

DEFENCE AREA 52

SPEETON

1. Area details:

Speeton is 4½ miles S of Filey and 6 miles N of Bridlington.

County: North Yorkshire.

Parish: Reighton.

NGR: centre of area, TA 147751.

1.1 Area Description: [see Map 1].

The defence area consists of the coast and its immediate hinterland north of the village of Speeton. A line of grass-covered hills (the Speeton Hills) descends over the steep-sided wooded valley of Old Beck to the edge of the tumbled cliffs standing above Speeton Sands. A steep path descends to the beach at Speeton Gap. To the north-west is Reighton with its caravan parks and a broader access to the beach at Reighton Gap. To the south-east, Speeton Sands, and Filey Bay itself, end at the sheer heights of Buckton Cliffs.

Speeton Cliffs, standing some 50 metres high, are formed of a mixture of chalk and clay, and have eroded from their top, forming a series of ledges above the rocks and sands of the beach below. Speeton itself is a most attractive small village lying to the north of the B1229 coastal road, which, further to the west, joins the main A165.

A viewshed is formed by the sweep of the beach running from the cliffs at the south-east of the area towards Reighton Sands at the north-west. At the edge of Speeton Cliffs, the viewshed is formed by the line of the Speeton Hills to the south, beneath which lies Speeton village.



*Fig. 1 -
The
ledges of
Speeton
Cliffs
above
Filey Bay,
looking
north-
west.*





Fig. 2 - The line of the Speeton Hills, crowned here by two pillboxes [UORNs 2774 and 2776] form a viewshed to the south.

2. **Assessment.**

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

Defence overview -

Speeton lay within the military East Riding Coastal Area, falling within the Bridlington Sector, manned in late 1940 to 1941 by troops from the 218th Independent Infantry Brigade.¹ Earlier, in June and July 1940, 66 Division had been responsible for the entire coastline from the River Humber to Whitby, and, in the critical invasion danger period of August-September 1940, troops from the 6th Infantry Brigade had been stationed at Speeton.² Adjacent villages, of which Reighton was one, formed a series of inland 'bases' defended by the Home Guard - the 5th East Riding Battalion.³

The coast was defended by two lines of pillboxes - the first built at the head of the beach itself, supplemented by slit trenches, and the second at the edge of the cliffs above and within the hills behind. From early in 1941, these lines of extended defence were centred around a series of defended localities manned at platoon strength that commanded all feasible exits for vehicles from the beaches. These exits were blocked by anti-tank obstacles, supplemented by minefields.⁴

In February 1941, the 11th Bn. York and Lancaster Regiment manned the perimeter at Speeton, which faced north from the village to the edge of the cliffs. 16 Platoon of 'D' Company occupied the high ground of Speeton Hills, with the Company

¹ TNA: PRO WO 166/1236 and TNA: PRO WO 166/1071. 218th Infantry Brigade's responsibilities stretched from Spurn Head to Filey.

² TNA: PRO WO 166/4410 and TNA: PRO WO 166/906.

³ TNA: PRO WO 166/10996.

⁴ TNA: PRO WO 166/4378.



headquarters in Speeton village, while 12 Platoon of 'B' Company manned the beach front and cliff top defences.⁵ A few months later, companies of the 8th Bn. King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry and the 6th Bn. King's Own Royal Regiment were in position here. Their company headquarters were at Reighton.⁶ The Reighton Gap, in fact, just to the north of the study defence area, was the most heavily defended point of this sector of the coast [see Fig. 11].

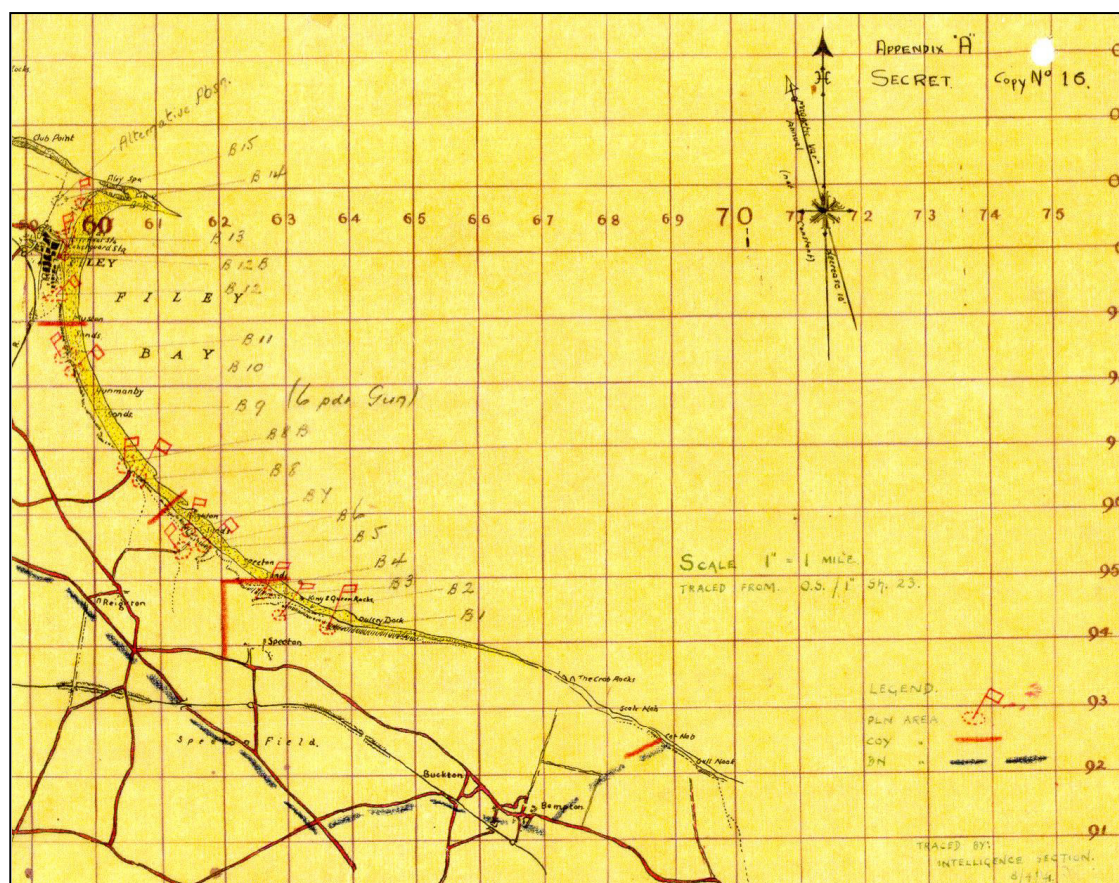


Fig. 3 - Map showing defence dispositions around Filey Bay in April 1941.⁷

Double lines of anti-tank blocks were constructed at the head of the beach, running below the gaps in the cliffs or at points where they were least sheer. Set at right angles to them were single lines of blocks running across the beach to the sea's edge: these were designed to stop enemy vehicles traversing the sands. Most of these blocks appear to have been constructed between August 1940 and March 1941.

Minefields were laid at the head of the Speeton Gap, where a steep track, known as the Donkey's Path, rises from the beach, and also to the west at Low Fields. Two hundred and ninety anti-tank and anti-personnel mines were placed at these two locations.⁸ To the rear, the 391st Battery RA had the task of laying down artillery fire on Speeton and Reighton Sands. Three artillery guns also covered the Reighton Gap.⁹ A rear perimeter bounded the coastal defence area to the south, running from Speeton to Reighton, and on to Moor Farm at Hunmanby.

⁵ TNA: PRO WO 166/4760.

⁶ TNA: PRO WO 166/4378 and TNA: PRO WO 166/4394.

⁷ Map from TNA: PRO WO 166/4394.

⁸ TNA: PRO WO 166/4378.

⁹ TNA: PRO WO 166/906.





Fig. 4 - Air photograph taken in 1969 showing the defence area. Speeton village lies at the bottom, with the wooded Old Beck running across the centre. The edge of the tumbled cliffs, with Speeton Sands beyond, can be clearly seen. The caravan park at the upper left has developed since the war, although it appears to have originated in the 1930s.

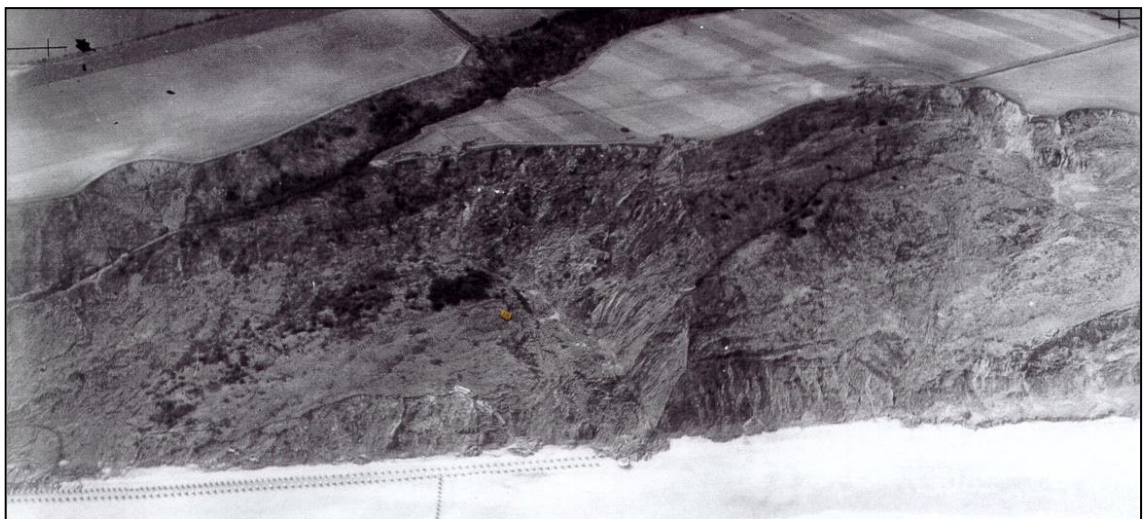


Fig. 5 - Oblique air photograph taken in 1941 showing the double line of anti-tank cubes running from Speeton Gap below Black Cliff. A single line of cubes running towards the sea can also be seen. The pillbox is the destroyed, UORN 16559.



The defence works -

Owing to the effects of sea action and coastal erosion over the past sixty years, it is the second line of pillboxes that survive in the best condition within this defence area. As almost all lie on private land, or are difficult of access, they remain in excellent condition, and provide first-rate examples of their types. The local lozenge-shaped variant of an infantry pillbox, with four side by side embrasures in its forward face, can be found in the Speeton Hills as well as on the cliff edge [UORNs 2776, 2788, 2807, and 2794]. Also to be seen [UORN 2774] is a further local variant - an hexagonal medium machine gun pillbox with two large embrasures and two entrances. A further example lies upside down on the beach [UORN 2799].



Figs. 6 and 7 - UORNs 2776 [left] and 2807 [right]. Excellent examples of the local lozenge-shaped variant of an infantry pillbox, the latter well dug in and positioned to enfilade the cliff top to the east.



Figs. 8 and 9. UORN 2774 [left] is a powerful example of a medium machine gun pillbox positioned on a summit of the Speeton Hills. Its type is hardly to be recognised in these overturned, sea-eroded remains [right] below Speeton Gap [UORN 2799].

There is still considerable evidence of the lines of anti-tank cubes on Speeton Sands, including one of the single lines running at right angles to the beach. Such is the effect of the action of the sea that many of the five-foot concrete blocks of the latter have been eroded completely away, leaving only the central steel post around which they were cast.

Reighton Gap lies beyond the study defence area, although many of its defence structures are included on Map 2.¹⁰ It presents a scene of 'Second World War desolation', with tumbled anti-tank cubes and pillbox remains washed by the sea, and, further inland, the concrete bases of gun mounts and the floor surfaces of accommodation huts and stores. Here, as well, the remains of a rare Ruck Machine Gun Post [UORN 13966] are gradually succumbing to erosion and vandalism.

¹⁰ The positions of these have not been checked by detailed field survey.





Fig. 10 - The remains of what was once a double line of anti-tank cubes still protect Speeton Gap. Buckton Cliffs are in the distance.



Fig. 11 - A jumble of Second World War remains at Reighton Gap. The remains of a Ruck Machine Gun Post [UORN 13966] are in the left foreground.

2.2 Landscape:

The principal change to the landscape of the defence area since the war, and only affecting its north-west extremity, has been the development of the Reighton Sands Holiday Park and adjacent caravan site. Air photographs show that there was already an area of chalets here in 1940.

There have been few other changes. Speeton village is a close-knit settlement consisting of a handful of houses and farms, with only a few new houses to its south. St. Leonard's Church offers a small parking area, from which a signposted path runs to the cliffs. An information leaflet, 'Speeton Cliff Walk', can be acquired for a few pence in the church. Speeton Sands are accessed by a steep footpath through Speeton Gap, which can be slippery and dangerous after rain. The structures on the beach are best viewed at low tide. When the tide is full, the anti-tank cubes and pillbox remains are covered by the sea.

The Speeton Hills is an area of rough pasture grazed by sheep and horses, and is all private land. Permission must be obtained to see the pillboxes here.

2.3 Statement of Significance:

Speeton provides a good example of coastal defence in depth in an area where it might have been thought the cliffs and other natural features were sufficient protection against a seaborne invasion. However, as with comparable situations at Atwick [see Defence Area 53] and Hollicombe Beach [see Defence Area 64], the principal danger was perceived to be from an attack by specially trained cliff-assault troops to secure the left flank of a main assault on more vulnerable beaches in Filey Bay to the north.

There is a valuable group of well-preserved pillboxes here, both those for infantry sections and machine gun detachments. The topography of their siting, on hilltops (well camouflaged), dug in on cliff edges, and at the base of cliffs is particularly interesting. The principle of first and second line defence can be well understood from the surviving structures. The remains of pillboxes and anti-tank blocks on Speeton Sands provide dramatic evidence of the importance attached to beach front defence. The fragments of the lines of anti-tank cubes set at right angles to the sea to prevent the enemy's motorised equipment traversing the beach are a rare survival.

A 'pillbox walk' could be drawn up to visit the remains on Speeton Sands (and possibly beyond the area at Reighton Gap), and also to view other defence works at a distance where they lie on private land. Information on the Second World War defences might be provided as an addition to the 'Speeton Cliff Walk' leaflet (which currently ignores them totally).

3. Recommendations:

1. That the surviving anti-invasion defence works in the Speeton area be considered of national importance. They enable the defence of this section of the coast of North Yorkshire 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, in a possible initiative with North Yorkshire County Council or the local authority, consideration be given to providing information for the public on the



Second World War defences of Speeton and its adjacent coastline. Such information might be provided as an addition to the current 'Speeton Cliff Walk' leaflet.

4. **Supporting material.**

4.1 **Photographs:**

Figs. 1-2 and 6-11 - taken (AWF) during field survey, 29.4.2003.

Fig. 4 - OS/69047 fr.212 (6.4.1969) - NMR.

Fig. 5 - MSO 31150 fr.03328 (10.4.1941) - NMR.

4.2 **Documentary Sources:**

'Operation Order No. 4', 8.6.1940 (from 2/6th Bn. Lancashire Fusiliers War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/4410.

'Operation Order No. 2', 28.10.1940 and 'Secret Routine Instructions, Issue No. 41', 30.6.1941 (from 8th Bn. King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/4378.

218th Infantry Brigade War Diary, 1941 - TNA: PRO WO 166/1071.

6th Bn. King's Own Royal Regiment War Diary - TNA: PRO WO 166/4394.

'Operation Instruction No. 3', November 1940 and 'Operation Instruction No. 4', 14.2.1941 (from 11th Bn. York and Lancaster Regiment War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/4760.

'Operation Order No. 6', 17.2.1941 (from 6th Infantry Brigade War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/906.

'Operation Instruction No.1', Appendix 'A', December 1941 (from East Riding Coastal Area 'G' War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/1236.

'Operation Instruction No.1', Appendix 'A', 1943 (from East Riding Sub-District War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/10996.

4.3 **Aerial Photographs:**

MSO 31046 fr.A41 (6.7.1940) - NMR.

MSO 31046 fr.A46 (6.7.1940) - NMR.

4E/BR42/B fr.30 (25.7.40) - NMR.

MSO 31133 fr.06109 (29.7.1940) - NMR.

MSO 31133 fr.06110 (29.7.1940) - NMR.

MSO 31133 fr.06111 (29.7.1940) - NMR.

MSO 31133 fr.06112 (29.7.1940) - NMR.

MSO 31133 fr.06113 (29.7.1940) - NMR.

4H/BR42/B fr.145 (1.8.1940) - NMR.

MSO 31150 fr.03327 (10.4.1941) - NMR.

MSO 31150 fr.03328 (10.4.1941) - NMR.

MSO 31150 fr.03329 (10.4.1941) - NMR.

MSO 31150 fr.03330 (10.4.1941) - NMR.

MSO 31150 fr.03331 (10.4.1941) - NMR.

MSO 31150 fr.03332 (10.4.1941) - NMR.

MSO 31217 fr.02 (22.7.1941) - NMR.

106G/UK/1032 fr.3024 (17.11.1945) - NMR.

OS/69047 fr.212 (6.4.1969) - NMR.



4.4 **Ordnance Survey 1: 2500 Plans:**

TA 1474-1574 (1971) - BLML.

TA 1475-1575 (1971) - BLML.

TA 1476 (1971) - BLML.

4.5 **Defence of Britain Project Database:**

[see 5. 'Annex'].

