

DEFENCE AREA 55

LAWYERS' CREEK, HOLBEACH

1. Area details:

The defence area is 1 mile N of Holbeach St. Matthew and 7 miles from Holbeach.
County: Lincolnshire.
Parish: Holbeach.
NGR: centre of area, TF 406338.

1.1 Area Description: [see Map 1].

The defence area lies on the sea banks of the southern coastal belt of The Wash. North of the sea banks, extensive salt marshes give way to sand flats and the open sea. This area is an air bombing range.

The sea banks stand some ten feet high by twelve feet broad at their top, and much of the land enclosed by them has been drained since the war and reclaimed for agriculture. In the north-east part of the defence area, however, the salt marsh still extends to the outer bank where defence works were erected in 1940. To the south a chequer-board pattern of fields, drains, and tracks stretch away to the small settlement of Holbeach St. Matthew.

At the centre of the defence area, at the end of a narrow lane from Holbeach St. Matthew, is an open place beside the sea banks at the south end of Lawyers' Creek where a car can be parked and the banks accessed by walkers. This place, with its anti-tank blocks and pillboxes, provides the central focus of the area, and viewsheds to east and west are formed by turns in the sea banks as they continue far beyond the area.



Fig. 1 - Signs in the defence area give warning of the adjacent air bombing range.



2. Assessment.

2.1 Defences: [see Map 2]

Defence overview -

In 1940-1941, the Holbeach coastal area, forming part of 'A' Sector, was defended firstly by the 2nd Infantry Brigade and then by the 212th Infantry Brigade of 1 (Lincoln County) Division of I Corps.¹ The brigade held the coast with three battalions forward, of which the 'Holbeach Battalion' (the 9th Royal Sussex Regiment) was on the right. The left company of the 7th Bn. South Lancashire Regiment was also defending the Holbeach sea banks in November 1940. The pillbox, UORN 5201, was manned by one of its rifle sections.²

To the rear, a defence in depth was created through a system of 'bases' (nodal points) which had an all-round perimeter formed by pillboxes, defended houses, and roadblocks. The 'bases' adjacent to the study defence area were Sutton Bridge, Red House, Penny Hill, and Holbeach itself.³ The landscape to the rear of the coastal front, seamed as it was with many water-filled drains, seems to have been considered a sufficient anti-tank barrier, and no artificial anti-tank ditch was dug at this point.

Defence works were largely constructed on the sea banks, which were also blocked against the movement of tanks and other vehicles. Pillboxes were usually dug into the banks and had defence perimeters of barbed wire. A fence of three-coiled barbed wire was also set up along the whole front.⁴ A standard type of pillbox is described as being suitable for both heavy and light machine gun fire [this is almost certainly the Lincolnshire three-bay type - see under 'The defence works' below], and they were stocked with ammunition, grenades, 'molotov' bombs, and food and water.⁵ Their sharp outlines and fresh concrete colour were camouflaged with mud and grass sods.⁶ Air photographs show defence works under construction in mid-July 1940.



Fig. 2 - Oblique air photograph of July 1940 showing defence works under construction in the area where the pillbox, UORN 5206, survives today [see Fig. 6].

¹ TNA: PRO WO 166/896; TNA: PRO WO 166/1065; and TNA: PRO WO 166/4296.

² TNA: PRO WO 166/4682.

³ TNA: PRO WO 166/982.

⁴ TNA: PRO WO 166/4495.

⁵ TNA: PRO WO 166/1065.

⁶ TNA: PRO WO 166/982.



The defence works -

At the southern junction of a curving section of outer sea bank with an inner bank running west-east, three anti-tank cubes can be found set on a thick concrete base [UORN 16171], a remnant probably of much more extensive anti-tank blocks at this point. To the north, running across the sea bank and its adjoining track as well as an area of marshland to the west, is a line of some twenty cubes, each only two feet by 1 foot, possibly the smallest such blocks with an anti-vehicular role surviving anywhere in the country [UORN 5204]. They must have been intended as a control on the movement of vehicles (possibly civilian as well as military) along the sea bank: they would have been of little use to stop enemy armoured vehicles.



Fig. 3 - UORN 5204: still in place across the sea bank, these are probably the country's smallest concrete cubes having a role in the 1940 anti-invasion defences.

North of the cubes on this sea bank is a type 22 pillbox built with corrugated iron shuttering [UORN 5205], and further on a rectangular Lincolnshire-type three-bay pillbox, a variant on the type 23, intended for anti-aircraft fire as well as LMG ground fire [UORN 5206]. The AA weapon was mounted in the open central court, and two side chambers with embrasures in each face held infantry rifle sections.

Two further examples of this distinctive pillbox type lie close together to the west in what was evidently a strongpoint [UORNs 5202 and 5203]. The southern of these pillboxes [UORN 5202] is a further variant of the Lincolnshire-type, with the open well being at its west end rather than in the centre. An addition has been made to the roof probably for recent agricultural purposes.



Fig. 4 - UORN 5203: Lincolnshire-type pillbox, with two chambers separated by an open bay for anti-aircraft fire.



Fig. 5 - UORN 5202: interior of a variant on the Lincolnshire-type three bay pillbox.





Fig. 6 - UORN 5206: Lincolnshire-type three bay infantry pillbox on the curving corner of the sea bank. The bank to the right did not exist at the time of the Second World War.

A fragment of reinforced concrete lying on the bank above a pond to the west is probably the remains of a 'rifle section pillbox' [UORN 5201] for which there is documentary evidence.⁷ A little further to the west of this is the outstanding survival of a very rare Ruck Machine Gun Post [UORN 16172]. Field work has established remains of this type of defence structure in each of the three Lincolnshire coastal study defence areas, and it seems that it was used relatively widely in the defence of the east coast north of The Wash [see also Defence Areas 30 - Saltfleetby and 35 - Freiston Shore]. The Holbeach example, however, is the best preserved. The concrete-slatted roof is pierced with three embrasures that must have been intended to allow anti-aircraft fire, and the complete structure is set around an earthwork pit some six feet deep and ten feet long [see Fig. 7].

2.2 Landscape:

Post-war aerial photographs show the extension of the system of sea banks along the line of Lawyers' Creek, and from its northern end towards the west. Here, the land between the outer and inner banks has now been drained and converted to arable fields. In the eastern part of the defence area, the landscape remains largely unaltered from that of 1940, with the outer of the two sea banks fronting salt marshes that extend to open expanses of sand used during the war, and since, as an air bombing range. Public footpaths run along all the sea banks, other than for the inner one to the east leading to Lawyers' Farm, and access is possible to all the defence works.

⁷ TNA: PRO WO 166/4682.





Fig. 7 - UORN 16172: excellent example of the very rare Ruck Machine Gun Post surviving within a bend of the sea bank.



Fig. 8 - 1952 air photograph showing, at the right centre, Lawyers' Creek and the sea bank here, continuing to the west [left], that was constructed post-war.



2.3 **Statement of Significance:**

This defence area is of importance as it shows well the forward localities of the British Field Army in 1940 and 1941 in its role of the defence of the Lincolnshire coast. Differing types of defence works are represented, in particular the rectangular Lincolnshire-type pillbox with its separate chambers for ground and air defence. Surviving anti-tank and anti-vehicle blocks provide some indication of the overall strength of the defence that was not based purely on concrete blockhouses. The blocks against wheeled vehicles are a reminder that during the war these were military-controlled areas with defences not only against the enemy but also to enforce civilian exclusion.

The Ruck Machine Gun Post is an outstanding example of a very rare structure, and its preservation as one component within this defended landscape is of particular importance. As it is vulnerable to damage and removal, its immediate protection is vital.

This is a fine and compelling landscape, under wide skies, with good public access to all the structures, most of which allow for interior inspection. A short 'pillbox walk' could be set out here and information provided for the public.

3. **Recommendations:**

1. That the surviving anti-invasion defence works on the sea banks north of Holbeach St. Matthew be considered of national importance. They enable the Second World War defence of the Lincolnshire coast to be interpreted, and provide evidence of the articulation of the defence and the inter-relationship of its functionally different components.
2. That especial consideration be given to the preservation of the Ruck Machine Gun Post [UORN 16172] which is an exceptional survival of a rare structure that is vulnerable to damage or destruction.
3. That, in a possible initiative with Lincolnshire County Council and the local authority, a 'pillbox walk' be established here. An information board on the Second World War heritage of the area could be set up within the parking area by Lawyers' Creek. Such information might include adjacent locations where defence works can be visited.

4. **Supporting material.**

4.1 **Photographs:**

Figs. 1 and 3-7 - taken (AWF) during field survey, 30.7.2002.

Fig. 2 - MSO 31142 fr.00960 (14.7.1940) - NMR.

Fig. 8 - 540/756 fr.3148 (25.5.1952) - NMR.



4.2 **Documentary Sources:**

'131st Infantry Brigade Operation Instruction No.1', 25.6.1940 (from 1/5th Queen's Royal Regiment War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/4495.

'Operation Instruction No.2', 8.7.1940 (from 131st Infantry Brigade War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/982.

'Operation Instruction No.3', 5.11.1940 (from 7th Bn. South Lancashire Regiment War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/4682.

212th Infantry Brigade War Diary, February 1941 - TNA: PRO WO 166/1065.

'Operation Instruction No.11', March 1941 (from 2nd Infantry Brigade War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/896.

10th. Bn. Gloucestershire Regiment War Diary, 1941 - TNA: PRO WO 166/4296.

4.3 **Aerial Photographs:**

MSO 31142 fr.00960 (14.7.40) - NMR.

MSO 31153 fr.7923 (24.3.41) - NMR.

540/756 fr.3148 (25.5.52) - NMR.

543/392 fr.4 (17.9.58) - NMR.

OS/68142 fr.101 (31.5.68) - NMR.

OS/89052 frs.37-38 (27.3.89) - NMR.

4.4 **Ordnance Survey 1: 2500 Plan:**

TF 4033-4133 (1971) - BLML.

4.5 **Defence of Britain Project Database:**

[see 5. 'Annex'].

