

DEFENCE AREA 42

LEEDS & LIVERPOOL CANAL: BURSCOUGH

1. Area details:

The defence area is 3 miles N of Ormskirk and 15 miles NNE of the centre of Liverpool.

County: Lancashire.

Parish: Burscough.

NGR: centre of area, SD 420425.

1.1 Area Description: [see Map 1].

The defence area follows the course of the Leeds & Liverpool Canal between Heaton's Bridge and Crabtree Bridge, the latter place being some two-thirds of a mile from Burscough. This is a flat landscape of drained marshland, with a rich dark soil producing very good agricultural crops.

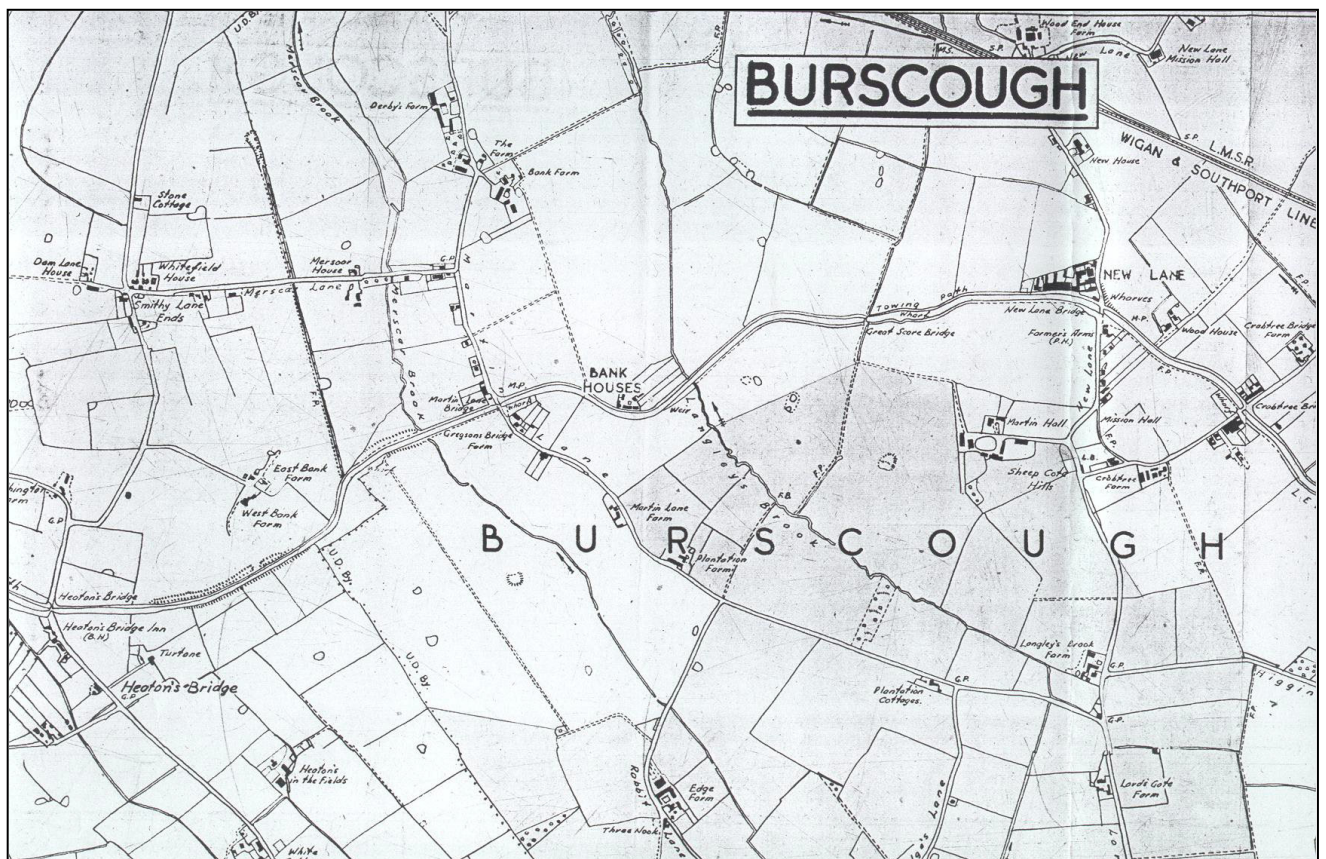


Fig. 1 - Pre-war map showing the course of the Leeds & Liverpool Canal in the defence area. An immense swathe of the farming land south-west of New Lane was destroyed for the construction of an airfield opened in 1943 [compare with Fig. 2]¹

¹ TNA: PRO DEFE 51/59.



The Leeds & Liverpool Canal is crossed by five bridges within the study defence area - from the west, Heaton's Bridge (which has given its name to an adjacent settlement), Martin Lane Bridge, Great Score Bridge (now removed), New Lane Bridge, and Crabtree Bridge. At all these bridges, except Great Score Bridge, buildings stand close to the canal on its south bank - at Heaton Bridge this is the Heaton Bridge Inn; at Martin Lane Bridge, Gregson's Bridge Farm; at New Lane Bridge, the Farmers Arms public house, and at Crabtree Bridge, the Slipway public house.

South-west of New Lane Bridge, an industrial estate has been developed on part of the site of a Second World War airfield - the Royal Naval Air Station 'HMS Ringtail' which was closed in 1957. The railway line running between Southport and Wigan passes north of New Lane Bridge where there is a station.

Viewsheds are formed by the line of the canal to west and east, backed to the south by the remaining buildings of Burscough airfield.



Fig. 2 - 1945 air photograph showing the course of the Leeds & Liverpool Canal through the defence area. The effect on the landscape of the Second World War airfield can be clearly seen. Heaton's Bridge lies beyond the west edge [left] of the photograph.



Fig.3 - Remaining buildings of Burscough airfield, the former site of HMS Ringtail, seen from the north bank of the Leeds & Liverpool Canal.

2. **Assessment.**

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

Defence overview -

Burscough fell within 1a Sub-Sector of the Liverpool Sector of Mersey Garrison. The Sub-Sector was crossed by the Leeds & Liverpool Canal, which was defended as an outer defence line of the Mersey Garrison and also as Western Command Stop Line No.14. This stop line, which followed the Leeds & Liverpool Canal to Wigan in the east, left the Liverpool Sector at Burscough.²

The stop line was in essence a continuous anti-tank obstacle provided by the canal. It was defended against anticipated enemy attacks from the west and the north: in the Burscough area that meant defence works were prepared on the south bank with the canal in front. At all crossings of the canal and the stop line, bridges were prepared for demolition and roadblocks set up. Some anti-tank minefields were also laid. Each bridge, in fact, was a defended locality, with machine gun posts, spigot mortars, and flame fougasses, the whole position being surrounded by barbed wire entanglements.³ The machine gun posts, or pillboxes, were established, either within existing buildings or as additions to those buildings disguised to blend with them. Such a policy of fortifying buildings rather than constructing standard free-

² TNA: PRO WO 166/6872 and TNA: PRO WO 166/94. Western Command Stop Line No.14 is stated to have started from Formby: its route from that place to the Leeds & Liverpool Canal is unclear.

³ Although the defence preparations are clear from instructions in the Mersey Garrison Home Security Scheme (TNA: PRO WO 166/6872) precise lists of e.g. mined bridges, roadblocks, spigot mortar emplacements, and flame fougasses are not given. Hence, these categories of sites, for which, unlike the machine gun posts, there is no surviving physical evidence, are not shown on the map.



standing pillboxes is unique to this stretch of stop line.⁴ The machine gun positions are highly unusual as well as all being at a double-storey height.

Villages and towns on the course of the stop line were also prepared for all-round defence, although there is no list of these places in the surviving documentation. Ormskirk lying to the south, however, was a designated anti-tank island.⁵



Fig. 4 - Map showing the Sectors and Sub-Sectors of the Mersey Garrison. Burscough was in 1a Sub Sector.⁶

⁴ TNA: PRO WO 166/6872. The Defence Scheme states, 'Buildings suitable for fortification will be recced and earmarked and necessary materials stored nearby so that they may soon be fortified'.

⁵ TNA: PRO WO 166/6810.

⁶ TNA: PRO WO 166/6872.



The troops to man the various defended localities in the event of an enemy assault would have come from the Mersey Garrison. They were supplemented by units of the Home Guard: the 71st Bn. Lancashire Home Guard was based at Ormskirk.⁷

When the Burscough airfield was built as a Royal Naval Air Station (HMS Ringtail) in 1942, its northern perimeter defences came close to the Leeds & Liverpool Canal, and, although documentary evidence is lacking, it is probable that the existing stop line defences were incorporated into the overall defence planning for the airfield. More research on this point is needed.

The defence works -

The series of defended buildings along the course of the Leeds & Liverpool Canal allows a rare and important appreciation of this method of defence. Most buildings that were converted to defence during the Second World War, where they have survived, have long since been restored to their original appearance, although the occasional blocked-in loophole indicates the wartime purpose. On the south bank of the Leeds & Liverpool Canal, however, building after building at all the bridge crossing points still shows substantial evidence of their adaptation for defence.

At Crabtree Bridge, former stables attached to the public house were pierced with eight loopholes at two levels [UORN 11731].



Fig. 5 - UORN 11731: loopholed former stables at The Slipway public house. The lower loopholes are now blocked, but the upper have been glazed.

At New Lane Bridge a short distance to the west, the Farmers Arms public house appears to have received the addition of a purpose-built brick-faced tower [UORN 11732], again with loopholes at two levels, although it is possible that this tower was already present and was simply loopholed for defence.

⁷TNA: PRO WO 166/1351 and TNA: PRO WO 166/6872.





*Fig. 6 - UORN 11732:
loopholed tower attached to the
Farmers Arms public house.
The loopholes are at two levels.*



Fig. 7 - The defended tower amongst the buildings of The Farmers Arms. The tower would appear to be an addition purpose-built by the military.

At Martin Lane bridge, it was an outbuilding of the adjacent farm that was defended [UORN 7805]. Three loopholes have been cut at an upper level, and possibly others faced west and/or east.



Fig. 8 - UORN 7805: an outbuilding of Gregsons Bridge Farm loopholed for defence. Other loopholes may be hidden by the ivy.

At the Heaton's Bridge Inn is the most remarkable of this series of defence works. Here a brick-faced pillbox tower was built a short distance from the canal bank [UORN 7807]. It is possible that originally this stood closer to buildings of the inn that have since been demolished, assisting in its camouflage, although its doorways and all-round embrasures show it was always free-standing.



Fig. 9 - UORN 7807: the pillbox tower at the Heaton's Bridge Inn. It is now close to a children's play area and is fitted with spotlights.





Fig. 10 - UORN 7807: a view showing the doorways at two levels; the upper must have been accessed by a ladder.

On land south-east of Martin Lane Bridge is a defence post of Burscough airfield [UORN 7806]. It was only possible to view it at a distance during fieldwork, but it appears to be a square structure with a slab roof raised on four corner pillars, allowing all-round visibility.



Fig. 11 - UORN 7806: defence post of the northern perimeter defences of Burscough airfield.

2.2 **Landscape:**

The most significant changes in the landscape of the defence area since the Second World War concern the military abandonment of Burscough airfield from the mid-1950s and the subsequent use of its accommodation and administration sites for an industrial estate. Work is currently being undertaken that may be part of a further extension of the industrial estate.

The broad pattern of the farmed landscape cut by the Leeds & Liverpool Canal, which is still used by long boat traffic, is, however, much as it was sixty years ago. The huddle of buildings at the canal crossings have been little expanded, although north of New Lane Bridge there is new housing next to the railway station.

This is a most interesting landscape, with a rich farmed soil, and with small settlements of red-brick cottages. Its flat, open characteristics make it exposed to rain and storm which sweep in from the Irish Sea coast lying to the west and north.

The defence works can all be seen at the various bridge crossings, and the towpath running on the north bank of the canal enables each to be visited in turn. The airfield defence post [UORN 7806] lies on private land, and permission would need to be obtained to visit it. A car park is available for visitors to the area opposite The Slipway public house at Crabtree Bridge.

2.3 **Statement of Significance:**

The defence area is a most important example of a stop line defended by the expedient of fortifying buildings at its main crossing points. Although examples of fortified buildings can be found elsewhere in the country [see, for example, Defence Area 45 - Breamore Mill], it is unusual to find so many surviving so well in such close proximity to each other. Additional examples can be found in the continuation of the stop line beyond the boundaries of this study defence area to west and east.

Individually these structures are important in showing how defended localities were prepared at the bridge crossings of which the fortified building was a key component. The external evidence of the defences erected within these buildings should be supplemented by interior surveys that would establish if the buildings were strengthened internally.

The relationship between the stop line defence and that of the later airfield is also of interest, and it is instructive to see these two types of defended landscapes from different periods of the war meeting in this way.

A 'pillbox walk' could be established through the area that might include as well the surviving airfield buildings.

3. **Recommendations:**

1. That the surviving anti-invasion defence works on the Leeds & Liverpool Canal west of Burscough be considered of national importance. They enable the defence of this stop line to be interpreted, and provide evidence of the



articulation of the defence and the inter-relationship of its functionally different components.

2. That the various fortified buildings be surveyed internally.
3. That consideration be given, in a possible initiative with Lancashire County Council and the local authority, to establishing a 'pillbox walk' along the line of the Leeds & Liverpool Canal between Heaton's Bridge and Crabtree Bridge, such a walk including as well the remains of the adjacent airfield. An information board on the Second World War heritage of the area might also be provided, possibly positioned by the car park at Crabtree Bridge.

4. **Supporting material.**

4.1 **Photographs:**

Fig. 2 - 106G/UK/623 fr.3200 (10.8.1945) - NMR.

Figs. 3 and 5-11 - taken (AWF) during field survey, 20.5.2003.

4.2 **Documentary Sources:**

'Operation Instruction No.7', 5.7.1940 (from Western Command 'G' War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/94.

'Mersey Garrison Operation Instruction No.1', 27.9.1940 and 'Operation Order No.1', 4.12.1940 (from Mersey Garrison HQ War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/1351.

West Lancashire District War Diary, 1942 - TNA: PRO WO 166/6810.

'Mersey Garrison Home Security Scheme', March 1942 (from Mersey Garrison HQ War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/6872.

'Standing Operation Instruction', 1943 (from West Lancashire District HQ War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/10858.

Burscough Royal Naval Air Station: acquisition of freehold, 1942-1964 - TNA: PRO DEFE 51/59.

4.3 **Aerial Photographs:**

106G/UK/623 frs.3199-3200 (10.8.1945) - NMR.

4.4 **Defence of Britain Project Database:**

[see 5. 'Annex'].

