

DEFENCE AREA 76

WOOLER

1. **Area details:**

Wooler is 16 miles NW of Alnwick and 17 miles E of Kelso.

County: Northumberland.

Parish: Wooler.

NGR: centre of area, NT 986277.

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

Wooler is a small town that lies on Wooler Water, a tributary of the River Till. It stands at the edge of the Cheviot Hills, which stretch away to the west forming the Northumberland National Park. Moorland, and high hills grazed by sheep, overlook the town on its western and south-western sides, and there are further wooded uplands to the east. To the north and south, the river valleys allow arable farming, and are followed by the main A697 road that passes through the town. A railway line running from Morpeth via Wooler to Kelso is now disused.

The site of a Norman motte and bailey castle is at Green Castle to the south-west of Wooler, close to the edge of the Northumberland National Park.

A viewshed is formed by the hills encircling the town to the south-west, upon which a line of pillboxes was built.

2. **Assessment.**

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

Defence overview -

Wooler was a 'defended village' within the plan for the defence of the Northumbrian Area from a German sea and air landing across the North Sea. In the critical invasion months from June-October 1940, the defence was the responsibility of 162nd Infantry Brigade, but, early in 1941, this brigade was replaced by 225th Infantry Brigade which, with the 202nd and 216th Brigades, formed the Northumberland County Division.¹

The defence of the coast from Berwick to Sunderland demanded a defence of the interior as well, which was achieved by a system of stop lines ['switch lines'] and 'defended villages' [elsewhere termed 'nodal points']. The purpose of the stop lines was to prevent the enemy, having landed at one point, being able to move laterally along the coast to mount a flanking attack against a port or other landing point. The intention was to keep the enemy troops contained within the sector where they had landed, until they could be counter-attacked by forces from the mobile

¹ TNA: PRO WO 166/1035 and TNA: PRO WO 166/1078.



reserve. Stop lines were established along the River Coquet west of Amble, along the River Wansbeck west and east of Morpeth, between Alnwick and Wooler, and between Belford and Wooler. Wooler was, therefore, an important point in the network of defence, being at the junction of two stop lines and defended on all sides. It also contained the headquarters of 225th Infantry Brigade, which were set up at the requisitioned Ryecroft Hotel.² Later in the war, an army camp was also built at the town.

Wooler was defended by six pillboxes and thirteen roadblocks within the town and its immediate outskirts, but at least six further pillboxes were built (possibly at a later date) at a slightly further distance to the west and south-west to protect the town where it was overlooked here by hills.³



Fig. 1 - Wooler in a 1948 air photograph. A critical part of the defence of the town was an arc of six pillboxes to the south-west [bottom left].

² TNA: PRO WO 166/1078.

³ TNA: PRO WO 166/1035. Six pillboxes are listed in 'Operation Instruction No.2' dated January 1941, but not the pillboxes protecting the western and south-western arc. The assumption is that they were built later than this document.



The defence of Wooler was the responsibility of the Wooler Company of the 1st (Berwick) Bn., Northumberland Home Guard.



Fig. 2 - Detail from a 1948 air photograph showing an army camp at Wooler. The site off Brewery Road is now occupied by a school.

The defence works -

Nine pillboxes survive around Wooler, and at least a further five have been destroyed. Further to the east, beyond the boundary of the study area, other surviving pillboxes mark the course of the two stop lines running from Wooler.

Owing to the position of many of the pillboxes on private land, it was not possible to inspect these at close quarters during the fieldwork for this report. A local history group might well undertake this work, and at the same time gather more information on the Second World War history of the town, particularly through the oral testimony of residents with memories of the period.

The predominant pillbox type is a local variant of the hexagonal type 22, with light machine gun embrasures in the forward faces and a rifle port by the doorway.



Fig. 3 - UORN 7296: hexagonal infantry pillbox sited on a knoll to guard a pass through the hills south-west of Wooler.

Other pillboxes, which it was not possible to inspect closely [for example, UORN 7300], are of a lozenge shape with three (or possibly four) small embrasures side-by-side in the forward face [see also Defence Area 52 - Atwick].



Fig. 4 - UORN 7297: irregular-shaped pillbox close to Green Castle, scheduled as part of the site of this motte and bailey castle.



Fig. 5 - UORN 7300: three embrasures side by side can be seen in the forward face of this pillbox that overlooks Burnhouse Road.

On the ridge south of Common Road are three pillboxes in a line (possibly all type 22s), radio masts having been erected in recent years beside two of these. There appears to be no surviving evidence of any of the ten roadblocks around the town whose positions are known from documentary sources.





Fig. 6 - Two of the three pillboxes on the ridge south of Wooler [UORNs 7294 and 16614] now serve to support radio masts.

2.2 Landscape:

Wooler, and its surrounding landscape, have changed very little since the Second World War. It remains a small compact town nestling in its river valley, with moorland pressing against its western flank. New housing has been limited to some small developments to the north and the east. A caravan park has been established to the west of the town, tucked away in the valley of a stream near Humbleton Mill. The railway has long been disused, and the site of the former station and good yards now forms a small industrial estate.

The roadblocks were presumably all removed soon after the end of the war, and a number of pillboxes within the town have also been destroyed. However, most of the pillboxes surrounding the western outskirts of the town remain, and, as they stand on private land, there appears to be little danger to them from any development.

2.3 Statement of Significance:

Wooler provides a very good example of a defended place at the hub of an overall system of anti-invasion defence. The surviving pillboxes around the town enable its defences to be readily appreciated, and other pillboxes on stop lines in the countryside to the east and south indicate its place in the overall strategy for the defence of Northumberland.

It is unusual to find such a high survival of pillboxes defending an urban centre: these remain because of the lack of expansion of Wooler over the past sixty years. It is a pity that there is now no evidence of the many roadblocks, or other categories of defence works, such as possible Home Guard spigot mortar emplacements, but it is always possible that fieldwork by a local history group might yet locate evidence of such sites.



A 'pillbox walk' to visit, or view from a distance, surviving sites of Wooler's Second World War heritage could be drawn up, and information provided for the benefit of visitors and local residents alike. At present, there appear to be no information boards on any aspect of the history of the town.

3. **Recommendations:**

1. That the surviving anti-invasion defence works at Wooler be considered of national importance. They enable the defence provision of the town, and that of the surrounding area, 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 further field work be carried out by a local history group, with the permission of landowners, to confirm and amplify the information on individual structures given in this report, and to determine if there are further surviving defence works, or evidence of them. Such a project should incorporate the oral testimony of residents who can recall Wooler during the Second World War.
3. That consideration be given, in a possible initiative with Northumberland County Council and the local authority, to displaying information for visitors on the Second World War history of the town, such information to include details of a 'pillbox walk'.

4. **Supporting material.**

4.1 **Photographs:**

Fig. 1 - 541/A/437 fr.3198 (28.7.1948) - NMR.

Fig. 2 - 541/A/437 fr.3197 (28.7.1948) - NMR.

Figs. 3-6 - taken (AWF) during field survey, 5.5.2003.

4.2 **Documentary Sources:**

'Operation Order No.4', 8.9.1940 (from 162nd Infantry Brigade War Diary)
- TNA: PRO WO 166/1035.

'Operation Instruction No.8', 4.11.1940 (from 6th Bn. Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire Regiment War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/4134.

'Operation Instruction No.7', 14.11.1940 (from Northumbrian Area HQ War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/1230.

9th Bn. Border Regiment War Diary, 1941 - TNA: PRO WO 166/4159.

'Operation Order No.3', 29.4.1941 and 'Operation Order No.5', 31.10.1941
(from 225th Infantry Brigade War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/1078.

4.3 **Aerial Photographs:**

106G/SCOT/UK/121 fr.4033 (20.6.1946) - NMR.

CPE/UK/2074 fr.3106 (17.5.1947) - NMR.

CPE/SCOT/319 fr.4014 (18.3.1948) - NMR.



541/A/437 frs.3197-3198 (28.7.1948) - NMR.
OS/72385 fr.341 (10.9.1972) - NMR.

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

NT 9827-9927 (1966) - BLML.

NT 9828-9928 (1966) - BLML.

4.5 **Defence of Britain Project Database:**

[see 5. 'Annex'].

