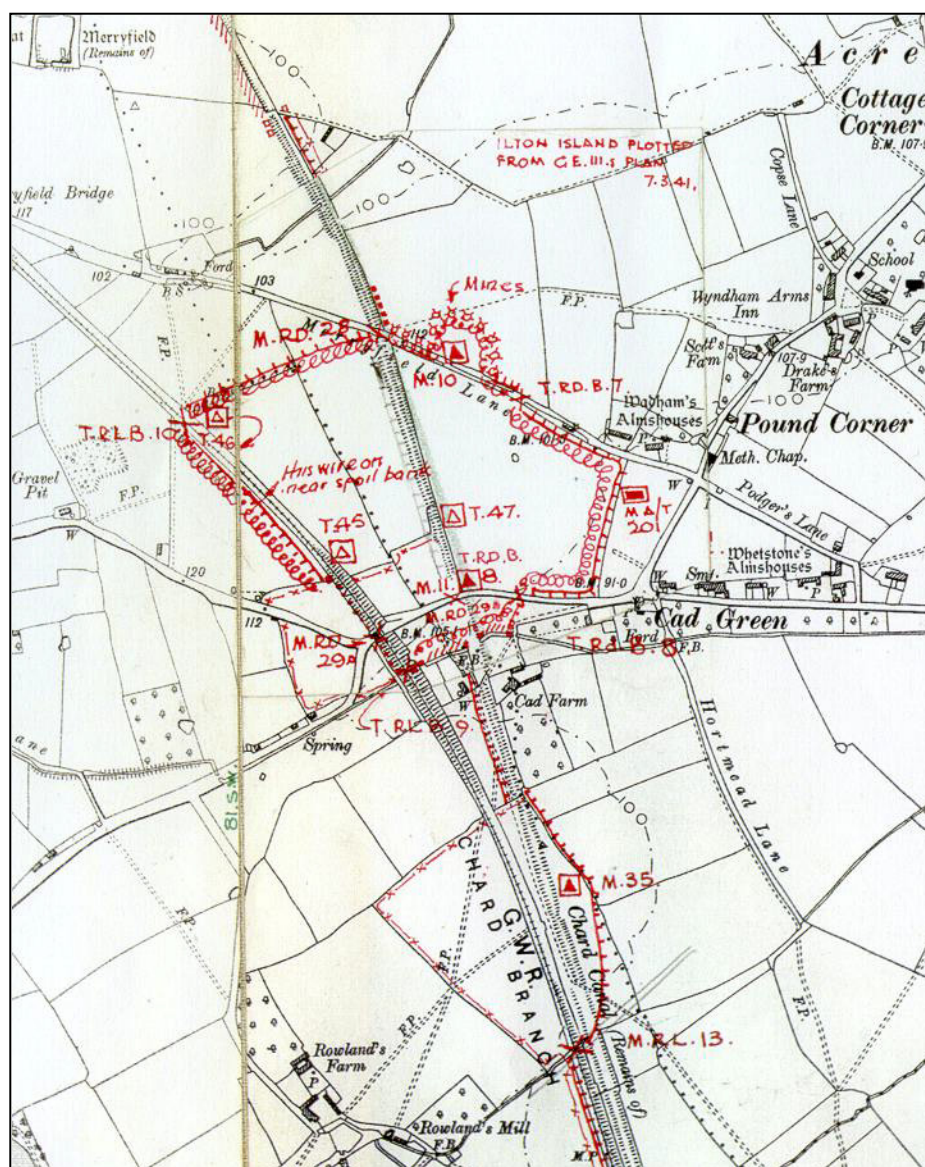


Fig. 2 - The defences of Ilton Anti-Tank Island, with the course of the Taunton Stop Line continuing to the north and south - from a Royal Engineers map made in 1940.<sup>1</sup>

The complete defence perimeter had been completed by December 1940, although documentary evidence shows that three planned pillboxes were not yet constructed

<sup>1</sup> Taunton Stop Line record map folios (Wills Collection, NMR).





at that date.<sup>2</sup> The garrison of the anti-tank island was provided by the Field Army, with Home Guard support. In 1940, the sector in which Ilton lay was the responsibility of the 144th Infantry Brigade, and the 8th Bn. Somerset Light Infantry had the particular task of reinforcing the Ilton garrison.<sup>3</sup> The Home Guard unit forming part of the Ilton garrison was the Ilminster Comapny of the 2nd Somerset (Taunton) Battalion.<sup>4</sup> By early 1942, Ilton's anti-tank island status had been downgraded to that of a Category 'C' nodal point (also termed 'centre of resistance').<sup>5</sup>

It is hard to understand the exact purpose of Ilton as an anti-tank island. Although it defended the junction of a minor road with the railway line, nevertheless it did not defend the whole town as was the case with Ilminster less than three miles to the south. Other than for the railway line, and the disused canal, the Ilton anti-tank island, in fact, was defending an area of open fields, and it has to be seen as a strongpoint on a fortified line rather than as a major defended communications point. The essential difference is that the town of Ilminster was fortified although it lay to the rear of the actual stop line, whereas at Ilton the town to the rear was neglected and the defences brought forward to the line itself.

There is very good documentary evidence for the defences of Ilton anti-tank island.<sup>6</sup> The perimeter defences were made up of a combination of anti-tank ditches, concrete cube obstacles, concrete posts, barbed wire entanglements, and land mines. Strengthening these defences were pillboxes, roadblocks, and railblocks, mainly set on the perimeter itself, but with one pillbox at least built inside the defended area. On the east flank, a 2pdr anti-tank gun emplacement was positioned just outside the defended perimeter. The disused canal, which at Ilton forms the central line of the stop line itself, appears to have been partly re-excavated as an anti-tank ditch. As with almost all pillboxes and other emplacements, those at Ilton were camouflaged, and a record of the camouflage scheme of the pillbox west of Cad Green [UORN 6786] survives. It was disguised as a bus stop shelter.

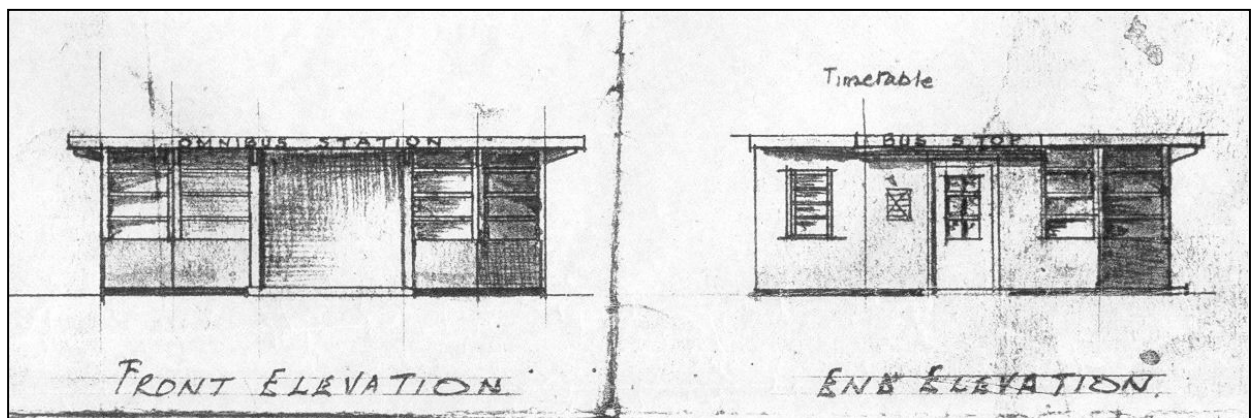


Fig. 3 - Pillbox near Cad Green [UORN 6786] camouflaged as a bus stop shelter.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>2</sup> 'Ilton A/T Island' (Wills Collection, NMR). AP evidence from 1944 shows that two of these pillboxes were, in fact, built. They are amongst the defence works that have been destroyed.

<sup>3</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/1007 and TNA: PRO WO 166/1251.

<sup>4</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/10824.

<sup>5</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/6713 and TNA: PRO WO 166/6775 - requiring supplies for 1-2 days and water for 4 days.

<sup>6</sup> See 'Ilton A/T Island' (plan) and Taunton Stop Line record map folios (Wills Collection, NMR).

<sup>7</sup> From archive of Messrs. Stansells (reproduced in Warren, 2001).



*The defence works -*

Significant surviving works from the 1940 Ilton defences are the pillbox at Cad Green [UORN 6786] and that on the railway embankment to its west [UORN 6780]. The former is of a large irregular, hexagonal form, shuttered with corrugated iron, while the latter is an imposing two-storey structure, built high so as to be able to fire west over the railway embankment. Both are rare variant pillbox types and important monuments.



*Fig. 4 -UORN 6786: variant form of an hexagonal pillbox situated at the very edge of the road [see also Fig. 3].*



*Fig. 5 - UORN 6780: rare double-decker pillbox with firing points on two floors.*





*Fig. 6 - UORN 6789: the rear of the pillbox showing entrances at two levels.*

The 2pdr. anti-tank gun emplacement [UORN 2990] just outside the eastern perimeter defences still survives, apparently in good condition, but, as it lies on private land, no close inspection was possible.



*Fig. 7 - UORN 2990: anti-tank gun emplacement positioned just outside the eastern perimeter defences of the anti-tank island.*



A further surviving pillbox in Merryfield Lane [UORN 3444] is so overgrown it can scarcely be made out. It originally occupied an important position in the anti-tank island defences, at the junction of the northern perimeter with the continuing course of the Taunton Stop Line itself, and was surrounded by anti-tank cubes, barbed wire, and landmines.



*Fig. 8 - UORN 3444: a pillbox once at a pivotal position in the Ilton defences, now so overgrown it can scarcely be made out.*

There are few signs of the perimeter defences of the anti-tank island. The anti-tank ditches have long since been infilled and the rows of anti-tank cubes removed. The line of the long disused canal is now just a hedgerow crossing the flat fields. However, on the west side of the former railway embankment, close to pillbox, UORN 6780, stands one surviving cube and the beginning of a long line of concrete posts that were part of the south-western defences of the anti-tank island. .



*Fig. 9 - UORN 16433: just to be made out through the overgrowth is a line of concrete posts erected to supplement the defences at the south-west corner of the anti-tank island.*



Other defence structures, in particular pillboxes and railblocks, may survive along the course of the disused railway line, both north and south of Cad Road. This land is private, and permission would have to be obtained for the necessary fieldwork.

## **2.2 Landscape:**

The railway line cutting through the area is now disused, and the canal is today just a field division. Some hedgerows have been removed to create larger fields. Merryfield Lane, which in 1940 continued west to a bridge crossing of the railway, is now cut short at Merryfield Cottage and there is no longer public access. Suburbs of Ilton have developed at Pound Corner and Cad Green. Cad Road is now busy carrying traffic to the A358 and A303 roads that ring Ilton to the west and south. However, essentially this is still a farming landscape, and the area of the anti-tank island is little affected by development.

Merryfield Airfield was built after the 1940-1941 invasion danger period, the Chard canal and its accompanying stop line defences to the north of the anti-tank island being obliterated at this point for its construction. The airfield still dominates the landscape here.

## **2.3 Statement of Significance:**

Although the majority of the Ilton anti-tank island defences have long since been removed, enough individual components survive to enable the defences to be reconstructed and understood. In this regard, the excellent surviving documentary evidence is also invaluable. Because of the relatively small size of the defence perimeter, it can easily be walked and the locations of the various defence works, now destroyed, established. Surviving structures occupy positions on each defensive face, and two of these [UORNs 6780 and 6786] are outstanding, rare examples of their type.

Consequently, the area provides a good example of the defences of an anti-tank island, and because at Ilton those defences have always been within a rural landscape, the survival of individual structures is proportionately higher than is usually found in the more common occurrence of an anti-tank island set around a town.

A short 'pillbox walk' could be established using roads and lanes that run around the area, in particular if access was allowed to the disused railway line.

## **3. Recommendations:**

1. That the surviving anti-invasion defence works in the Ilton area be considered of national importance. They enable the defence of an anti-tank island 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 to removing the overgrowth on pillbox structures, UORN 3444 and 6786, in order that their shape can be seen more clearly, and their function interpreted.
3. That consideration be given to extending the fieldwork carried out for this report by exploring the line of the disused railway line both north and south of Cad Road. Such fieldwork might be carried out by a local historical society with the permission of the landowner/s.
4. 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. Such a walk would need to include the railway embankment north of Cad Road, and appropriate permission for this obtained. An information board describing the significance of the Ilton anti-tank island, and its role in the defences of the Taunton Stop Line, might be established at some appropriate point.

#### 4. **Supporting material.**

##### 4.1 **Photographs:**

Fig. 1 - US/7GR/LOC390 fr.3034 (13.8.44) - NMR.  
Figs. 4-9 - taken (AWF) during field survey, 15.1.2003.

##### 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.  
144th Infantry Brigade War Diary, 1940 - TNA: PRO WO 166/1007.  
'Southern Command Home Defence programme, 1940' (map from General Headquarters Papers, Defence Works) - TNA: PRO WO 199/48.  
'Home Defence Progress Report: Taunton Line', 30.10.1940 (from General Headquarters Papers, Home Forces) - TNA: PRO WO 199/1803.  
'Report on Taunton Stop Line', December 1940 (from General Headquarters Papers, Home Defence - Stop Lines) - TNA: PRO WO 199/1810.  
'Plans of Anti-Tank Islands on the Taunton Stop Line' - 'Ilton A/T Island', 30.1.41 - Wills Collection, NMR.  
'Western Area Defence Scheme', 23.6.1941 (from Western Area HQ War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/1251.  
'Somerset and Bristol Area Defence Scheme', 1942 (from Somerset and Bristol Area War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/6713.  
'Operation Instruction No.4', 7.3.1942 (from South Somerset Sub-Area War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/6775.  
'Somerset and Bristol Area Defence Scheme', 1943 (from Somerset and Bristol Area War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/10824.  
[Letter to Defence of Britain Project from Mr. P. Davies - late 552 Army Troops Coy RE - re the construction of the Taunton Stop Line], 26.10.1997 (Defence of Britain Project Archive, NMR).





- 4.3 **Published Source:**  
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:**  
US/7GR/LOC390 frs.3033-3034 (13.8.1944) - NMR.  
ST3418/1 fr.0001 (27.10.1945) - NMR.  
CPE/UK/1974 fr.1239 (11.4.1947) - NMR.  
CPE/UK/1974 fr.2106 (11.4.1947) - NMR.
- 4.5 **Ordnance Survey 1: 2500 Plans:**  
ST 3416-3516 (1966) - BLML.  
SY 3417-3517 (1966) - BLML.
- 4.6 **Defence of Britain Project Database:**  
[see 5. 'Annex'].

