

DEFENCE AREA 66

PEVENSEY CASTLE

1. **Area details:**

The defence area is 4 miles NE of Eastbourne and 6 miles W of Bexhill.

County: East Sussex.

Parishes: Pevensey / Westham.

NGR: centre of area, TQ 645047.

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

The Roman Saxon Shore Fort, which later became medieval Pevensey Castle, is situated within the village of Pevensey that is now connected to the larger settlement of Westham lying to the west. The southern wall of Pevensey Castle was once washed by the open sea, but the coast of Pevensey Bay has now retreated a mile or so and the intervening landscape is flat, drained marshland intersected by ditches and 'sewers'. A much broader expanse of wetlands, the Pevensey Levels, now a National Nature Reserve, stretches away to the north and east. Pevensey itself occupies what was once a peninsula connected to the higher land to the west.

A broad canalised stream, Salt Haven, flows on the eastern side of Pevensey, and is crossed by the A259 road that turns to follow it towards the settlement of Pevensey Bay on the coast. At Pevensey Halt, this road crosses the Eastbourne to Hastings railway line that follows a straight course south of Westham and Pevensey.

Within Pevensey, the buildings are grouped mainly to the east of the Castle, and Castle Road (B2191) follows a curving route around the north wall of the Roman enclosure. A footpath right of way also runs between the west and east Roman gates. Pevensey Castle is a scheduled monument in the care of English Heritage. Paying admission is only required for entry into the inner bailey of the medieval castle.



Fig. 1 - Pevensey Castle, with the west curtain wall of the medieval castle to the right and the north-east wall of the Roman enclosure (the medieval outer bailey) in the distance.



Fig. 2 - A 1946 aerial photograph showing Pevensey Castle and Westham at the top, with the drained flatlands below stretching to the coast of Pevensey Bay. In 1940, this area was very vulnerable to German attack. According to the Operation Sea Lion plan, elements of the German 9th Army would have landed here.

2. **Assessment.**

2.1 **Defences:** [see Maps 2 and 3]

Defence overview -

The last successful invasion of England took place in 1066, with landings by Duke William's army on a then open coastline beneath the walls of Pevensey Castle. Nine hundred years later, under the Operation Sea Lion plan, a spearhead of the German 9th Army was poised to repeat history at the same location. Beach reconnaissances by the British Army identified Pevensey Bay as being exceptionally vulnerable to attack, and



a complex system of defence was gradually put into place there following the fall of France and the return of the defeated Dunkirk armies.¹

Pevensey Castle's first entry into the war came, however, in mid-May 1940 when its Ministry of Works' curator was asked by the Army if it could be used as a transit camp for 8,000 prisoners-of-war on their way to Newhaven. Permission was given, but it is not recorded if the Castle was ever actually used for this purpose. By July 1940, it was being put into a defensible state, the principal concern being that it should not be taken by surprise by armoured vehicles which might penetrate its interior and use it as a strongpoint. To prevent this, the Roman east gate was closed entirely by three concrete walls, and the west gate by two 'baffle' walls. In addition, the main and postern gates of the medieval inner bailey were blocked with walls of concrete and brick.²

Pevensey village, probably including Westham, was now designated as a 'fortress' (later termed a 'nodal point') which required an inner keep surrounded by a continuous anti-tank obstacle.³ The Castle clearly served as the keep. The ruined gaps in its walls were plugged with lines of anti-tank cubes, of which the most significant length, made up of forty-eight cubes, lay along the missing Roman south wall, running from the medieval moat next to the gatehouse to the surviving Roman wall close to the west gate [see Figs. 5 and 14].

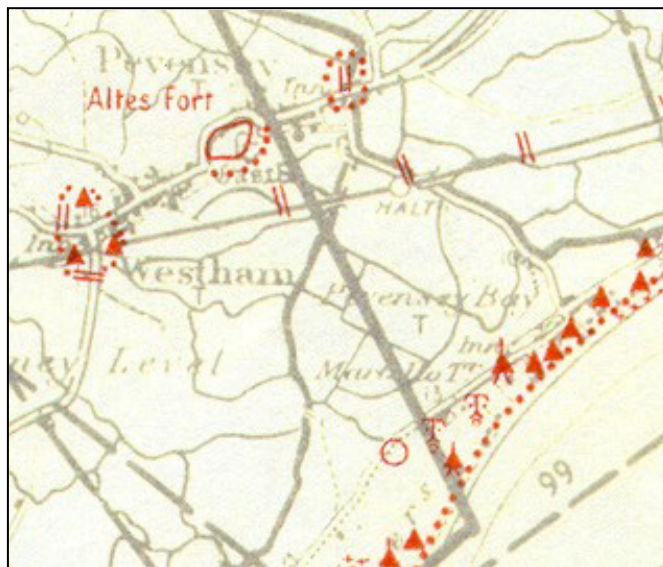


Fig. 3 - German map on an Ordnance Survey base showing details of the defences of Pevensey Bay in November 1940. [The red triangles represent pillboxes and the small dots, anti-tank blocks]. The oval-shaped enclosure of Pevensey Castle is shown with the anti-tank blocks on its southern side, as well as defended localities, ringed with anti-tank blocks, at Westham and to the east of Pevensey. The intensive defence of the coastline is also shown.⁴

In the critical invasion danger period of August - October 1940, 219th Infantry Brigade from 45 Division (motto: 'Be Bloody, Bold and Resolute') defended this part of the Sussex coast, designated 'C' Sub Area and divided into four Sub-Sectors, viz Newhaven, Seaford, Eastbourne, and Pevensey. Pevensey Castle and its village lay

¹ TNA: PRO WO 166/536.

² TNA: PRO WORK 14/1584. It is not clear where this large number of prisoners had been captured or why they were going to Newhaven. They were said to be wounded other ranks, with some officers, to be dispersed later in labour gangs. As the inner bailey was considered sufficient space to hold them, the 8,000 figure must be considered suspect.

³ TNA: PRO WO 166/536.

⁴ Südostküste England - Schrägbildreihe III (RAF Museum, Hendon).



dungeons and towers of the medieval castle to serve as headquarters buildings.⁸ This work was carried out by 562nd Field Company Royal Engineers.⁹

Machine gun posts were built within the Roman and medieval walls of Pevensey Castle, a 2pdr. anti-tank gun position was set out within the outer bailey, and a further anti-tank gun emplacement constructed at the Roman west gate. Additional pillboxes and gun positions were built beyond the eastern walls in the area between the Castle and the former cattle market.¹⁰



Fig. 5 - RAF air photograph taken in 21 August 1940 showing the south wall of Pevensey Castle protected by lines of anti-tank blocks. At this date, the machine gun emplacements around the walls of the Castle would have been under construction or just completed, although there is no direct evidence in the photograph for them.

The nodal point / fortress of Pevensey was further protected by two defended localities at its western and eastern ends, where road junctions were protected by enclosing anti-tank blocks, and, at Westham, by pillboxes - all now destroyed. The railway crossing

⁸ TNA: PRO WO 166/4215.

⁹ TNA: PRO WO 166/3800.

¹⁰ See evidence on some gun positions removed after the war in TNA: PRO WORK 14/1584. Information on the anti-tank gun emplacement at the west gate comes from the guidebook to Pevensey Castle (1999): no independent documentary evidence corroborating this has been found.



The defence works -

The surviving defence works at Pevensey are all built in and around the Castle. Although they can be seen clearly from the outside, there is now no access to their interiors. Nothing survives of the other defences of the nodal point. Viewing the Castle from the car park, which lies on the site of the former cattle market, a machine gun emplacement [UORN 1512] built at the top of the medieval keep, and firing west and east through distinctive horizontal embrasures (a feature of the Castle defences) can be seen. Below it amongst tumbled ruins of the keep are at least four embrasures of a rectangular defence post [UORN 16913]. Close by, three anti-tank cubes blocked an opening here, and a pillbox (removed after the war) stood by the detached chunk of masonry of a tower. The east of the Castle was particularly heavily defended, and a further machine gun emplacement was positioned at the top of the wall south of the Roman east gate [UORN 1510].



Fig. 7 - UORN 1512: machine gun emplacement constructed to look like the medieval masonry of the keep and firing through two horizontal embrasures to east and west. The long, narrow embrasures are a feature of the Castle defences, and are a rare type for machine gun fire also found in emplacements at Rye.

Within the medieval inner bailey, the concrete reinforcement of both the east and north towers can be seen, and in the exterior face of the north wall close to the east tower a Second World War loophole can be made out [UORN 1506]. Not far south of the Roman west gate, a machine gun emplacement with embrasures firing two ways was constructed amongst tumbled masonry [UORN 1506]. Within the section of fallen

Roman north wall, there are two further machine gun emplacements [UORNs 1507 and 1509], of which the latter is a purpose-built concrete and brick pillbox disguised with flint facing to look like the Castle ruins. A further machine gun emplacement on the north wall was built high in the medieval tower constructed on top of a Roman bastion [UORN 1511].



Fig. 8 (left) - UORN 16913: cluster of embrasures from a section post amongst the eastern ruins of the keep.



Fig. 9 (right) - UORN 16912: loophole in the north curtain wall of the inner bailey.



Fig. 10 - UORN 1510: machine gun emplacement constructed on top of the Roman wall south of the east gate, seen from outside the Castle.



Fig. 11 (left) - UORN 1506: machine gun emplacement built amongst fallen masonry south of the Roman west gate.



Fig. 12 (right) - UORN 1507: pillbox, one of two blocking the section of fallen Roman north wall.



Fig. 13 - UORN 1511: machine gun emplacement erected within a medieval tower built on top of a Roman bastion.



Fig. 14 - The position of the forty-eight anti-tank cubes that ran along the line of the vanished Roman south wall.

2.2 Landscape:

The landscape of the defence area is substantially the same as that which prevailed sixty years ago, although there have been substantial housing developments in Westham to the west. A large roundabout to the east of Pevensey Castle now controls the intersection of the A259 and A27 roads, and, just south of this, the Salt Haven waterway that runs past Pevensey Halt now occupies a different channel from the one that existed during the wartime period.

The cattle market to the east of Pevensey Castle has been removed, although its brick flooring still forms the surface of the car park now occupying its site. The Castle itself is in the care of English Heritage, and paid admission is required to see the medieval buildings of the inner bailey. The outer bailey, however, occupying most of the enclosure of the Roman fort, around which are many of the Second World War defence works, has a right of way running through it and is open to the public at all times.

2.3 Statement of Significance:

Pevensey Castle is a very important site in the context of its Second World War anti-invasion defences as it contains several excellent examples of machine gun emplacements incorporated into the masonry of an earlier fortified structure. It represents, in fact, probably the finest example of a historic building adapted for mid-twentieth century defence, and it was both sensitive and imaginative that a decision was made after the war to preserve many of these defence works as part of the overall history of the Roman and medieval castle. Visitors can thereby see the Second World War as but the latest period in a continuous history of defence at this location. A comparable site is Mont Orgueil Castle in Jersey where defence additions and alterations made under the German occupation have also been left largely in place.

The castle custodian tells of the considerable interest by the visiting public in the Second World War history of the site, and it would seem, therefore, to be important to present further information on the 1940 defence structures by means of information boards and possibly an expansion of the relevant section of the current guidebook. Consideration might also be given to opening up one or two of the defence works so that they can be examined internally.

3. Recommendations:

1. That the surviving anti-invasion defence works at Pevensey Castle be considered of national importance. They enable the defence of this important locality within the overall Pevensey fortress 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 consideration be given to opening up a number of the defence works so that they can be seen internally by the public.
3. That consideration be given to providing more public information on the Second World War defence of the Castle, possibly by an information board or by an



addition to existing literature. A 'pillbox walk' taking in the various defence works could also be drawn up.

4. **Supporting material.**

4.1 **Photographs:**

Figs. 1 and 7-14 - taken (AWF) during field survey, 10.12.2003.

Fig. 2 - 106G/UK/1725 fr.4041 (10.9.1946) - NMR.

Fig. 5 - 26C/UK1443 fr.1585 (21.8.1940) - NMR.

4.2 **Documentary Sources:**

'Defence Scheme for 'C' Sub-Area', June 1940 (from 136th Infantry Brigade War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/992.

135th Infantry Brigade War Diary, 1940 - TNA: PRO WO 166/990.

4th Bn. Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry War Diary, 1940 - TNA PRO WO 166/4215.

562nd Field Company Royal Engineers War Diary, 1940 - TNA: PRO WO 166/3800.

1/6th Bn. Queen's Royal Regiment War Diary, 1940 - TNA: PRO WO 166/4497.

'45 Division Defence Scheme', October 1940 (from 45 Division 'G' Branch HQ War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/536.

'C' Sub-Area Defence Scheme', October 1940 (from 219th Infantry Brigade War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/1072.

Südostküste England - Schrägbildreihe III: Eastbourne - Dungeness, 20.11.1940 - RAF Museum, Hendon AC 95/130/1.

9th Bn. The King's Regiment War Diary, 1941 - TNA: PRO WO 166/4354.

165th Infantry Brigade War Diary, 1941 - TNA: PRO WO 166/1038.

Befestigungskarte Grossbritannien: 1:50,000 (Sheet 134), 1.6.1941 - BLML 1305(13).

'38 Division Defence Scheme', July 1941 [map] (from 38 Division War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/482.

'Pevensey Castle: Maintenance and minor works', 1940-1958 (Ministry of Works file) - TNA: PRO WORK 14/1584.

4.3 **Published Sources:**

John Goodall, *Pevensey Castle* [guidebook] (English Heritage, 1999).

Dot Meades, *Pevensey Castle: A Handbook for Teachers* (English Heritage, 1991).

4.4 **Aerial Photographs:**

26A/BR263 fr.1 (18.6.1940) - NMR.

26C/UK1443 fr.1575 (21.8.1940) - NMR.

26C/UK1443 frs.1581 and 585 (21.8.1940) - NMR.

26C/UK1443 frs.1588, 1590, and 1592-1593 (21.8.1940) - NMR.

3G/TUD/UK/149 frs.5159-5160 (16.4.1946) - NMR.

106G/UK/1725 frs.4040-4041 (10.9.1946) - NMR.

541/506 frs.3052-3053 (20.4.1950) - NMR.



- 4.5 **Ordnance Survey 1: 2500 Plans:**
TQ 6404-6504 (1964 and 1976) - BLML.
- 4.6 **Defence of Britain Project Database:**
[see 5. 'Annex'].

