

DEFENCE AREA 73

FRESHWATER BAY

1. **Area details:**

The defence area is 3½ miles from The Needles and 10 miles W of Newport.

County: Isle of Wight.

Parish: Freshwater.

NGR: centre of area, SZ 346860.

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

The defence area lies partly on the coast at Freshwater Bay and partly inland in the valley of the River Yar, as far north as the crossing of the river known as The Causeway, east of the town of Freshwater. The course of the River Yar, which rises near Freshwater Bay and debouches on the north coast on the west side of Yarmouth, creates a virtual island from the western tip of the Isle of Wight.

Freshwater Bay is a small semi-circular bay with a shingle beach between the high chalk upland of Tennyson Down (National Trust) to the west and the heights of Afton and Compton Downs to the east. It is approached from Freshwater town by the A3055 Afton Road which runs along the Yar valley. The valley itself is marshy and full of reed beds. Afton Marsh Nature Reserve lies just north of Freshwater Bay.

Above the cliffs at the western end of the Bay is a mid-nineteenth century fort known as the Fort Redoubt. It passed into private hands in the late 1920s and is now a residence - there is no access. It does not appear to have been reoccupied by the military in either the First or the Second World Wars, although an observation post [UORN 12105] was built in 1940 at the eastern limit of its grounds.



Fig. 1 - Freshwater Bay looking east from Tennyson Down.



Principal viewsheds are formed by the curve of Freshwater Bay flanked by the chalk downs either side, and, further north, by the expanse of marsh and water at The Causeway crossing of the River Yar.



Fig. 2 - The Fort Redoubt above the cliffs at the western end of Freshwater Bay. At the middle right of the picture is the Albion Hotel, with Freshwater House behind it.



Fig. 3 - The view across the broad marshy valley of the River Yar at The Causeway. Pillbox, UORN 12109, is in the distance on the left side of the road.

2. **Assessment.**

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

Defence overview -

In July 1940, the Isle of Wight was divided for defence purposes into two principal sectors - the West Sector and the East Sector. Additionally, there was the Needles Promontory Sector, and, to the east of that, the Rear Boundary Outpost Sector that included Freshwater Bay.¹ The island also formed a Sub-Area within the military Hampshire Area.²

From August 1941, a stop line known as the Yar Line was built following the River Yar from Freshwater Bay to Thorley, south of Yarmouth.³ This defence line protected the western peninsula of the Isle of Wight, on the north coast of which, between The Needles and Cliff End, five coastal batteries and forts were positioned. The principal defence work built on the Line was the type 22 infantry pillbox, but there were undoubtedly additional earthwork defence posts, as well as barbed wire entanglements and roadblocks. At The Causeway crossing of the River Yar were both a roadblock and a railblock, the latter on the railway (now disused) running between Yarmouth and Freshwater town.

In 1940, 12th Infantry Brigade had responsibility for the defence of the Isle of Wight, being replaced early in 1941 by 214th Infantry Brigade.⁴ In July 1940, troops from the 2nd Bn. Royal Fusiliers were manning the defences at Freshwater Bay, their place being taken in September (the key invasion danger period) by the 50th Bn. Hampshire Regiment.⁵ The 19th Bn. Hampshire Home Guard also played a role in the manning of the pillboxes and roadblocks of the Yar Line. The main task of the defending troops was to deny the beaches to an enemy seaborne landing and to protect the fixed defences to the west.⁶

A German map of the Isle of Wight defences made in August 1940 shows what are termed anti-tank obstacles running along the beach in the eastern area of Freshwater Bay.⁷ These are more likely to have been anti-boat obstacles at the sea edge, as these are recorded in a documentary source.⁸ In the western half of the Bay, however, anti-tank scaffolding was erected, as this shows in 1941 air photographs.⁹

Major defence works were constructed in a field at the west of the Bay below Tennyson Down. A 1941 air photograph shows two large structures here with a barbed wire perimeter around them. One is undoubtedly a 6pdr. gun emplacement known from a documentary source¹⁰ and the other is probably a defence work shown on the German map as a 'fortified installation'. A pillbox on the sea front close to the Albion Hotel is also shown on the German map, and this can be seen as

¹ TNA: PRO WO 166/4532 and TNA: PRO WO 166/917.

² TNA: PRO WO 166/1206.

³ TNA: PRO WO 166/1067.

⁴ TNA: PRO WO 166/917 and TNA: PRO WO 166/1067.

⁵ TNA: PRO WO 166/4532.

⁶ TNA: PRO WO 166/1067.

⁷ Sheet 141: Befestigungskarte Grossbritannien 1:50,000 (BLML).

⁸ TNA: PRO WO 166/10970.

⁹ Air photograph evidence shows that beach anti-tank scaffolding was not generally erected before the Spring of 1941.

¹⁰ TNA: PRO WO 166/1067.



well on air photographs.¹¹ The positions of various roadblocks are also known from a combination of air photographic and documentary evidence. On Tennyson Down to the west, trenches, dug both parallel with the cliff edge and at right angles to it, blocked the open grassland against the landing of enemy aircraft.



Fig. 4 - A 1941 oblique air photograph that shows the seafront at Freshwater Bay and its immediate hinterland. The barbed wire perimeter defences to the 6pdr gun position, and another defence structure in the fields to the left [SW] of the road, can be clearly seen.



Fig. 5 - Portion of a 1946 air photograph showing anti-landing trenches to the west [left] of Freshwater Bay. Some of these trenches can still be made out on Tennyson Down today [see Fig. 11].

¹¹ The pillbox is destroyed: the site appears to be occupied today by a wishing well.





Fig. 6 - Wishing well that now occupies the site of a pillbox [UORN 16666] near the Albion Hotel, Freshwater Bay. Air photographs show it to have had a domed top, presumably part of its camouflage.

The defence works -

The great majority of the defence works around Freshwater Bay itself have been cleared away. However, there are some significant survivors that enable the fortification of the coast here to be appreciated. On top of the heights between the Albion Hotel and the Fort Redoubt is an observation post that can be seen from the beach front below [UORN 12105]. On the beach nearby at the western end of the Bay are also numbers of concrete cylinders [UORN 16750], some of which have been built into the sea defences. On the north side of the Fort Redoubt is a large concrete base [UORN 16749] of indeterminate function: it may have been a gun platform. Above on Tennyson Down, some of the anti-landing trenches can still be seen as linear hollows [UORN 16713]. There are no remains of the various roadblocks, and the field that contained the 6pdr. gun and adjacent emplacement [see Fig. 4] shows no sign now of its former military role. The position of the pillbox that once stood near the Albion Hotel has already been mentioned [see Fig. 6], and another pillbox probably stood to its west at the top of the beach below the cliffs [UORN 16714].

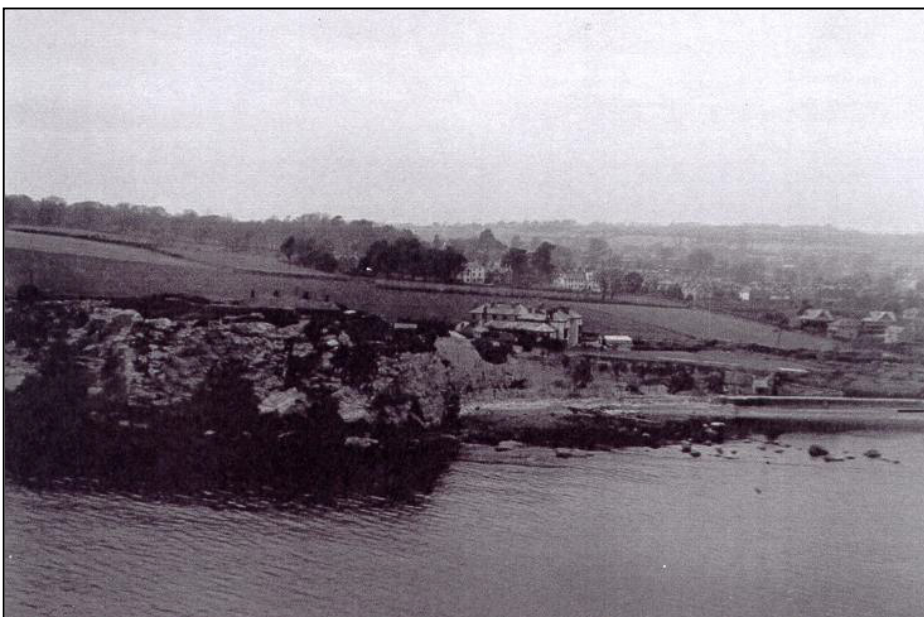


Fig. 7 - 1949 oblique air photograph that seems to show a square loop-holed structure at the foot of the cliffs [UORN 16714].



Fig. 8 - UORN 12105: observation post next to the dining room of the Albion Hotel.



Fig. 9 [left] - UORN 16750: concrete cylinders now used as sea defences.



Fig. 10 [right] - UORN 16749: concrete base, possibly of a coastal gun position.



Fig. 11 - UORN 16713: anti-landing trenches still visible on Tennyson Down.

Three type 22 hexagonal pillboxes of the southern end of the Yar Line survive, and another at Afton [UORN 12106] appears to have been destroyed only recently. That at Black Bridge on Afton Marsh [UORN 12107] is so overgrown its shape can scarcely be made out. A better example survives near Freshwater town [UORN 12108]. Here the pillbox has been retained at the centre of the car park of a garden centre and café, and plants have been grown against it. The best example within the defence area is undoubtedly that at The Causeway where the pillbox is in good condition, largely unencumbered by any overgrowth and with interior access possible [UORN 12109]. It has merged with its setting and is clearly now an accepted addition to the overall landscape history of this area [see Figs. 3 and 13].



Fig. 12 - UORN 12108: a garden centre's treatment of a type 22 pillbox, preserving it in a situation where it might otherwise have been destroyed.



Fig. 13 - UORN 12109: type 22 pillbox at The Causeway, Freshwater.

2.2 Landscape:

Although there has been some housing development in the Afton Marsh valley and in Freshwater town, little of this intrudes on the study defence area. The Freshwater Bay seafront has received no commercial development and is much as it was in 1940. There is a car park for visitors where a board provides information on the history and geology of the area. Although details are given here of the Fort Redoubt, there is no information on any aspect of the Second World War history of the area. A National Trust information board on the path to Tennyson Down, however, makes reference to the anti-landing trenches, although it terms them incorrectly, 'anti-glider trenches'.¹² From Tennyson Down, an excellent view of Freshwater Bay and its hinterland can be obtained.

A footpath has been laid out with boarded walks through Afton Marsh Nature Reserve, and the visitor can walk from Freshwater Bay to Black Bridge (where pillbox UORN 12107 can be seen) and then further north to Freshwater town where it would be a short diversion to see pillboxes, UORNs 12108 and 12109. Car parking near the latter pillbox is very limited, and the road is narrow.

There is no public access to the Fort Redoubt, which includes the observation post [UORN 12105]. However, details of the Victorian defences can be seen from a distance, and the observation post viewed from the path by the Albion Hotel.

2.3 Statement of Significance:

The defence area provides a good example of coastal defence combining with an inland stop line in a most important defence sector of the Isle of Wight. Of prime importance here was the protection of the various coastal batteries on the West Wight peninsula from both seaborne and airborne assault.

Although the surviving defence works are not great in number, they do provide a significant indication of the nature of the coastal defence at Freshwater Bay. This is amplified by the documentary and air photograph research included in this report. Inland, the three surviving pillboxes of the Yar Line show how it was intended to protect the peninsula to the west from a land assault by invading forces. It can be seen how the topography, with its areas of river and marsh, assists such a defence, and caused the stop line to be placed here.

This is an attractive location which receives many summer visitors, and there is scope for public education on its Second World War history. Further information might be added to the existing boards, and a 'pillbox walk' set out which would help promote the public's use of existing trails.

¹² This error can also be seen in information at the National Trust property of Sutton Hoo, Suffolk. The error, although admittedly small, demands correction. The trenches were primarily intended to prevent troop-carrying aircraft landing *and taking off again*. On arable land, the fact that fields were ploughed was often considered a sufficient precaution. This would clearly not have prevented gliders landing.



3. **Recommendations:**

1. That the surviving anti-invasion defence works at Freshwater Bay and within the defence area to the north be considered of national importance. They enable the defence of this part of the Isle of Wight 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, in a possible initiative with the local authority, to establishing a 'pillbox walk' at Freshwater Bay and in the Yar valley, and to providing information for the public on the Second World War anti-invasion defences of the area. Such information could be added to the existing information board within the Freshwater Bay car park.

4. **Supporting material.**

4.1 **Photographs:**

Figs x, xx - taken (AWF) during field survey, 26-27.8.2003.

Fig. x - MSO 31258 fr.67 (29.8.1941) - NMR.

Fig. x - 106G/UK/1665 fr.4101 (12.7.1946) - NMR.

Fig. x - RAF 30101 fr.0049 (25.3.1949) - NMR.

4.2 **Documentary Sources:**

12th Infantry Brigade War Diary, 1940 - TNA: PRO WO 166/917.

2nd Bn. Royal Fusiliers War Diary, 1940- TNA: PRO WO 166/4532.

'Operation Instruction No.13', 23.10.1940 (from Hampshire Area War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/1206.

Befestigungskarte Grossbritannien: 1:50,000 (Sheet 141), 1.6.1941 - BLML 1305(13).

'Scheme for Defence of Isle of Wight', 24.8.1941 (from 214th Infantry Brigade War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/1067.

'Plan to Defeat the Enemy', 1.9.1943 (from Isle of Wight Sub-District War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/10970.

'List of Railway Blocks in Hampshire and Dorset District', 14.12.1943 (from Hampshire and Dorset District HQ War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/10843.

4.3 **Aerial Photographs:**

225E/BR222 frs.9-10 (28.7.1940) - NMR.

225B/UK851/2 frs.9-10 (3.9.1940) - NMR.

S260/H6 fr.35 (27.6.1941) - NMR.

MSO 31205 fr.019 (27.6.1941) - NMR.

MSO 31258 fr.67 (29.8.1941) - NMR.

S/464 fr.19 (30.8.1941) - NMR.

S/483 fr.79 (13.9.1941) - NMR.

106G/UK/1665 fr.4101 (12.7.1946) - NMR.

RAF 30101 fr.024 (25.3.1949) - NMR.

RAF 30101 frs.0049-0050 (25.3.1949) - NMR.



MAL/71003 fr.146 (27.1.1971) - NMR.

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

SZ 3486-3586 (1971) - BLML.

SZ 3487-3587 (1976) - BLML.

4.5 **Defence of Britain Project Database:**

[see 5. 'Annex'].

