

# DEFENCE AREA 60

## DRURIDGE

### 1. Area details:

Druridge is 5½ miles S of Amble, 5½ miles N of Newbiggin, and 8 miles NE of Morpeth.

County: Northumberland.

Parish: Widdrington.

NGR: centre of area, NZ 278960.

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

The defence area consists of the coast and its immediate hinterland on Druridge Bay, from a position north of the small settlement at Druridge (now just a farm and cottages) to one south of the farm at Hemscott Hill. Here, at low tide, is a broad, flat sandy beach backed by sand dunes rising to a height of twenty-five feet. At intervals along the beach are several natural gaps in the dunes allowing access to the beach, and north of Hemscott Hill a stream flows onto the beach. The beach and the dunes are owned in part by the National Trust. North of Druridge is the Druridge Pools Nature Reserve run by the Northumberland Wildlife Trust.

A minor road from Cresswell runs parallel with the coast, turning inland at Druridge where it passes close to the ruins of a fourteenth century preceptory of the Knights of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem.



*Fig. 1 - The flat, open beach at Druridge backed by sand dunes.*



Viewsheds are formed by the sweep of the beach north and south backed by the high dunes, and by the buildings of Druridge and Hemscott Hill which act as 'anchor points' at the northern and southern borders of the defence area.

## 2. Assessment.

### 2.1 Defences: [see Map 2]

#### *Defence overview -*

The level sandy beach at Druridge Bay was considered to be exceptionally vulnerable to an attack by enemy landing craft. It was the most critical point (the Centre Sub-Sector of No.2 Sector) at the centre of the defence positions occupied by the 162nd Infantry Brigade, defending the Northumberland coast during the critical invasion danger period of June - September 1940.<sup>1</sup> By November 1940, this brigade had been replaced by the 202nd Infantry Brigade.<sup>2</sup>

The defence of Druridge Bay was organised by front-line firing positions, including pillboxes, situated amongst the sand dunes overlooking the beach. Anti-tank cubes were positioned in almost continuous lengths along the beach, but blocking in particular the exits between the dunes where they were arranged in two and sometimes three lines. From 1941, these were supplemented by anti-tank scaffolding, normally placed in front of the concrete cubes, but sometimes behind.

An anti-tank ditch was dug at the back of the dunes, and minefields were laid.

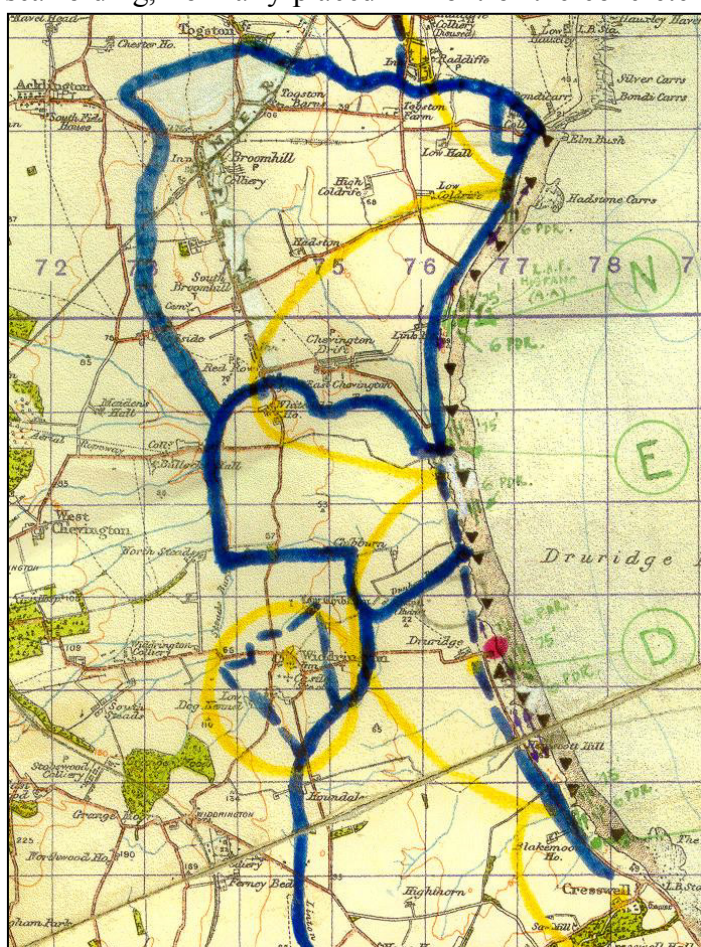


Fig. 2 - Section of a map that indicates both the intensity and the complexity of the defence at Druridge Bay. The red blob on the map is at the defended locality of Druridge itself. The blue lines show the courses of anti-tank ditches, and the yellow lines, company boundaries.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/1035.

<sup>2</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/1055.

<sup>3</sup> TNA: PRO WO 199/1508.



From early in 1941, the extended defences along Druridge Bay were arranged around a series of defended localities, of which there were two at Druridge (Posts Nos.1 and 2), another at Hemscott Hill, and a further to the rear at Chibburn.<sup>4</sup> At the latter, the medieval preceptory was included in the defences. Also to the rear, Widdrington and Widdrington Station were defended with machine gun emplacements and roadblocks, with a further anti-tank ditch running in front of these positions. The slightly higher ground here gave a good command of the beach front.<sup>5</sup> Battle headquarters for the defence of the Druridge Bay Sub-Sector was at Druridge, with both company and battalion headquarters to the rear at Widdrington Station where the railway line, which gave this place its name, formed the rear boundary. Open fields were blocked against enemy aircraft by machine-dug anti-landing trenches.

Two-pounder anti-tank guns were positioned at Druridge and south of Hemscott Hill, while at Druridge were two 6pdr. guns manned by 938 Battery of the 9th (Northumbrian) Defence Regiment RA. To the rear were two 60pdr guns and a 4.75mm with firing tasks on the beaches.<sup>6</sup> In addition, a coast battery, with two Mk.VII 6in. guns and two searchlights manned by 311 Battery of 510 Coast Regiment RA, was sited at Hemscott Hill.<sup>7</sup>

The 7th Bn. East Lancashire Regiment manned the beach front defences of the Druridge Sub-Sector from late 1940 to mid-1941, with one company forward and one in reserve at Widdrington. The defended localities at Druridge were held by a single platoon, with a further platoon responsible for the two 6pdr. guns and a beach light. Seven accommodation huts were provided for these troops.<sup>8</sup> Defences at Widdrington, including roadblocks, pillboxes, and 'beehives' [thought to be sandbagged positions], were manned by the 3rd Bn. Northumberland Home Guard.<sup>9</sup>



*Fig. 3 - Beach front defences at Hemscott in a 1941 air photograph. The anti-tank ditch running between the road and the sand dunes can be seen, as can lines of anti-tank cubes and scaffolding blocking beach exits. The coast battery is positioned amongst the sand dunes: its accommodation huts are clearly visible, and it is possible to make out the gun positions.*

<sup>4</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/4341.

<sup>5</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/4255. Some of the rear-position anti-tank ditches were dug as late as 1942.

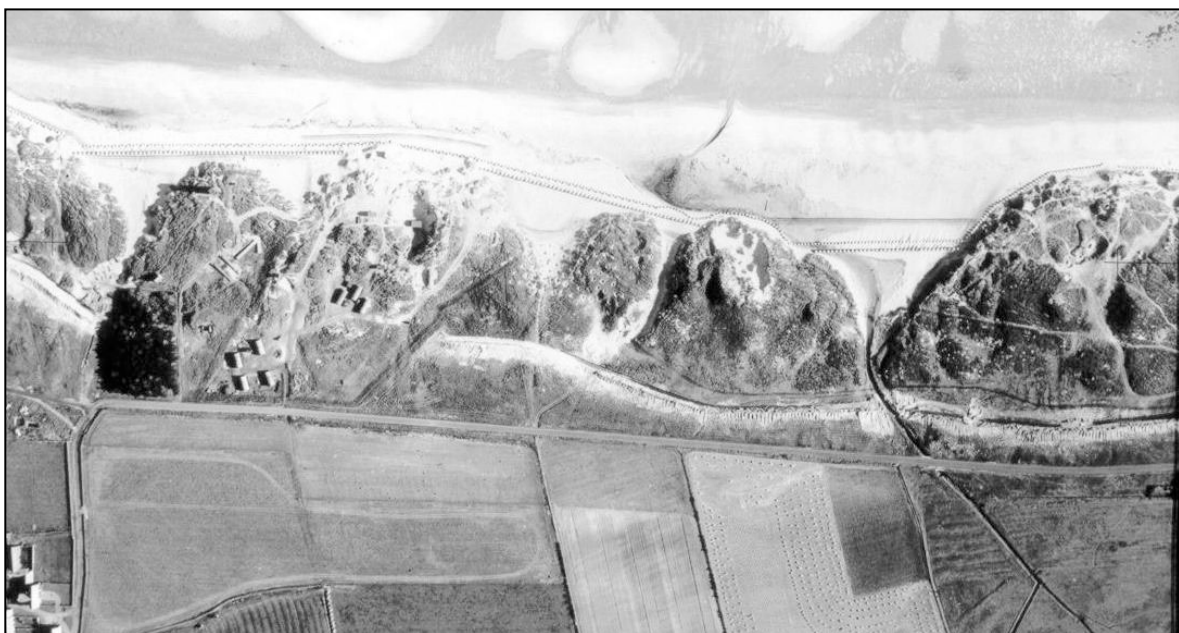
<sup>6</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/4255.

<sup>7</sup> TNA: PRO WO 192/99.

<sup>8</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/4255.

<sup>9</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/1035.





*Fig. 4 - The defended locality of Druridge seen in a 1941 air photograph. Anti-tank blocks, scaffolding, and ditch are all clearly visible, as are the accommodation huts of the defending troops. The arrow is the direction marker of an air bombing range.*



*Fig. 5 - Anti-tank scaffolding is seen in this detail from a 1941 oblique view. The beach scaffolding was erected from the Spring of 1941.*

#### *The defence works -*

Two examples of pillboxes survive amongst the sand dunes at Druridge [UORNs 7220 and 7135]. The first is a medium machine gun type with two entrances, and the latter a variant on a hexagonal type 24 infantry pillbox. UORN 7220 is almost completely buried, and it is possible that other pillboxes have disappeared entirely under the sand.



*Fig. 6 - UORN 7220: medium machine gun pillbox now largely buried under the sand dunes.*





*Fig. 7 - UORN 7135: hexagonal infantry pillbox with protected entrance positioned to enfilade the beach with its fire.*

A remarkable survival is a pillbox purpose-built as a ruined cottage at the edge of the road to the south of Hemscott Hill [UORN 7011]. This is in perfect condition, with no damage or vandalism, and is an important example of a disguised defence work where the camouflage was built as part of the pillbox's overall construction scheme.

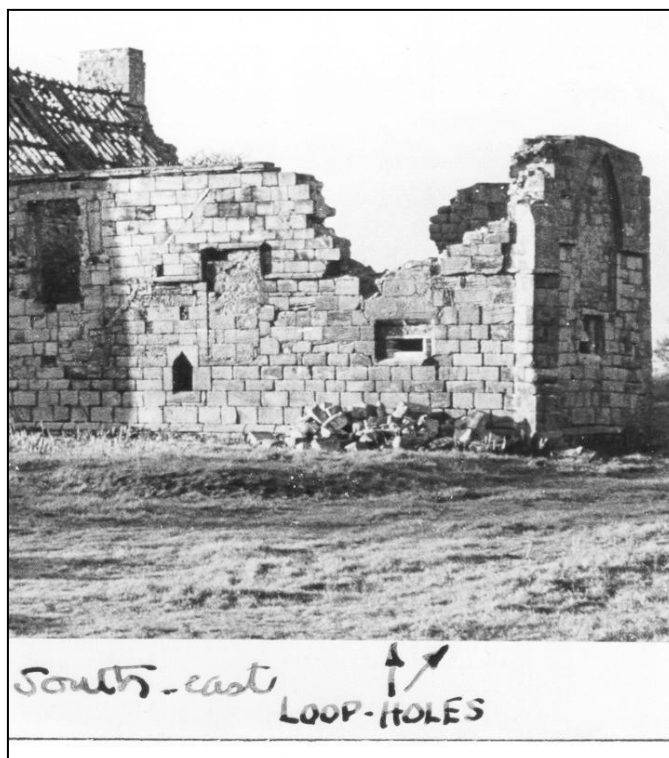


*Fig. 8 - UORN 7011: pillbox disguised as a ruined cottage. The pillbox has not been inserted in a pre-existing building, but has been purpose-built with its disguised exterior.*



*Fig. 9 - UORN 7011: the interior showing a brick anti-ricochet wall, an embrasure with concrete shelf, and a reinforced concrete roof made with corrugated-iron shuttering.*

An example of a pillbox that had been inserted for camouflage in an existing building was formerly provided by the medieval preceptory at Low Chibburn. Here a pillbox built in the ruined chapel [UORN 15673] survived until 1994 when it was removed as part of the consolidation of the ruins. It is understood that this happened despite the pillbox being scheduled as part of the historic fabric of the preceptory. One of its loopholes through the medieval walls has been rebuilt, however, and there is an illustrated information board erroneously stating that this was a 1940 'look out'.



*Fig. 10 - Photograph taken in December 1945 showing loopholes of the pillbox built within the preceptory chapel. The pillbox was removed in the 1990s and the medieval walls 'restored'. The loophole that has been left in place is on the far side.*



*Fig. 11 - The chapel of the Preceptory of the Knights Hospitallers, Low Chibburn within which a 1940 pillbox stood until 1994.*

Despite clearance, and possibly burial, of many of the hundreds of anti-tank cubes that once lined the head of the beach, several short lengths still survive at gaps in the dunes. These may have been preserved because they were considered useful in preventing motorised access to the sands, an interesting update on their original purpose.



*Fig. 12 - UORN 16612: anti-tank cubes still blocking one of the beach exits north of Druridge. Other cubes are probably buried beneath the sand.*



*Fig. 13 - UORN 16591: anti-tank cubes, now ex-situ but close to their original location, blocking this exit from Druridge Beach at a point where a stream crosses the sand.*

A length of the anti-tank ditch running to the rear of the sand dunes can still be made out north of Druridge. Where the ditch was dug amongst the dunes it is unlikely that it was ever formally infilled, but it has simply filled over the years with drifting sand. Excavation would probably reveal evidence of its revetment.



*Fig. 14 - UORN 16587: evidence of the anti-tank ditch running behind the sand dunes can still be seen*

Although no evidence of the beach scaffolding was seen when the fieldwork for this study was undertaken, it has been reported in the past that rough seas have exposed sections of the scaffolding base that was buried by sand rather than being removed in its entirety.<sup>10</sup>

At Hemscott Hill, amongst the sand dunes, it is possible to make out the positions of the gun emplacements of the coast battery. Some remnants of concrete and brick remain, and a great deal more is probably buried. Close by the stub walls of a building may be the remains of one of the accommodation huts.



*Fig. 15 - UORN 15181: the site of one of the gun emplacements of Hemscott Battery. Various earthworks can be made out which should be professionally surveyed.*

## **2.2 Landscape:**

The landscape of beach and sand dunes, with the coast road running behind, remains as it was in 1940. However, the fields beyond were only restored to agriculture in the mid-1970s having been the site of the Radar Opencast Coal Mine for sixteen years from 1957. In this period eighteen million tons of coal were extracted, and a further 200,000 tons were sought beneath the Low Clibburn preceptory by the Ministry of Fuel and Power who proposed obliterating these ruins as they seemed derelict and of little value. The fact that the military had damaged them during the war was also cited in favour of their destruction. This proposal was resisted strongly by the Ministry of Works, and a compromise agreed whereby mining was allowed to a distance of twenty feet from the preceptory's walls.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See Defence of Britain Project database (record 7202) - NMR.

<sup>11</sup> TNA: PRO WORK 14/2672. The Ministry of Works commented, 'This is a monstrous blasphemy by a set of ignoramuses. Who are the officials of this upstart Ministry to teach us the value of a scheduled ancient monument?'



A grass car parking area has been established by the dunes at Druridge, providing access for visitors to the beach and the nature reserve. A couple of large, square concrete structures here are probably related to sewage pumping (or have some other such function) as they are unlikely to be of military origin. A further small car park is sited on the dunes-side of the coast road south of Hemscott Hill. This car park should be used by visitors wishing to see the ruined cottage pillbox [UORN 7011] as it is dangerous to stop by this structure on the road.

All the surviving defence works can be accessed on the beach and amongst the sand dunes, and a footpath runs across the fields from near the Druridge car park to the Low Clibburn preceptory.

### **2.3 Statement of Significance:**

Druridge provides a good example of coastal defence in an area that was very vulnerable to attack owing to the broad, flat beach of Druridge Bay backed by sand dunes through which are many gaps. All the various components of coastal defence were, therefore, present - beach scaffolding, anti-tank obstacles, anti-tank ditches, barbed wire, minefields, pillboxes, weapons pits, slit trenches, beach defence guns, and a coast battery. Artillery was also ranged on the beach from gun positions inland.

Although the beach and dunes have long since been cleared of most of the defence works, enough survive for the overall defence scheme to be understood. The three pillboxes, including the outstanding ruined cottage site, make an important group, and to this can be added the site at the medieval preceptory where one loophole has been preserved. The remaining anti-tank cubes are a reminder of the great lengths of double, and even triple, blocks that once lined the beach. The surviving earthworks of both the anti-tank ditch and the coast battery should be surveyed so that a full record of these sites can be made. In particular, it would be useful to establish the exact layout of the battery as no surviving plan has been located and air photographic evidence is unclear.

## **3. Recommendations:**

1. That the surviving anti-invasion defence works in the Druridge area be considered of national importance. They enable the defence of this section of the coast of Northumberland 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 a professional survey be made of the earthwork remains of Hemscott Battery, as well as the length of anti-tank ditch north of Druridge.
3. That the information board at the Low Clibburn Preceptory ruins be amended to include more accurate information on the pillbox that stood here and its role in the scheme of anti-invasion defence.



4. That, in a possible initiative with Northumberland County Council or the National Trust, consideration be given to providing information for the public on the Second World War defence of Druridge Bay. An information board for this purpose could be set up at the Druridge car park. A short 'pillbox walk' to surviving structures could also be drawn up.

#### 4. **Supporting material.**

##### 4.1 **Photographs:**

Figs. 1, 6-9, and 11-15 - taken (AWF) during field survey, 3.5.2003.  
Fig. 3 - S/629 fr.68 (22.10.1941) - NMR.  
Fig. 4 - S/629 fr.67 (22.10.1941) - NMR.  
Fig. 5 - MSO 31272 fr.102 (22.10.1941) - NMR.  
Fig. 10 - TNA: PRO WORK 14/1170.

##### 4.2 **Documentary Sources:**

'Operation Order No.4', 8.9.1940 and Operation Instructions Nos.1 and 2, January 1941 (from 162nd Infantry Brigade War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/1035.  
'Operation Instruction No.7', 14.11.1940 (from Northumbrian Area HQ War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/1230.  
'Operation Order No.2', 15.11.1940 (from 202nd Infantry Brigade War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/1055.  
2nd Bn. Hertfordshire Regiment War Diary, 1940-1941 - TNA: PRO WO 166/4341.  
'Operation Order ', 2.1.1941 and 'Defence Scheme', 28.4.1941 (from 7th Bn. East Lancashire Regiment War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/4255.  
Anti-Tank Ditches: Northern Command Schemes, 1941-1942 - TNA: PRO WO 199/1444.  
Northumberland Area: coast defence - map showing anti-tank ditches, 1942 - TNA: PRO WO 199/1508.  
Fort Record Book: Druridge [Hemscott] Battery, 1942 - TNA: PRO WO 192/99.  
'Standing Defence Instruction, Appendix 'A", 1943 (from Northumbrian District 'G' War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/10875.  
The Preceptory, Widdrington, 1940-1946 - TNA: PRO WORK 14/1170.  
The Preceptory, Widdrington, 1954-1971 - TNA: PRO WORK 14/2672.  
Naval Intelligence Department: Beach Survey, Druridge Bay, June 1961 - TNA: PRO ADM 326/113.

##### 4.3 **Aerial Photographs:**

MSO 31044 fr.1914 (21.8.1940) - NMR.  
MSO 31044 fr.1915 (21.8.1940) - NMR.  
MSO 31044 fr.1916 (21.8.1940) - NMR.  
MSO 31044 fr.1918 (21.8.1940) - NMR.  
MSO 31034 fr.2404 (13.3.1941) - NMR.  
MSO 31034 fr.2406 (13.3.1941) - NMR.  
S/629 frs.64-70 (22.10.1941) - NMR.  
MSO 31272 fr.90 (22.10.1941) - NMR.  
MSO 31272 fr.91 (22.10.1941) - NMR.



MSO 31272 fr.92 (22.10.1941) - NMR.  
MSO 31272 fr.93 (22.10.1941) - NMR.  
MSO 31272 fr.97 (22.10.1941) - NMR.  
MSO 31272 fr.101 (22.10.1941) - NMR.  
MSO 31272 fr.102 (22.10.1941) - NMR.  
CPE/UK/SCOT/221 fr.3002 (27.6.1947) - NMR.  
541/394 fr.3046 (14.11.1949) - NMR.  
MAL/70054 fr.67 (30.6.1970) - NMR.

4.4 **Ordnance Survey 1: 2500 Plans:**  
NZ 2696-2796 (1959) - BLML.

4.5 **Defence of Britain Project Database:**  
[see 5. 'Annex'].

