

DEFENCE AREA 72

WAKES COLNE VIADUCT

1. **Area details:**

The defence area is 7 miles W of Colchester, 6 miles E of Halstead, and 2½ miles E of Earls Colne.

County: Essex.

Parish: Wakes Colne.

NGR: centre of area, TL 896284.

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

The defence area lies in the River Colne valley, on both sides of the busy A1124 road. The focus of the area is the magnificent Victorian brick railway viaduct, which crosses both the river and the road, carrying the line from Marks Tey to Sudbury high above the shallow valley. The railway continues to the north on a high embankment, passing through the station of Chappel and Wakes Colne. South-east of the viaduct a park - Chappel Millennium Green - has been created recently.

The village of Chappel lies to the south of the area, where a side road crosses the River Colne at Chappel Bridge.

The surviving defence works all lie beneath the viaduct, or in close proximity to it. A viewshed is defined by the viaduct, the river, and the railway embankment to the north.

2. **Assessment.**

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

Defence overview -

From July 1940, a Corps (XI Corps) Stop Line was constructed from the River Colne to Mildenhall in Suffolk.¹ The route of this defended Line, which also included a Corps Demolition Belt,² ran along the River Colne as far as the Wakes Colne railway viaduct, where it turned north, following the then LNER railway line to Bures, at which point it joined the River Stour. As with other such stop lines, it was defended with hardened gun positions (pillboxes for light and medium machine guns, and rifle fire) and anti-tank gun emplacements. At points where the Line was crossed by roads or other communication routes, blocks were set up and bridges mined in readiness for demolition. The main anti-tank obstacle was the

¹ TNA: PRO WO 166/1207.

² TNA: PRO WO 166/6700 (map).



waterway, the banks of which were steepened and revetted as necessary. Where there was no natural waterway, the anti-tank obstacle was continued by lines of concrete blocks or by a machine-dug ditch.

In order that the defence of the stop line might also have a strength in depth, various towns, villages, and other communication points along its route were declared nodal points or 'defended places' [these terms used in Eastern Command were synonymous], and prepared for all-round defence. Much of this defence was entrusted to the Home Guard. Wakes Colne itself (probably just the area of the viaduct), was a Category 'C' nodal point. Other nodal points close to this sector of the Line were West Bergholt, Ford Street, Fordham, Earls Colne, Wormingford, and Bures.³ These were all manned by the 8th Bn. Essex Home Guard. After 1942, the name Wakes Colne disappears from the lists of 'defended places', and is replaced at the same military grid reference by Chappel, which is upgraded to a Class 'B' 'defended place'.⁴

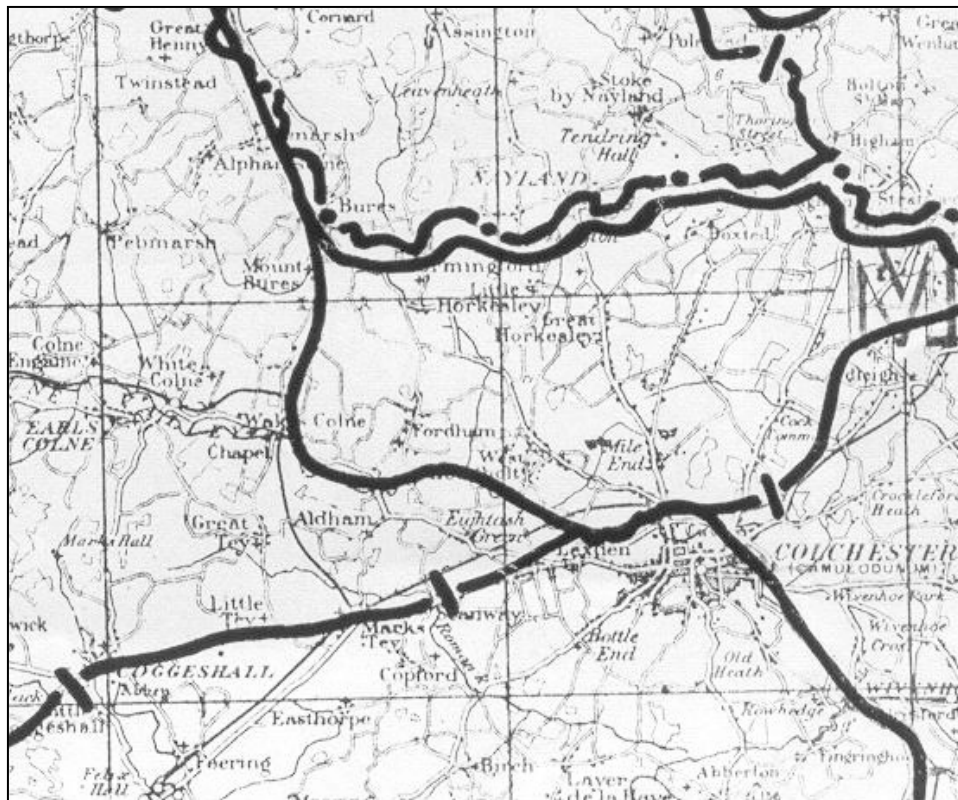


Fig. 1 - The course of the Corps Line (solid line running north-west from Colchester), turning north at Wakes Colne to join the River Stour near Bures.⁵

The Wakes Colne railway viaduct was an important communications point, which demanded all-round defence in its own right. It also stood at a vital point where the stop line turned from running west along the Colne to head north towards the River Stour. At the point of the turn, the anti-tank obstacle provided by the river had to be supplemented by lines of anti-tank blocks to protect the crossing of road and railway. The anti-tank obstacle was then continued by a purpose-dug ditch

³ TNA: PRO WO 199544 and TNA: PRO WO 166/6700.

⁴ TNA: PRO WO 166/14392.

⁵ TNA: PRO WO 166/6700.



running parallel with the railway on its east side, reinforced by the high embankment behind.⁶ Although no confirming field or documentary evidence has been located, there were undoubtedly both road and rail blocks at the viaduct crossing.

The defence works -

Aerial photographs show the anti-tank ditch running north on the east side of Chappel Station, defended at frequent intervals by hexagonal pillboxes. All these pillboxes had been removed by 1949, and the ditch itself infilled. A pillbox [UORN 16088] at the south end of the ditch, hidden by woodland, survived until at least 1974, although it appears now to have been destroyed - the land here has recently been redeveloped and there is no access. A line of anti-tank cubes ran from the road at the base of the railway embankment to join with the end of the anti-tank ditch. In 1999, there were still eleven surviving cubes, but the redevelopment of the land has removed most of these and there are now only a few left immediately north of the road, adjacent to pillbox, UORN 15697.



Fig. 2 - Aerial photograph taken in May 1946, showing the Wakes Colne railway viaduct crossing the River Colne and the main road. The anti-tank ditch north of the viaduct, already partly infilled at this date, with pillboxes along its line, can be clearly made out.

⁶ This was dug by 135th Mechanical Equipment Company RE in July 1940 - TNA: PRO WO 166/3631.



At the viaduct itself, a fine group of defence works survives. On the north side of the road, built half under the arches and half projecting on their eastern side, is an infantry pillbox of a variant form, with a covered entry porch and small embrasures [UORN 15697]. South of the road, there are two lines of massive concrete cubes and cylinders [UORNs 16085 and 16086]. The reason for these two lines, with the easternmost set at an angle to the NE, is not clear. Possibly, the latter was intended originally as the principal line of the anti-tank obstacle, and it was later made redundant when the anti-tank ditch was dug to join up with the line of anti-tank cubes running parallel with the viaduct on the north side of the road. This line of cubes probably also linked up with a roadblock at the bridge itself [see Map 2].

The two lines of anti-tank blocks run from an anti-tank gun emplacement [UORN 15696], sited to fire north-east. Inside, is a holdfast for a 6pdr. gun. Close to this emplacement, on the western side of the arches, is a spigot mortar pedestal [UORN 15691]; another stands a little to the south on the eastern side [UORN 15692]. These two spigot mortar positions, which would have been built at some time after mid-1941, relate to the defence of Wakes Colne [or Chappel] as a nodal point.



Fig. 3 - UORN 15697: infantry pillbox north of the A1124 road. The anti-tank ditch began by the trees in the background, and a further pillbox stood at that point.

A further hexagonal pillbox, badly overgrown, stands to the south of the river, at a corner of what is now the Chappel Millennium Green. Completing the surviving defences of the nodal point is a pillbox to the west, on the south-west side of Chappel Bridge. This bridge was undoubtedly mined for demolition, as very likely were some of the spans of the viaduct itself.





Fig. 4 - UORN 16085: concrete cubes with cylinders behind that form two lines of obstacles on the east side of the viaduct.



Fig. 5 - UORN 15696: the main embrasure of the type 28 anti-tank gun emplacement.





Fig. 6 - UORN 15691: spigot mortar pedestal on the west side of the viaduct. There was a companion pedestal on the east side [UORN 15692].



Fig. 7 - UORN 15690: overgrown pillbox seen from the Chappel Millennium Green, with the railway viaduct behind.



2.2 Landscape:

There have been few changes in the landscape of the defence area over the past sixty years. The railway line, with its viaduct, survived the cuts of the 1950s/60s, and is still in use today. Chappel Station is host to a railway museum. Viaduct Cottages on the north-east side of the main road have recently been demolished and new houses built, this development resulting in the further loss of some of the anti-tank blocks. There is more tree cover today on the eastern side of the railway embankment, and it is possible that this might hide pillbox, UORN 16088. It seems certain, however, that other pillboxes near the station have been destroyed.

Off Chappel Hill, just south of the village of Chappel, parking is available in a recreational area, from where a path runs to the viaduct and the adjacent Millennium Green. All the defence works at the viaduct have easy public access, except the pillbox on the north side of the road that is dangerous to approach given the volume of the traffic.

2.3 Statement of Significance:

This is an important defence area, not only in terms of its surviving structures but also in its position at a vital point on a major stop line where road and rail routes met. The surviving concrete defence works, peering grimly from beneath the brick arches, provide a powerful visual statement of the reality of the 1940 invasion danger and the intensity of the defence against it.



Fig. 8 - Oblique aerial view of the Wakes Colne viaduct taken in 1999, showing the defence structures beneath the arches. At this date, Viaduct Cottages had been demolished and the site was ready for development. Many of the remaining blocks here have since been removed. The anti-tank ditch ran at the edge of the wooded railway embankment.



Some excellent examples of differing defence structures survive, from the anti-tank gun emplacement and infantry pillboxes to the concrete anti-tank obstacles and spigot mortar pedestals. These works enable the different components of stop line and nodal point defences, and their inter-relationship, to be understood by the visitor. They serve as a reminder that, in addition to the linear stop line defence, here was an important centre of communications that required all-round defence.

A short 'pillbox walk', taking in the different structures at the viaduct and by the adjacent Millennium Green, could readily be drawn up.

3. **Recommendations:**

1. That the surviving anti-invasion defence works in and around Wakes Colne viaduct be considered of national importance. They enable the Second World War defence of the stop line and nodal point here 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 the removal of the overgrowth on pillbox, UORN 15690, and the spigot mortar pedestal, UORN 15692. This would help in their identification and interpretation for the purpose of 1. above.
3. That consideration be given, in a possible initiative with Essex County Council and the local authority, to establishing a 'pillbox walk' to view the defence structures at, and adjacent to, the viaduct. Care would need to be taken with pillbox, UORN 15697, which the busy road and difficult access makes dangerous to approach. An information board on the Second World War defences could be set up at the viaduct or in Chappel village.

4. **Supporting material.**

4.1 **Photographs:**

Fig. 2 - 106G/UK/1492 fr.4141 (10.5.1946) - NMR.
Figs. 3-7 - taken (AWF) during field survey, 14.6.2002.
Fig. 8 - EXC19573 fr.9 (18.1.1999) - 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.
135th Mechanical Equipment Company Royal Engineers War Diary, July 1940 - TNA: PRO WO 166/3631.
XI Corps 'G' HQ War Diary, 1940-1941 - TNA: PRO WO 166/329.
'Hertford Area Defence Scheme', 1941 (from Hertford Area HQ War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/1207.



'Operation Instruction No.15', 24.7.1942 (from Essex Sub-Area War Diary)
- TNA: PRO WO 166/6738.

'Essex and Suffolk Area Defence Scheme' (with map), 1942 (from Essex
and Suffolk Area War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/6700.

'Operation Instruction No.12', 5.4.1944 (from Essex and Suffolk District
War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/14392.

4.3 **Aerial Photographs:**

106G/UK/1492 fr.4141 (10.5.1946) - NMR.

58/304 fr.5037 (5.8.1949) - NMR.

OS/89062 fr.37 (30.3.1989) - NMR.

EXC19573 fr.9 (18.1.1999) - NMR.

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

TL 8828-8928 (1969) - BLML.

4.5 **Defence of Britain Project Database:**

[see 5. 'Annex'].

