

DEFENCE AREA 40

WALBERSWICK

1. **Area details:**

Walberswick is 1 mile S of Southwold and 7 miles E of Halesworth.

County: Suffolk.

Parishes: Walberswick / Southwold.

NGR: centre of area, TM 500745.

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

The defence area lies on the Suffolk coast and is crossed by the River Blyth, which separates Walberswick from the seaside holiday areas of Southwold to the north. A small boat ferry service enables foot passengers to cross the river. East and south-east of Walberswick, the flat shoreline of Walberswick is characterised by its shingle and sand beach which is backed to the south by extensive marshland. This area includes a National Nature Reserve. The village of Walberswick, much famed for its artistic community, lies on somewhat higher land to the west. Further marshland extends to its north.

A small area of the Southwold shore is included in the area to show the continuous nature of the defences to the north, although all here have now been destroyed. Walberswick itself forms the focus of the area, and the principal concentration of surviving defence works lies to its south within a viewshed bordered by the village to the north, and the marshland and beach to the south and south-west.

2. **Assessment.**

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

Defence overview -

In the Second World War, Walberswick and Southwold were intensively defended as part of the coastal defences of Eastern Command. Beach defences consisted of anti-tank blocks, beach scaffolding (erected in 1941), minefields, barbed wire entanglements, weapons pits, and fire and communication trenches, backed by gun positions and pillboxes from which artillery, and machine gun and rifle fire, could be laid down. A number of depth charges that could be detonated to create road craters were laid. The Walberswick Ferry was also demolished.¹ Two 6in naval guns of an Emergency Coast Defence Battery were positioned close to the river here, at a spot now occupied by a caravan park.² In 1941, the battery was moved to a new site just beyond the north

¹ TNA: PRO WO 166/1037.

² TNA: PRO WO 166/4680.



boundary of the study defence area [see UORN 14711].³ Some idea of the intensity of these front-line defence preparations can be gained from the work of the Suffolk Coast and Intertidal Zone National Mapping Project which has recorded from aerial photographs concentrations of slit trenches and barbed wire entanglements too detailed to include in their entirety on Map 2 accompanying this report [see Suffolk Sites and Monuments Record].

Walberswick was also defended by inundation. The marshland as far as Dunwich was flooded by sea water through the sluice at Walberswick.⁴ Westwood Marsh, now lying within the nature reserve but west of the defence area, which had been reclaimed at the beginning of the twentieth century, was re-flooded in 1940 and remains so today.

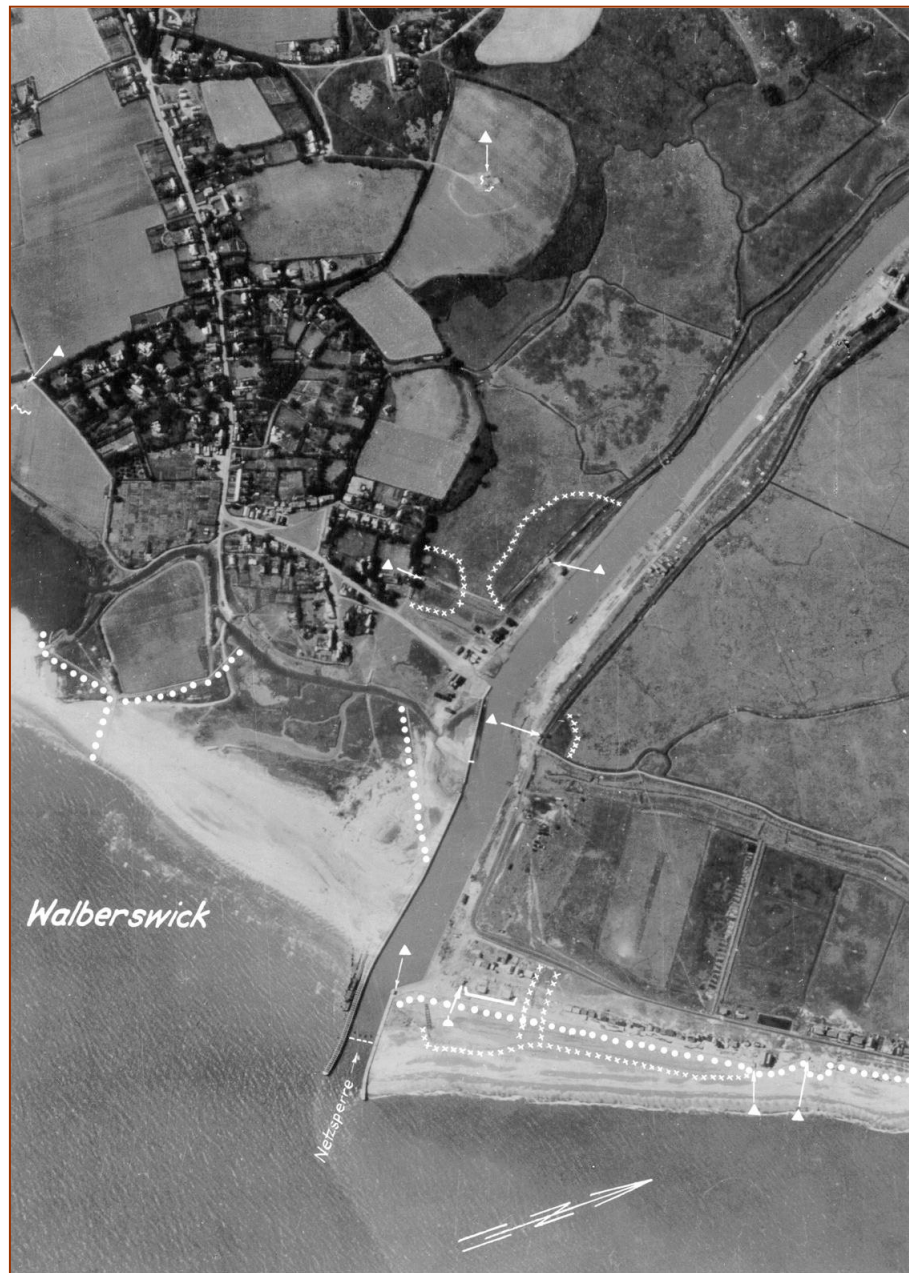


Fig. 1 - German reconnaissance photograph, taken probably in August 1940, showing defence works on both sides of the River Blyth. All the structures on the Southwold side of the river [right] have now been removed, but a number survive in Walberswick.

³ TNA: PRO WO 192/79.

⁴ TNA: PRO WO 166/11004.



Walberswick lay within No.3 Sub-Sector (running from the River Blyth in the north to the River Alde in the south), defended by the 45th Infantry Brigade, with three battalions forward. In October 1940, Walberswick was the Sub-Area of 'D' Coy. of 2/4th Bn. South Lancashire Regiment (within No.1 Area), replaced in 1941 by two companies of 10th Bn. Cameronians. The headquarters of this battalion were also established in the village. Forward Defended Localities (FDLs) were set out in the areas of the seafront immediately south-west of the River Blyth, and between Millfield Lane and the shore. Each FDL was ringed by a triple wire fence, and machine guns⁵, and artillery were sited within them.⁶

To the west (beyond the study area), an anti-tank ditch ran north-south from the River Blyth to Westwood Marshes, passing just west of Westwood [at that time, Blythburgh] Lodge.⁷ Further defence in depth was provided by the Category 'C' nodal point of Blythburgh, with other nodal points to the north and south, including Reydon behind Southwold.⁸ A 'Divisional Back Line' further defended this coastal area, running from Saxmundham through Halesworth to Beccles, all three of these places being Category 'A' nodal points. A further stop line [a 'switch line'], followed the course of the River Blyth to Halesworth, and ran thence to Harleston where it joined one of the three main Corps Lines.⁹

Just beyond the defence area to the west, fields were blocked by the digging of anti-landing trenches. A network of fire trenches was also dug here.¹⁰ North of the River Blyth (which lay in a separate Sub-Sector), the intensive beach front defences, including a continuous line of anti-tank blocks running parallel with the sea, continued towards Southwold. A fine German aerial reconnaissance photograph [see Fig. 1], taken probably in August 1940, enables the positions of pillboxes, anti-tank blocks, and barbed wire entanglements to be seen.



Fig 2 - An RAF oblique photograph of July 1941 confirms much of the defence detail shown by the Germans in Fig. 1 above.

⁵ Some manned by 1/7th Bn. Middlesex Regiment - TNA: PRO WO 166/4462.

⁶ TNA: PRO WO 166/957 and TNA: PRO WO 166/4680.

⁷ TNA: PRO WO 166/957.

⁸ TNA: PRO WO 199/544 and WO 166/957.

⁹ TNA: PRO WO 166/1207.

¹⁰ See site records with Suffolk SMR.



The defence works -

Of the various lines of anti-tank blocks, almost all have now disappeared. However, two lengths of cubes (the shorter probably of blocks now ex-situ) survive next to the seafront car park at the east end of The Street in Walberswick. Other blocks are probably buried beneath the sand near the bathing huts nearby. This position is within one of the FDLs.



Fig. 3 - UORN 11726: line of anti-tank cubes, all that survives of three such lines, once forming part of the defences of a Forward Defended Locality (FDL).



Fig. 4 - UORN 11774: good example of a small hexagonal pillbox overlooking marshes and the sea. It stands today in a nature reserve.

A group of surviving pillboxes south of Millfield Road [UORNs 11778, 11779, and 11780] mark the location of the second FDL. This was one of the most heavily defended areas, and one of the pillboxes [probably UORN 11780] was also a command post. Other pillboxes [UORNs 11774 and 11782] survive further to the south-west, in the area above Oldtown Marshes that was occupied later in the war by an anti-aircraft battery and its attendant camp.



Fig. 5 - UORN 11782: a large pillbox made of concrete blocks, with an attached external blast wall and twin embrasures in each face (except that with the entrance) - sometimes termed a 'Suffolk square' type.



Fig. 6 - UORN 11782: detail of the external blast wall.

2.2 Landscape:

Comparison with aerial photographs shows that there have been few changes in the landscape in and around Walberswick. Other than for some small housing development and infill, in particular to the north of the village and around the riverfronts, the pattern of houses and fields is essentially the same. Most change has taken place on the Southwold bank of the River Blyth where a large caravan park has been established.



Fig. 7 - RAF aerial photograph taken in June 1941 showing the landscape of the defence area much as it is today. The lines of anti-tank blocks, barbed wire, and beach scaffolding can be clearly seen.

The fields south of Walberswick village, which were the site of some of the most concentrated defences, still show the same appearance today as in 1940. The three pillboxes here are badly overgrown, and it would be helpful if they could be extricated from their overgrowth. Pillbox, UORN 11780, is potentially dangerous, as it is sunken and there is an unprotected drop, covered with



vegetation, to its entrance. Hoist Covert is part of the National Nature Reserve, and this area to the south-west of Walberswick, which was additionally the site of an anti-aircraft battery, contains two pillboxes set within an attractive landscape. Here, a network of footpaths allows a walk to be made from the beach, through thick reed beds to the sandy heathland slopes that fringe the shoreline, and eventually into Walberswick.

Walberswick is popular with visitors, for whom car parks have been set up on the waterfronts. However, the Southwold bank of the Blyth, where there are caravan parks and other holiday facilities, attracts the majority of the holiday-makers.

2.3 **Statement of Significance:**

The defence area provides some very good examples of coastal defence works set within a largely unchanged landscape. Differing types of pillbox structures survive, together with lines of anti-tank blocks. The excellent documentary evidence also enables the buildings in Walberswick village used for observation posts and battalion headquarters to be identified.

Although many defence works have been swept away since the war, enough survive to enable the structure of the defence to be understood by the visitor. These are important for they represent the beachfront anti-tank defences as well as the hardened firing posts further inland. Defence works survive from both Forward Defended Localities, with the area of one of these former FDLs exceptional inasmuch as all three of its machine gun pillboxes survive. Within this FDL was the command point from which the immediate battle would have been controlled in the event of an invasion.

A 'pillbox walk' could readily be established using the existing footpaths that cross the land south and south-west of Walberswick.

3. **Recommendations:**

1. That the surviving anti-invasion defence works in and around Walberswick, within the boundaries of the study defence area, be considered of national importance. They enable the Second World War defence of the Suffolk coastline 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 the removal of the overgrowth on various of the pillboxes, in particular the three that form a group south of Millfield Road. This would help in their identification and interpretation for the purpose of 1. above, although it is recognised that a warning notice and/or a safety rail would then need to be set up at pillbox, UORN 11780.



3. That consideration be given, in a possible initiative with Suffolk County Council and the local authority, to establishing a 'pillbox walk' that would take in the defence works to the east, south, and south-west of Walberswick. An information board on the Second World War defence of the area could be set up at the Walberswick car parks, and possibly as well on the Southwold side of the river.

4. **Supporting material.**

4.1 **Photographs:**

- Fig. 1 - 'Taktisches Luftbildbuch', p33 (?Aug.1940) - IWM, uncatalogued.
- Fig. 2 - MSO 31038 fr.6988 (7.7.1941) - NMR
- Figs. 3-6 - taken (AWF) during field survey, 2.7.2002.
- Fig. 7 - 2B/BR173 fr.18 (17.6.1941) - NMR.

4.2 **Documentary Sources:**

- 'Home Defence Scheme East Anglia', June 1940 (from 164th Infantry Brigade War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/1037.
- 'List of Nodal Points in Eastern Command', September 1940 (from General Headquarters Papers, Home Forces) - TNA: PRO WO 199/544
- '2/4th Bn. South Lancashire Regiment Home Defence Scheme 3rd edition', 14.10.1940 (from 2/4th Bn. South Lancashire Regiment War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/4680.
- XI Corps HQ 'G' War Diary, 1940-1941 - TNA: PRO WO 166/329.
- 'Operation Instruction', 20.6.1941 (from 10th Bn. Cameronians War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/4181.
- 'Operation Instruction No.16', 16.7.1941 (from 1/7th Bn. Middlesex Regiment War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/4462.
- 'Hertford Area Defence Scheme', 1941 (from Hertford Area HQ War Diary) - PRO WO 166/1207.
- '45th Infantry Brigade Defence Scheme', December 1941 (from 45th Infantry Brigade War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/957.
- 'East Suffolk Sub-District Defence Scheme', 1943 (from East Suffolk Sub-District War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/11004.
- Fort Record Book - Southwold Battery, 1941-1945 - TNA: PRO WO 192/79.

4.3 **Published Source:**

- Peter Kent, *Fortifications of East Anglia* (Terence Dalton, 1988).

4.4 **Aerial Photographs:**

- MSO 31011 frs.1882-1883 (4.7.1940) - NMR.
- 2/BR11/14 fr.35 (8.7.1940) - NMR.
- 2BC/BR173 frs.16-18 (17.6.1941) - NMR.
- MSO 31038 frs.6986 and 6988 (7.7.1941) - NMR
- 106G/UK/929 fr.4122 (16.10.1945) - NMR.
- 540/705 fr.5363 (9.4.1952) - NMR.



- 4.5 **Ordnance Survey 1: 2500 Plans:**
TM 4875-4975 (1973) - BLML.
TM 4874-4974 (1976) - BLML.
- 4.6 **Suffolk Sites and Monuments Record:**
Suffolk SMR records (from the Suffolk Coast and Intertidal Zone NMP Project) checked and SMR references added to 4.6 below.
- 4.7 **Defence of Britain Project Database:**
[see 5. 'Annex'].

