

DEFENCE AREA 31

HOPWAS BRIDGE

1. **Area details:**

Hopwas Bridge is 2 miles WNW of the centre of Tamworth and 5 miles SE of Lichfield.

County: Staffordshire.

Parishes: Wigginton and Hopwas / Tamworth / Fisherwick.

NGR: centre of area, SK 182052.

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

Hopwas Bridge is a road bridge over the River Tame, which flows south-north in a broad valley just to the east of the small settlement of Hopwas. To the west of the river, the land rises steeply, and into the side of this higher land the Birmingham and Fazeley Canal is cut, running parallel at this point with the river. The canal passes through the centre of Hopwas, and is crossed by a further road bridge to the west of Hopwas Bridge.

The defence works all lie to the west of the River Tame, between it and the Birmingham and Fazeley Canal. Hopwas Bridge itself is the focus of the area, with viewsheds over the valley of the River Tame both to the north and the south of the bridge. Physical boundaries are provided by the river and the canal, and by the available access to the continuing line of pillboxes to north and south.



Fig. 1 - Hopwas Bridge looking east from close to pillbox, UORN 5336.



2. **Assessment.**

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

Defence overview -

Hopwas Bridge lay in the military Lichfield Sub-Area, an area of responsibility also of III Corps under Western Command.¹ In August 1940, it was also part of the area of 113th Infantry Brigade, one of whose battalions was the 2nd Bn. Queen's Westminster Regiment (KRRC).²

From July 1940, various Command stop lines were constructed crossing the Lichfield Sub-Area. Principal amongst these was Western Command Defensive Line No.5 from Fazeley via Tamworth and Uttoxeter, following the courses of the Rivers Tame, Trent, and Dove, eventually running to Ashbourne in Derbyshire. This Line passed through Hopwas Bridge. A further stop line was Western Command Defensive Line No.6, which branched from No.5, and ran along the line of the River Trent west towards Stafford. Tamworth was also the finishing point for Western Command Defensive Lines Nos. 3 and 4, both approaching the town from the south - from Coventry and Stratford-on-Avon respectively. Tamworth thus formed a very important point in the defence plan. It was designated an anti-tank island with all-round defences capable of resisting armoured attack. Lichfield, seven miles to the north-west, was also an anti-tank island.³

Western Command Defensive Line No.5 was fortified with pillboxes, section trenches, and roadblocks against an expected attack from the east. The roadblocks were formed of concrete anti-tank blocks, and were protected by slit trenches and barbed wire, each being part of a designated 'defended locality' requiring all-round defence. Some roadblocks at important bridges were also sown with anti-tank mines. Although the documentary evidence for this has not been located, the bridges themselves were undoubtedly prepared for demolition. The pillboxes were predominantly infantry type 24s, built with wooden shuttering to a hexagonal plan, with embrasures in each forward face, and an entrance with two side rifle ports in the rear face. They were camouflaged, and a surviving list of the pillboxes gives the camouflage scheme used for each. Within the defence area, this was variously an ash heap, a woodman's cottage, a cowshed, and haystacks.⁴

The defence works -

Within the defence area, the line of pillboxes from south to north on the west bank of the River Tame is complete. What has vanished, however, are the pillboxes' accompanying trenches and barbed wire perimeter defences. Also removed at the end of the war is all evidence for the Hopwas Bridge roadblock, so it is not certain on which side of the bridge it was positioned - possibly there was a block at both ends.

¹ TNA: PRO WO 166/1301 and TNA: PRO WO 166/10975.

² TNA: PRO WO 166/972 and TNA: PRO WO 166/4381.

³ TNA: PRO WO 166/94 and TNA: PRO WO 166/1301.

⁴ TNA: PRO WO 166/4381.





Fig. 2 - UORN 5336: an excellent example of a community's awareness of its Second World War heritage has led to the preservation of this type 24 pillbox within a new housing estate.

Sited to protect this bridge and roadblock was pillbox, UORN 5336, which to the credit of Lichfield District Council has recently been preserved amongst a new housing development overlooking the river. It now stands on the front lawn of a house, where it can be inspected internally as well as externally. North of Hopwas Bridge, accessible from the tow path of the canal, are two further type 24 pillboxes, UORNs 5337 and 6255. The latter has an exceptionally tall front face as it is set on the slope of a bank. Its embrasures are square and splayed.



Fig. 3 - UORN 6255: type 24 pillbox, with a step down to its entrance, positioned on the slope of the canal bank overlooking the River Tame that is flowing on a parallel course beneath.





Fig. 4 - UORN 6255: detail of one of the pillbox's square, splayed embrasures.



Fig. 5 - UORN 5337: type 24 pillbox now within a sewage works, with the River Tame in the distance.

At the north edge of the defence area, a further type 24 pillbox [UORN 5339] can be seen close to the river, but there is no access to this land (Tamhorn Park) without permission. To the south of the area, however, a small type 24 pillbox on the river bank can be inspected internally and externally. It stands close to the western suburbs of Tamworth, on land where further development might be expected. If this should come to pass, it is to be hoped that the same enlightened attitude as was displayed with pillbox, UORN 5336, will help ensure its survival.





Fig. 6 - UORN 5335: type 24 pillbox, already suffering from some spray-can damage, which may be vulnerable to possible future development here.

2.2 Landscape:

Hopwas village is a 'conservation area', and, apart from some small post-war housing developments and infill, such as the recent one affecting pillbox, UORN 5336, it remains much the same as during the Second World War. Perhaps the most detrimental change has been the alteration of the name of the historic Chequers public house on the east bank of the canal to the 'Tame Otter'!

To the east of Hopwas Bridge, however, housing development since the 1970s has now absorbed the village of Coton within the north-western suburbs of Tamworth, and areas to the south-west of Tamworth also look vulnerable to the expansion of the town. Other than for these changes, the immediate environs of the former stop line between the river and canal remain substantially unaltered.

2.3 Statement of Significance:

This defence area provides a very good example of the defences of a stop line, centred on a defended bridge crossing. The landscape of the actual defence line is largely unchanged, and the run of pillboxes is known from a documentary source to have survived complete.⁵ The defence works continue beyond the northern and south-eastern boundaries of the area, and there would be scope to include these as well, if desired, within an expanded version of the area.

Most of the pillboxes, which are excellent examples of type 24s, have good public access. The recent preservation of UORN 5336 has highlighted interest by

⁵ TNA: PRO WO 166/4381.



the local community in its Second World War heritage, and the area would lend itself to the establishment of a 'pillbox walk' and the provision of public information.

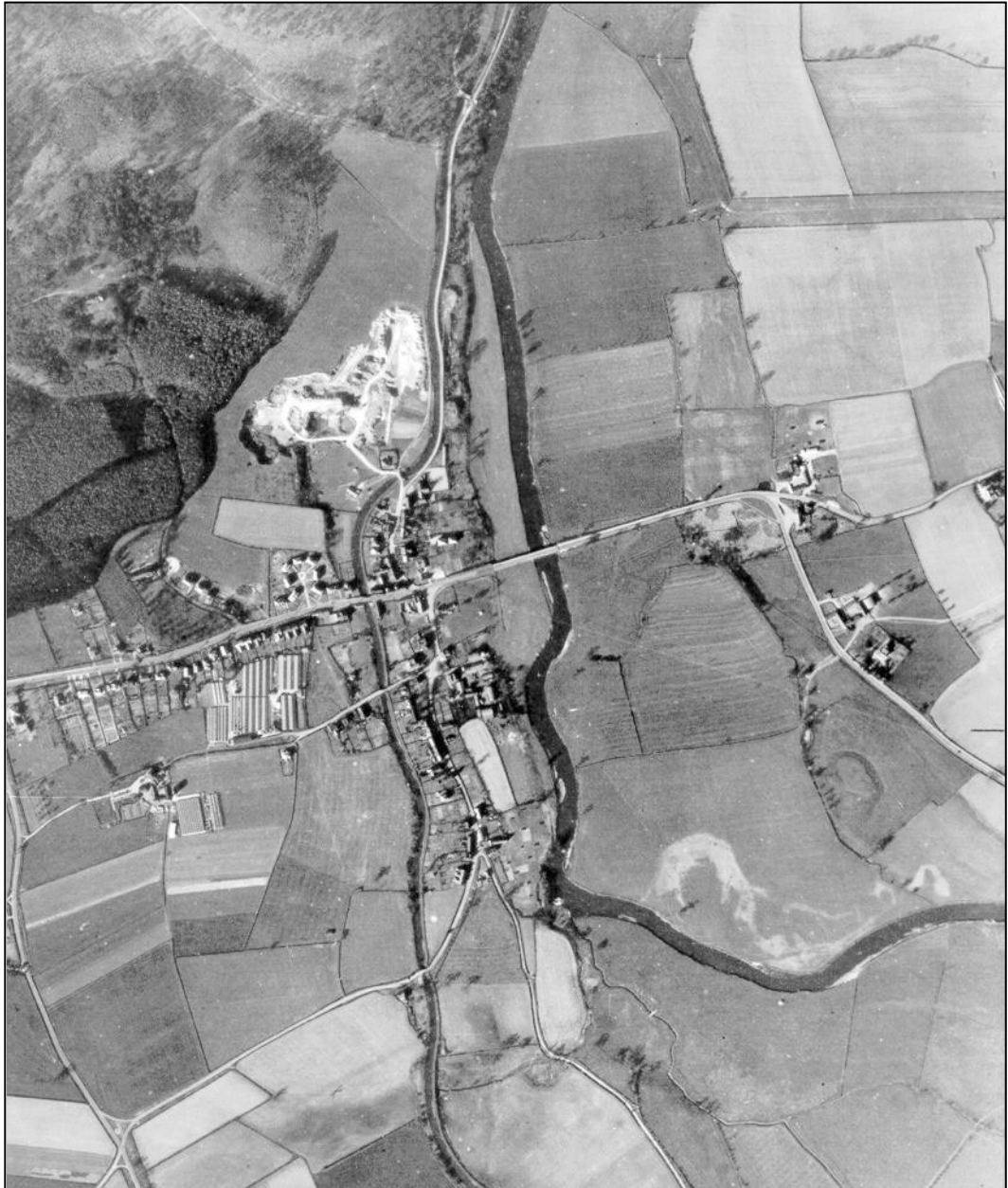


Fig. 7 - Air photograph taken in 1948. Hopwas Bridge, crossing the River Tame, is at the centre, and pillbox, UORN 5336, can be seen in a field (now housing) to its south-west. Towards the bottom right, pillbox, UORN 5335, can be spotted on the south bank of the river. At the far right of the photograph, the fields are now covered by suburbs of Tamworth.

3. **Recommendations:**

1. That the surviving anti-invasion defence works at Hopwas, and to its north and south within the borders of the defence area, be considered of national importance. They enable the defence of this section of Western Command Defensive Line No.5 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, in a possible initiative with Litchfield District Council, a 'pillbox walk' be established within the area. An information board on the area's Second World War defence heritage could be set up by the Birmingham and Fazeley Canal (where information is already provided). Notes on adjacent and related defence sites beyond the defence area might also be provided with this information.

4. **Supporting material.**

4.1 **Photographs:**

Figs. 1-6 - taken (AWF) during field survey, 28.10.2002.
Fig. 7 - CPE/UK/2555 fr.4303 (27.3.1948) - NMR.

4.2 **Documentary Sources:**

'Operation Instruction No.7', 5.7.1940 (from Western Command 'G' War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/94.
'Home Security Scheme No.2', 7.8.1940 (from 113th Infantry Brigade War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/972.
'Defence Scheme - Staffordshire 2', 27.12.1940 (from 2nd Bn. Queen's Westminster Regiment War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/4381.
'Lichfield Sub-Area Defence Scheme', 1941 (from Lichfield Sub-Area War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/1301.
'Lichfield Sub-District Defence Scheme', 16.5.1943 (from Lichfield Sub-District War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/10975.

4.3 **Aerial Photographs:**

CPE/UK/2469 frs.4240-4241 (9.3.1948) - NMR.
CPE/UK/2555 frs.4303-4304 (27.3.1948) - NMR.

4.4 **Defence of Britain Project Database:**

[see 5. 'Annex'].

