

# DEFENCE AREA 63

## DUNSTER BEACH

### 1. Area details:

Dunster Beach is 1 mile N of Dunster and 2 miles E of Minehead.

County: Somerset.

Parish: Dunster

NGR: centre of area, ST 007443.

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

The defence area consists of the foreshore and immediate hinterland of Dunster Beach within the western half of Blue Anchor Bay. Running parallel with the coast and crossing the area is the West Somerset (Taunton to Minehead) Railway line. South of the railway, and beyond the area, is the A39 road and the line of hills where the small town of Dunster itself is situated.

The coastline and the railway are key features within the defence area. At its western end is Dunster holiday village (on the site of a former army camp) and the Dunster Beach car park. To the east, the railway runs close to the beach, and this point marks the eastern border of the area from which Blue Anchor and the eastern half of Blue Anchor Bay can be seen. The railway line, and the rising land beyond, mark the southern border.



*Figs. 1 and 2 - Dunster holiday village at the western edge of the defence area is on the site of a former Second World War army camp (right).*

The beach is a flat shingle and sand expanse at low tide, very vulnerable to an enemy landing. Behind the beach, the land is farmed - a mixture of arable and pasture fields with the occasional clump of woodland. Viewsheds are formed by the curving line of the beach to the east and by the railway line and hills to the south.





*Fig. 3 - Dunster Beach looking east. The flat shingle and sand expanses of the beach made it particularly vulnerable to a German seaborne landing.*

## 2. **Assessment.**

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

#### *Defence overview -*

The defence of Dunster Beach formed part of Southern Command's responsibility for the protection of the North Somerset coast. This stretch of coastline fell within the Somerset Sub-Area of the military Western Area. In the Defence Scheme of the Western Area dated 23 June 1941, it was stated that 'the North coast of Somerset is NOT at present considered to be a likely initial objective of an enemy sea borne attack'. The reasons for this opinion were given as the long distances involved from enemy ports and the difficulties of navigation in the Bristol Channel.<sup>1</sup> Notwithstanding, considerable defences were erected along this coast between 1940-1941.

The Blue Anchor Bay defences, which included Dunster Beach, fell within the Dunster Sector, which appears to have been divided into six Defence Localities.<sup>2</sup> In December 1940, the 12th Defence Regiment RA, with 20 officers and 67 other ranks, was garrisoning the Dunster Sector. Also operational in the Sector was the Dunster Battalion of the Somerset Home Guard, with 4 officers and 161 other ranks.<sup>3</sup>

Watchet and Minehead were two designated 'Centres of Resistance', for the garrisoning of which 60 men from the 58th Medium Regiment RA were assigned. The defence responsibilities within the Dunster Sector were not confined to coastal protection. A fear was that German airborne troops would land on the uplands of

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<sup>1</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/1251.

<sup>2</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/1251.

<sup>3</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/1317.



North Somerset and Devon, and combine with a sea borne landing on the Dorset coast to cut off the South West peninsula. Patrols were sent from the Dunster Sector into the Brendon and Quantock Hills to watch for this danger.<sup>4</sup>



*Fig. 4 - The coastline of the Dunster Beach defence area in an air photograph taken in 1947. The army camp is at the extreme left. Defence works can be seen along the line of the beach and against the railway line to the rear.*

Oblique air photographs and surviving field evidence show that the Dunster Sector coastline was heavily defended. By June 1941, an army camp was established at the western end of the study defence area, and was surrounded by a number of pillboxes and trenches. It is perhaps surprising that this camp was established in such an exposed position, and with little apparent attempt at camouflage. To its east, in the area of the current beach car park, there is evidence for the positioning of a beach defence battery, although at what date these guns were placed here is not known. A major area of defences was around Sea Lane End where several pillboxes and other defence works were erected. A number of pillboxes were positioned

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<sup>4</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/1317.





along the beach at the high water mark, and air photographs show amongst them an unusual type of structure that is probably a concrete section post. This takes the form of a rectangular pillbox with two wings, each with four forward-facing embrasures, the central core of the pillbox being unroofed, possibly for anti-aircraft fire, and with a single embrasure. Six of these structures have been plotted from air photographs within the area. None survive today, although it is possible that a length of curving wall near to Sea Lane End may have been part of one. Section posts were normally earthworks, but other hardened examples exist [see, for example, Defence Area 33 - Greatham Creek].



*Fig. 5 - Detail from an air photograph, showing, at the centre, one of the 'section posts' unique to the North Somerset coast.*



*Fig. 6 - UORN 16436: fragment of curving wall that possible formed part of one of the unusual 'section post' defence structures.*

Behind the beach front pillboxes was a further line of pillboxes, set against the embankment of the railway or positioned amongst the pattern of small fields stretching from the top of the beach to the hills behind. Many of these pillboxes



were camouflaged with beach pebbles applied to the external concrete surfaces [see UORN 3024]. Part of the more elaborate camouflage scheme of another example also survives [UORN 426]. The pillboxes were particularly well made, being furnished with steel surrounds and visors to their embrasures.

Unlike the eastern and southern coasts of England, no anti-tank scaffolding was erected along the beach. Air photographs, however, appear to show barbed wire fences at the head of the beach, together with zig-zag slit trenches that were dug along the hedgerows of fields behind. At one point at the eastern edge of the area, the beach defences were supplemented by a row of anti-tank blocks. Additionally, minefields would almost certainly have been laid behind the beach front.

*The defence works -*

The condition of the surviving defence works varies between a few chunks of rubble washed by the sea on the foreshore to some very fine examples of pillboxes to be found on the railway line and amongst the fields behind. Additionally, at the Dunster beach car park can be seen the concrete slabs on which the beach defence battery's guns were positioned [UORN 3008].



*Fig. 7 - UORN 3008: concrete slabs where a beach defence battery was positioned.*



*Fig. 8 - UORN 16370: remains of a pillbox or section post on Dunster Beach.*





The most accessible pillbox to the general public is that to be found close to the entry of the Dunster Beach car park [UORN 3024], used today to affix a variety of signage. This is an excellent example that illustrates the use of beach pebbles as camouflage.



*Fig. 9 - UORN 3024: variant of a type 24 pillbox with a detached blast wall. Embrasures and doorway are now blocked. The use of beach pebbles as exterior camouflage cladding is remarkable.*

At Sea Lane End a pillbox survives in a broken state [UORN 1563], and its remains should be consolidated or otherwise it is likely to be removed as a public danger. East of the drainage canal (constructed in the early 1960s), however, pillboxes can be found in conditions varying from fair to excellent.



*Fig. 10 - UORN 1563: remains of a type 24 pillbox, instructive in showing the method of construction and the different building materials.*





UORN 424 is a variant hexagonal-shaped pillbox that now looks rounded owing to weathering. It retains its steel embrasure surrounds. Today, it stands in the middle of a field, whereas originally it was positioned in a hedgerow at the corner junction of three fields.



*Fig. 11 - UORN 424: a steel embrasure surround is still in place on this pillbox.*



*Fig. 12 - The position of pillbox, UORN 424, can be seen in the right centre of this oblique air photograph. Slit trenches run along the hedgerow to the beach where there are pillboxes, further trenches, and a section post.*

Close to UORN 424, on the south side of the railway line, is pillbox, UORN 426, which was camouflaged as a signal cabin. A brick chimney still rises from the concrete roof. Further down the railway line is another pillbox [UORN 431], which is in excellent condition with steel visors still in place. Behind this, on rising ground is the brick-shuttered pillbox, UORN 432, inaccessible on private land but appearing from a distance to be in good condition. The turrets of Dunster Castle overlook it. A further pillbox built on the railway embankment stands further to the east near the crossing of the line by a public footpath [UORN 16303]. The pillbox has an unusual entrance way made from curving corrugated iron.



No surviving field evidence could be found for the anti-tank blocks, or for any of the many slit trenches, noted on air photographs. In the distance, from the east end of the study area, can be seen a pillbox at Blue Anchor, showing how the anti-invasion defence works continue along this section of coastline.



*Fig. 13 - UORN 426: pillbox by the railway line that was disguised as a signal cabin. It once had a false pitched roof of which the chimney stack survives.*



*Fig. 14 - Pillbox, UORN 431, with UORN 432 beyond. Dunster Castle is in the centre of the line of hills.*





## 2.2 **Landscape:**

Tourism has brought significant changes to the defence area, particularly at its western boundary with the development of the holiday village on the site of the army camp, and the car park at the end of Sea Lane. However, to the east of the drainage channel (itself built between 1962-1964), the landscape is much as it was in 1940. There appears to have been some coastal erosion, as it seems likely that the pillboxes that now lie in fragments on the beach have been destroyed by the action of the sea rather than the deliberate destruction of man. Certainly, their remains today are on the upper levels of the beach, whereas the evidence from air photographs shows they were built at what was then the edge of the fields behind. Several of the fields have had hedgerows removed to make them larger, leading to the isolation of pillbox, UORN 424, in the centre of a field whereas originally it was tucked into a junction of hedgerows.

In the holiday season many visitors come to this beach from the adjacent car parks. However, beyond the holiday village, there are few purpose-built attractions, and there has been no other building development. The West Somerset Railway line remains a single track as it was at the time of the Second World War, and it seems to be little used outside of the summer months.

Many of the defence structures can be accessed by walking on the beach front from the car parks. However, when the fields are in crop, it would be best to view the important railway line-side pillboxes from a distance as there is no public right of way to them, and they are on the far side of the railway line that may present dangers.

## 2.3 **Statement of Significance:**

The Dunster Beach area provides an excellent illustration of the intensity and organisation of coastal defence, even on a sector of coast where a German landing was considered 'unlikely'. The excellent 1941 oblique air photograph evidence enables the defences to be reconstructed where other documentary sources are lacking. Indeed, it is the quality of the air photographs, complementing the surviving defence structures, which contribute to making this area an important one for evaluation and preservation. The defences can be seen to have been arranged in three lines, at the beach head, along the line of the railway, and at the foot of the hills behind. The fact that this arrangement can still be seen on the ground makes the area of considerable importance.

Several of the pillboxes are outstanding examples of their type, and have surviving features, such as the metal embrasure surrounds and visors, and the camouflage, that rarely survive elsewhere. The section posts are a rare type of hardened defence work, seen mainly in the north of England although some examples are known from west Hampshire.

A pleasant 'pillbox walk' along the line of the beach (preferably taken at low tide when the remnants of defence works are revealed) could be established, although access to some structures would be difficult without prior permission [see 'Recommendations'].



### 3. **Recommendations:**

1. That the surviving anti-invasion defence works in the Dunster Beach area be considered of national importance. They enable the defence of this section of the North Somerset 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 excellent air photographic evidence of defence structures that were built as part of the overall strategy, but which have now been removed.
2. That the remains of pillbox, UORN 1563, which is in a ruinous condition, be consolidated to prevent their further deterioration and to eliminate a possible danger to visitors.
3. That consideration be given, in a possible initiative with Somerset County Council and the local authority, to establishing a 'pillbox walk' along Dunster Beach and its immediate hinterland. It might be possible to organise with landowners access to pillboxes, UORNs 424, 426, and 431, for the purpose of this walk, otherwise these structures could only be viewed from a distance. As they are important surviving defence works, with features encountered rarely and worthy of public inspection, it is hoped that some form of access could be organised.
4. That consideration be given to erecting an information board within the Dunster Beach car park, probably alongside pillbox, UORN 3024, that would provide information on the Second World War defence of Dunster Beach. Such information should include reference to the continuity of the defence along Blue Anchor Bay as a whole.

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

#### 4.1 **Photographs:**

Figs. 1, 3, 6-11, and 13-14 - taken (AWF) during field survey, 16.1.2003.

Fig. 2 - ST 0044/9 fr.052 (27.6.1941)- NMR.

Fig. 4 - CPE/UK/1980 fr.3004 (11.4.1947) - NMR.

Figs. 5 and 12 - ST 0044/6 fr.049 (27.6.1941) - NMR.

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

'Somerset Sub-Area Defence Scheme', August 1940 (from Somerset Sub-Area HQ War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/1317.

'Western Area Defence Scheme', 23.6.1941 (from Western Area HQ War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/1251.

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

S/262 frs.56-57,59,61 (27.6.1941) - NMR.

ST 0044/6 fr.049 (27.6.1941) - NMR.

ST 0044/7 fr.050 (27.6.1941) - NMR.

ST 0044/8 fr.051 (27.6.1941) - NMR.

ST 0044/9 fr.052 (27.6.1941) - NMR.

ST 0143/6 fr.047 (27.6.1941) - NMR.





ST 0143/7 fr.048 (27.6.1941) - NMR.  
ST 0044/27 fr.0240 (25.8.1958) - NMR.  
CPE/UK/1980 fr.3004 (11.4.1947) - NMR.  
543/2821 frs.133-135 (27.4.1964) - NMR.

4.4 **Ordnance Survey 1: 2500 Plans:**

ST 0043-0143 (1972) - BLML.  
ST 0044-0144 (1972) - BLML.

4.5 **Defence of Britain Project Database:**

[see 5. 'Annex'].

