

DEFENCE AREA 75

LITTLEPORT

1. **Area details:**

Littleport is 5 miles NNE of Ely and 20 miles NNE of Cambridge.

County: Cambridgeshire.

Parish: Littleport.

NGR: centre of area, TL 573869.

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

The defence area lies in the flat Fen country north of Ely. It consists of part of the town of Littleport, as well as adjacent countryside to its north and east. The rich farming land is intersected by a chequerboard pattern of drains. The canalised River Great Ouse flows past Littleport on its east side, and is joined by the River Lark to the south.

The focal points of the area are the two bridges across the Great Ouse - Littleport Bridge to the north and Sandhill Bridge to the south. From the high embankment of the river at these two locations, there are viewsheds across the flat Fenland to the north, east, and south, enabling the junction here of the GHQ and Command Lines to be understood. To the west, a further viewshed is formed by defence works in fields at the northern edge of the town where an anti-tank ditch (surviving in part as an open drain) took the GHQ Line towards the west.

2. **Assessment.**

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

Defence overview -

Littleport was a 'Priority 2' nodal point [also called a focal point] within the Ely Sub-Area of the military Cambridge Area¹ (Isle of Ely Home Guard Sector). It stood at the junction of the Command Line (Eastern Army Command) [see Defence Area 5 - River Lark: Jude's Ferry Bridge] with the GHQ Line [see Defence Area 8 - Hartford End]. This section of the GHQ Line, which followed a course around the north of Littleport before heading west and then north, was also known as the 'Thorney Line'.² Littleport was, therefore, of great importance as it controlled a meeting point of the two defence lines, which then divided and went

¹ Military areas, originally set up in peace time for recruiting and other administrative purposes, but part of the complicated structure of defence strategy in 1940/41.

² TNA: PRO WO 166/6693 and TNA: PRO WO 166/6728: the course of the GHQ Line north of Cambridge is somewhat confused by a map and route summary with the II Corps 'G' War Diary, 1941 [TNA: PRO WO 166/189] which indicates it as going west via St. Ives and Huntingdon, then south of Peterborough to Thorney, missing out Ely and Littleport entirely. The weight of documentation, however, supports the Ely - Littleport - Thorney route.



their separate courses again. In 1941, it had a garrison of a hundred men from 2nd Bn. Ely Home Guard, with ten spigot mortars, two hundred anti-tank grenades, and two hundred anti-tank mines.³ Ely, to the south, was also a 'Priority 2' nodal point, but had a larger garrison. It served a dual role with Littleport in the strategy of defence at this critical location.

The study of this defence area is only concerned with the nodal point defences of Littleport in respect of the way these relate to the junction of the two stop lines. No attempt has been made to survey the nodal point as a whole.

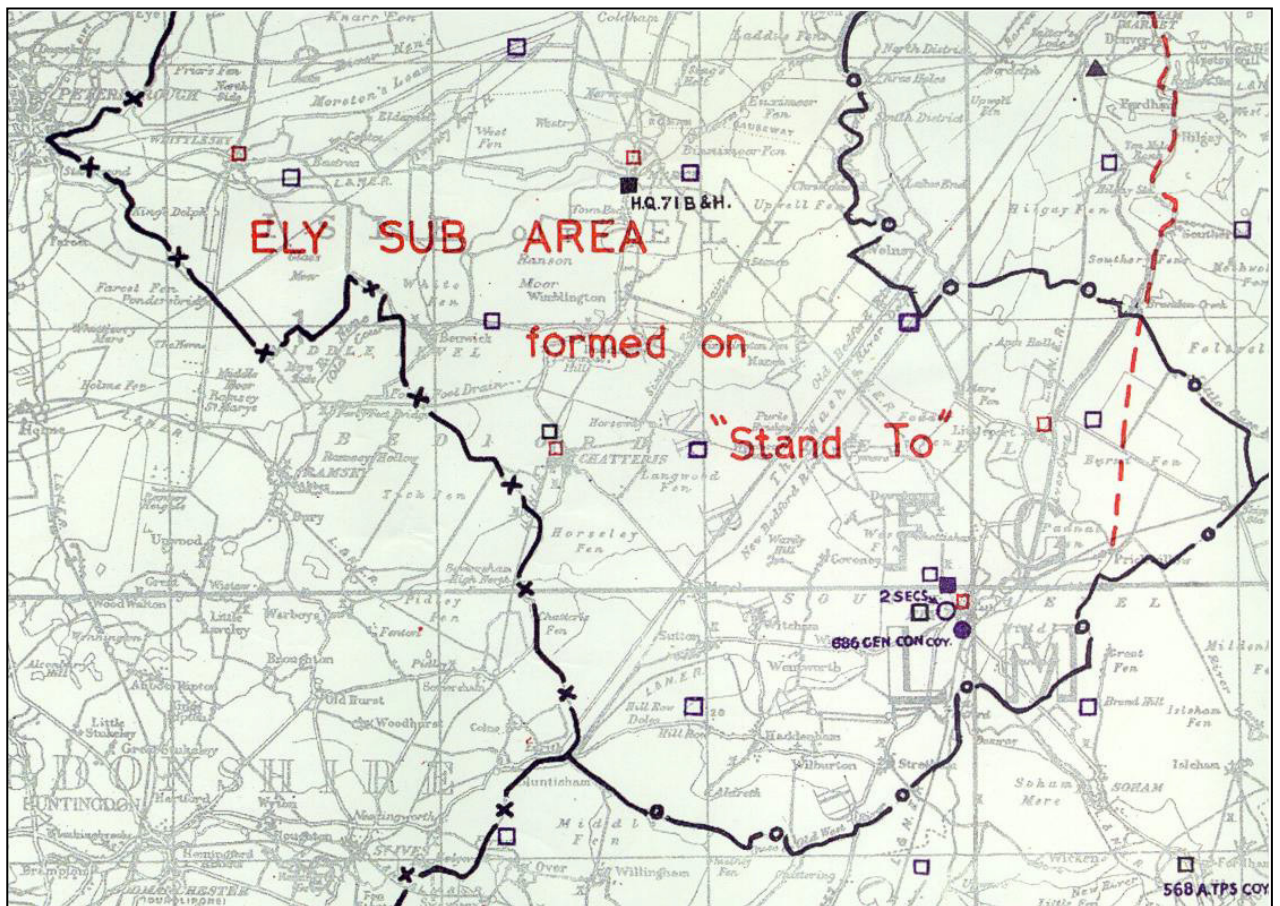


Fig. 1 - Map showing the military administration of the Ely Sub-Area. Littleport nodal point is shown by the furthest red open square to the right, with a cluster of symbols around Ely to its south. Stop lines are not shown on this map.⁴

The GHQ Line approached Littleport from Cambridge, at first along the line of the River Cam and then the River Ouse via Ely. A highly fortified junction with the Command Line was made in the Prickwillow / Queen Adelaide area. The Command Line continued north from Littleport, following the River Great Ouse to King's Lynn, which was a 'Priority 1' nodal point. The GHQ Line swung west from the Great Ouse, encircling the north of Littleport town, before branching off west through Little Downham, Chatteris, and Whittlesey on a course to Thorney. Where it passed north of Littleport, an artificial anti-tank ditch was dug to form the main front-line obstacle, which also served as a defence for the nodal point.

³ TNA: PRO WO 166/1193 and TNA: PRO WO 166/10881.

⁴ TNA: PRO WO 166/1193.



Major defended localities at Littleport were the crossings of the Great Ouse at Sandhill Bridge and at Littleport Bridge. There were concentrations of defence works around these bridges, some of which survive. The anti-tank ditch, some 350 yards of which is recorded as 92% complete by 22 September 1940,⁵ was infilled by 1946, although its eastern section to the railway embankment survives as an open drain.⁶ The western course of the ditch is uncertain. It possibly followed pre-existing drains as its total length would have been greater than the 700 yards that is recorded as having been dug by 13 October.⁷

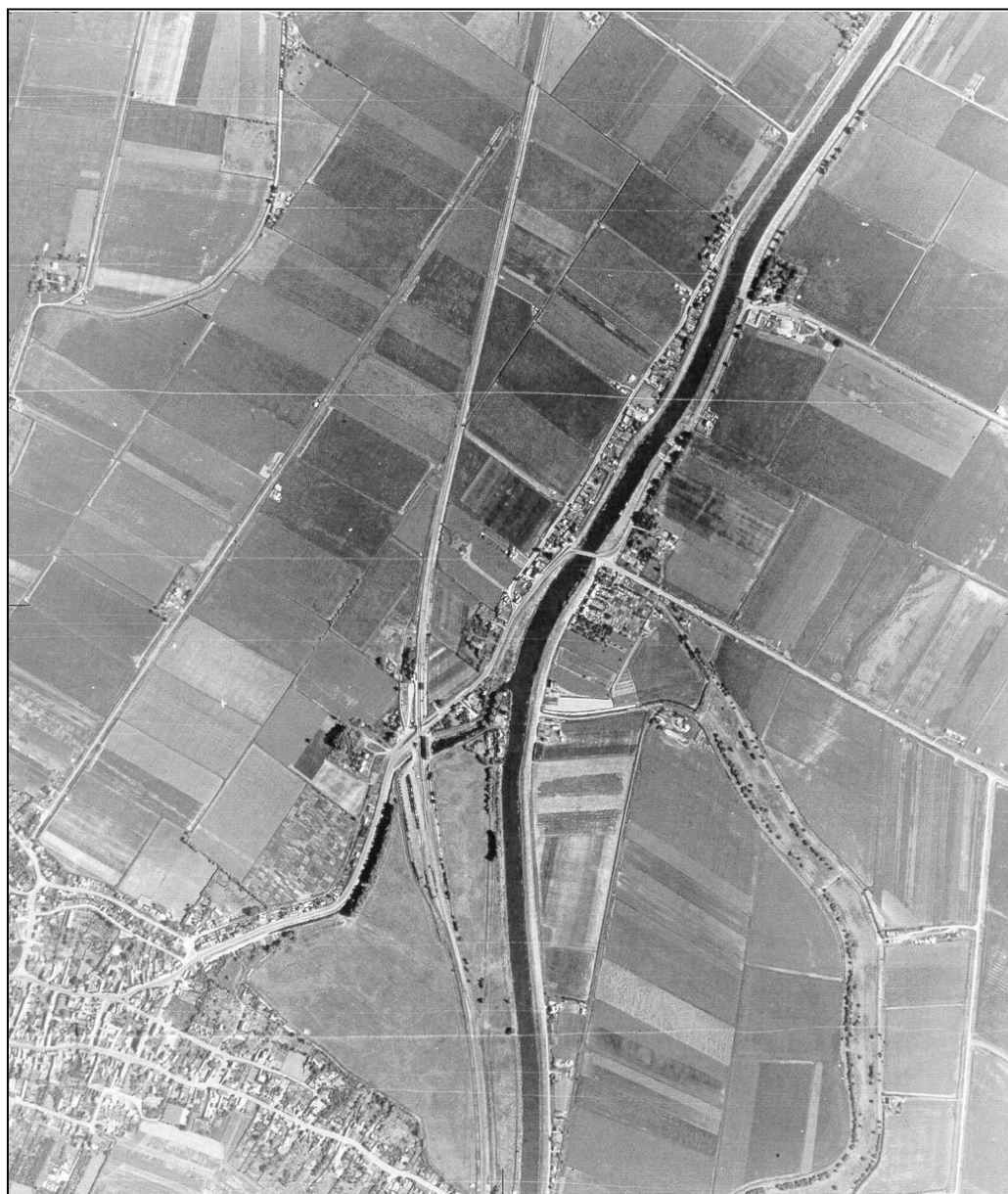


Fig. 2 - Aerial photograph taken in 1946 showing the River Great Ouse and Littleport Bridge. Littleport town lies at the bottom left. The GHQ Line left the river here, making a loop to the west, and its course is marked by the line of the artificial anti-tank ditch [seen as a white line crossing the fields north of the town suburbs]. Pillboxes stand in the fields east and west of the river, and are grouped around Littleport Bridge. The majority are now destroyed.

⁵ TNA: PRO WO 166/3709.

⁶ 1946 aerial photographs show this section also infilled. It was possibly later re-excavated for field drainage.

⁷ TNA: PRO WO 166/3709.



Pillboxes were constructed on the stop lines, and within the nodal point. These all had wired inner and outer perimeters, and slit trenches were dug around them to provide additional protective fire. Road and rail crossings of the stop lines were mined for demolition, and steel rail blocks constructed. Depth charges were also set beneath some crossing points to be blown in an emergency. Later, from mid-1941, spigot mortar emplacements were built to defend the crossing points. Although the open nature of the countryside might superficially appear to have favoured an attacker, its widespread division by banks and drains would have greatly assisted the defender.

The defence works-

Many of the defence works were destroyed in the immediate post-war years, but some have been removed only recently. Enough works remain, however, to illustrate the intense nature of the defence in this area. At Sandhill Bridge, a type 24 pillbox [UORN 2746] survives behind houses to the east of the bridge. Further pillboxes set in front of the stop line have been destroyed in recent years. To the west of the bridge, a heavy infantry pillbox [UORN 4697] guarded the railway and the road into Littleport, with behind it an anti-tank gun emplacement [UORN 2743]. Both these structures survive.



Fig. 3 - UORN 4697: Square 'Eastern Command-type' pillbox, with detached loopholed blast wall. It survives in poor condition behind houses in Victoria Street.

North of Sandhill Bridge, the line of the anti-tank ditch can be seen as a drain running across fields between the railway and Station Road. The defences of Littleport Bridge are only represented today by a spigot mortar pedestal [UORN 4699] dug into the western river embankment to its south, and by an anti-tank gun emplacement [UORN 1573] over half a mile to its east. To the north of the bridge, a surviving pillbox at White Hall Farm [UORN 1571] marks the continuation of



the Command Line towards King's Lynn. Remnants of anti-tank blocks [UORN 16168] on the edge of the road outside the farm may have come from a roadblock here.



Fig. 4 - UORN 2743: anti-tank gun emplacement, with field of fire towards Sandhill Bridge.



Fig. 5 - UORN 16156: the line of the eastern section of the anti-tank ditch surviving as a drain.



Fig. 6 - UORN 4699: spigot mortar pedestal south-west of Littleport Bridge, dug into the embankment of the River Great Ouse.



Fig. 7 - UORN 16168: probable remnants of a roadblock - these are the only such remains today from the large number of horizontal rail roadblocks that were constructed in the Littleport area in 1940/41.

2.2 Landscape:

Much of the spread of housing within Littleport in recent years has taken place to the west of the town, beyond the study defence area. There has been some development to the immediate west of Sandhill Bridge and south of Littleport Bridge at Hereford Farm, but substantially the pattern of town and surrounding countryside has changed little. The span of Littleport Bridge itself has been replaced recently, and a new by-pass road now loops from it around the town, taking the place of the old A10 road to Ely.

East of the Great Ouse, the enclosed chequerboard fields divided by drains have been opened up into larger fields, leading to the loss of at least two pillboxes here. A trackway has also been ploughed out, but a new footpath opposite Sandhill Bridge enables the walker to enter these fields and locate pillbox, UORN 2746. To the west, it is possible to walk around the embankment of a drain to inspect the defence works, UORNs 2743 and 4697. Both of the high embankments of the Great Ouse between the two bridges provide pleasant walks, enabling different parts of the defence area to be seen. An increasing amount of leisure boating uses the Great Ouse, and there are information boards on its banks on the history of the town and the Fenlands.

2.3 Statement of Significance:

This defence area is of importance as it lies at a major junction of stop lines at a point where the defences of a nodal point were built into the overall defence strategy. Differing types of defence works survive in a landscape that is part urban and part rural, as it was in 1940.

Good documentary evidence and air photographs have enabled the positions of many pillboxes and roadblocks, as well as the line of the anti-tank ditch, to be plotted. Consequently, it has been possible to make a full interpretation of the defence strategy, which is supported by the evidence of the surviving structures. Many of these are in poor and vulnerable condition (for example UORNs 2743, 4697, 2746, and 1573) and their future preservation as part of the surviving legacy of the Second World War defence of the Cambridgeshire Fenland is vital.



Fig. 8 - UORN 1573: anti-tank gun emplacement in a derelict farm yard, once commanding Littleport Bridge to the west - overgrown and semi-buried, it is highly vulnerable to destruction.

3. **Recommendations:**

1. That the surviving anti-invasion defence works at Littleport be considered of national importance. They enable the Second World War defence of the stop lines and the nodal point 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 especial consideration be given to the preservation of defence works, UORNs 4697 and 1573, which are highly vulnerable to destruction, as has happened to other adjacent structures in the recent past.
3. That, in a possible initiative with Cambridgeshire County Council and the local authority, information boards on the Second World War heritage of Littleport be set up. Details of other adjacent defence works, in particular at Queen Adelaide and Prickwillow, might be included.

4. **Supporting material.**

4.1 **Photographs:**

Fig. 2 - 106G/UK/1634 fr.2436 (9.7.1946) - NMR.

Figs. 3-8 - taken (AWF) during field survey, 18.6.2002 and 28.7.2002.

4.2 **Documentary Sources:**

'II Corps Defence Scheme', 1940 (from II Corps CRE War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/194.

'List of Nodal Points in Eastern Command', September 1940 (from General Headquarters Papers, Home Forces) - TNA: PRO WO 199/544.

'Progress Report Littleport Focal Point', 13.9.1940 (from 240th Army Field Company Royal Engineers War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/3709.

'Progress Report Command Line', 22.9.1940 (from 240th Army Field Company Royal Engineers War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/3709.

'Operation Instruction No. 41', 6.8.1941 (from II Corps 'G' War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/189.

'Operation Instruction No. 12', 18 December 1941 (from Cambridge Area War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/1193.

'Cambridge Sub-Area Defence Scheme', 1942 (from Cambridge Sub-Area War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/6728.

'Operation Instruction No.19', 14.1.1942 (from Cambridge Area War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/6693.

Norfolk and Cambridge District HQ War Diary, 1943 - TNA: PRO WO 166/10881.

4.3 **Published Source:**

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



- 4.4 **Aerial Photographs:**
106G/UK/1557 frs.4045 and 4047 (7.6.1946) - NMR.
106G/UK/1557 fr.6046 (7.6.1946) - NMR.
106G/UK/1634 frs.2435-2436 and 2438 (9.7.1946) - NMR.
- 4.5 **Ordnance Survey 1: 2500 Plans:**
TL 5686-5786 (1973) - BLML.
TL 5886-5986 (1973) - BLML.
TL 5887-5987 (1973) - BLML.
TL 5888-5988 (1973) - BLML.
- 4.6 **Defence of Britain Project Database:**
[see 5. 'Annex'].

