

# DEFENCE AREA 53

## ATWICK

### 1. **Area details:**

Atwick is 2 miles N of Hornsea, with Beverley 12 miles to the SW.

County: East Riding of Yorkshire.

Parish: Atwick

NGR: centre of area, TA 196510.

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

The defence area consists principally of the coastal strip lying east of the village of Atwick that meets the sea in a continuous length of eroding earthen cliffs standing some fifteen to twenty metres high. To the north is the low ridge of Moor Hill which represents the northern boundary of the area, while on the south boundary is the deep gully of the Atwick Gap that provides access to the shingle and sand beach. To the west, the area boundary is the village of Atwick itself. The B1242 road traverses the area from south to north.

A viewshed is formed by the sweep of the land rising to the Moor Hill ridge, and to the south by the sharp edge of the Atwick Gap.



*Fig. 1 - Oblique air photograph taken in 1941 showing the cliffs and defended coastline east of the village of Atwick.*



*Fig. 2 - The flat landscape of the coastal fringe north-east of Atwick. The cliffs are to the right and the swell of Moor Hill ahead.*

## 2. **Assessment.**

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

#### *Defence overview -*

Atwick lay in the military East Riding Coastal Area, falling within the Beverley Sector manned in late 1940/41 by troops from the 218th Independent Infantry Brigade.<sup>1</sup> Atwick village itself formed a 'base' with a garrison of thirty men provided by the 3rd Bn. East Riding Home Guard. Other such adjacent bases were at Skipsea, Seaton, and Hornsea.<sup>2</sup> By February 1941, 218th Infantry Brigade had been supplemented by the 201st and 221st Brigades, the whole forming the Yorkshire Division.<sup>3</sup> Earlier, in June and July 1940, the 66th Division had been responsible for the entire coastline from the River Humber to Whitby.<sup>4</sup>

Infantry battalions manning defences at Atwick, and to its immediate south, in the critical invasion danger period of July-September 1940 were the 1st Bn. Royal Welch Fusiliers, the 10th Bn. Duke of Wellington's Regiment, and the 2nd Bn. Dorsetshire Regiment. Company headquarters were established in Atwick village, with the battalion headquarters in Hornsea.<sup>5</sup>

The infantry established forward defended localities (FDLs) on the shoreline with pillboxes and slit trenches at the head of the beaches.<sup>6</sup> A second line of pillboxes was also constructed to defend against enemy troops who might scale the cliffs.

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

<sup>2</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/10996.

<sup>3</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/4378.

<sup>4</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/4410.

<sup>5</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/4624; TNA: PRO WO 166/4245; and TNA: PRO WO 166/4207 respectively.

<sup>6</sup> Oblique air photographs show slit trenches dug in the cliffs above the pillboxes [see Fig. 6 ].



There were eleven front line pillboxes in the Atwick area, to be manned at three minutes' notice by one NCO and five other ranks, with two Bren guns for each pillbox set on fixed lines with aiming marks. Second line pillboxes were to be manned by a complete section of eight men at five minutes' notice. Pillboxes appear to have been ringed extensively with barbed wire. Where the cliffs did not form a sufficient obstacle to a sea-borne landing (i.e. at natural exits from the beach such as the Atwick Gap), anti-tank blocks were erected, sited between the pillboxes of the second line. The cliffs, however, were considered protection enough to obviate the need for beach scaffolding, and there is no documentary evidence either for minefields in the Atwick locality.<sup>7</sup> A rear boundary line to the coastal defences was established running from Bewholme to Skipsea, and roadblocks set up at points along it.<sup>8</sup> Field artillery of the 393rd Battery RA was ranged on the beaches.<sup>9</sup> Fields to the north of Atwick were blocked with concrete posts against enemy aircraft landing.<sup>10</sup>

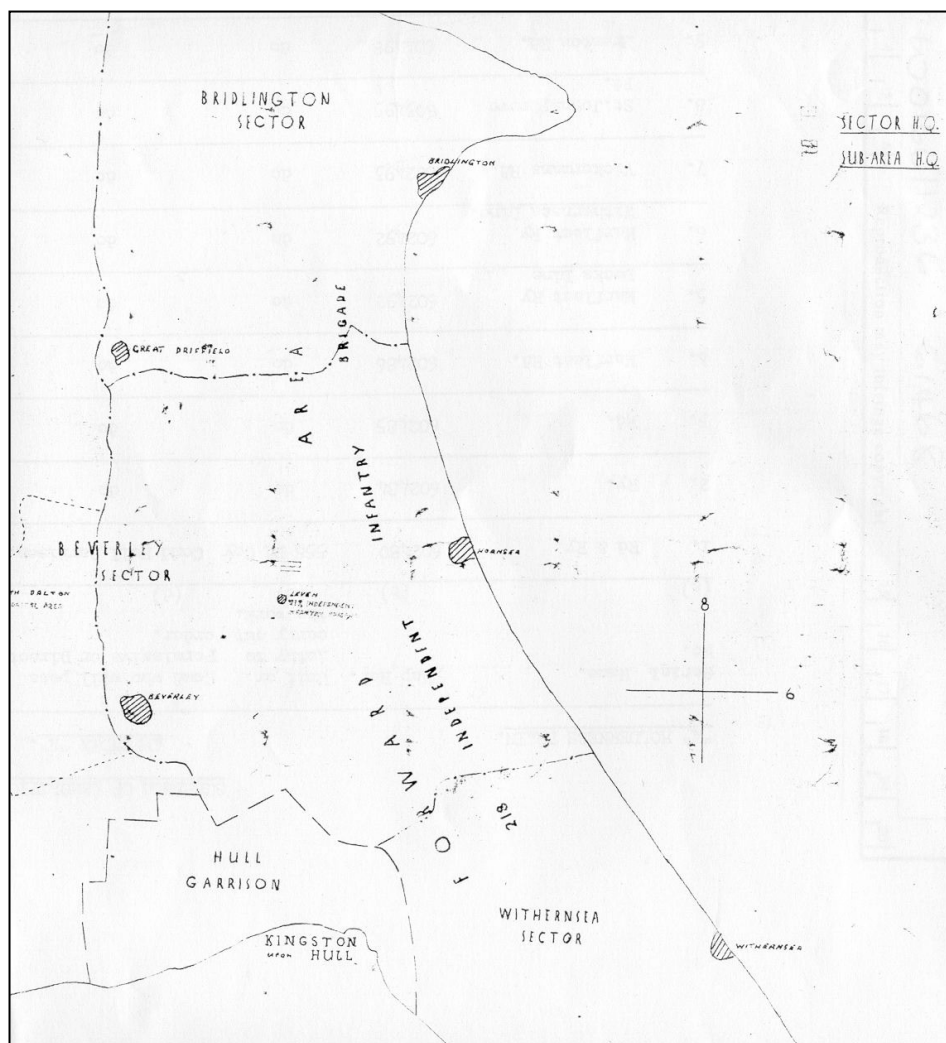


Fig. 3 - 1941 map showing the arrangement of the defence in the East Riding Coastal Area. Atwick lay in Beverley Sector.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> However, minefields were certainly laid in adjacent localities as a brigadier and major on a tour of inspection were killed when they trod on an anti-personnel mine on 5 September 1940. They were buried in Kilham parish churchyard - TNA: PRO WO 166/4624.

<sup>8</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/4624 and TNA: PRO WO 166/4245.

<sup>9</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/906.

<sup>10</sup> Oral testimony from an Atwick villager who was a boy during the war.

<sup>11</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/1236.

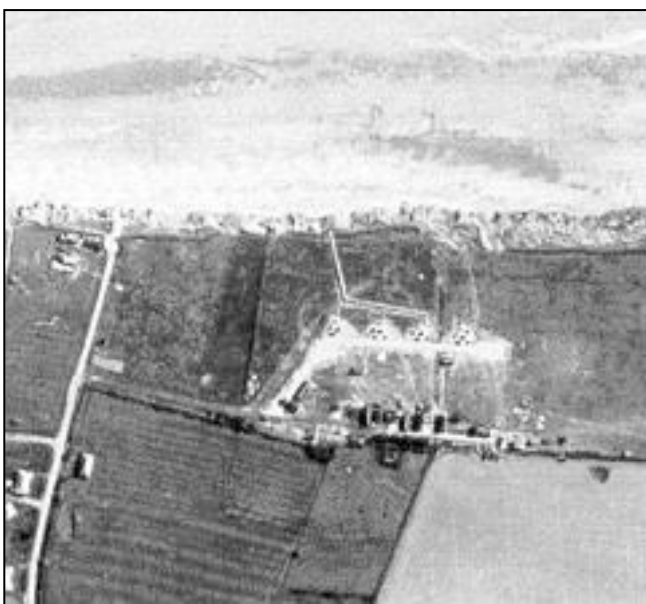




Circular earthworks in a field to the south of Atwick that show in air photographs of 1941 probably indicate the presence of a heavy anti-aircraft battery. At a later date in the war, a further heavy anti-aircraft battery, with four gun emplacements and an accompanying accommodation camp, was established on the site of the current caravan park. This may have been positioned here as part of the anti-Diver operations of 1944/45.



*Fig. 4 - Earthworks from a possible anti-aircraft battery (established early in 1941) still visible in fields south of Atwick in 1995.*



*Fig. 5 (left) - Heavy anti-aircraft battery on site of present caravan park - detail from 1945 air photograph.*



*Fig. 6 (right) - Beach front pillbox, UORN 13124, with a slit trench in the cliff face above it - detail from a July 1940 air photograph.*

*The defence works -*

Owing to cliff erosion, all the pillboxes in the first line on the beach have been destroyed.<sup>12</sup> However, many of the second line pillboxes do survive, and these are of a particular local variant type that can be found as well further to the north [see Defence Area 52 - Speeton]. The type is of a hexagonal lozenge shape, and is characterised by four small embrasures side by side in the main forward face and by an attached loop-holed blast wall.



*Figs. 7, 8, 9 - Examples of the principal local type of infantry pillbox: from the top (clockwise), UORNs 13121, 13123, and 13194.*

Two semi-buried structures [UORNs 13122 and 13195] may have been command posts, although their exact purpose and function is not clear.



*Fig. 10 - UORN 13195: sunken command post, looking from a distance like a prehistoric round barrow.*

<sup>12</sup> Some evidence of pillbox, UORN 13124 may still be present, however: it was not possible to field check this.



At Atwick Gap, protection of this natural exit between the cliffs from the beach was provided by parallel line of anti-tank cubes running from the shore to the sea that were designed to prevent armoured vehicles traversing the beach. Only a few heavily eroded blocks remain today.



*Fig. 11 - Parallel lines of anti-tank cubes running towards the sea at Atwick Gap can be seen in this detail from an oblique air photograph of July 1940. They were designed to prevent enemy armoured vehicles from traversing the beach to gain access to this exit through the cliffs.*



*Fig. 12 - UORN 13211: all that remains of the Atwick Gap anti-tank blocks today.*

At Moor Hill at the north of the defence area piles of concrete and brick rubble indicate where at least two defence structures have been destroyed in recent years. Close by, a large loopholed observation post [UORN 13117], with unusual internal features that are hard to interpret, now hangs perilously over the eroding cliff. It is unlikely to survive for many months more, and represents a public danger that should be shut off with warning notices.



*Fig. 13 - UORN 13117: unusual defended observation post, whose exact function is not known. Part now projects over the eroding cliff and little could be done to prevent its inevitable fall.*

At the beach front caravan park, a structure close to pillbox, UORN 13123, has been recently removed. It is said by a local resident to have had some connection with the adjacent anti-Diver anti-aircraft battery, and its site is now represented by a low bank.<sup>13</sup>

## **2.2 Landscape:**

The principal changing feature of the landscape of the Atwick defence area is the steady erosion of the cliffs by the sea. Comparison with Second World War air photographs indicates that some twenty-five metres of cliff top land have been lost to the sea in the course of the last sixty years. This gradual erosion continues to threaten the cliff top defence works, and structures currently a hundred metres or so from the cliff edge [e.g. UORNs 13194 and 13195] will steadily become endangered. The observation post, UORN 13117, is already undermined and could fall at any time. Some caravans in the park near the cliff edge appear to be precariously situated.

Intensive agriculture to within a few metres of the cliff edge has led to the removal of several field divisions, leaving some pillboxes isolated that were once positioned in hedgerows. Otherwise, there have been few changes to the landscape. The village

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<sup>13</sup> Information from Mr. Neville Jones, resident of Atwick village.





of Atwick has been little developed, with only a modest amount of infill new housing. In the 1960s a caravan park was established on the site of the cliff top anti-aircraft battery making use of concrete hard-standing and a trackway laid down by the military.



*Fig. 14 - Continuous cliff erosion since the Second World War has removed many defence structures and endangers others.*

A feature of the study of Second World War air photographs of this area are the number of apparent crop marks they show that might be interpreted as single or double-ditched enclosures. As all of these correspond to the known positions of defence works, it is likely that they, in fact, show perimeter barbed-wire defences rather than buried ditches of an earlier period, although the clarity and extent of these marks is unusual.



*Fig. 15 - Portion of a 1941 air photograph showing three sets of apparent crop marks of enclosures. The markings, in fact, are almost certainly the lines of barbed wire perimeter defences at these positions.*

There is access to many of the surviving pillboxes in the areas adjacent to the cliffs as they stand close to public footpaths. Some, however, lie further inland at the edges of fields, and there would be no access without specific permission when the fields are in crop. Parking for visitors is also difficult. Although there is a caravan park, Atwick is not a holiday location as such, and there are no public car parks. There are very few places to leave a car in Cliff Road which leads from Atwick to



the coastline, and it is probably best to seek car parking within the village itself. The crumbling cliff edge is dangerous, and care needs to be exercised when walking here.

### 2.3 **Statement of Significance:**

Atwick provides a good example of the intensity of coastal defence even in areas where natural features such as cliffs made the coastline much less vulnerable to an enemy landing. The danger at such places was perceived as a flanking attack by specially trained cliff-assault troops while the main invasion was being directed against adjacent open beaches or ports. Comparable scenarios were carried out by Allied troops on D-Day.

Whereas almost all the evidence of the front-line pillboxes has disappeared owing to cliff erosion, the second-line defences are very evident and form an important group of defence structures. The command posts situated alongside the local variant-type of infantry pillboxes make a rare survival and, with the permission of landowners, should be examined and recorded in more detail than has been possible for this survey. The remaining anti-tank cubes at the Atwick Gap also provide evidence of the blocking of beach exits: the parallel lines of concrete cubes running at right angles to the sea to prevent the traversing of the beach by armoured fighting vehicles are a relatively rare survival.

The observation post [UORN 13117], which is in immediate danger of being lost to the sea, is an unusual structure whose precise purpose is uncertain. The building should be recorded as fully as possible while this is still possible.

Although it would be impossible to establish the circuit of a 'pillbox walk' at this location, nevertheless information on the surviving defence works from Moor Hill to the Atwick Gap might be provided through the medium of an Atwick local history group.

## 3. **Recommendations:**

1. That the surviving anti-invasion defence works in the Atwick area be considered of national importance. They enable the defence of this section of the coast of the East Riding of 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 the probable command posts, UORNs 13122 and 13195, be examined and recorded in detail to confirm their identity and function.
3. That the probable observation post, UORN 13117, be recorded before it is destroyed by cliff erosion.



4. That consideration be given, in a possible initiative by an Atwick local history group, to providing information for the public on the Second World War defences of this village and its adjacent coastline.

#### 4. **Supporting material.**

##### 4.1 **Photographs:**

Fig. 1 - MSO 31148 fr.03227 (10.4.1941)- NMR.  
Fig. 4 - NMR 15193 fr.38 (6.1.1995) - NMR.  
Fig. 5 - 106G/LA/212 fr.3287 (13.4.1945) - NMR.  
Figs. 6 and 11 - MSO 31133 fr.06036 (29.7.1940) - NMR.  
Fig. 15 - 613E/BR174 fr.11 (24.3.1941) - NMR.  
Figs. 2, 7-10, and 12-14 - taken (AWF) during field survey, 28.4.2003.

##### 4.2 **Documentary Sources:**

2nd Bn. Dorsetshire Regiment War Diary, 1940 - TNA: PRO WO 166/4207.  
'Operation Order No.4', 8.6.1940 (from 2/6th Bn. Lancashire Fusiliers War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/4410.  
'Operation Order No.1', 3.7.1940 (from 1st Bn. Royal Welch Fusiliers War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/4624.  
'Operation Order No.1', 28.10.1940 (from 10th Bn. Duke of Wellington's Regiment War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/4245.  
'Operation Order No.2', 28.10.1940 (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.  
'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 31133 frs.06036-06038 (29.7.1940) - NMR.  
MSO 31130 frs.06634-06635 (14.9.1940) - NMR.  
613E/BR174 frs.10-11 (24.3.1941) - NMR.  
MSO 31148 fr.03227 (10.4.1941)- NMR.  
106G/LA/212 fr.3282 (13.4.1945) - NMR.  
106G/LA/212 fr.3287 (13.4.1945) - NMR.  
MAL/77022 fr.186 (6.7.1977) - NMR.  
NMR 15193 fr.38 (6.1.1995) - NMR.

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

TA 1850-1950 (1976) - BLML.  
TA 1851-1951 (1976) - BLML.

##### 4.5 **Defence of Britain Project Database:**

[see 5. 'Annex'].

