

# DEFENCE AREA 51

## CHEQUERS BRIDGE

### 1. Area details:

The defence area is 2 miles SW of Fleet and 5 miles NW of Farnham.

County: Hampshire.

Parish: Crookham Village.

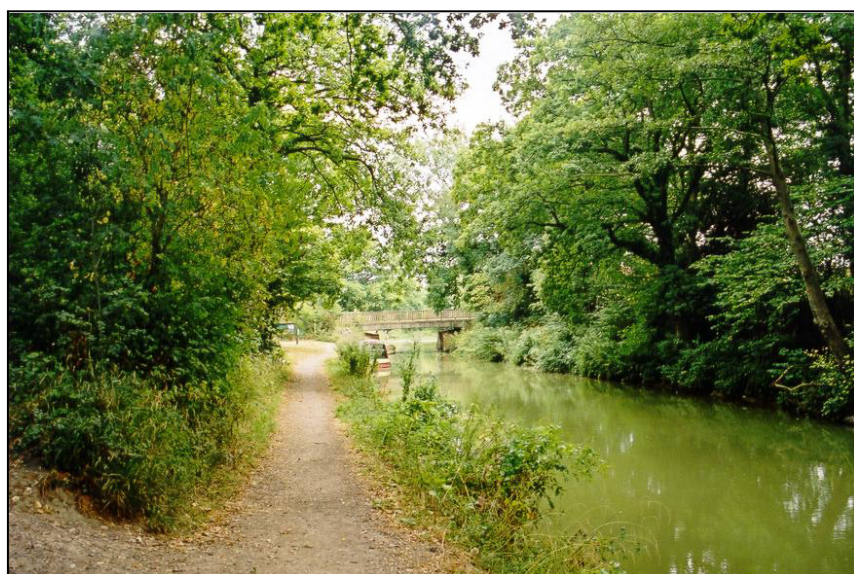
NGR: centre of area, SU 792517.

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

This is a large defence area consisting of part of Crookham Village and its small neighbouring settlement of Pilcot to the north, as well as the west - east stretch of the Basingstoke Canal that passes between Poulter's Bridge and Chequers Bridge, and as far west as the now demolished Coxmoor Bridge.<sup>1</sup> To the south, the area boundary is the recently opened Bowenhurst Golf Course. The focus of the area is Chequers Bridge where the Crondall Road, running north from the main A287 Farnham - Odiham road, crosses the Basingstoke Canal.

It is a landscape of narrow, leafy lanes, with houses tucked away behind high hedges, as well as of farms and open fields and belts of heavy woodland. Hancock's Farm stands on a hill towards the south of the area, and its position commands the land towards Chequers Bridge. A small hill on land of Albany Farm also commands the landscape to the south and east of Poulter's Bridge.

To the immediate west of Chequer's Bridge, the Canal runs in a cutting that is fringed by trees, and further west towards the site of Coxmoor Bridge it passes between thicker woodland that includes, on the south bank, Coxmoor Wood.



*Fig. 1 - The Basingstoke Canal looking west towards Chequers Bridge.*

<sup>1</sup> The Basingstoke Canal, opened in 1794, was restored in the 1970s-1980s. An information board at the Chequers Bridge car park provides details of its history.



There is a fine viewshed from the hill at Hancock's farm looking towards Chequers Bridge, another from the hillock west of Albany Farm, and others across the defence area formed by the pattern of fields and woods. The Basingstoke Canal acts as a prime focus linking the various viewsheds.



*Fig. 2 - Air photograph taken in January 1946 showing the central and southern parts of the defence area. Chequers Bridge is at the upper centre where the curving line of the Basingstoke Canal can be clearly seen. Hancock's Farm lies to the south at the edge of woodland [to the left of centre of the photograph] and Coxmoor Wood is at the left edge. The line of the filled in anti-tank ditches can be made out both north and south of the Canal. The centre of Crookham Village, and Pilcot, are off the photograph to the north.*



## 2. Assessment.

### 2.1 Defences: [see Map 2]

#### *Defence overview -*

GHQ Line 'A', the principal anti-tank stop line protecting the approaches to London from the south-west, as well as the military concentrations around Aldershot, was constructed from the junction of GHQ Lines Red and Blue at Theale, south of Reading, to Farnham, where its course east to Penshurst in Kent was taken up by GHQ Line 'B'. It was built from late June, and throughout July and August, 1940.<sup>2</sup>

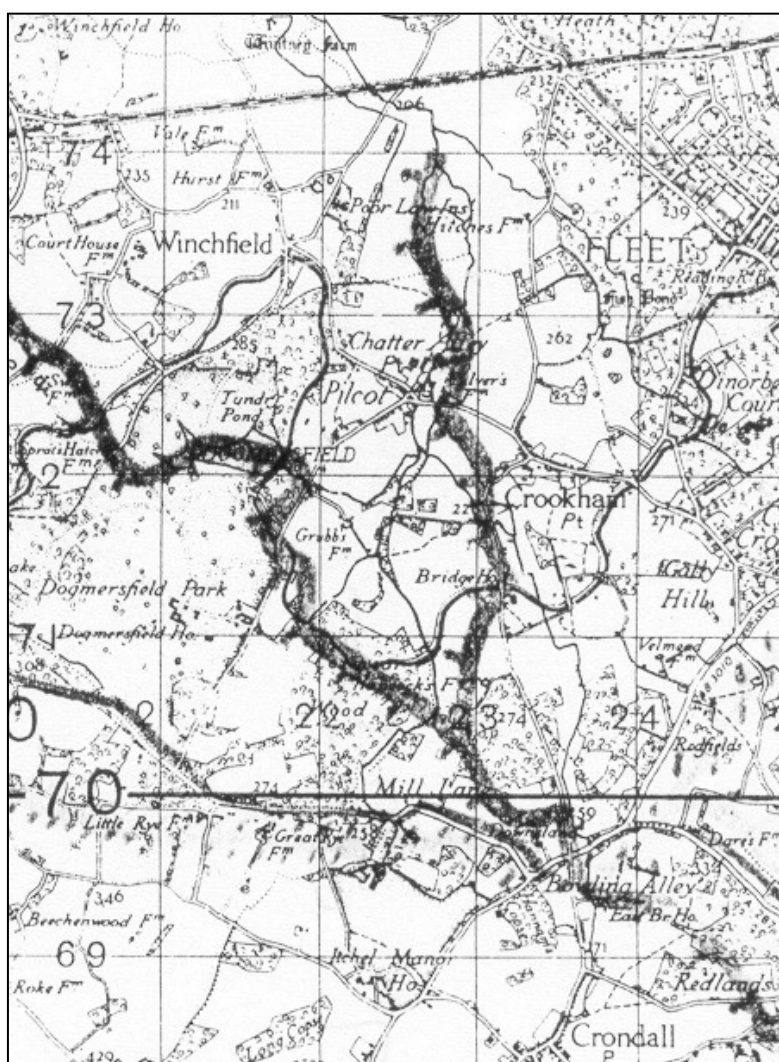


Fig. 3 - Portion of an Aldershot Command map dated November 1940, showing the course of the Chequers Bridge switch line and the junction it makes with GHQ Line 'A'<sup>3</sup>

In mid-July it was decided to add two short lengths of 'switch line' for the better protection of Aldershot. One of these running from Culverlands south-east of Farnham ran to Ash Vale east of Aldershot, and faced the direction of a possible enemy attack from the east. The other, which concerns this defence area, ran from a point south-east of Coxmoor Wood via Chequers Bridge to the railway line north of Pilcot. This line faced west.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Alexander, 'Ironside's Line', pp55-62.

<sup>3</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/151.

<sup>4</sup> TNA: PRO WO 199/55.



The course of the Chequers Bridge switch line, and the section of GHQ Line 'A' which it joined, fell within Aldershot Command, and more particularly within the North Aldershot Sub-Area of Aldershot Area.<sup>5</sup> By 1942, these areas had been re-designated as the Aldershot Sector of Farnborough Sub-Area, Aldershot District.<sup>6</sup>

The principal anti-tank obstacle of GHQ Line 'A' was an artificial anti-tank ditch, in part at least hand dug by troops from Aldershot Garrison, running through a series of defended localities north-west of Farnham [see Defence Area 34 - Ewshot]. It crossed the south-west corner of the study defence area on land now occupied by the Bowenhurst Golf Club, and from the edge of Coxmoor Wood to the Basingstoke Canal was continued by a double line (uncompleted) of closely spaced anti-tank cylinders. This remarkable construction was presumably easier to erect than the digging of an anti-tank ditch through thick woodland.

Although the route of the switch line was based on the course of the River Hart, this was not considered a sufficient anti-tank obstacle, and an artificial anti-tank ditch was dug from the GHQ Line at a point south-west of Leeches Copse [now under the golf course] in a series of angled lengths to the Basingstoke Canal, from the north bank of which at Crookham Wharf it was carried north, running west of the Crondall Road, to the Pilcot Road and so out of the defence area.

The two stop lines, defending such a critical area, demanded an especially intense defence, and this was provided by six known Vickers machine gun emplacements, a rare structure on the GHQ Line and generally only found within the area of Aldershot Command. The hill north of Hancock's Farm, which commands the switch line running north to Chequers Bridge, as well as the GHQ Line to the south-west, received two of these emplacements, and fire converging on Chequers Bridge could also be laid down from two emplacements on high land near Poultners Bridge. Another emplacement on the north bank of the Basingstoke Canal protected the area between the two stop lines, and a further one fired towards Chequers Bridge from the north. In addition to these medium machine gun emplacements, type 22 and type 24 pillboxes were also constructed along the course of the switch line.

In addition to the defences of the stop lines, the north of the defence area around Pilcot and Crookham Village was a designated defended locality. Defences here included roadblocks, pillboxes, and spigot mortars, and these were manned by 103 men of 'C' Coy. 25th Bn. Hampshire Home Guard.<sup>7</sup>

#### *The defence works -*

West of Chequers Bridge can be seen anti-tank 'pimples' [UORN 10812] - popularly termed 'dragon's teeth' - which, together with the hexagonal pillbox, are arguably the structures most redolent of the 1940 anti-invasion defences. Other 'dragon's teeth' can be found to the north by Stroud Lane [UORN 11220]. Close to Chequers Bridge is an information board on the 'war defences on the Basingstoke Canal', which, although containing errors of fact, is commendable in its statement of their importance and need for preservation.

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<sup>5</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/1185.

<sup>6</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/6739.

<sup>7</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/10962. The uncertain sites of UORNs 11165 and 11166 presumably relate to these defences. The document gives two spigot mortar sites.



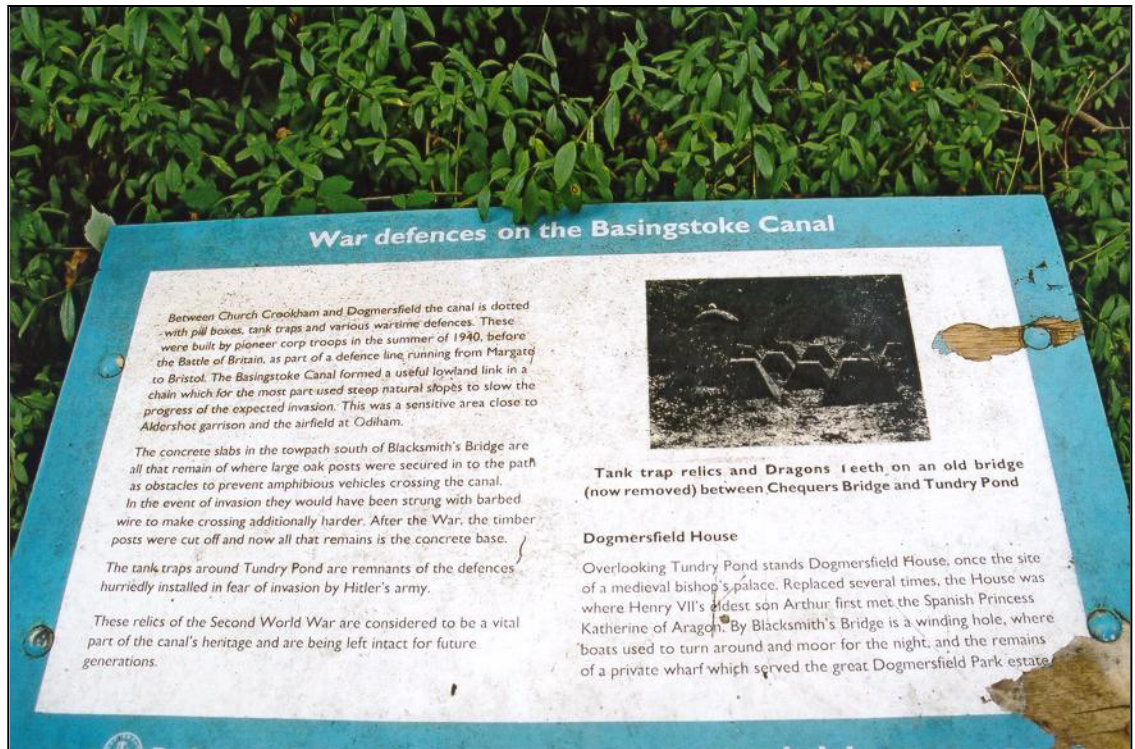


Fig. 4 - Information board at Chequers Bridge.



Fig. 5 - UORN 10812: 'dragon's teeth' in rows west of Chequers Bridge.

West of Chequers Bridge, under trees on the north bank of the Canal, can be found an example of the Vickers machine gun emplacement [UORN 8618] that can be inspected close up. The two emplacements on land of Hancock's Farm, however, can only be viewed with permission [UORNs 7413 and 7414]. The farm also has an unusual eight-sided variant on a type 22 pillbox [UORN 7415], but it is now so



overgrown that its shape can hardly be made out. By Leeches Copse is a half-buried type 24 pillbox [UORN 7411], said by the farmer to have been covered by spoil when the adjacent anti-tank ditch was dug.<sup>8</sup> In the hot, dry summer of 2003 this length of anti-tank ditch approaching the pillbox could be clearly seen as a line in the grass.



*Fig. 6 - The line of the infilled anti-tank ditch can be seen in the grass approaching pillbox, UORN 7411, from the north. The trees line the east bank of the Basingstoke Canal.*



*Fig. 7 - UORN 7414: Vickers machine gun emplacement with detached blast wall.*

<sup>8</sup> Information from Mr. D.G. Collis of Hancock's Farm, 28.8.03.



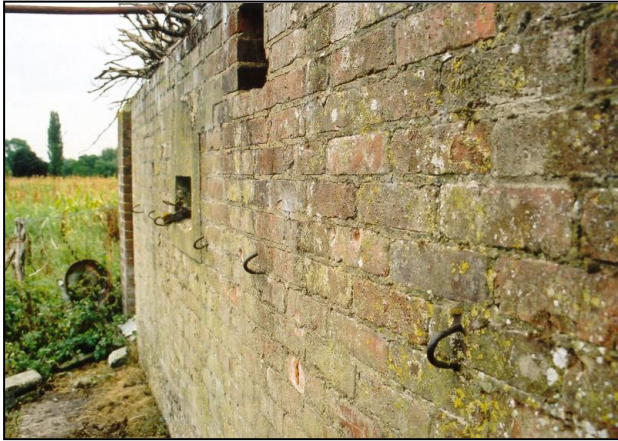


Fig. 8 (left) - UORN 7414: hooks probably to attach camouflage netting to a Vickers emplacement.

Fig. 9 (right) - UORN 7415: octagonal variant of a type 22 pillbox, with embrasure above the entrance.



Fig. 10 - UORN 7411: type 24 pillbox with earth piled around, said to be from the spoil of the anti-tank ditch.

Close to the junction of the switch line with the GHQ Line stood a type 24 pillbox [UORN 7412], which is now just inside the grounds of the golf course. It survives in excellent condition with asbestos shutters to its embrasures that still move on their hinges. Near to Poulter's Bridge on the eastern side of the defence area, one of the two Vickers machine gun emplacements [UORN 7416] has been destroyed recently, but its companion survives at the edge of a small quarry pit [UORN 6974]. North of the Basingstoke Canal, a remarkable Vickers machine gun emplacement [UORN 16698], positioned at a bend in the anti-tank ditch, was located during this survey. It has three main machine gun embrasures (the only such structure known) as well as light machine gun embrasures with shutters still in position.

It was regrettably not possible to gain access to Coxmoor Wood to survey the lines of anti-tank cylinders there, but several cylinders can be seen emerging from the trees on the north bank of the Basingstoke Canal, where two further cylinders are



also positioned and may be examined at close quarters [UORN 16752]. A type 24 pillbox close by is much overgrown [UORN 10816].



*Fig. 11 - UORN 7412: Shutter to a light machine gun embrasure of a type 24 pillbox that can still be opened and shut.*



*Fig. 12 - UORN 6974: the gun firing table of a Vickers medium machine gun emplacement near Poulter's Bridge*





*Fig. 13 - UORN 6974: the exterior of the Vickers machine gun emplacement shows its massive main embrasure. Another example of this type of emplacement further north-west has three such embrasures making it probably unique [UORN 16698].*



*Fig. 14 - UORN 16698: a multi-stepped light machine gun embrasure with hinged asbestos shutter still in place.*



*Fig. 15 - UORN 16695: line of anti-tank cylinders through Coxmoor Wood meeting the south bank of the Basingstoke Canal.*



*Fig. 16 - UORN 16752: anti-tank cylinders by the towpath of the Basingstoke Canal opposite Coxmoor Wood. They are three feet in diameter and stand five feet high.*

## **2.2 Landscape:**

Although there has been an infill of housing bordering the Crondall Road, and also at Pilcot and Crookham Village, there have been few other changes in the course of the last sixty years affecting the landscape of the defence area. Other than for the construction of a golf course in the extreme south-west of the area, most of the land is still intensively farmed, with fields being used for a mixture of arable cultivation and livestock grazing. Horses are also bred and schooled at Albany Farm. The areas of woodland are also much as they were in 1940, although a large electricity sub station (Fleet Sub Station) has been built in the western extent of Coxmoor Wood



just beyond the defence area. Outside the south of the area at Mill Lane a new line for the A287 road has been constructed in recent years, and recent developments such as Bowenhurst Golf Club, a restaurant, and a small industrial park, are approached from that road.

Probably the greatest change is in the volume of the traffic using the narrow roads through the defence area, and parking at their sides is impossible. Fortunately, the Crookham Wharf Car Park has been opened recently for the purpose of providing access to the towpath of the Basingstoke Canal and as a picnic place. A board here provides information on the Canal, and nearby is a further board on the Second World War defences [see Fig. 4].

There is public access via footpaths to many of the defence sites, but others are on private land and cannot be approached without permission. Entry to the interior of the Vickers machine gun emplacement, UORN 16698, is potentially dangerous as the structure is sunken and in wet weather flooded with several feet of water.

### 2.3 Statement of Significance:

This is a most important defence area, both because of its vital position in the 1940 strategy of defence but also because of its high level of survival of differing and unusual defence components. The area's inclusion of the junction of two stop lines, its concentration of defence works at the Chequers Bridge crossing of the Basingstoke Canal, and its evidence of the additional defences of a defended locality, all combine to make it of particular significance. In such a busy landscape, both in terms of settlement and agriculture, it is remarkable that such a high percentage of the defence works that were built sixty years ago survive today.

Also adding to the defence area's importance is the presence of six relatively rare Vickers medium machine gun emplacements, one of a unique type [UORN 16698], and such a concentration of these emplacements is exceptional for any part of England. The double line of anti-tank cylinders through Coxmoor Wood [UORN 16695] is also a major surviving feature, and equates with the finest examples of such lines of anti-tank obstacles to be found anywhere in the country [see, for example, UORN 12099 at Abbotsbury - Defence Area 49].

A 'pillbox walk' could be set out through the area, with access to some of the defence works while others could be viewed from a distance. Such a walk would also enable the strategic importance of the area and its topography to be understood.

## 3. Recommendations:

1. That the surviving anti-invasion defence works in the Chequers Bridge area be considered of national importance. They enable the defence of this part of the GHQ Line 'A', and its associated switch line, 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 removing the overgrowth on the anti-tank 'pimples' by the towpath near Chequers Bridge [UORN 10812] so that they may be seen more clearly.
3. That further field work be carried out by a local group working with the relevant archaeological authority to determine the condition of the anti-tank cylinder line through Coxmoor Wood [UORN 16695], as well as that of defence structures marked on Map 2 as 'Unknown'.
4. That consideration be given, in a possible initiative with Hampshire County Council and the local authority, to providing information for the public on the Second World War defence of the area. Such information could be displayed in the Crookham Wharf car park, possibly by correcting and updating the existing information board. A 'pillbox walk' could also be set out.

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

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

Figs. 1 and 4-16 - taken (AWF) during field survey, 27-28.8.2003.

Fig. 2 - 106G/UK/1114 fr.3031 (12.1.1946) - NMR.

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

'Operation Instruction No.2', 20.6.1940; 'Operation Instruction No.5', 16.9.1940; and map, 4.11.1940, issued with 'Aldershot Command Defence Scheme' (from Aldershot Command 'G' War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/151.

Memorandum 'GHQ Line', 18.7.1940 (from file, 'Construction of GHQ Zones') - TNA: PRO WO 199/55.

'Aldershot Area Defence Scheme', 15.3.1941 (from Aldershot Area War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/1185.

'Operation Instruction No.4', 1.4.1941 (from North Aldershot Sub-Area War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/1256.

'Plan to Defeat Invasion', 1942 (from Farnborough Sub-Area HQ War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/6739.

'Plan to Defeat Invasion', 1943 (from Farnborough Sub-District War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/10962.

##### 4.3 **Published Sources:**

Colin Alexander, 'Defending Chequers Bridge' (from *Loopholes* No.11 pp 6-8, March 1995).

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

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

106G/UK/1036 frs.4087-4088 (27.11.1945) - NMR.

106G/UK/1093 fr.4173 (3.1.1946) - NMR.

106G/UK/1114 fr.3031 (12.1.1946) - NMR.

106G/UK/1647 fr.1010 (10.7.1946) - NMR.

106G/UK/1710 fr.4003 (30.8.1946) - NMR.

82/866 fr.37 (12.3.1954) - NMR.

543/1426 fr.364 (28.8.1961) - NMR.



58/4683 fr.124 (18.9.1961) - NMR.

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

SU 7852-7952 (1977) - BLML.

4.6 **Hampshire Archaeology and Historic Buildings Record:**

Aldershot Military Historical Trust 'Defence Line Survey' records checked and added to 4.7 below.

4.7 **Defence of Britain Project Database:**

[see 5. 'Annex'].

