

DEFENCE AREA 49

ABBOTSBURY

1. **Area details:**

Abbotsbury is 9 miles WSW of Dorchester.

County: Dorset.

Parish: Abbotsbury.

NGR: centre of area, SY 561846.

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

The Abbotsbury defence area is large, consisting of the coastal strip at the point where the lagoon of the West Fleet behind the Chesil Beach ends, together with the hills behind the beach and the village of Abbotsbury itself. The main focus of the area is the beach front where the Chesil Bank starts at Reeds End, with the lagoon of the West Fleet opening out and cutting off the beach from the mainland behind.



Fig. 1 - Looking at the coastline from the slopes of Chapel Hill. The gaps between the hills that would have made a route off the beaches for enemy armour were blocked with minefields and an anti-tank ditch.

Steep hills rise behind the shoreline, some crowned with woods, and the sea-facing slopes are seamed with medieval strip lynchets. Abbotsbury Castle, a walled and wooded enclosure, also stands on these hills to the west of Buller's Way, while, to the east, Chapel Hill is crowned by the battlemented St. Catherine's Chapel. Reed beds and marshes are extensive around Reeds End. The area here is part of the Chesil Bank and Fleet Lagoon Nature Reserve, and a little further east is Abbotsbury Swannery.



The borders of the area are Abbotsbury village and the high land to the north, the narrowing coastal strip to the west, and the Fleet lagoon to the east. Good viewsheds are obtained both from the hills looking seaward, and conversely from the beach looking back at the hills.

2. Assessment.

2.1 Defences: [see Maps 2 and 3]

Defence overview -

The Dorset coastline from Weymouth to Lyme Regis, including the Abbotsbury area, was to be the secondary area of attack, carried out by the German 6th Army, under the plans for Operation Sea Lion. Intensive aerial reconnaissance to detect British defence preparations was made, and the results mapped. The Abbotsbury area is covered by sheet 140 in the 1:50,000 series 'Befestigungskarte Grossbritannien', but unfortunately that sheet does not appear to survive in a British archive, and the only known copy is at the German military archives in Freiburg where it has not been possible to consult it.

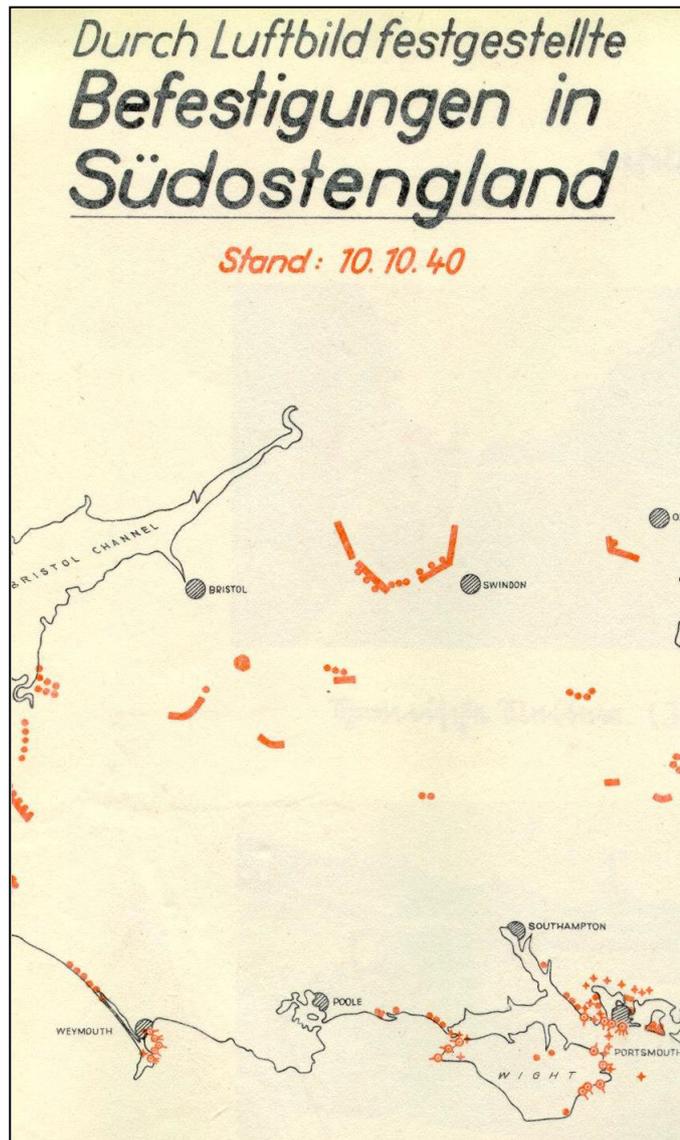


Fig. 2 - Portion of a map showing the extent of German air reconnaissance of British defence works by October 1940. Lines of pillboxes are represented north of Weymouth. This information would have been shown in much more detail in mapping at the 1:50,000 scale.¹

¹ 'Taktisches Luftbildbuch' (IWM, uncatalogued).



In 1940, the defence of the Dorset coast was the responsibility of V Corps. Its 50th Division had its headquarters at Blandford Forum, with three infantry brigades forward to defend the coastline. Anti-tank islands were established at Blandford itself, as well as at Dorchester, Maiden Newton, Yeovil, Bournemouth, Weymouth, Poole, Wareham, and Wimborne Minster.² Stop lines were constructed, including one from Weymouth via Dorchester and Maiden Newton to Yeovil. Together with another to the west running from Bridport to Crewkerne, these lines sealed off the coastal area north-west of Weymouth from the hinterland. The Abbotsbury sector was considered (together with Studland Bay - see Defence Area 6) to be one of the most vulnerable areas in the South West for a German landing. In the critical invasion danger period from July-October 1940, it was the 151st Infantry Brigade that was defending this sector, with the 150th Infantry Brigade to its left.³

In July 1940, the infantry battalion at Abbotsbury was the 6th Bn. Durham Light Infantry, with two platoons from each of three companies distributed along its front at forward defended localities (FDLs) on the high water mark of the beach. The beach divisions were all numbered. Half-section posts were set up at 200 yard intervals. Pillboxes were constructed at 500 yard intervals, with each of the three forward companies having six each. Dummy pillboxes were also built every 100 yards. By 1 September 1940, twelve of the planned pillboxes had been completed.⁴ The rear boundary of these positions was set on a line from Askerswell via Litton Cheney and Portesham to Chickerell.⁵

By December 1940, the 50th Division had been replaced by the 3rd (Dorset) Division, and it was now the 210th Infantry Brigade that had the responsibility for the Abbotsbury coastline. The infantry battalion in the Abbotsbury sector was the 8th Bn. Essex Regiment, which held a series of beach-front localities organised for all round defence. All automatic weapons, which included Vickers medium machine guns and Lewis guns, were set on fixed lines to fire along the beach. Behind the front line troops, Abbotsbury itself was organised as a 'defended locality' manned by both the Weymouth and the Dorchester Battalions of the Dorset Home Guard.⁶

Behind the beach-front defences of the infantry, artillery was positioned on the hills to the rear. A coast battery of Fixed Defences Portland, with two 4in naval guns, was established on the hillside to the east of Buller's Way (behind the current car park), being at first manned by 51/B Heavy Battery RA, and then, from December 1940, by the 387th Coast Battery RA.⁷ Reinforced concrete gun pits, shelters, and an observation post were completed by early September 1940, although the 4in guns had been mounted by the beginning of August.⁸ A further gun position, for a 6pdr, was built within Abbotsbury Castle, and at least two more 6pdr positions established to the rear. A battery of 25pdr. field artillery was also in support.⁹ Two additional 6pdr., and one 4pdr., beach defence guns were manned by the infantry.¹⁰

² TNA: PRO WO 166/4677.

³ TNA: PRO WO 166/605 and TNA: PRO WO 166/1020.

⁴ TNA: PRO WO 166/4220.

⁵ TNA: PRO WO 166/4276.

⁶ TNA: PRO WO 166/4276 and TNA: PRO WO 166/1018.

⁷ TNA: PRO WO 166/1851.

⁸ TNA: PRO WO 192/140.

⁹ TNA: PRO WO 166/4220.

¹⁰ TNA: PRO WO 166/1079 and TNA: PRO WO 166/4220.





Fig. 3 - The focus of the defence area - where the Chesil Beach joins with the hills at Abbotsbury. The medieval strip lynchets can be clearly seen, as can the line of the anti-tank ditch behind the beach. Abbotsbury village is just off the right top of the photograph.

Where the Chesil Beach joined the mainland at the western end of the Fleet lagoon, a massive anti-tank obstacle was constructed. It consisted of two lines of 4ft concrete cubes set on a thick concrete base that crossed the width of the bank from the lagoon to the sea's edge. Its purpose was to stop German armour that had landed on the beach to the east from gaining access to the dry land at the end of the lagoon. From close to this point, running behind the beach in various sections as far as the old Coastguard Station to the west, an anti-tank ditch was dug to prevent German tanks getting off the beach.¹¹ Extensive minefields were also laid further to the rear to block the entrances to the gaps between the hills that led inland, and certain points were prepared with powerful charges to create craters when blown.¹² From May 1941, tubular steel scaffolding (known as a 'Z.1. Obstacle') was erected along the head of the beach as far as the lagoon.¹³

¹¹ TNA: PRO WO 166/912 and TNA: PRO WO 166/4220.

¹² TNA: PRO WO 166/4276 and TNA: PRO WO 166/1079, TNA: PRO WO 166/1018, and TNA: PRO WO 166/10955.

¹³ TNA: PRO WO 166/4276.





Fig. 4 - The great anti-tank obstacle at the north-west end of the Chesil Bank. It ran out into the Fleet lagoon, and crossed the hump of the shingle bank to the sea edge. This RAF air photograph is dated 5 August 1940, so the obstacle is likely to have been built, and completed, during the month of July.



Fig. 5 - A 1948 oblique air photograph shows the Abbotsbury shore as a German invasion fleet might have seen it. The coast artillery battery was to the right of the road (Buller's Way).

Within Abbotsbury village, roadblocks were set up and flame fougasse charges prepared. None of these sites survive, but the Abbotsbury defences (where recorded)



have been included to show how the coastal defence was linked to the defended village behind.¹⁴

The defence works -

Foremost amongst the surviving structures in the Abbotsbury area is the massive double row of anti-tank blocks crossing the Chesil Bank [UORN 12099]. Originally four pillboxes stood adjacent to it, of which two survive. This is one of the major anti-invasion sites in England in terms of its size and dramatic setting. Most of the seaward blocks have been destroyed or buried, but the parallel lines of blocks on the landward side, still running out into the lagoon, are virtually complete, although damaged.



Fig. 6 - UORN 12099: the parallel lines of anti-tank blocks crossing the hump of the Chesil Beach, as seen from Chapel Hill.

Figs. 7 and 8 - UORN 12099: two views of the lines of cubes, with pillbox, UORN 3114, standing alongside.



¹⁴ TNA: PRO WO 166/4276.



Two pillboxes [UORNs 7803 and 3118] crown the hills west of Buller Way. These have to be viewed from a distance as there is no public access to the fields in which they stand. To the east of Buller's Way, above the Chesil Beach car park, a circular Norcon pillbox [UORN 3116] can be made out below the crest where the 4in gun emplacements of the Abbotsbury Battery stood. Amongst the broken ground, a few chunks of brick and concrete are all that survive of the battery.



Fig. 9 - The site of Abbotsbury Battery above the Chesil Beach car park. The battery gun emplacements stood above the ridge in the centre of the photograph [compare with Fig. 5].



Fig. 10 - UORN 3116: Norcon pillbox near the site of the Abbotsbury Battery.



On the slopes of Chapel Hill are two pillboxes of identical square design, each with three stepped embrasures designed for a medium machine gun. One of these pillboxes [UORN 3112] is a scheduled monument as it lies at the southern edge of the strip lynchets here and was scheduled with them.



Fig. 11 - UORN 3112: a square pillbox with a large front embrasure designed for medium machine gun fire. This pillbox is a scheduled monument.



Fig. 12 - UORN 3113: pillbox showing the view over the landscape it was built to defend. The medium machine gun within would have been set on fixed lines so that it could have been fired in battle, by day or night, without the need to re-sight.



Most of the pillboxes that have been recorded solely from documentary sources have long since been cleared away. One at least, however, off Burton Road west of Buller's Way, appears to have been destroyed recently. At the east of the area, pillboxes can be seen in the distance on Shipmoor Point. These pillboxes were not visited during the fieldwork for this study as they lie beyond the strict limits of the defence area, but their presence is a reminder of the continuity of the defence along the Dorset coastline towards Weymouth.



Fig. 13 - UORN 3118: pillbox on the hills above the Old Coastguard Station on Burton Road. Another lies to its west [left]. These sites cannot be reached without permission from the landowner.

Landscape:

There have been few physical changes to the landscape of the defence area since 1940. Some field divisions on the southern slopes of the hills facing the beach have been removed to create larger fields, but there have been very few other developments. A nature reserve, combining with the Abbotsbury Swannery, has been created around the Fleet lagoon.

Tourism has become a major factor in the area, and a car park has been established at the end of Buller's Way providing access to the Chesil Beach. Footpaths, including the South West Coast Path, can be accessed from here. The Abbotsbury Swannery is a tourist attraction, as are the great Abbey tithe barn and St. Catherine's Chapel.

The hills between Abbotsbury village and the beach, on which many of the surviving defence works are situated, are intensively farmed, and there is no public access to these sites. However, footpaths cross the slopes of Chapel Hill enabling the pillboxes there to be viewed close-up. There is no easy path to the anti-tank obstacle on the Chesil Bank, and it is best approached from the car park along the beach itself.



2.3 **Statement of Significance:**

The Abbotsbury area was intensively fortified against invasion in the Second World War, and the majority of the defence works constructed have long since been removed. However, enough survives for the importance of the area to be appreciated, particularly when seen in conjunction with the documentary and air photographic evidence presented in this report. The anti-tank obstacle [UORN 12099] is a major monument, which can stand alone as an evocative statement of the enormous effort put into the construction of the 1940 defences, but whose purpose has to be understood in relation to the other works that were constructed around it. The area is made more significant by the known fact from the Operation Sea Lion plans that it would have become a key landing point extending the German invasion front had their initial onslaught against the Kent and Sussex coast been successful.

A walk can be readily made through the landscape of the defence area to appreciate the Second World War heritage in a context that is both scenically attractive and historically interesting.

3. **Recommendations:**

1. That the surviving anti-invasion defence works in the Abbotsbury area be considered of national importance. They enable the defence of this section of the Dorset coast 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 and air photographic evidence of defence structures that were built as part of the overall strategy, but which have now been removed.
2. That consideration be given, in a possible initiative with Dorset County Council and the local authority, to providing information to visitors on Abbotsbury's Second World War history, and its particular place as a target in the Operation Sea Lion plans. An information board could be set up in the Chesil Beach car park for this purpose, and provide as well details of the defence structures that survive and how they can be viewed.

4. **Supporting material.**

4.1 **Photographs:**

Figs. 1 and 6-13 - taken (AWF) during field survey, 18.1.2003.

Fig. 3 - CPE/UK/1824 fr.3318 (4.11.1946) - NMR.

Fig. 4 - 225A/BR252 fr.6 (5.8.1940) - NMR.

Fig. 5 - SY 5684/8 fr.0047 (13.9.1948) - NMR.

4.2 **Documentary Sources:**

50 Division 'G' War Diary, 1940 - TNA: PRO WO 166/605.

9th Infantry Brigade War Diary, 1940 - TNA: PRO WO 166/912.

387th Coast Battery War Diary, 1940 - TNA: PRO WO 166/1851.

Abbotsbury Battery Fort Record Book, 1940-1943 - TNA: PRO WO 192/140.

'Operation Instruction No.1' and 'Operation Instruction No.3', July 1940 (from 6th Bn. Durham Light Infantry War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/4220.



'Defence Instruction No.1', 9.7.1940, 'Defence Instruction No.2', 21.9.1940, and 'Operation Order No.1', 2.10.1940 (from 150th Infantry Brigade War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/1018.

'Operation Order No.17', 5.8.1940 (from 151st Infantry Brigade War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/1020.

'Operation Instruction No.41', 5.9.1940 (from V Corps War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/249.

'Operation Order No.2', 8.9.1940 (from 1st Bn. South Lancashire Regiment War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/4677.

'Taktisches Luftbildbuch', 23.10.1940 (IWM, uncatalogued).

'210th Infantry Brigade Defence Scheme', 6.3.1941 (from 210th Infantry Brigade War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/1063.

'Operation Order No.1', 21.3.1941 and 17.5.1941 (from 8th Bn. Essex Regiment War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/4276.

'Operation Order No.3', 4.7.1941 (from 226th (Ind.) Infantry Brigade War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/1079.

'Standing Operation Instruction', 1943 (from Dorset Sub-District War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/10955.

'Standing Operation Instruction', 1943 (from Hampshire & Dorset District HQ War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/10842.

'Locations and Armament of Coast Artillery', 1944 (from Hampshire & Dorset District War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/14398.

4.3 **Published Sources:**

John Murphy, *Dorset at War!* (Dorset Publishing Company, 1979).
 Robin T. Pearce, *Dorset Attacked, Dorset Defended* (Hamblin Books, 1999).
 Colin A. Pomeroy, *Military Dorset Today* (Silver Link Publishing, 1995).

4.4 **Aerial Photographs:**

225A/BR252 frs.5-6 (5.8.1940) - NMR.
 CPE/UK/1824 frs.3317-3319 (4.11.1946) - NMR.
 SY 5685/1 fr.0092 (7.5.1948) - NMR.
 SY 5684/8 fr.0047 (13.9.1948) - NMR.
 MAL/68004 fr.9 (1.2.1968) - NMR.

4.5 **Ordnance Survey 1: 2500 Plans:**

SY 5683-5783 (1964) - BLML.
 SY 5684-5784 (1964) - BLML.

4.6 **Defence of Britain Project Database:**

[see 5. 'Annex'].

