

DEFENCE AREA 56

WINTERTON-ON-SEA

1. **Area details:**

Winterton-on-Sea is 20 miles E of Norwich and 8 miles N of Great Yarmouth.

County: Norfolk.

Parish: Winterton-on-Sea.

NGR: centre of area, TG 498198

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

The defence area lies between the small Norfolk coastal town of Winterton-on-Sea and the sea itself. It consists of the beach and the dunes behind, which run to the north and south. To the north, they form the National Nature Reserve of Winterton and Horsey Dunes. The sea is steadily eroding the dunes, forming low sand cliffs.

The focal point of the area is the beach car park, which is set out around the anti-tank blocks that make up the major defence structure in the area. Viewsheds are formed looking towards the town to the west, and to the south-west where high bluffs mark the western edge of the dunes. To north and south, a seascape of beach and dunes stretches away.



Fig. 1 - Winterton Dunes, looking south-west across Beach Road towards the bluffs topped by holiday homes and the Old Lighthouse. The latter was the Observation Post of Winterton Battery, which in 1940/41 was flanked by pillboxes and spigot mortar emplacements.





Fig. 2 - Winterton dunes are protected and managed by English Nature.

2. Assessment.

2.1 Defences: [see Maps 2 and 3]

Defence overview -

Winterton-on-Sea fell within Norfolk Defence Sector 'B', which, in the critical invasion danger period of June-October 1940, was the responsibility of the 37th Infantry Brigade of 18 Division, replaced in 1941 by the 213th Infantry Brigade of 46 Division. A Forward Defended Locality (FDL), termed the 'Winterton Gap', was established here by a platoon of the 9th Bn. Royal Berkshire Regiment, with a further FDL located a short distance to the north in an area known as 'Decoy'.¹ The shore was also defended by Winterton Battery, garrisoned by the 384th Coastal Battery (some 65 men) with two 4in. naval guns. The 11th Bn. Norfolk Home Guard manned one of these guns, as well as the ground defences of the battery.²

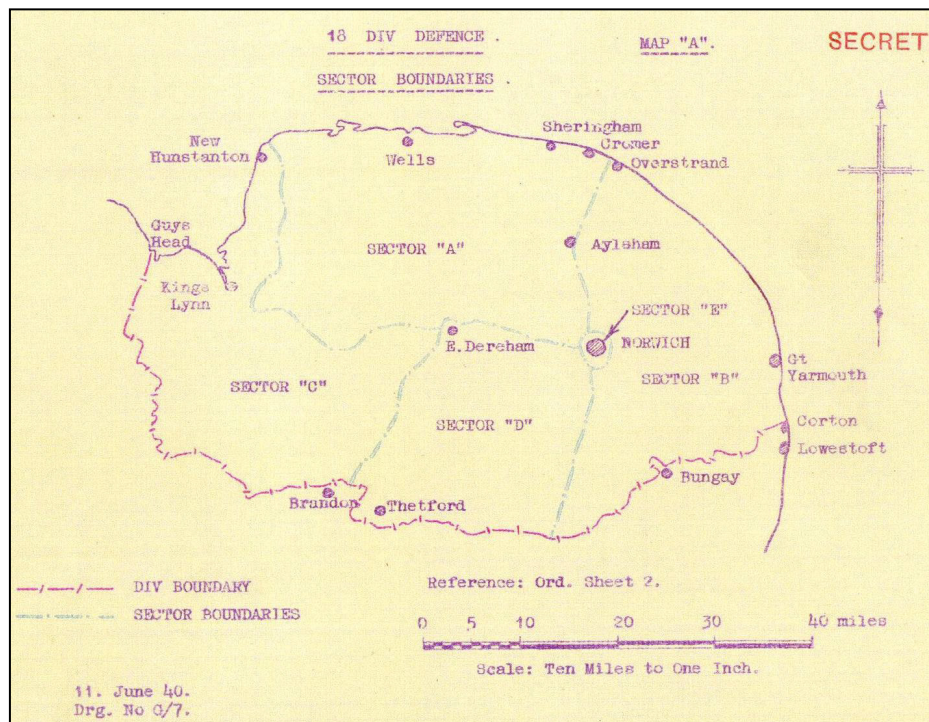


Fig. 3 - The defence of Norfolk by 18 Division, June 1940. Later, additional Sectors were created, and their boundaries altered.³

¹ TNA: PRO WO 166/4528 and TNA: PRO WO 166/1066.

² TNA: PRO WO 192/62 and WO 166/4528.

³ TNA: PRO WO 166/464.



By mid-1941 an intensive system of front-edge coast defence had been put in place, with hardened defence works, observation and command posts, tubular beach scaffolding, barbed wire entanglements, anti-tank blocks, prepared depth charge craters, minefields, flame fougasses, spigot mortar emplacements, and slit trenches. Various other indeterminate military structures, seen on aerial photographs, littered the dunes between the town and the seafront.

This part of the coast was seen as very vulnerable to attack by an enemy seeking a beach head here from which to make a flanking attack against the port of Great Yarmouth, through which men, weapons, and supplies could be landed. Winterton Battery provided a close defence of the Great Yarmouth inner channel.⁴ A defence in depth was provided by a system of nodal points and demolition belts. [See as well Defence Area 15 - Acle and Defence Area 65 - Ludham Bridge]. The Sector was backed by a Corps Line [II Corps] running from Beccles in Suffolk to the Norfolk coast between Wells-next-the-Sea and Stiffkey.⁵

The defence works -

Of the concentration of defence works at Winterton, only a few survive today. Yet, what survives is of major importance. Some remaining buildings of Winterton Battery alongside the old lighthouse, itself the battery observation post, look out across the sand dunes beneath where in 1940/41 there were minefields, pillboxes, spigot mortar emplacements, and, at the edge of the sea, the battery's searchlights (CASLs). The debris from at least one of these is now piled at the head of the beach.



Fig. 4 - UORN 15958: the remains of one of the CASLs (Coast Artillery Searchlights) of Winterton Battery. This debris should be cleared away as it is ugly and a danger to holidaymakers.

The major defence works, seen by everyone coming to the beach front as the car park is set out around them, are the lines of concrete anti-tank blocks. These are

⁴ TNA: PRO WO 192/62.

⁵ TNA: PRO WO 166/189 (map).



the remains of a once massive anti-tank barrier designed to block the Winterton Gap itself from an enemy landing.



Fig. 5 - UORN 9102: the lines of anti-tank blocks, now the site of the beach car park. The coastguard lookout hut is set on stilts resting on the blocks. Many blocks are now buried deep in the sand, and, to the left of the picture, they have tumbled onto the beach.



Fig. 6 - UORN 9102: anti-tank cubes toppled down the eroded sand dunes. At the time of the Second World War, the sea's edge was some 20 metres further out. A pillbox, and lines of barbed wire and tubular scaffolding, once stood where there is now open water.

The reason for the name 'Winterton Gap' needs some consideration. Aerial photographs indicate that in 1940 the shore line here was not made up of the sand cliffs that are seen today, but that these have been created over the past sixty years through the steady erosion by the sea of the dunes behind. It looks as if in 1940 the dunes may have merged at this point much more levelly with the beach, with the



sand cliffs then beginning to north and south, effectively forming a gap, and beach exit, that needed special protection.

The anti-tank blocks that form UORN 9102 can first be seen in an aerial photograph of 16 August 1940. Then, they were only a single row of what was to become the northern arm of a double line of blocks, with a pillbox at the sea end. A short spur of blocks connected with this line (later the east end of the later western arm).



Fig. 7 - Aerial photograph taken on 16 August 1940, showing the first line of anti-tank blocks to be built. A pillbox is at the end nearest the sea, and a zig-zag line of barbed wire runs at the head of the beach. Behind, various structures can be seen within the sand dunes.

By 19 September, the anti-tank blocks were much further developed. The full extent of the eventual double-lined structure had been built, with its single connecting western arm. More additions were evidently considered necessary for a second north-south line was built alongside the first (probably in September 1941). It is possible that this work was carried out because the first blocks had sunk into the sand negating their value as an anti-tank obstacle.⁶

An aerial photograph of 1944 shows the structure at its full extent, linked with a complex system of barbed wire fences (possibly enclosing minefields) and beach scaffolding. When fully built, the structure consisted of some ninety-eight 5ft cubes, laid corner to corner, many erected on substantial concrete bases presumably to stop subsidence into the sand. Near the end of its southern arm, there was a gap to allow access from Beach Road. About sixty-eight cubes survive today. Some are buried beneath the dunes, and others have toppled to the beach owing to coastal erosion at this point. Some blocks as well appear to have been removed from the ends of the southern and western arms.

Contemporary incised graffiti adds an extra emphasis to the historic value of this important structure.

⁶ Bird, *Silent Sentinels*, p11.





Fig. 8 - The single lines of anti-tank blocks as further developed by 19 Sept. 1940 .

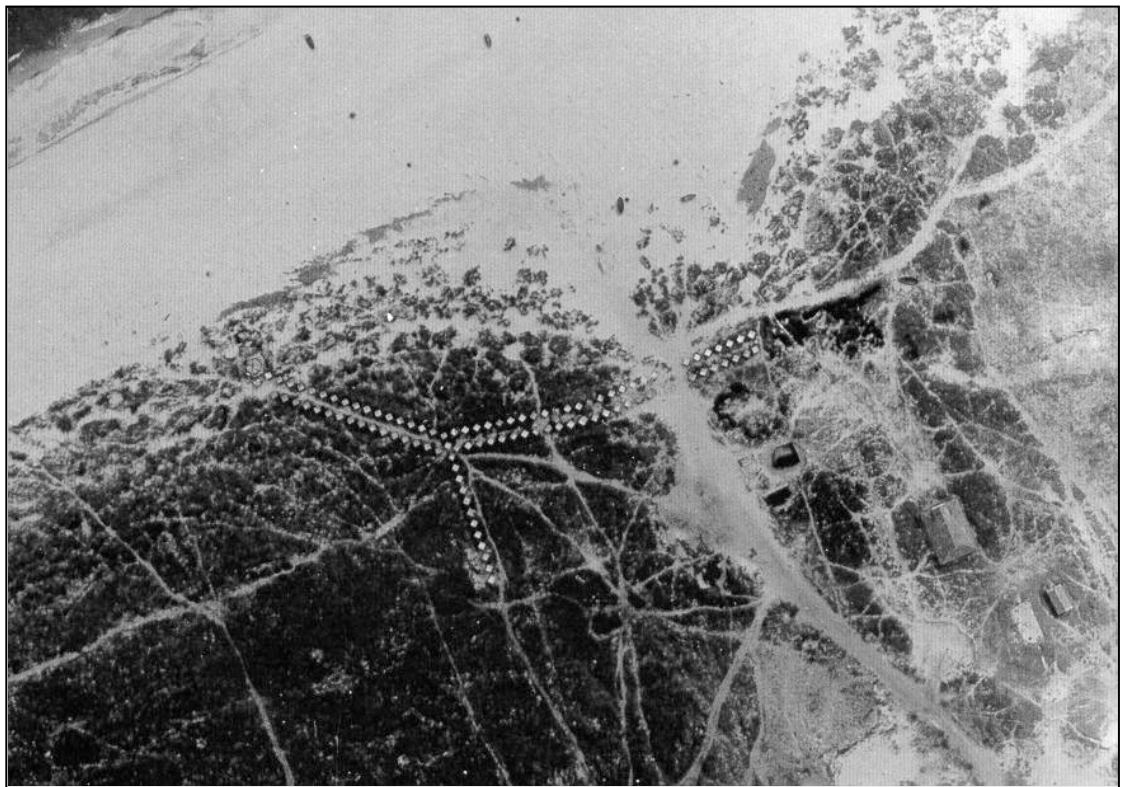


Fig. 9 - The lines of anti-tank cubes at their fullest extent. Air photograph taken in 1949.

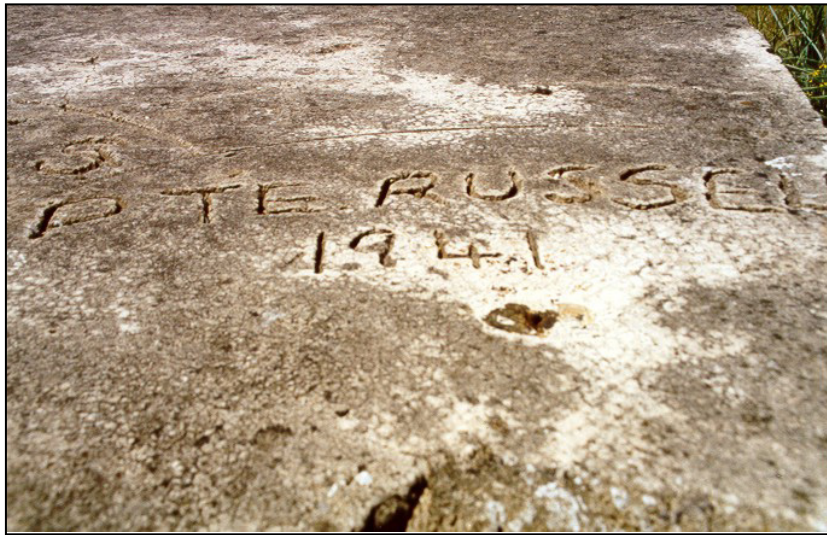


Fig. 10 - UORN 9102: incised graffiti on one of the anti-tank cubes. Several soldiers' names, with dates and numbers, can be read on the blocks.

Two spigot mortar pedestals, from emplacements built possibly late in 1941, now stand on the beach near the tumbled anti-tank cubes. These were presumably built at the edge of the sand dunes, and have now been displaced to the edge of the sea, being entirely covered at high tide. Two other spigot mortar pedestals lie to the south, and show the particular deployment of this weapon for coastal defence by Eastern Command.



Fig. 11 - UORN 9101: spigot mortar pedestal emerging from the sea.

A further surviving defence structure is a Royal Observer Corps underground monitoring post within a fenced compound amongst the dunes south of Beach

Road [UORN 16170]. This includes the remains of an Orlit A, as well as the foundations of an earlier building that may have been a Second World War aircraft spotting post.⁷

A particular interest of the defences of the Winterton Gap lies in the evidence they provide of the totality of the defended landscape at this point. The very good documentary and air photographic evidence enables many components, long since destroyed, to be reconstructed.

2.2 Landscape:

As already stated, the most significant change in the landscape of this defence area lies in the degree of coastal erosion that has taken place in the last sixty years. Aerial photographs show that the lines of anti-tank blocks [UORN 9102] remained little affected by erosion until the end of the 1960s. There was then a relatively fast deterioration that resulted in almost the entire length of the northern arm disappearing by 1981, some blocks being washed away but others apparently buried by sand. The erosion is undoubtedly continuing, although perhaps slowed down, and before long the entire northern arm will have been displaced, with the remaining parts of the structure also threatened.

The beach car park was set up from the early 1970s, and later the coastguard lookout and a small shop and café built. Housing and holiday development has spread along the bluffs, where surviving buildings of Winterton Battery are situated, but not close to the beach itself. The dunes north of the car park are a National Nature Reserve.

The area is much frequented by holidaymakers, who delight in an unspoilt, sandy beach. The fallen anti-tank cubes are used for shelter and as a play area for children. They have long since become merged with the overall beach scene here, and it is doubtful if many people would think of them today as an eyesore, but perhaps wonder at their origin and purpose. On the Ordnance Survey map they are termed 'Stones'.

2.3 Statement of Significance:

The defence area represents an important sector of 1940/41 coastal defence, where buildings of a coast battery survive alongside other defence works. The massive lines of anti-tank blocks are a monumental structure of great importance, which documentary research can now place in relation to the other works, long since removed, of which it was a focal component. The spigot mortar pedestals provide evidence of the value given to this weapon in coastal defence (from mid-1941) by Eastern Command, a fact that has not been ascertained from documentary sources.

This is a compelling place in which to reflect on the 1940 invasion dangers. The beaches and unspoilt open dunes enable the area to be crossed at will. Research has enabled the coastline to be repopulated with the differing types of defence works that once stood here, and it is relatively easy to visualise the totality of the 1940/41 defence and to understand how the topography was used to achieve this.

⁷ On-line database of the Cold War research group, 'Subterranea Britannica'.



The sweeping views along the beach to north and south serve as a reminder that the Winterton Gap was just one heavily defended point amongst defences that were virtually continuous on the coasts of England.

3. **Recommendations:**

1. That the surviving defence works at Winterton-on-Sea (including the fallen anti-tank blocks of UORN 9102 and the post-war Royal Observer Corps monitoring post [UORN 16170]) be considered of national importance. They enable the Second World War defence of this sector of the Norfolk 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 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 debris of the coastal searchlight from Winterton Battery [UORN 15958] be cleared away. The structure has been destroyed, and there is no value in the remains. They represent a safety hazard to holidaymakers.
3. That, in a possible initiative with Norfolk County Council and the local authority, an information board be set up with details of the Second World War anti-invasion defence of the area. Such information should emphasise the continuous nature of the coastal defence, with details of other adjacent locations where defence works survive and are publicly accessible.

4. **Supporting material.**

4.1 **Photographs:**

Figs. 1-2, 4-6, and 11 - taken (AWF) during field survey, 29.7.2002.
Fig. 7 - MSO/31014 fr.3612 (16.8.1940) - NMR.
Fig. 8 - MSO/31022 fr.4809 (19.9.1940) - NMR.
Fig. 9 - 541/264 fr.3046 (2.6.1949) - NMR.
Fig. 10 - D. Dennett - Defence of Britain Project Archive, NMR.

4.2 **Documentary Sources:**

18 Division 'GS' War Diary, June 1940 - TNA: PRO WO 166/464.
II Corps 'G' War Diary, 1941 - TNA: PRO WO 166/189.
'A' Sector Defence Scheme', 15.7.1941 (from 213th Infantry Brigade War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/1066.
'9th Bn. Royal Berkshire Regiment Defence Scheme', 15.7.1941 (from 9th Bn. Royal Berkshire Regiment War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/4528.
Fort Record Book, Winterton Fort, 1940-1945 - TNA: PRO WO 192/62.
Files categorising military defence works for maintenance of demolition, 1949-50: Winterton - Norfolk Record Office, C/P 8/1/16.
Survey of coastal defence works, Winterton to Caister [maps], 1947-1950 - Norfolk Record Office, C/P 8/4.



- 4.3 **Published Source:**
Christopher Bird, *Silent Sentinels: The Story of Norfolk's Fixed Defences during the Twentieth Century* (The Larks Press, 1999).
- 4.4 **Aerial Photographs:**
MSO/31014 fr.3612 (16.8.1940) - NMR.
2A/BR190 frs.57-58 (18.8.1940) - NMR.
MSO/31022 fr.4809 (19.9.1940) - NMR.
268A/BR183 fr.18 (17.12.1940) - NMR.
106G/LA/17 frs.3004-3005 (28.5.1944) - NMR.
106G/UK/832 frs.3195-3196 (23.9.1945) - NMR.
106G/UK/859 fr.3122 (29.9.1945) - NMR.
541/264 fr.3046 (2.6.1949) - NMR.
541/264 frs.4045-4046 (2.6.1949) - NMR.
540/1005 fr.131 (4.2.1953) - NMR.
CAP 8170 fr.71 (23.6.1954) - NMR.
- 4.5 **Ordnance Survey 1: 2500 Plans:**
TG 4819-4919 (1977) - BLML.
- 4.6 **Defence of Britain Project Database:**
[see 5. 'Annex'].

