

DEFENCE AREA 59

FRILFORD / FYFIELD

1. Area details:

The defence area is 4 miles W of Abingdon and 9 miles ENE of Faringdon.

County: Oxfordshire.

Parishes: Frilford / Fyfield and Tubney.

NGR: centre of area, SU 425980.

1.1 Area Description: [see Map 1].

The defence area lies between the villages of Frilford and Fyfield, in a flat landscape of large arable fields and the occasional stand of woodland. Frilford lies on the A415 road to Abingdon, and to its north a new stretch of the A420 road now by-passes Fyfield. Digging Lane connects the two roads. To the south-west of the area is the disused Second World War airfield of Kingston Bagpuize.

The area is formed by the defence line that crossed it, its north-western boundary being the north side of Fyfield village, and its south-eastern, Collins Farm buildings within Frilford. The western and eastern boundaries are arbitrary within the flat landscape of open fields. Viewsheds are formed to the north-east and south-west, allowing the course of the line to be seen in both directions from the emplacements, UORNs 11971 and 11972, which stand at the centre of the area.



Fig. 1 - The flat landscape of the defence area, looking north-west towards Digginglane Cottages south of Fyfield from the position of the anti-tank gun emplacements, UORNs 11971 and 11972. The darker green area to the left of the photograph was once covered by a wood.

2. Assessment.

2.1 Defences: [see Map 2]

Defence overview -

The defence area was crossed by GHQ Line Red, the main front-edge anti-tank obstacle of which was a machine-dug ditch that ran in this section from the River Thames south-west of Abingdon to rejoin it near Appleton north of Fyfield, thereby cutting off a great loop of the river that includes Oxford. [For further details of GHQ Line Red, see Defence Area 7 - Sulham Valley].

The defence of the area also rested on the Southern Command anti-tank islands of Witney and Faringdon, the South Midland Area anti-tank island of Oxford, and a 'centre of resistance' at Abingdon. Allocated troops to man this section of the Line were four platoons of the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, together with local Home Guard units, which in the study defence area were the Frilford and Fyfield platoons of the 1st (Abingdon) Battalion, Berkshire Home Guard.¹ To the south-west, just beyond the defence area, lay the airfield of Kingston Bagpuize, greatly expanded in the summer of 1943 for the United States Army Air Force.²

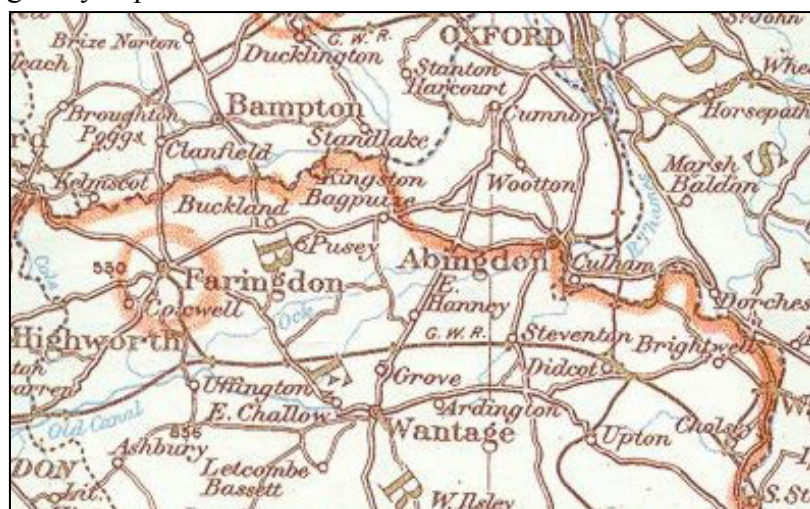


Fig. 2 - Portion of a Southern Command map of 1940 showing the course of GHQ Line Red south of Oxford.³

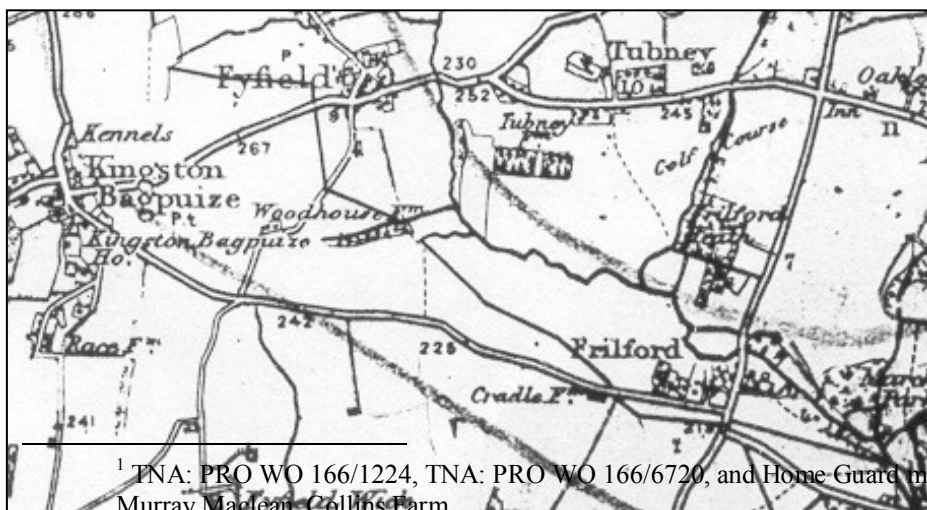


Fig. 3 - Portion of a map made in 1943 for the purpose of infilling the anti-tank ditch. This work was carried out in mid-1944. The anti-tank ditch is the line with

¹ TNA: PRO WO 166/1224, TNA: PRO WO 166/6720, and Home Guard map in possession of Mr. Murray Maclean, Collins Farm.

² TNA: PRO MAF 48/385.

³ Map from TNA: PRO WO 199/48.



the sharp-angled bends between Frilford and Fyfield.⁴



Fig. 4 - USAAF air photograph taken in March 1944 showing the open anti-tank ditch. Frilford is off the photograph at its centre right edge and Fyfield is at the upper left corner. Part of Kingston Bagpuize airfield is at the bottom left. The positions of anti-tank gun emplacements, pillboxes, section posts, and roadblocks can be seen. Particularly clear at the first angle of the ditch from the right edge are anti-tank gun emplacements, UORNs 9546 and 11973. A section of the ditch closest to the right hand of these emplacements has been re-excavated [UORN 16702 - see Fig. 7].

A particular feature of the defence of this section of GHQ Line Red are its 2pdr. anti-tank gun emplacements, of the type 28A with an additional light machine gun chamber, often arranged in pairs at angles of the anti-tank ditch. Three such pairs can be seen within the defence area. All these emplacements have a single main embrasure, and presumably it was considered more practical to place two back to back in this way rather than construct the twin-embrasure type, with fields of fire at

⁴ Map from PRO MAF 169/64.



ninety degree angles, that can be seen, for example, in the Sulham Valley [see Defence Area 7].

The 2pdr. emplacements were interspersed with gun pits for the 6pdr. Hotchkiss gun that could swivel through 360 degrees. Eight of these were planned in the eastern section of GHQ Line Red, and one survives within the defence area.⁵

Although there are no surviving remains, clear evidence can be obtained from the 1944 air photograph of the blocks at the four road crossings of the anti-tank ditch - the A338 road on the east side of Frilford, the A415 west of Frilford, Digging Lane south of Fyfield, and the old A420 at Fyfield itself. Also to be seen clearly on this air photograph is the 'V'- shaped earthwork of a section post north of the anti-tank ditch [UORN 16748], a structure for which photographic evidence is rare.

The defence works -

The first pair of anti-tank emplacements west of Frilford stand between the border of Collins Farm and its neighbour [UORNs 9546 and 11973]. UORN 9546 is used as a chemicals store, and there is no interior access, but UORN 11973 is open and in exceptionally good condition.⁶ Close to UORN 9546, a twenty yard section of the anti-tank ditch has been re-excavated in recent years and left open so that the width, depth, and profile of the earthwork can be seen. It is twenty feet across and eight feet deep.



Fig. 5 - UORN 9546: 2pdr. anti-tank gun emplacement now converted into a store for dangerous chemicals.

⁵ Alexander, 'Ironside's Line', p52.

⁶ In 1944, the owner of Collins Farm requested that he be allowed to use emplacement, UORN 9546, and save 'the trouble of moving it' - TNA: PRO MAF 169/64.





Fig. 6 - The interior of anti-tank gun emplacement, UORN 11973. The slot in the floor is to take the trail of the 2pdr. anti-tank gun. This structure is in excellent, clean condition, although it is doubtful if the green paint is original.



Fig. 7 - The re-excavated section of anti-tank ditch on Collins Farm, with anti-tank gun emplacement, UORN 9546, behind. The ditch made a sharp- angled corner here, passing in front of the post-war shed and the second emplacement [UORN 11973], a corner of which can just be seen beyond the hedge.⁷

⁷ Mr. Murray Maclean of Collins Farm has excavated a further stretch of the anti-tank ditch adjacent to the roadblock on the A415 road [UORN 16701] finding that its terminal was revetted in concrete at a point some yards before the road edge.



The second pair of anti-tank gun emplacements stand by a public footpath at the centre of the study defence area [UORNs 11971 and 11972], and are in a very overgrown condition. They were positioned at a slight angle in the anti-tank ditch at a point where in 1940 there was a thick wood preventing visibility to the west. The third pair of emplacements [UORNs 11966 and 11967] stand on land at Manor Farm in Fyfield where recent housing has been built close to them. The latter were not inspected at close quarters during the project fieldwork, but they appear to be in good condition.



Fig. 8 - UORN 11972: this type 28A anti-tank gun emplacement is in relatively good condition, with only a small amount of interior graffiti. As it stands by a public footpath, it can easily be inspected.



Fig. 9 - Interior of anti-tank gun emplacement, UORN 11971, showing its LMG chamber.



Fig. 10 - A pair of type 28A anti-tank gun emplacements [UORNs 11966 (right) and 11967], seen from a distance.

An outstanding and rare survival is the open emplacement (or gun pit) with a central pedestal and holdfast to mount a 6pdr. Hotchkiss gun, traversing through 360 degrees, that stands, complete with its ammunition lockers, just east of the junction of the A338 road with the A415 on the east side of Frilford [UORN 7220].



Fig. 11 - UORN 7200: 6pdr. gun pit, with central pedestal and holdfast to mount the swivelling Hotchkiss 'QF' gun. Lockers for ammunition surround the emplacement.

An infantry pillbox [UORN 11970] recorded on Digging Lane appears to have been destroyed in recent years. However, an excellent example of a type 22 pillbox, strengthened against shell fire, survives in the garden of a house off the A415 road opposite Collins Farm.



Fig. 12 - UORN 11974: type 22 pillbox strengthened to withstand shell fire. The roof has chamfered edges, a feature found usually on heavier emplacements.



Fig. 13 - UORN 11974: the pillbox's original reference number is painted on its interior blast wall.

2.2 Landscape:

In the sixty years since the Second World War, this predominantly flat, open landscape of field and wood has been opened up further, with many field divisions removed and some areas of woodland grubbed out. The only housing development that affects the study defence area has been on the west side of Fyfield where a small cul-de-sac has been built and houses erected.

The new A420 road that by-passes Fyfield on its south side has left this village agreeably quiet. As no parking is possible by the side of the A415 road at Frilford, it is recommended that visitors wishing to see the defence works park in a lay-by on the old main road near Manor Farm in Fyfield, and take the footpath from Digginglane Cottages that crosses the defence area. Permission should be sought to see the sites on Collins Farm.

2.3 Statement of Significance:

The defence area illustrates well a sector of GHQ Line Red, with its pairs of anti-tank gun emplacements placed at strategic points along the course of the anti-tank ditch. The excellent air photographic evidence enables the other components of defence, long since removed, to be reconstructed.

All the type 28A anti-tank gun emplacements at their three locations survive, with most in good condition, providing excellent examples of this type of defence work. The open 6pdr. emplacement [UORN 7220] is a rare structure, and it survives in good condition with its pedestal, holdfast, and ammunition lockers complete. However, it should be considered as highly vulnerable to destruction or burial should there be development at this point. The type 22 pillbox [UORN 11974] stands in private grounds, and has, therefore, survived in pristine condition, other than for its modern use as a store. It is an important example of an infantry pillbox built to withstand shell fire.

The section of anti-tank ditch that has been re-excavated and left open is the only example that is known where such work has been undertaken, and is thus important for the understanding it provides of the depth, width, and profile of these earthworks, as well as their position in relation to the defence structures built alongside them.⁸

3. Recommendations:

1. That the surviving anti-invasion defence works in the Frilford - Fyfield area be considered of national importance. They enable the defence of this part of GHQ Line Red 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 provided in this report of defence structures that were built as part of the overall strategy, but which have now been removed.
2. That consideration be given to removing the overgrowth on the anti-tank emplacements adjacent to the public footpath south of Digginglane Cottages [UORNs 11971 and 11972].

⁸ There are a few lengths open of anti-tank ditches that have never been infilled, of which the example at Hog Wood [see Defence Area 32] is the most significant.



4. **Supporting material.**

4.1 **Photographs:**

Figs. 1, 5-10, and 12-13 - taken (AWF) during field survey, 4.9.2003.

Fig. 4 - US/7PH/GP/LOC208 fr.5004 (8.3.1944) - NMR.

Fig. 11 - from 'Invasion 1940: Britain's Defence Line near Radley', p7 [See 'Published Sources' below].

4.2 **Documentary Sources:**

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

[Home Guard maps], 1940 - in possession of Mr. Murray Maclean, Collins Farm, Frilford.

South Midland Area HQ War Diary, 1940 - TNA: PRO WO 166/1224.

'Construction of GHQ Zones, defence lines, road blocks, etc', July-October 1940 - TNA: PRO WO 199/1801.

'Construction of Anti-Tank Islands and Centres of Resistance', 1940-1941 - TNA: PRO WO 199/1714.

'Restoration of Land Used for Anti-Tank Trenches' (Berkshire County War Agricultural Executive Committee), 1941-1944 - TNA: PRO MAF 169/64.

Berkshire and Oxfordshire Sub-Area War Diary, 1942 - TNA: PRO WO 166/6720.

'Acquisition of Agricultural Land for an Airfield at Kingston Bagpuize', 1943-1944 - TNA: PRO MAF 48/385.

'G.H.Q Line Rear or Section Red: Research Report' [No author, no date] - copy with Defence of Britain Project Archive, NMR.

4.3 **Published Sources:**

Colin Alexander, *Ironside's Line* (Historic Military Press, 1999).

Nigel Dawe, 'An Anti-Tank Ditch Restored' (from *Loopholes* No.5 pp 20-21, September 1993).

Leslie Smith & Tony Money, 'Invasion 1940: Britain's Defence Line near Radley' (from *Old Radleian Magazine*, pp 3-16, 1999).

4.4 **Aerial Photographs:**

US/7PH/GP/LOC208 frs.5003-5004 (8.3.1944) - NMR.

106G/UK/1408 frs.3099-3100 (12.4.1946) - NMR.

106G/UK/1408 frs.4100-4101 (12.4.1946) - NMR.

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

SU 4098-4198 (1975) - BLML.

SU 4297-4397 (1975) - BLML.

SU 4298-4398 (1975) - BLML.

4.6 **Defence of Britain Project Database:**

[see 5. 'Annex'].

