

DEFENCE AREA 43

BARROW ISLAND

1. Area details:

Barrow Island is on the S side of the town of Barrow-in-Furness which lies on the W side of Morecambe Bay.

County: Cumbria.

Parish: Barrow-in-Furness.

NGR: centre of area, SD 200677.

1.1 Area Description: [see Map 1].

Barrow Island is the docks area of the town of Barrow-in-Furness, which has been a shipbuilding port since the mid-nineteenth century. A severe decline in shipbuilding since the Second World War has led to the abandonment of many of the former docks, although others have been modernised and serve both merchant and naval ships. Former dockyard buildings are now occupied by the defence technology company, BAE Systems, and an oil storage depot also stands on part of the former docks. However, a large expanse of Barrow Island that fronts the Walney Channel has been cleared of its dockside buildings, equipment, and infrastructure and is lying derelict. Presumably it will be the site one day of a regeneration scheme.

The borders of the defence area to which there is public access are the BAE works on the shore of the Walney Channel to the north-west and the lines of neat terraced houses (once occupied by the families of dockyard workers) to the north. Also at the north, and to the east, are allotment gardens, still carefully tended, which are cut by the lines of former dockyard roads and railway lines. At the far east of the area is an oil storage depot overlooking Ramsden Dock, and at the south are modern docks administered by Associated British Docks. The area is traversed by Ramsden Dock Road, which runs parallel with the Walney Channel that forms the western boundary.

The principal viewshed is formed by the waterfront of Walney Channel where the majority of the surviving defence works face the flat, marshy expanses of Biggar Sands beyond.



Fig. 1 - Biggar Sands across the Walney Channel from Barrow Island.





Fig. 2 - A 1946 air photograph shows the principal part of the defence area bordering Walney Channel. Ramsden Dock Road runs across the centre of the picture and still crosses this area, now largely derelict, today. The central area of water was filled in during the late 1960s.

2. **Assessment.**

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

Defence overview -

Barrow Island, with the rest of Barrow-in-Furness, formed Sector No.10 within the military Lancaster and Barrow Sub-Area. Sector No.10 was made up of two defended localities, one at Vickerstown on Walney Island and the other at Barrow-in-Furness town and docks. Barrow Island was part of 'P' Zone which was



responsible, amongst other tasks, for denying the enemy the crossing of the Walney Channel in an attack coming from the west. Should the enemy penetrate into 'P' Zone, the line north of Cavendish, Buccleuch, and Devonshire Docks was to be held 'at all costs'. A main sea-borne landing at Barrow, in fact, was considered very unlikely, 'unless Ireland is first occupied', and the principal danger was considered to be an attack by airborne troops to seize the docks in support of other operations elsewhere.¹

To defend Barrow Island, a line of pillboxes, including some for anti-aircraft fire, were built on the west side of Barrow Island. Other pillboxes were placed towards the centre of the docks area as well as on the north and the south sides of the Dock Basin and Ramsden Dock. A searchlight (one of ten in the Barrow-in-Furness area) was also positioned on the south arm of Ramsden Dock.

Towards the north of Walney Island was the RAF station at Walney airfield, and at the south of the island, Fort Walney, originally built in 1910, but in 1940 mounting two Mk. VII 6in. guns.²

The defences of 'P' Zone were manned by detachments from the 8th Bn. The Border Regiment, as well as by the Vickers Armstrong Company, Home Guard. Amongst other troops available to the Sector Commander were the 562nd Coast Regiment, a company from the Pioneer Corps, a mobile reserve of three platoons from the 11th Bn. Manchester Regiment, and the 1st Bn. Lancashire Home Guard, with detachments from the GPO Home Guard.³

The defence works -

Some very good examples of infantry pillboxes, some with unusual additional features, survive in the defence area. Most common is the type 24 hexagonal pillbox with two projecting walls either side of the doorway. Six examples of this type can be found within the publicly accessible part of the defence area, all in positions to fire across the Walney Channel, some at the water's edge, with others set further back.



Fig. 3 - UORN 15733: type 24 pillbox positioned to fire across Walney Channel.

¹ TNA: PRO WO 166/1299.

² TNA: PRO WO 192/318.

³ TNA: PRO WO 166/1299.





Fig. 4 - UORN 16490: type 24 pillbox at the edge of the Walney Channel, showing the unusual projecting doorway.



Fig. 5 - UORN 15727: type 24 pillbox, with modern docks area behind.



Fig. 6 - UORN 15730: type 24 pillbox, now largely buried and used as a take-off ramp for motor bike scrambling.



One of the type 24 pillboxes at the water's edge has a brick observation post placed on its roof [UORN 15729]. Also by the Walney Channel is a type 23 pillbox with an open court at the rear to mount an anti-aircraft gun [UORN 16617]. Another type 23 is dug in at the top of the cutting of a former railway line towards the east side of Barrow Island [UORN 16618].

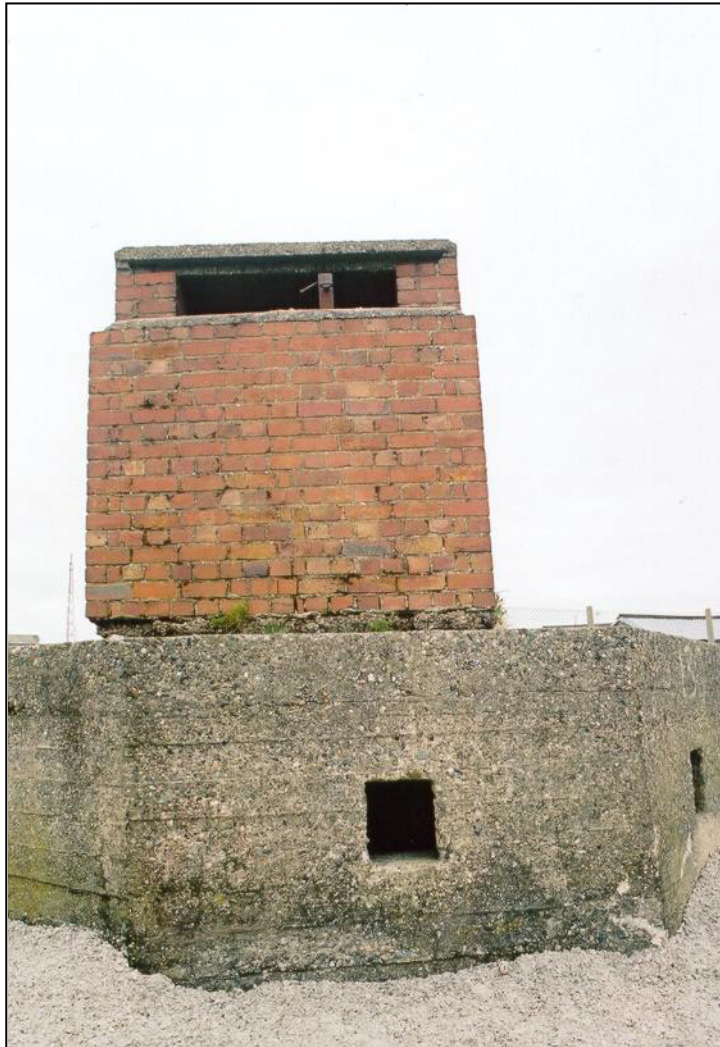


Fig. 7 - UORN 15729: type 24 pillbox with an observation post placed on the roof facing across the Walney Channel.



Fig. 8 - UORN 16617: type 23 pillbox with open anti-aircraft bay.



Fig. 9 - UORN 16618: type 23 pillbox set on a thick concrete base on the side of a former railway cutting.



Fig. 10 - UORN 16618: the anti-aircraft gun mount in the open bay attached to the pillbox.

2.2 Landscape:

The changes to the landscape of the defence area since the Second World War have been immense, with the clearance of many of the former docks areas and the building of modern docks facilities, works, and an oil storage depot. However, despite these changes, the layout of the defended docks is clear, and it is possible to reconstruct the defences in their original context.

When the clearance of docks buildings, and the infrastructure of roads and railways, was carried out, a decision appears to have been made to preserve the Second World War defence works. Consequently, in many cases, the pillboxes stand in clear isolation whereas once they would have been amongst a busy pattern of roads and buildings. With any planned regeneration of the area, it will be important to ensure the continuing survival of the defence works. Many would seem to be vulnerable to destruction given the extensive ground clearance demanded by re-landscaping and new building.



Fig. 11 - Part of the former area of dockland that might be redeveloped. A pillbox [UORN 16490] can be seen in the left mid-distance.

Most of the defence area on either side of Ramsden Dock Road is administered by Associated British Docks, and there are signs displayed stating 'no stopping'. However, the area does appear to be used by local residents, and there was no problem gaining access to undertake the fieldwork for this study. There is no access, however, to other areas of operating docks, and, as these include the sites of defence works plotted from air photographs, permission needs to be obtained from Associated British Docks to make an inspection at a future date to see if they survive.

2.3 Statement of Significance:

The defence area of Barrow Island is important for it illustrates the defence works required to protect a dockland that was not only part of a defended locality in the overall defence of Barrow-in-Furness and its surrounding region but a vulnerable



point in its own right. The defences were constructed in 1940 as part of an overall plan for anti-invasion defence, but were undoubtedly maintained after the immediate invasion threat receded as a protection against the danger of enemy raids with the intent of destroying port facilities and ships in dock.

The defence works here make a significant group, largely in good condition allowing internal as well as external inspection, of both infantry and anti-aircraft pillboxes, many with local variations unique to the area. Pillbox, UORN 15729 in particular, is a rare example of an observation post attached to an infantry pillbox, and UORN 16618 is an excellent example of a type 23 complete with anti-aircraft gun mount. These Second World War defence works make an important contribution to the history of Barrow-in-Furness, and it would be a valuable addition to the presentation of the town's heritage if there could be some information displayed on them at a public location. Although the excellent new The Dock Museum carries several displays on the Second World War history of Barrow, nothing is included on the defence works that protected it. More publicity about these works is needed to obviate the possible danger of their being destroyed at a time of re-development.

3. **Recommendations:**

1. That the surviving anti-invasion defence works on Barrow Island be considered of national importance. They enable the defence of the dockland of Barrow-in-Furness to be interpreted, and provide evidence of the articulation of the defence and the inter-relationship of its functionally different components.
2. That consideration be given, possibly by a local archaeological group, to carrying out further work field work to record other anti-invasion defence works in localities where there is no public access without permission.
3. That consideration be given, in a possible initiative with the local authority and The Dock Museum, to preparing information on the Second World War defences of Barrow-in-Furness for display to the public. Such a display might include information as well on Fort Walney and Walney airfield.

4. **Supporting material.**

4.1 **Photographs:**

Figs. 1 and 3-11 - taken (AWF) during field survey, 21.5.2003.
Fig. 1 - 106G/UK/1277 fr.6048 (24.3.1946) - NMR.

4.2 **Documentary Sources:**

Fort Record Book: Fort Walney Battery, 1909-1955 - TNA: PRO WO 192/318.

'Lancaster and Barrow Sub-Area Defence Scheme', 1941 (from Lancaster and Barrow Sub-Area War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/1299.



- 4.3 **Aerial Photographs:**
106G/UK/654 frs.6270-6275 (13.8.1945) - NMR.
106G/UK/654 fr.6284 (13.8.1945) - NMR.
106G/UK/1277 fr.6048 (24.3.1946) - NMR.
- 4.4 **Ordnance Survey 1: 2500 Plans:**
SD 1967 (1958) - BLML.
SD 1968 (1958) - BLML.
SD 2067 (1957) - BLML.
SD 2068 (1958) - BLML.
- 4.5 **Defence of Britain Project Database:**
[see 5. 'Annex' below].

