

# DEFENCE AREA 67

## RIVER MEDWAY: MAIDSTONE

### 1. **Area details:**

The defence area is 1 mile N of the centre of Maidstone.

County: Kent.

Parishes: Maidstone / Aylesford.

NGR: centre of area, TQ 752579.

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

The defence area consists of the margins of the west bank of the River Medway from a point north of Maidstone town centre to Little Preston, half a mile east of Aylesford. The area includes Allington Lock at its approximate centre, with the re-built Allington Castle, occupied today by an order of Carmelite friars, close by. Allington Lock marks the point where the River Medway ceases to be tidal, and its sluices are vital for the control of waters in the Medway Valley: the Lock is managed by the Environment Agency.

From Allington Lock to Teston (to the south-west of Maidstone), the east bank of the Medway (becoming the south bank as the river loops around Maidstone) is a 'Millennium River Park' opened in 2001 with a continuous 'Centenary Walk' following the former towpath. North of the town centre of Maidstone, the River Park connects by a footbridge with the recently laid-out Whatman Park. One and a half miles upstream from Allington Lock is the ancient town of Aylesford with its famous medieval bridge.

The main London - Channel Tunnel railway line runs through the area, roughly following the course of the Medway, and is crossed by the M20 motorway close to the point where it also bridges the river. On the fringes of road and railway are industrial estates and quarries, giving way to fields and woods by the river margins themselves.



*Fig. 1 -  
Landscape at the  
west of the  
defence area.  
The railway  
follows the  
hedgerow line in  
the mid-distance,  
with a loop of the  
River Medway  
behind. The  
distant North  
Downs frame the  
view.*



The focus of the defence area is Allington Lock. Viewsheds are restricted, largely being confined to the river and its wooded banks, although to the west of the area several defence works can be seen against the backdrop of the North Downs to the north.



*Fig. 2 - Air photograph taken in 1946. Allington Lock lies at the centre of the view, with Allington Castle to the east within the bend of the River Medway. Suburbs of Maidstone spread at the bottom right. To the west beyond the railway lines, the areas of orchards and hopfields have all disappeared today under housing and industrial estates.*



## 2. Assessment.

### 2.1 Defences: [see Map 2]

#### *Defence overview -*

The defence area forms part of the Newhaven - Cliffe branch of the GHQ Line [for a description of this Line, see Defence Area 17 - Old Lodge Warren]. The Line had followed the course of the River Medway from Penshurst, and now passed in a loop around Maidstone before entering the Medway Valley to cut through the North Downs on its way to the River Thames. As with other sectors of the GHQ Line, it was defended here by infantry pillboxes interspersed with anti-tank gun emplacements at important crossing points. Bridges were prepared for demolition, and roads and railways set with blocks to be activated in the event of an invasion.

Maidstone was a Category 'A' nodal point with the reference 'N.5', also termed a 'fortress' ('F.1') with an officially-designated garrison. It had all-round defences including artificial anti-tank ditches strengthening the perimeter on its eastern side. It lay within its own Maidstone Sub-Area [originally termed a Sector], part of the military Home Counties Area (later, Kent Area). Its garrison came principally from the 11th (Maidstone) Bn., Kent Home Guard, but with some regular troops in addition to companies drawn from other Home Guard battalions. In June 1941, it consisted of 985 men (860 rifles) with twenty-four Boys anti-tank rifles, two Bren light machine guns, and five Northover Projectors.<sup>1</sup>

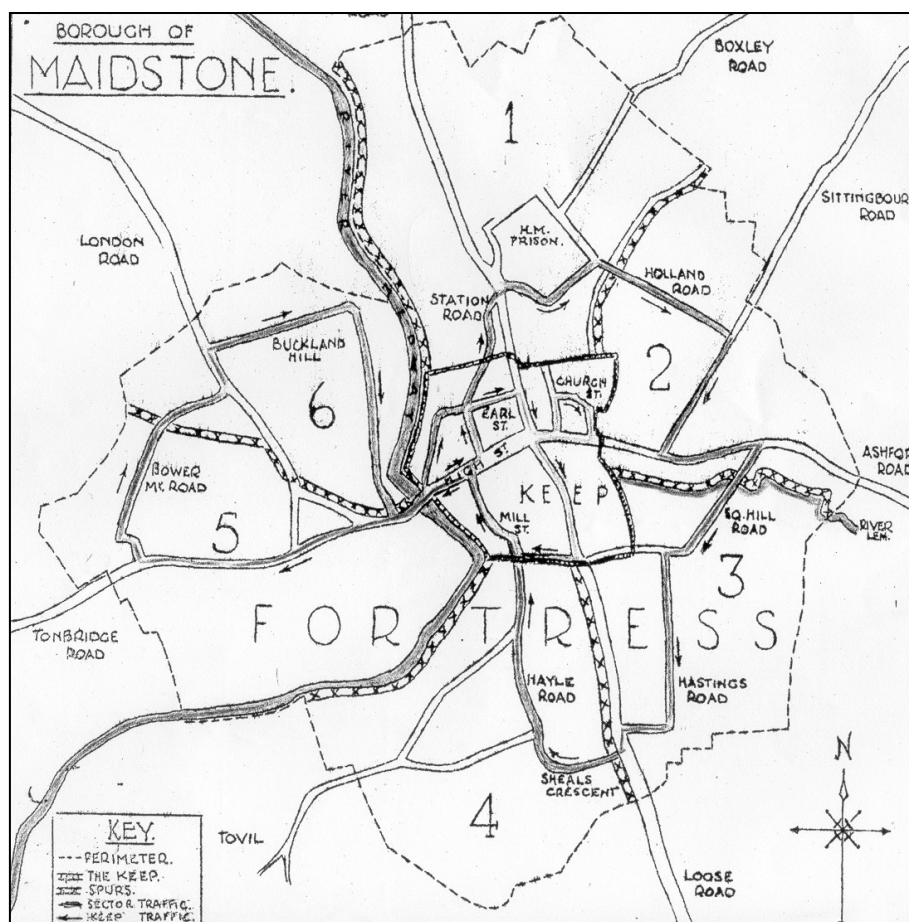


Fig. 3 - Map showing the fortress of Maidstone with its six numbered sectors, its Keep, and the line of its outer perimeter.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> TNA: PRO WO 199/544; TNA: PRO WO 166/6870; TNA: PRO WO 166/1304; TNA: PRO WO 166/6760; and Alexander, *Ironside's Line*, p75.

<sup>2</sup> Map from TNA: PRO WO 166/6870.



Of adjacent areas, Teston and Aylesford were designated 'defended localities', and Larkfield and West Malling, 'defended villages'. Under the Maidstone Garrison Defence Plan, Allington Lock also received special protection.<sup>3</sup>

As part of the fortification of the GHQ Line, infantry type 24 pillboxes were built at regular intervals on the west bank of the river, also being sited against the cuttings and embankments of the railway line behind. A number of pillboxes were constructed around Allington Castle strengthening the defences of Allington Lock a few hundred yards downstream. A type 28A anti-tank gun emplacement to take a 6pdr. gun, with a side chamber for light machine gun fire, defended the Lock itself [UORN 9510], while a further similar emplacement stood at a point close to the railway a little further to the west [UORN 9513].



*Fig. 4 - The River Medway at Allington Lock.*

Almost all the defence works considered in this study area formed part of the GHQ Line, lying outside the perimeter of Maidstone fortress. However, on the east side of the river the Maidstone perimeter defence extended further north than on the west bank, and

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<sup>3</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/6870.



the lines of anti-tank blocks that survive remarkably by the footbridge to Whatman Park [UORN 9509] are surviving components of that defence [see Fig. 10].

*The defence works -*

The two anti-tank gun emplacements are interesting examples of double-chambered type 28As, but their overall condition is poor - UORN 9510 being on Environment Agency land and used as a store and UORN 9513 overgrown and generally neglected.



Fig. 5 - UORN 9510: type 28A double-chambered anti-tank gun emplacement in the Environment Agency yard at Allington Lock.



Fig. 6 - UORN 9513: much neglected anti-tank gun emplacement standing now on waste land close to the M20. The holdfast for a 6pdr. gun can be made out in front of the square embrasure.



Almost all the examples of surviving type 24 infantry pillboxes are in a similar overgrown and neglected condition, some so hidden away under thick vegetation that they are extremely difficult to locate. Although one pillbox [UORN 16799] has clearly been carefully preserved within the recent landscaping of Whatman Park, two others appear to have been destroyed without record.<sup>4</sup> In the grounds of Allington Castle it was not possible to verify a number of pillboxes whose positions from air photographic evidence seem likely as there was no public access for the necessary field work. It is possible also that other pillboxes survive elsewhere on private land. One type 24 [UORN 16798], previously entirely unrecorded, was located from air photographs and found to be extant and in good condition.



*Fig. 7 - UORN 16798: rear face of brick-shuttered type 24 pillbox previously unrecorded.*



*Fig. 8 - UORN 16799: this type 24 pillbox with its entrances and embrasures blocked stands today in Whatman Park.*

<sup>4</sup> Information from Kent Sites and Monuments Record. It is possible the pillboxes were destroyed (or buried) at some time before the creation of Whatman Park.





*Fig. 9 - The overgrown condition of many pillboxes is illustrated by this example. Within this tangle of vegetation is a type 24 infantry pillbox [UORN 9641].*

The lines of massive anti-tank cubes that survive for short distances parallel with the river bank at the new footbridge to Whatman Park are remnants of the defences of Maidstone fortress itself [UORN 9509]. Other than for the obvious inference that they strengthened the defences of the bank of the Medway at this point, their exact purpose is not clear. It is likely, however, that they formed the main anti-tank barrier of the perimeter defences as they ran towards the east from the river bank.



*Fig. 10 - The two lines of anti-tank cubes crossing the towpath of the River Medway at Ringlestone, with the recently-built footbridge to Whatman Park running above them.*





*Fig. 11 - UORN 9509: one of the anti-tank cubes showing it was constructed using corrugated iron for shuttering. It has a height of nearly six feet.*

## 2.2 Landscape:

There have been many changes in the landscape of the defence area since the Second World War, although some sections of the margins of the Medway remain substantially unaltered. The motorway has cut across the area, and industrial developments have spread along its line isolating some defence works in pockets of wasteland. New housing has spread close to the Medway at Ringlestone, opposite which Whatman Park has been landscaped from former river meadows.

Allington Lock and the adjacent Castle have altered little, and there is a non-signposted car park off Castle Road just across the railway which serves as a convenient place from which to visit the defence works of the area. From here, Allington Lock can be reached (it is best not to approach the Lock by car as there is little parking space) and the river crossed to reach the towpath (the Centenary Walk) on the opposite bank. From here, walks can be made downstream to Whatman Park or upstream to Aylesford Bridge. A footpath also runs parallel with the railway line, and, close to anti-tank gun emplacement, UORN 9513, crosses the M20 motorway and continues across the southern margins of the river as far as Aylesford.

## 2.3 Statement of Significance:

The defence area provides a good example of the defence works of a section of stop line [GHQ Line] that also merges with the all-round defence of a nodal point or fortress. Maidstone was a most important town strategically and would have been a clear target for German invading forces under the Operation Sea Lion plan.

The area includes two important surviving examples of type 28A anti-tank gun emplacements, albeit in neglected condition, and a minimum of five type 24 infantry





pillboxes, with a good possibility of others surviving on private land. The anti-tank cubes towards the south of the area make an outstanding survival, and provide an excellent illustration of the massive size of certain of these obstacles.

Much could be done to improve the surviving condition of the defence works by clearing rubbish and overgrowth from them and making them more publicly accessible. Considerable work has evidently been carried out in recent years in the development of the river margins for public enjoyment, and a project to preserve the Second World War heritage of the area and provide public information could well be incorporated.

Further field work should also be carried out by local volunteers, possibly under the auspices of an archaeological group, to investigate and record pillboxes surviving in the grounds of Allington Castle, as well as along the line of the river bank further south as far as Whatman Park.

It is uncertain whether the two 'missing pillboxes' in Whatman Park do survive or not: possibly they have been buried. If they have been destroyed without record, that would be regrettable. Balanced against such destruction, however, is the obvious careful preservation of the anti-tank cubes at Ringlestone which provide such a clear visual statement of the defences of sixty years ago. They require now information and interpretation for the many interested passers-by.

### 3. **Recommendations:**

1. That the surviving anti-invasion defence works on the River Medway between Whatman Park and Aylesford be considered of national importance. They enable this section of the defence of the Newhaven - Cliffe branch of the GHQ Line, and its inter-relation with the northernmost defences of the Maidstone 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 pillboxes and anti-tank emplacements in the defence area be freed of overgrowth and cleared of rubbish to make them more publicly accessible
3. That further field work by interested volunteers be carried out in the grounds of Allington Castle, and on the privately-owned river margins to its south, to identify and record pillboxes only uncertainly known at present: and that it also be established whether two known pillboxes in Whatman Park [UORNs 9508 and 11454] survive or not.
3. That consideration be given, possibly in collaboration with Kent County Council and Maidstone Borough Council, to providing information boards on the anti-invasion defences of the area. A 'pillbox walk' could also be set out and described on the board, or made available in other publicly available literature. Possible positions for information boards are at Allington Lock, at the anti-tank cubes on the Centenary Walk at Ringlestone, and in Whatman Park.





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

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

Figs. 1, and 4-11- taken (AWF) during field survey, 17.12.2003.  
Fig. 2 - 106G/UK/1444 fr.3404 (1.5.1946) - NMR.

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

'List of Nodal Points in Eastern Command', September 1940 (from General Headquarters Papers, Home Forces) - TNA: PRO WO 199/544.  
'Sub-Area Dispositions to Defeat Invasion', 8 June 1941 (from Maidstone Sub-Area HQ War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/1304.  
Maidstone Sub-Area HQ War Diary, 1942 - TNA: PRO WO 166/6760.  
'Maidstone Garrison Defence Plan No.1', August 1942 (from Maidstone Garrison HQ War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/6870.

##### 4.3 **Published Source:**

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

##### 4.4 **Aerial Photographs:**

106G/UK/1093 fr.4078 (3.1.1946) - NMR.  
106G/UK/1112 frs.3031-3032 (12.1.1946) - NMR.  
106G/UK/1444 frs.3404-3405 (1.5.1946) - NMR.  
CPE/UK/1923 frs.3191 and 3194 (16.1.1947) - NMR.

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

TQ 7257-7357 (1961 and 1972) - BLML.  
TQ 7258-7358 (1963, 1965, and 1973) - BLML.  
TQ 7457-7557 (1960) - BLML.  
TQ 7458-7558 (1961 and 1969) - BLML.  
TQ 7556 (1957) - BLML.  
TQ 7557 (1957) - BLML.

##### 4.6 **Defence of Britain Project Database:**

[see 5. 'Annex'].

