

DEFENCE AREA 64

HOLLICOMBE BEACH

1. **Area details:**

The defence area is $\frac{3}{4}$ mile N of the centre of Paignton and 4 miles S of Torquay.

Local Authority: Torbay.

Parish: Paignton

NGR: centre of area, SX 898623

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

The defence area consists of the foreshore of Hollicombe Beach, with its red sandstone cliffs fronting an area of suburbs to the north of Paignton. The cliffs are some thirty feet high above the ruddy-brown coloured sands of the beach. Running parallel with the cliffs, only some ten feet from their edge, is the Kingwear to Newton Abbot railway line, which enters a cutting at the south edge of the area. Behind the railway is Hollicombe Park, opened in 1979 on the site of the former Hollicombe Gas Works. One of its gas holders is still standing on the far side of the A3022 road that borders the park.



Fig. 1 - Hollicombe Beach looking north-east.

The beach can be accessed, either by a flight of steps at its southern end near Hollicombe Head, or through a tunnel (a former effluent discharge tunnel) under the railway from Hollicombe Park. The sands are revealed when the tide is out: at high tide they are covered to the base of the cliffs. A bridge carries a trackway over the



railway near the Chadwell Centre (an NHS facility) close to Hollicombe Head. This marks the southern edge of the area, with the Torbay Road (A3022) and the surviving gas holder behind forming the western border, and the converging road and railway the limit to the north.

The focus of the area is the cliff top. A viewshed is formed by the curve of the cliffs to the north.



Fig. 2 - Hollicombe Park on the site of the former Hollicombe Gas Works. A surviving gas holder can be seen in the background.

2. **Assessment.**

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

Defence overview -

Hollicombe Beach, lying within Tor Bay, together with Preston and Paignton Sands to the south, was a 'classified beach', considered in 1940 vulnerable to a German landing.¹ To the north and west were the anti-tank islands of Exeter, Okehampton, and Plymouth, and further east ran the defence line of the Taunton Stop Line, designed to provide an anti-tank barrier to prevent the enemy breaking out into the heartland of southern England should a landing have been made on the South West peninsula.

From the autumn of 1940 through to 1941, the area was defended by troops from the 209th Infantry Brigade, with defences manned as well by the 10th (Torbay) Battalion, Devon Home Guard. Paignton was a designated 'defended locality'.² Within its perimeter defences was the Vulnerable Point of the Hollicombe Gas Works, the various gas holders and other buildings of which were camouflaged against air attack.

¹ TNA: PRO WO 199/48 (map).

² TNA: PRO WO 166/10953.



Beyond the north of the study area at Corbyn's Head, a coast artillery battery, with two 4.7in. naval guns, commanded the northern end of Tor Bay.³



Fig. 3 - Hollicombe Beach in an air photograph taken in August 1941. The camouflaged gas holders and other buildings of the Hollicombe Gas Works can be seen.



Fig. 4 - The Hollicombe Gas Works behind the cliffs of Hollicombe Beach in an air photograph taken in 1958. The area of the gas works is now a park. The tunnel appears to be discharging effluent from the works: today it provides pedestrian access from the park to the beach. The building above the tunnel by the railway line may be disguising a pillbox - certainly, there is one at this location.

³ TNA: PRO WO 166/10904.



The defence works -

Pillboxes were built at the top of the cliffs and on the embankment of the railway, both to defend the beach against a landing and to prevent the line being used as a route for an enemy advance. One pillbox at least may also have been built on the rocks below Hollicombe Head. The air photographic evidence, however, shows no form of defence obstruction on the beach itself. It was probably thought that the cliffs of Hollicombe Beach might be scaled by special German assault troops in order to outflank Preston and Paignton Sands to the south where landing craft could be much more easily beached and exits inland found.

At the northern end of the area, is an hexagonal pillbox faced with the local stone, with an attached entrance porch and blast wall [UORN 1394]. It stands in an area of light woodland on the cliff top.



Fig. 5 - UORN 1394: an hexagonal pillbox faced with the local sandstone. Its small embrasures overlook Hollicombe Beach and the waters of Tor Bay.

Above the tunnel from Hollicombe Park, on the side of the railway embankment, is an uncertain defence structure whose overgrown state and inaccessibility prevent it from being more securely identified. It appears to be the remains of a pillbox, now in a somewhat unsafe position from the point of view of the pedestrian tunnel beneath. An air photograph taken in 1958 shows a large structure with a pitched roof at this location, perhaps a signal box, or just possibly the pillbox with its camouflage cladding surviving at that date.



Fig. 6 - UORN 6552: the clump of vegetation at the centre top of the railway embankment hides the remains of a pillbox. It stands rather perilously above the stone-lined pedestrian tunnel below.

On the top of the cliffs at the southern end of Hollicombe Beach is a further pillbox, rectangular in shape and stone-faced, also very much overgrown [UORN 1395]. It faces north-east to provide enfilading fire across the beach.



Fig. 7 - UORN 1395: this pillbox stands on top of the cliffs at the south end of Hollicombe Beach, but is so overgrown now it can scarcely be made out.

Close to pillbox, UORN 1395, was a further pillbox set into the east side of the railway cutting. This was removed in recent years for reasons that are not clear, an unfortunate loss because its survival would otherwise have added greatly to the importance of the defence area. It was the only defence work that protected the railway line itself rather than simply using the railway embankment as a backing to the sea-facing defences. Rail-side pillboxes are becoming increasingly rare as tracks are widened and wartime structures removed as perceived dangers to the travelling public.



Fig. 8 - UORN 6592: this pillbox, defending the railway line itself, was taken in 1998. The pillbox has now been destroyed, probably because it was considered to represent a track side danger.



Fig. 9 - The site today of destroyed pillbox, UORN 6592 [right-hand embankment], in a view taken from the railway bridge [see Fig. 8]. There seems to have been little need for the destruction of this pillbox.

2.2 Landscape:

The major change to the landscape of the defence area since the Second World War concerns the demolition of the Hollicombe Gas Works and its replacement in 1979 by Hollicombe Park. The Paignton suburbs have spread around the gas works site to the north of the Torbay Road.

The beach, and the park backing on to it, provide a pleasant, secluded amenity for local residents. There is a convenient lay-by for car parking on the Torbay Road close to the gates to the park. Most holiday visitors, however, frequent the much larger, and more easily accessible, Preston and Paignton Sands that lie to the south beyond Hollicombe Head.

2.3 Statement of Significance:

This is a small area with, admittedly, few surviving defence works. Its importance would have been increased had the railway side pillbox, UORN 6592, not been destroyed in recent years. However, the area is included in this series of reports as the surviving pillboxes show the Second World War need for the defence of beaches even where backed by cliffs. Undoubtedly, the defences here were designed to protect against an assault on the cliffs by commando-type troops in order to outflank the more open beaches to the south. The defence of the large gas works immediately behind would have been a further important consideration.

The area provides an interesting example of how defence works can survive even in a built-up environment. It is instructive as a reminder of the intensive militarisation of this part of the South Devon coast, and its importance is augmented by the fact that almost all the defence works built to protect the sands further to the south have now been removed. This is a pleasant location where the 1940 defence works have merged now with the topography within which they were sited.

3. Recommendations:

1. That the surviving anti-invasion defence works in the Hollicombe Beach area be considered of national importance. They enable the defence of this section of the South Devon coast to be interpreted, and provide evidence of the articulation of the defence and the inter-relationship of its functionally different components.
2. That the pillboxes, UORNs 1394, 6552, and 1395, be freed of their overgrowing vegetation so that they can be seen and interpreted more easily.
3. That, in a possible initiative with the local authority, information be provided on the Second World War defence of the area. An information board could be set up in Hollicombe Park.

4. Supporting material.

4.1 Photographs:

Figs. 1-2, 5-7, and 9 - taken (AWF) during field survey, 22.1.2003.
Fig. 3 - SX 8962/9 fr.052 (24.8.1941) - NMR.



Fig. 4 - SX 8962/4 fr.0115 (27.8.1958) - NMR.

Fig. 8 - copyright: M.J. Ford (Defence of Britain Project Archive, NMR).

4.2 Documentary Sources:

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

'List of Coast Artillery Batteries in S.W. District', 1943 (from South Western District War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/10904.

'Devon Sub-District Defence Scheme', 1943 (from Devon Sub-District War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/10953.

4.3 Aerial Photographs:

SX 8962/9 fr. 052 (24.8.1941) - NMR.

SX 8961/2 fr.14 (13.9.1941) - NMR.

3G/TUD/UK/223 frs.5097-5098 (12.7.1946) - NMR.

58/209 fr.5090 (15.4.1949) - NMR.

SX 8962/4 fr.0115 (27.8.1958) - NMR.

4.4 Ordnance Survey 1: 2500 Plan:

SX 8692 (1954) - BLML.

4.5 Defence of Britain Project Database:

[see 5. 'Annex'].

