

DEFENCE AREA 57

KIRKLEATHAM

1. Area details:

Kirkleatham is 2 miles S of Redcar and 7 miles E of Middlesborough.

Unitary Authority: Redcar and Cleveland.

Parish: Kirkleatham.

NGR: centre of area, NZ 594218.

1.1 Area Description: [see Map 1].

Kirkleatham is a small village that in the mid-18th century was taken over as part of the estate of Kirkleatham Hall, the inhabitants being removed to surrounding settlements. The village became part of the park of the Hall, which was enlarged and 'improved' in the gothic style, leaving only The Hall itself, the church, a 17th century Hospital, and a Free School (now termed the Old Hall, housing a museum). Kirkleatham Hall, requisitioned by the military during the Second World War, was demolished in 1956, and a 'special needs' school now occupies its site. The stable block, however, remains standing.

Kirkleatham is now by-passed by roads built in the 1970s - the A1042 and A174 that run to its west and south. It has few inhabitants, and seems strangely detached from the busy world around. Pathways run through the former grounds of the Hall. To the west of Kirkleatham rise cooling towers and other industrial works, and housing estates spread to the north and the east as far as the sea at Redcar and Marske. To the south rises a line of wooded hills, and between them and Kirkleatham lie flat, open fields. A viewshed is formed by these fields as they are cut by the A174 road, fronted at Kirkleatham by the red-brick buildings of Turners Hospital: this is the area of the southern perimeter defences of the village during the Second World War.

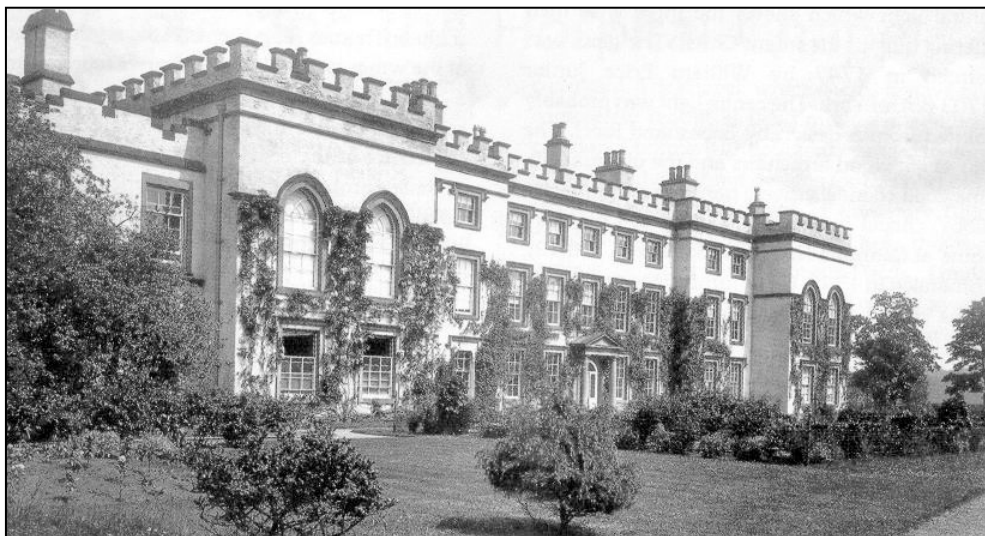


Fig. 1 - Kirkleatham Hall, requisitioned during the Second World War. The house was demolished in 1956.





Fig. 2 - Kirkleatham in an air photograph taken in 1958. The Hall at the upper centre has been destroyed, but the village has yet to be cut off by the main roads built in the 1970s. The line of the infilled anti-tank ditch to the south-east still shows.

2. **Assessment.**

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

Defence overview -

From June 1940, Kirkleatham formed a 'rearward defended locality' of the Left Sub-Sector, Central Zone of the North Riding Coastal Area defended by the 176th Infantry Brigade of 59 Division.¹ This Central Zone was occupied by the 'Kirkleatham Battalion', which in August 1940 was the 1/6th Bn. South Staffordshire Regiment. In September, it was replaced by the 6th Bn. North Staffordshire Regiment, and in October, by the 12th Bn. Green Howards. Battalion headquarters were at Kirkleatham Hall.² The defended locality was to provide a rear defence to the coastal defences at Marske. A mobile column was also based at Kirkleatham to go to the relief of the beach front defences in the event of an enemy landing or to confront airborne assault troops.

¹ TNA: PRO WO 166/1045.

² TNA: PRO WO 166/4687; TNA: PRO WO 166/4482; and TNA: PRO WO 166/4320.



The defence of Kirkleatham was based on nine pillboxes or infantry posts, four roadblocks, and an anti-tank ditch, and these ground and air defences were manned by three infantry companies.³ The role of the defending troops was to guard battalion headquarters, to man three anti-aircraft light machine gun posts, to supply the ground defence of the locality, to man roadblocks, and to have a standing patrol ready for deployment at night or in fog.⁴ The defence of the area between Kirkleatham and the coastal front line was the responsibility of No.6 Company of the 4th (Guisborough) Bn., North Riding Home Guard.⁵ Open fields south and east of Kirkleatham were blocked by posts against enemy air landing.

The defences of Kirkleatham were constructed from the beginning of July 1940 by the 509th Field Company Royal Engineers, and the pillboxes and roadblocks had been largely completed by the end of that month, although some additional machine gun emplacements were asked for and built in August. Two and three quarter miles of anti-tank ditch, forming the perimeter defences north, east, and south of Kirkleatham, were dug during August.⁶

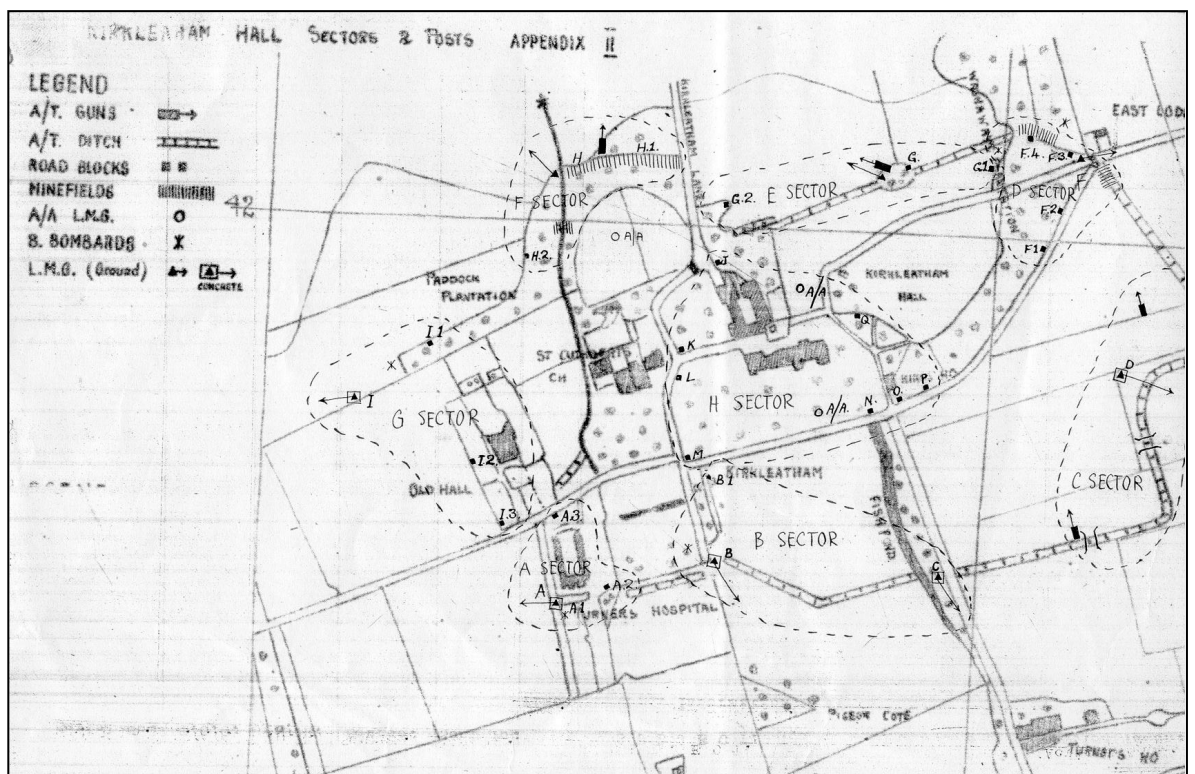


Fig. 3 - Plan showing the defences of Kirkleatham, December 1941.⁷

In mid-1941, the defences of this part of the North Riding Coast Sector were held by 215th Infantry Brigade, Kirkleatham falling within the 'A' Sub Sector of Tees Coastal Sector.⁸ The battalion based at Kirkleatham was now the 7th Bn. Leicestershire Regiment, whose War Diary for this period includes a detailed map

³ TNA: PRO WO 166/4482.

⁴ TNA: PRO WO 166/4320.

⁵ TNA: PRO WO 166/4421.

⁶ TNA: PRO WO 166/3775.

⁷ TNA: PRO WO 166/4421.

⁸ TNA: PRO WO 166/1068 and TNA: PRO WO 166/4421. Earlier, in November 1940 Kirkleatham is placed in the Redcar Sub-Sector of No.1 Sector (217th Infantry Brigade) - see TNA: PRO WO 166/1070.



of the defences.⁹ At this time, Kirkleatham Hall was the headquarters of several military units, including an Army Sub-Group south of the River Tees and a detachment of the Royal Air Force. The defended locality, with its substantial defences, appears to have become a base of growing importance. Four 2pdr. anti-tank guns from the 68th Anti Tank Regiment were positioned there as well as two 60pdr. guns with the task of firing at enemy vessels off the Marske Sands.¹⁰



Fig. 4 - Detail from a November 1946 air photograph showing the course of the anti-tank ditch running from Turners Hospital at the south of Kirkleatham. To the west of the road (Fishponds Road) it has been filled in, but to the east it is still open.

The defence works -

It is unfortunate that the two purpose-built pillboxes surviving at Kirkleatham now stand in the middle of a large open field with no public access when in crop. From a distance, they can be seen to be of different types, with one concrete-faced and the other apparently brick-shuttered [UORNs 5917 and 5916]. They stood at angles to each other, and on opposite sides, of the anti-tank ditch, and their positions marooned in the field are an indicator of the course of this ditch, now long since filled in. Two pillboxes regrettably have been destroyed recently - one at the crossing point of the anti-tank ditch with Fishponds Road (where an open area next to the road indicates its former position) and the other at the south-east corner of Turners Hospital grounds.

⁹ TNA: PRO WO 166/4421.

¹⁰ TNA: PRO WO 166/1068 and TNA: PRO WO 166/4421.

A machine gun post that was built within one of the 18th century drum towers of the perimeter wall of the former Kirkleatham Hall grounds near West Lodge [UORN 10148] still shows the evidence of its blocked in embrasure. Another important survival is the spigot mortar pedestal by the perimeter wall at East Lodge [UORN 10722]. The evidence of a possible vertical rail roadblock near the former junction of Fishponds Road with the Kirkleatham Hall estate may in fact be from a much later block, possibly set up when the adjacent A174 road was being built. Other surviving defence works might yet be found within Kirkleatham, and fieldwork by a local history group to inspect the sites of all the defence positions shown on the 1941 plan could possibly retrieve some further evidence.



Fig. 5 - UORNs 5917 (left) and 5916 standing on what was once the course of the anti-tank ditch south-east of Kirkleatham. Access to these sites is not possible when the field is in crop.



Fig. 6 - UORN 10148 - 18th century drum tower pierced for defence in 1940. The loophole has been crudely blocked in.



Fig. 7 - UORN 10722: spigot mortar pedestal by the perimeter wall at the eastern end of Kirkleatham Hall grounds, positioned so that the weapon could fire over the wall across open fields now occupied by housing. The pedestal was constructed with corrugated iron shuttering.



Fig. 8 - UORN 16611: site of a possible vertical rail roadblock. This may, however, have a more recent origin. It indicates the difficulty in interpretation of some categories of Second World War defence sites.

2.2 Landscape:

The principal landscape changes at Kirkleatham are the post-war destruction of the Hall, other than for its stable block, with the erection on its now wooded site of the various buildings (perhaps temporary) of a school, and the construction between 1972-1975 of the two main roads that now skirt the western and southern sides of the village. Housing developments (part of the suburbs of Redcar) also now abut the eastern boundary of the Kirkleatham Hall estate.



Fig. 9 - The stable block of Kirkleatham Hall - all that survives of the former house.

South of Kirkleatham, large open fields take the place of the former enclosed landscape, and very few of the field divisions and small areas of wood that can be seen on 1940s air photographs remain today. At Kirkleatham itself, however, the pattern of roads within the village remains the same, some fallen into disuse or turned into cycleways since the opening of the new main roads. Within Kirkleatham Hall estate, the pattern of paths, and other features of the once formal grounds, can be made out.

The church with its eighteenth century mausoleum, the seventeenth century Turners Hospital, and Old Hall with its museum, are prominent features of the village, visited by tourists. The museum, and the guide book that can be obtained there, ignore the Second World War history of Kirkleatham entirely.

There is public access to the surviving sites, except for the two pillboxes south-east of Kirkleatham where permission would have to be obtained to visit them at the appropriate season when the fields are fallow.

2.3 Statement of Significance:

Kirkleatham provides an excellent example of a defended locality in a rear position in support of front-line coastal defences, and one used as well increasingly throughout the war to protect a military headquarters of some obvious importance. The intensity of the defence provided is perhaps unusual, and suggests



that Kirkleatham Hall may have been used additionally for some exceptional purpose that is not stated in the available records. Another factor pointing towards that conclusion is that it appears to have been defended, certainly in 1940-41, by units of the regular Field Army entirely, and there was no role for the Home Guard, which was normally active in area defence behind front-line coastal or stop line positions.

Although the surviving remains are few, and the landscape altered considerably, nonetheless these are interesting and unusual examples of defence works. Together with the impressive amount of documentation that has been located, they help in the visualisation of the Second World War defence scheme. The two purpose-built pillboxes are important survivals, particularly since other pillboxes have recently been destroyed. As their position in the middle of fields that are intensively farmed makes them perhaps vulnerable to removal, it will be important to ensure their long-term survival. The spigot mortar pedestal survives in an interesting location where its purpose and use are clear: its corrugated iron construction is unusual. The surviving loopholed drum tower provides an excellent example of what was in essence a defended building, although forming part of the perimeter wall of Kirkleatham Hall.

Information on the Second World War requisition of Kirkleatham Hall, and its surrounding defence, might be added to the local museum, and be available in literature for visitors.

3. **Recommendations:**

1. That the surviving anti-invasion defence works in Kirkleatham be considered of national importance. They enable the defence of this defended locality within the coastal hinterland of Redcar and Cleveland 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 further fieldwork be carried out by a local history group, with the permission of landowners, to determine if there are further surviving defence works, or evidence of others that have been destroyed.
3. That consideration be given, in liaison with the Old Hall Museum and the local authority, to displaying information for visitors on the Second World War history of Kirkleatham.

4. **Supporting material.**

4.1 **Photographs:**

Fig. 1 - from '*Kirkleatham: A History of the Village*', p12.

Fig. 2 - 58/2558 fr.402 (3.9.1958) - NMR.

Fig. 4 - CPE/UK/1835 fr.3142 (13.11.1946) - NMR.

Figs. 5-9 - taken (AWF) during field survey, 30.4.2003.



4.2 **Documentary Sources:**

509th Field Company Royal Engineers War Diary, 1940 - TNA: PRO WO 166/3775.

1/6th Bn. South Staffordshire Regiment War Diary, 1940 - TNA: PRO WO 166/4687.

'Operation Instruction 10', 25.9.1940 (from 6th Bn. North Staffordshire Regiment War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/4482.

'59 Div. Left Sub Sector Defence Scheme', October 1940 (from 176th Infantry Brigade War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/1045.

'Operation Instruction' No.2', 12.10.1940 (from 12th Bn. Green Howards War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/4320.

'Operation Instruction No.1', 8.11.1940 (from 217th Infantry Brigade War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/1070.

'North Riding Coast Sector Home Defence Scheme', August 1941 (from 215th Infantry Brigade War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/1068.

'A' Sub Sector of Tees Coastal Sector Defence Scheme', 20.12.1941 (from 7th Bn. Leicestershire Regiment War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/4421.

4.3 **Published Source:**

Phil Philo, *Kirkleatham: A History of the Village Estate and Old Hall Museum* (Langbaugh on Tees Museum Service), n.d.

4.4 **Aerial Photographs:**

CPE/UK/1835 frs.3142-3143 (13.11.1946) - NMR.

540/612 fr.4093 (9.10.1951) - NMR.

540/1238 fr.145 (12.1.1954) - NMR.

58/1376 fr.79 (9.3.1954) - NMR.

58/2558 fr.402 (3.9.1958) - NMR.

543/2339 fr.132 (31.7.1963) - NMR.

MAL/72020 fr.9 (21.3.1972) - NMR.

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

NZ 5821-5921 (1972 and 1975) - BLML.

NZ 6021-6121 (1971) - BLML.

4.6 **Defence of Britain Project Database:**

[see 5. 'Annex'].

