

DEFENCE AREA 37

DRIFT BRIDGE

1. Area details:

The defence area is 1½ miles E of Epsom and 1 mile W of Banstead.

County: Surrey.

Parish: Epsom.

NGR: centre of area, TQ 231602.

1.1 Area Description: [see Map 1].

To the east of Epsom, amongst the outer suburbs of London, a railway line to central London, starting at Epsom Downs station, runs on a high embankment and crosses the A240 road by a bridge known as the Drift Bridge, a name which has become attached to the surrounding neighbourhood. The area is also an important road junction with the A2022 from Banstead to Epsom making a staggered crossing of the A240 here.

The heavily built up area at the Drift Bridge itself gives way to fields and market gardens to the north and west, open spaces that soon end in the suburbs of Epsom and Ewell. Epsom College lies at the western edge of the defence area, and to the south-west are the rising chalklands of Epsom Downs.



Fig. 1 - The Drift Bridge, looking north from the direction of the expected enemy advance against the Outer London Anti-Tank Line. Although the defence line here is followed by a high railway embankment, it was still further strengthened by an anti-tank ditch dug parallel with it on the far side. A roadblock was erected close to the bridge.



2. Assessment.

2.1 Defences: [see Map 2]

Defence overview -

The Drift Bridge was a defended locality on the Outer London Anti-Tank Line, otherwise known as Line 'A' [for a description of the London anti-tank lines, see Defence Area 61 - Cheshunt]. This important crossing of the Line by both railway and road was defended by pillboxes, roadblocks, an anti-tank ditch, and lines of anti-tank cubes. It was also proposed to create minefields north of the railway line, both west and east of the Drift Bridge, but the mines were probably never laid.¹

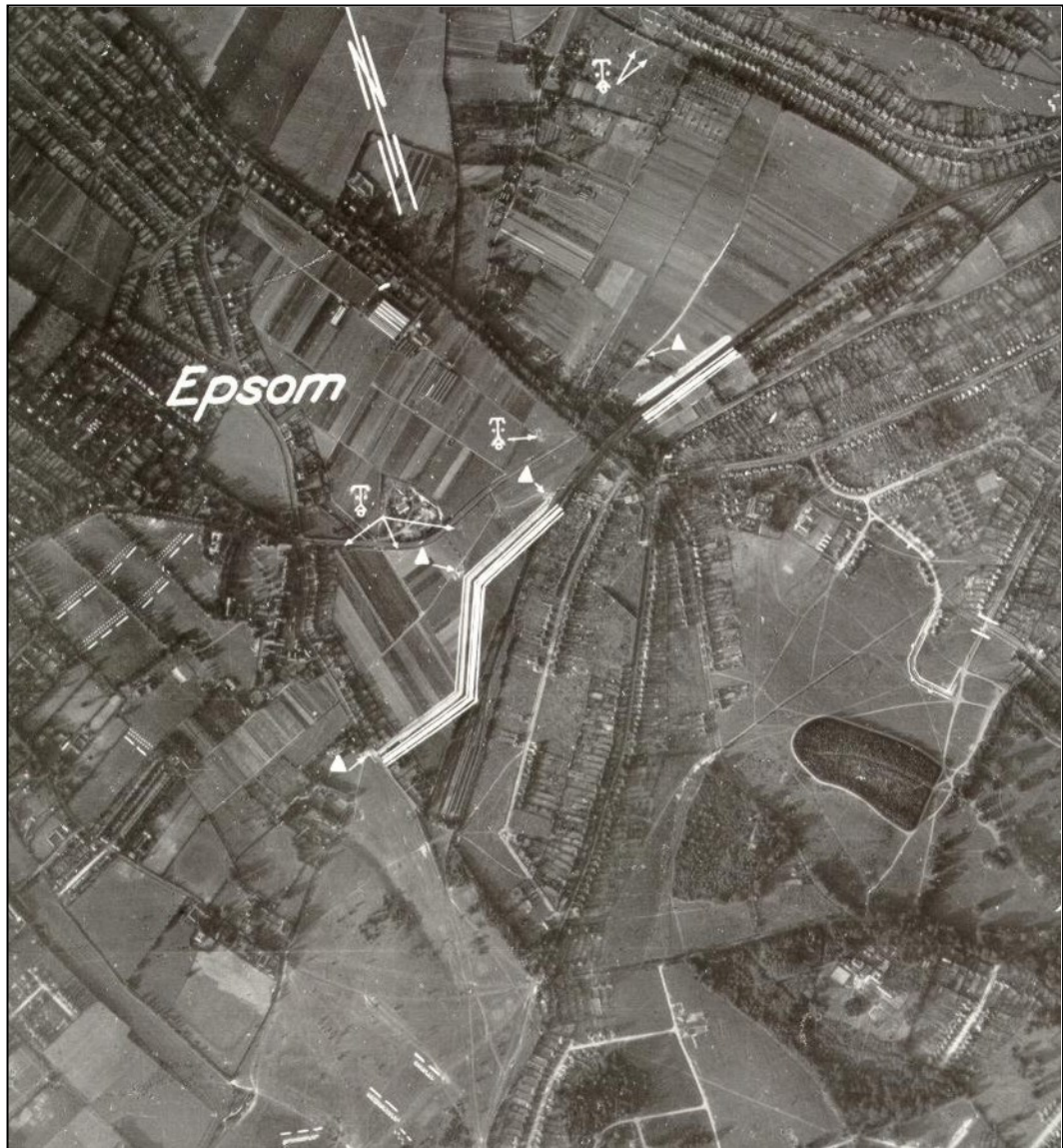


Fig. 2 - German air reconnaissance photograph probably of August 1940 showing anti-tank ditches either side of the Drift Bridge, and the positions of pillboxes [triangles], some of which survive today.

This section of the Outer London Anti-Tank Line lay within the South West Sub-Area (earlier part of the South London Sub-Area) of the military London District, and its defences were to be held in the first instance by local Home Guard units which would

¹ TNA: PRO WO 166/1159



be relieved in the event of an enemy advance by regular troops with anti-tank weapons from the Central London Reserve.²

The anti-tank ditch ran generally parallel with the railway embankment, but to the west of the Drift Bridge followed a zig-zag course, with its individual lengths covered by fire from pillboxes. Many of these pillboxes, manned by the Home Guard, were of the octagonal type 27 design, with a central well allowing anti-aircraft fire. This anti-aircraft capability was noted by the interpreters of German air reconnaissance photographs and duly marked on their maps. At the western edge of the study defence area, the anti-tank line bent sharply to the north, supplemented by several rows of concrete anti-tank blocks in the vicinity of the Epsom Downs golf course club house, and then passed through the grounds of Epsom College.



Fig. 3 - The filled in line of the anti-tank ditch, with pillboxes alongside it, shows very clearly in this RAF aerial photograph taken in January 1946. To the east of the Drift Bridge, the line is continued by anti-tank cubes in the woodland, and then by a further section of ditch.

The defence works -

The presence of fields and woodland adjacent to these Outer London suburbs has enabled a good survival of different defence components in what is otherwise an essentially urban environment, such survival being relatively rare. The pillboxes are

² TNA: PRO WO 166/1159.



all heavily overgrown, and all lie on private land restricting access without permission. The type 27 pillbox, UORN 2642, close to the railway embankment is most easily approached from the roadside by the railway bridge. Although overgrown and semi-buried, it seems nevertheless in reasonable condition. Close to it, the hollow of the infilled anti-tank ditch can be made out running parallel with the embankment.



Fig. 4 - An air photograph taken in January 1946 shows the line of the infilled anti-tank ditch turning north after crossing Lansdown Lane South, and continuing through a forest of anti-tank cubes to the buildings of Epsom College



Fig. 5 - The anti-tank ditch passed between houses as it reached Lansdown Road South, making use of a gap between the properties. There was almost certainly a roadblock at this point.





Fig. 6 - UORN 2642: this octagonal type 27 pillbox is now overgrown and partly buried, but, if cleared, would probably prove to be in relatively good condition.



Fig. 7 - The line of the anti-tank ditch, running parallel with the railway line to meet the road at the Drift Bridge, can be made out as a distinct hollow close to pillbox, UORN 2642.

A further pillbox, recorded as a type 24 [UORN 12925], stood in the field south-west of UORN 2642 until very recently, but has now regrettably been destroyed. The reason for the destruction is unclear as the land is private and used for grazing. Two other pillboxes, however, do survive, both heavily overgrown. One in a field north of College Road is a type 27, and the other in woodland near the anti-tank blocks at the railway bridge is possibly a type 24 [access for inspection was not possible].

The anti-tank cubes, UORN 2645, running through the woodland east of the Drift Bridge make a significant survival as it is rare to find such lines of concrete blocks remaining in an urban context. The value today of this defence work is increased by the presence on the opposite side of the road of a further short line of blocks [UORN 2644]. This was undoubtedly the position of a roadblock.



Fig. 8 - UORN 2645: anti-tank cubes, forming the front-edge anti-tank obstacle on the Outer London Anti-Tank Line, running through woodland east of the Drift Bridge.



Fig. 9 - UORN 2644: the gap between the terminal of the anti-tank ditch and the road west of the Drift Bridge was blocked by anti-tank cubes. This was also the position of a roadblock.

2.2 Landscape:

Although the Drift Bridge area has become ever more busy in the years since the war, the basic pre-war structure of roads and housing has changed little. The farms, nurseries, and market gardens beside the A2022 and A240 roads, with their attendant fields and open land, have survived remarkably into the 21st century. Whether this will remain the case when there is such a pressure for housing in this sought-after residential area of Outer London is problematic. If the land is developed, then the remaining defence works will undoubtedly be threatened. Those which survive have only done so because they stand on land that does not appear to be intensively used. A line of anti-tank cubes and an overgrown pillbox at present stand virtually unnoticed in a woodland wilderness that seems little managed. Should this situation alter, then they too will undoubtedly be threatened.



Fig. 10 - Overgrown type 27 pillbox standing forgotten in a grass field of The Downs Farm. Such a neglected condition might add to any threat to the structure's long-term survival should there be a change in land use.

2.3 Statement of Significance:

The Drift Bridge defence area represents an important section of the Outer London Anti-Tank Line where several anti-invasion works survive in a landscape where the overall strategy of defence obtained from air photographic and documentary evidence can still be readily interpreted. Such a survival in a predominantly urban landscape is rare, particularly so in the Greater London area where the defence provisions of 1940 were but the latest in a succession of fortified lines ringing the capital over the centuries. [See also Defence Area 61 - Cheshunt].

The defence works at the Drift Bridge provide good examples of type 27 pillboxes and of linear anti-tank obstacles, but these survive only in a neglected and overgrown condition with little public access. The importance of these surviving defences in the overall history of London is such that it is considered that an imaginative scheme might be drawn up to free them of overgrowth (beneath which they probably survive well) and give them some form of public presentation.



It is considered as well that work should be carried out by appropriate bodies concerned with the history of London to identify more exactly what survives elsewhere of the three Second World War anti-tank lines around London, using the Defence of Britain Project database as a starting point. Such work would be vital to understanding more fully what was built and why, and to aid in the protection of surviving components. As an example of what has been lost with little or no recording, two double-chambered anti-tank emplacements of a unique design, constructed in Banstead within a mile of the Drift Bridge, have been destroyed, one certainly within recent years and for little apparent reason for its site now stands unoccupied.

The survival, or otherwise, of two of the pillboxes [UORNs 16922 and 16923], the positions of which were plotted from a Luftwaffe air photograph, has not been determined, and further fieldwork to achieve this information is necessary.

Parking to view the defence structures from beside the road at the Drift Bridge is difficult, and can perhaps best be achieved at the parades of shops in adjacent Fir Tree Road. The anti-tank blocks and two of the pillboxes, albeit overgrown, can be seen from the road.

3. **Recommendations:**

1. That the surviving anti-invasion defence works in the Drift Bridge area be considered of national importance. They enable this section of the defence of the Outer London Anti-tank Line (Line 'A') 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 carrying out further limited fieldwork, perhaps by a local archaeological group, to ascertain whether other defence works survive, as indicated in this report.
3. That consideration be given, in collaboration with the local authority, to setting up a scheme to improve the condition of the surviving defence works and to providing public information on this section of the Outer London Anti-Tank Line.

4. **Supporting material.**

4.1 **Photographs:**

Figs. 1, 5-7, and 9-10 - taken (AWF) during field survey, 5.12.2003.

Fig. 2 - 'Taktisches Luftbildbuch', p48 (?Aug.1940) - IWM, uncatalogued.

Fig. 3 - 3G/TUD/UK/27 fr.5298 (15.1.1946) - NMR.

Fig. 4 - 3G/TUD/UK/27 fr.5299 (15.1.1946) - NMR.

Fig. 8 - copyright: Cyril Urquhart (Defence of Britain Project Archive, NMR).

4.2 **Documentary Sources:**

3rd London Infantry Brigade War Diary, 1940 - TNA: PRO WO 166/897.



'Taktisches Luftbildbuch', 23.10.40 (IWM, uncatalogued).
London District 'G' War Diary, 1940-1941 - TNA: PRO WO 166/1159.
London District Home Defence Scheme, December 1941 - TNA: PRO WO 199/3259.
[Map] Chief Engineer, London District: Anti-Tank Defences, July 1942 (from File, 'Cinderella' - Home Forces General Headquarters Papers) - TNA: WO 199/1202.
'Intelligence Folder', Feb.1943 (from London District CE War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/6814.
[Map of London showing 'General Line of A/Tk. Defences], 1944 - TNA: PRO WO 205/41.

- 4.3 **Aerial Photographs:**
106G/LA/30 fr.3191 (7.8.1944) - NMR.
106G/LA/30 fr.3383 (7.8.1944) - NMR.
3G/TUD/UK/27 frs.5297-5299 (15.1.1946) - NMR.
CPE/UK/2101 fr.5444 (28.5.1947) - NMR.
- 4.5 **Ordnance Survey 1: 2500 Plans:**
TQ 2259-2359 (1971) - BLML.
TQ 2260 (1955) - BLML.
TQ 2360 (1955) - BLML.
- 4.6 **Defence of Britain Project Database:**
[see 5. 'Annex'].

