

DEFENCE AREA 58

AVENING

1. **Area details:**

Avening is 6 miles S of Stroud and 3 miles N of Tetbury.

County: Gloucestershire.

Parish: Avening.

NGR: centre of area, ST 890970

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

The defence area lies to the south-east of the village of Avening, which stands at the head of a steep-sided valley that runs north-east to Nailsworth. This is high Cotswold limestone country, and the defence area lies upon a broadly flat plateau.

At the north of the area are the south-east outskirts of Avening and a gorge running west-east. To the west, east, and south of the area is a landscape of small stone-walled fields intersected by narrow lanes and trackways. At the south-centre of the area Star Farm is positioned at a crossing of lanes and a track, which provides a focus point for the area.

A viewshed is formed by this high, flat landscape, and the line of the lanes that carry the defence line to the south-east. Although the various sites are not inter-visible, they are nevertheless inter-linked, and there is a sense of progression in following them to the south. The southern border of the area is arbitrary and is chosen because of the survival of one defence work at this point. Beyond this border, the defence line continues to the south-east.

2. **Assessment.**

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

Defence overview -

The Avening defence area lay within the military Gloucestershire Sub-Area, and occupied a position in the northern sector of GHQ Line Green. [For a description of GHQ Line Green, see the report on Defence Area 20 - River Brue: Cripp's Bridge: see as well the map at Fig. 2 within that report]. The reconnaissance report on GHQ Line Green made in mid-June 1940 stated that the crossing of the Cotswold plateau would create difficulties owing to the hard limestone close to the surface which the mechanical excavators digging the necessary anti-tank ditch would find hard to work.¹ The task, however, was completed satisfactorily.

The defences of GHQ Line Green in this sector faced east to prevent an advance on Bristol. To its front [east], Gloucester and Cirencester were designated anti-tank

¹ TNA: PRO WO 166/578.



islands providing all-round defence against enemy armour. Tetbury on the Line to the south was a 'centre of resistance', with a garrison in 1941 of 125 men of the 6th Bn. King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry.² The artificial anti-tank ditch of GHQ Line Green was fortified with type 24 infantry pillboxes and with concrete blocks at points where it was cut by roads and trackways.



Fig. 1 - Air photograph taken in March 1946 showing the course of GHQ Line Green south of Avening. The line of the anti-tank ditch can be clearly seen. In the pasture field at the north (top) the ditch has been filled in creating a ridge that still survives today. Elsewhere, the line can be followed in the photograph as a soil mark. Star Farm is at the centre of the view towards the bottom.

The defence works -

The main surviving feature of the defence area is undoubtedly the anti-tank ditch, which, although almost all of it was filled in probably during 1945, can still be seen in part on the ground in the form of a raised ridge. This resulted from the infilling of a large amount of excavated rock that could not be consolidated adequately under a thin top soil. Where the land has remained as pasture, the ridge survives. However, in fields that have been ploughed, the ridge has been reduced and spread resulting in the soil marks that can be seen in air photographs from the late 1940s. The ridge can be made out from the pillbox, UORN 6846, crossing the pasture of two fields and turning a sharp angled corner to run to a point north of Star Cottages.

² TNA: PRO WO 166/1285.



It is remarkable that a raised landscape feature has been created in this way out of an original excavated ditch, which might thus be said to survive but in a totally different form!



Fig. 2 - UORN 14403: length of anti-tank ditch showing on the ground as a substantial ridge used today by the local farmer as a trackway - an example of the change of use of an archaeological feature.

To the east of Star Farm, a length of some 100 metres of the anti-tank ditch survives unfilled within a strip of woodland. Such lengths of open anti-tank ditch are extremely rare [see Defence Area 32 - Hog Wood].



Fig. 3 - UORN 12508: length of unfilled anti-tank ditch east of Star Farm. It is being used as a dump for rubbish.



Fig. 4 - UORN 12508: the open length of anti-tank ditch seen in an air photograph taken in May 1947. Also to be made out in this photograph is the crop mark of a rectilinear feature north of the right hand crossroads. There is no known archaeological site at this location.

Pillbox, UORN 6846, stands at the edge of a steep-sided valley near to Avening. It is made with an outer surface of prefabricated concrete panels bolted into place, and has an attached brick entry porch that serves as well as an exterior blast wall. This is the form of all three surviving pillboxes within the defence area. UORN 6850 by Star Cottages appears in better condition, but is not accessible without permission. This pillbox was positioned forward of the anti-tank ditch, which is highly unusual. The third pillbox, UORN 6851, standing at the edge of the lane is badly overgrown, but its interior, to which there is now no access, appears to be excellently preserved.



Fig. 5 - UORN 6846 - type 24 infantry pillbox overlooking the steep-sided valley that runs from the village of Avening.



Fig. 6 - UORN 6850: type 24 pillbox at Star Cottages made of prefabricated concrete panels and with a roofed entry porch. It appears to be in excellent condition.



Fig. 7 - UORN 6851: this pillbox once commanded the crossing of the lane south of Star Farm by the anti-tank ditch. There was undoubtedly a roadblock near this position as well.

There is evidence of only one of what must have been several roadblocks within the defence area surviving today. Two concrete cylinders stand by the side of the lane seventy metres or so towards Avening from pillbox, UORN 6846. The other likely positions of roadblocks are just north of Star Cottages, at the junction with Roundabout Lane, and near pillbox, UORN 6851. There is no documentary confirmation of these sites, however, so they have not been included in the overall record or on Map 2.





Fig. 8 - UORN 6851: interior of the pillbox - photograph taken through one of the embrasures. Concrete vertical panels bolted into place, and a breeze block anti-ricochet wall, can be seen.

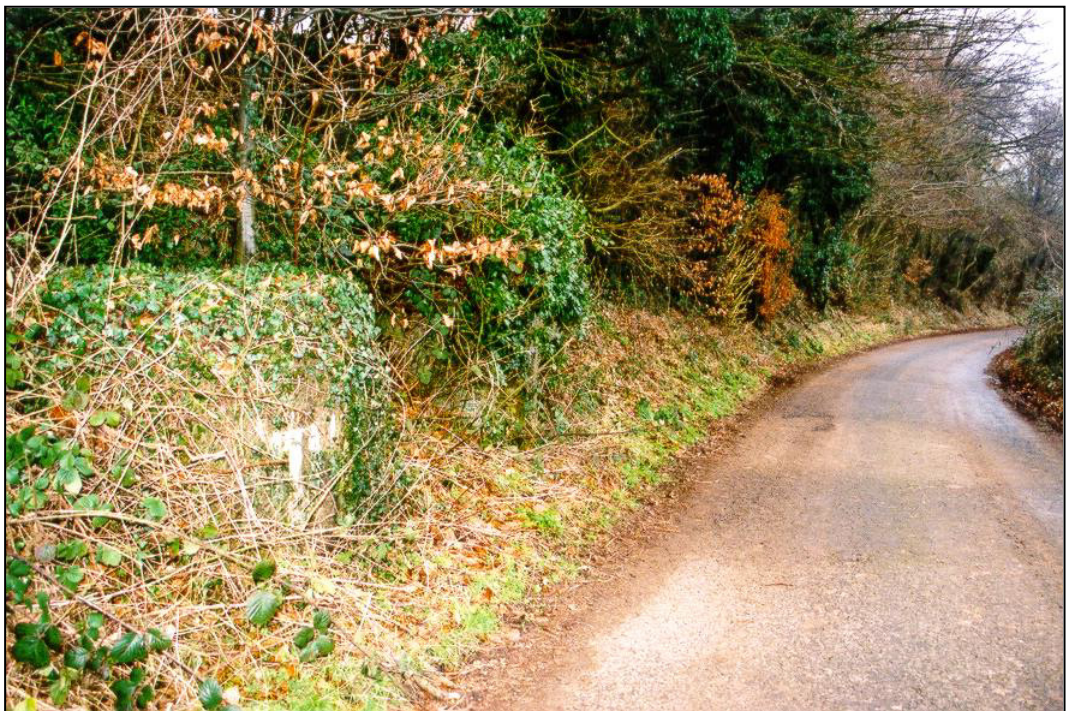


Fig. 9 - UORN 6848: overgrown anti-tank cylinders to the left of the lane mark the site of a roadblock.

Landscape:

The landscape of the defence area has altered very little since 1940. Fields to the west of Star Lane have been opened up by the removal of stone walls, and this has also happened to the fields crossed by the anti-tank ditch to the east of the lane south of Star Farm. Otherwise, the pattern of fields, lanes, and woodland strips remains as it was during the Second World War. There has been no other development of any sort along the course of this section of GHQ Line Green, and the only changes from the



wartime period have been the infilling of the anti-tank ditch and the removal of several pillboxes and roadblocks.

This is a farming landscape away from any tourist trail. The lanes are very narrow and there is little scope for roadside parking. The defence sites can be seen on foot from the lanes and by a footpath that crosses the ridge of the infilled anti-tank ditch.

2.3 Statement of Significance:

The Avening defence area is important as an example of a section of stop line where the main anti-tank obstacle has had to be artificially created. The fact that much of the line of the anti-tank ditch can be seen on the ground, with several covering pillboxes, makes it particularly significant.

The three surviving pillboxes are of an unusual type of construction - a basic type 24 design has been adapted in detail and in the building materials used. Pillboxes that make use of prefabricated concrete sections are relatively rare, and all three of these examples are in good condition.

A 'pillbox walk' could be set out in this attractive area south-east of Avening, using the lanes and footpaths to visit the sites described.

3. Recommendations:

1. That the surviving anti-invasion defence works in the Avening area be considered of national importance. They enable the defence of this section of GHQ Line Green 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 air photographic evidence of defence structures that were built as part of the overall strategy, but which have now been removed.
2. That consideration be given, in a possible initiative with Gloucestershire County Council and the local authority, to establishing a 'pillbox walk' here. It might be possible as well to set up an information board in Avening that would provide details of its position on GHQ Line Green.

4. Supporting material.

4.1 Photographs:

Fig. 1 - 3G/TUD/UK/102 fr.5252 (30.3.1946) - NMR.

Figs 2-3 and 5-9 - taken (AWF) during field survey, 6.2.2003.

Fig. 4 - CPE/UK/2110 fr.4050 (28.5.1947) - NMR.

4.2 Documentary Sources:

'Southern Command Home Defence Programme, 1940' (map from General Headquarters Papers, Defence Works) - TNA: PRO WO 199/48.

'Report on Reconnaissance of Outer Bristol Defence Position', 18.6.1940 (from 48 Division 'GS' War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/578.



'Operational Instruction No.1', 24.9.1941 (from Gloucestershire Sub-Area War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/1285.

4.3 **Published Source:**

(Major) M. Green, *Warwalks: Stop Line Green* (Reardon Publishing, 1999).

4.4 **Aerial Photographs:**

3G/TUD/UK/102 frs.5218-5220 (30.3.1946) - NMR.

3G/TUD/UK/102 frs.5251-5253 (30.3.1946) - NMR.

CPE/UK/2110 fr.3049 (28.5.1947) - NMR.

CPE/UK/2110 frs.4049-4050 (28.5.1947) - NMR.

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

ST 8896-8996 (1977) - BLML.

ST 8897-8997 (1977) - BLML.

ST 9096-9196 (1977) - BLML.

4.6 **Defence of Britain Project Database:**

[see 5. 'Annex'].

