

The London Mobilisation Centres

Photographs by
the Author

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OVER a dozen defence works were built in the 1890s to the south and east of London as part of a scheme for the protection of the capital against capture by an invading army. These works are often marked on Ordnance Survey maps as 'old fort' or 'fort dismantled.' Although they may have a fort-like appearance they were not forts as such but mobilisation centres with a level of self-defence capability, established as part of the defensive scheme.

Historical Background

During the 1880s in the face of competition in warship production from European powers such as France and Russia there were doubts in some quarters of British opinion as to the ability of the Royal Navy to adequately protect our shores from foreign invasion. The lack of confidence in the Royal Navy took hold and Colonel (late General) Edward Hamley, M.P. for Birkenhead, campaigned for the forming of a defence line to secure London, a crucial strategic objective to any invader. The idea of a defence line was not new; for example, earlier in 1859, when there was a fear of invasion from France, Lieut-General Shaw Kennedy had proposed a ring of 30 forts around London, the circumference being thirty miles, with a further 9 forts to protect Woolwich. The defensive requirements of the latter (more particularly of the government establishments there) were considered by the Royal Commission on the Defence of the United Kingdom, which reported in 1860, but no forts there or around the capital were ordered to be built. However, in 1888, the Government was convinced of the need for defensive preparations for London, and a plan was drawn up.

The Defence Line (Fig. 1)

The scheme finally adopted was that of a contingency plan for the establishment of an entrenched line, 72 miles long and divided into ten tactical sectors, with supporting artillery batteries and redoubts. This was to occupy the forward parts of the chalk escarpment of the North Downs from Guildford in Surrey (with the important military establishment at Aldershot nearby) through to Halstead in Kent and up the western side of the

Darent valley to Dartford on the right bank of the Thames; the line to be resumed at Vange in Essex and continued to Epping. There was to be an outlying entrenched position on Wrotham Hill. It was important to defend those gaps in the North Downs (e.g. the Mole Gap at Box Hill) through which the enemy would have to advance to capture London, and the line was planned with this in mind. The way to London along the Thames was already guarded by permanent forts built at the estuary in the 1860s and the garrison at Chatham might be used to threaten the flank of an attacking enemy. In fact, an optional extension of the line to link with the land defences of Chatham was seen as a possibility in 1903.

The scheme did not provide for the complete encirclement of the capital but covered London from what was regarded as the most likely direction of attack. None of the entrenched line and supporting batteries and redoubts was to be established until an invasion was thought to be imminent. It was nevertheless felt prudent to build a series of storehouses along the projected course of the line immediately; these were officially known as "mobilisation centres" where troops could collect ammunition and equipment in time of war which they would take to their allotted place in the line. The centres were also to be used for the storage of tools for the construction of fieldworks. Fifteen or sixteen mobilisation centres were established. Certain railway stations a short distance behind the line were designated to serve as advanced depots, and well behind the line three base depots of which the main one was Woolwich. The entire scheme for the defence of London was known as the "London Defence Positions."

The provision of permanent forts in the form of a ring-fortress would have been expensive and the scheme was therefore money-saving in character. It was thought that sufficient warning could be given to allow for a labour force (comprised largely of civilians) to be collected to construct the defence line. The comparatively remote siting of the line from London was within current thinking that an enemy should be kept out of artillery range from the object to be defended. Hamley's own proposals

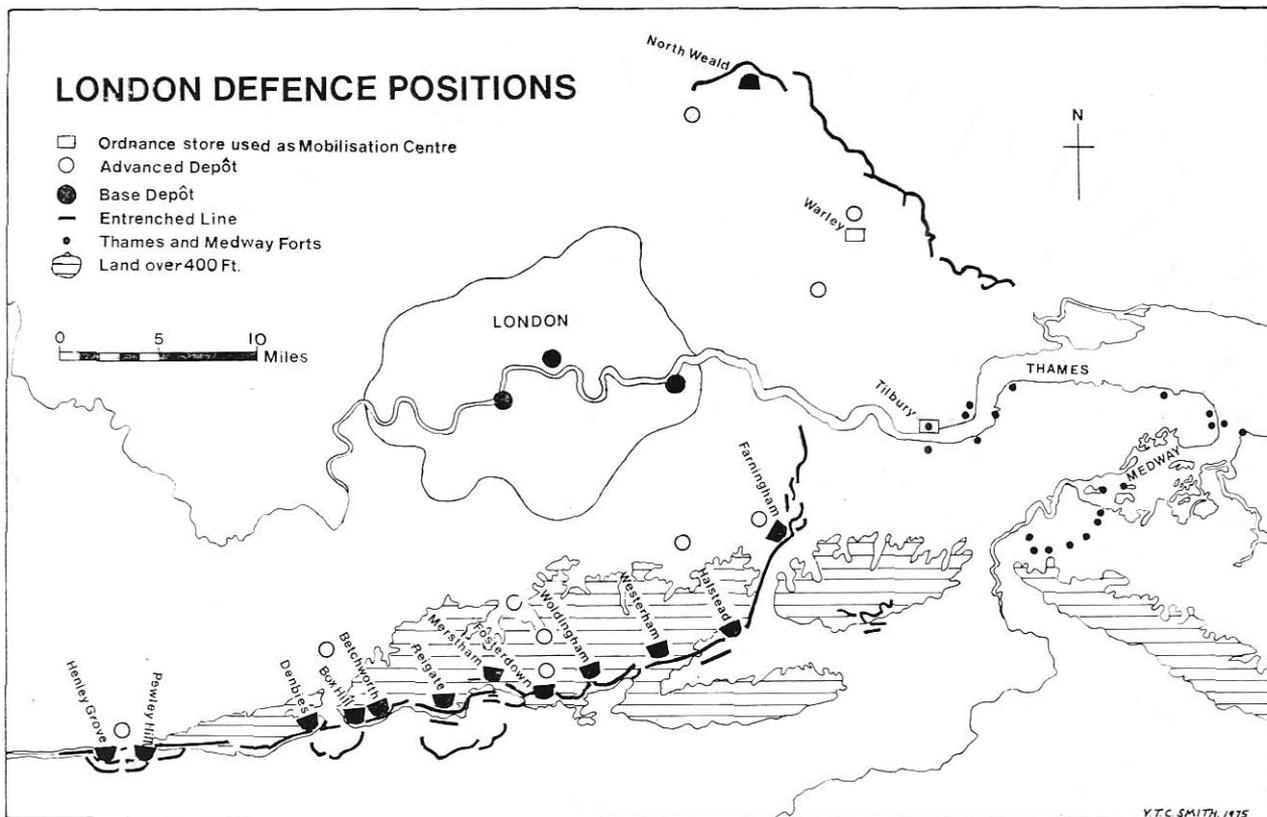


Fig. 1. Map of the London Defence positions showing the location of the mobilisation centres and the line of the proposed connecting entrenchment.

had been for a line located a little nearer to London—proceeding north of the Thames from Barking and south from Erith through Chislehurst to Bromley with other positions to the south.

In the event of the collapse of coastal resistance, the view was that the troops occupying the London Defence Positions would, in the first place, be opposed by forces with comparatively light field-guns, as there were transportation difficulties in moving forward heavy artillery for siege operations in adequate numbers at a sufficient speed. The artillery to be used in defence of the line was intended to be a mixture of 4.7-in. and 15-pounder breech-loading guns, but even after 1900 some artillery units were still armed with obsolete 40, 20 and 16-pounder rifled muzzle-loaders. The defence of the line was to rely to a large extent on a force of volunteer artillery and infantry which was to be specially trained for the task; stiffening was to be provided by certain regular units. Approximately 2,000 men were allowed for each mile of the line. Hamley was keen on the use of local volunteers but considered that the line which the government had adopted, was too far from London to be ideal for this purpose.

The Mobilisation Centres

In the years following 1889, the ground for the mobilisation centres was surveyed and the land purchased. Construction was in progress by the middle 1890s. Two centres utilised existing ordnance stores at Tilbury Fort and at Warley, Brentwood but the majority of them, thirteen in number, were on new sites. A statement of 1906 detailing the expenditure on the London defences contains a list of the mobilisation centres and it includes a site at Caterham—quite distinct from the Fosterdown one in the same vicinity. The possibility of a sixteenth centre seems implied, but the *Handbook for the London Defence Positions* issued in 1903 (which is after the period of the presumed completion of the various centres) mentions only fifteen; Caterham is merely listed as one of the advanced depots. This matter is currently being investigated.

In the main, each of the thirteen centres built on new sites comprise a piece of ground defined by a rampart, ditch and fence, and contain a magazine and other accommodation for stores and shelter from bombardment. Concrete (usually with metal reinforcement in the case of roofs) and bricks

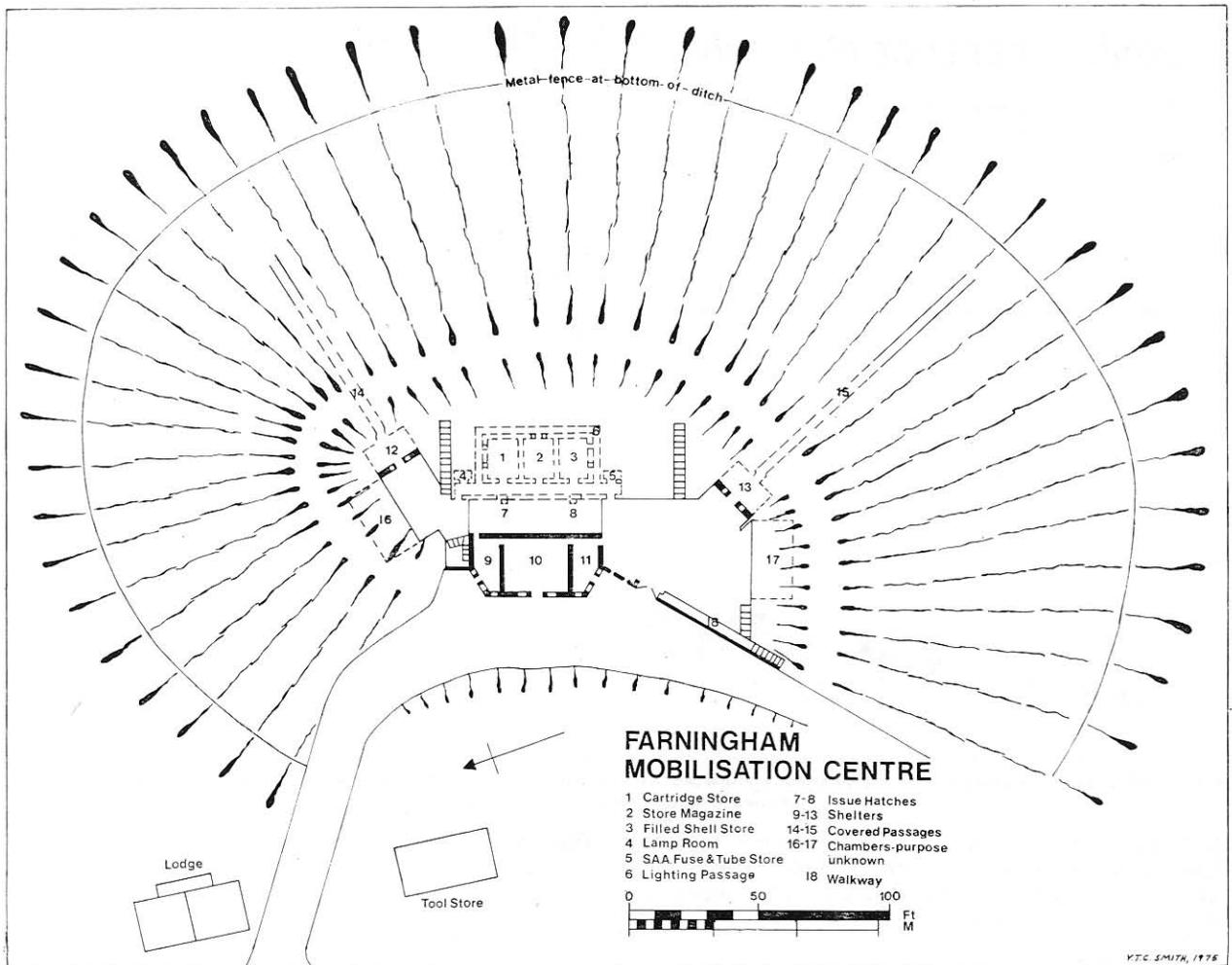


Fig. 2. A plan of the Centre at Farningham

are used extensively. Often there are ancillary extra-mural buildings.

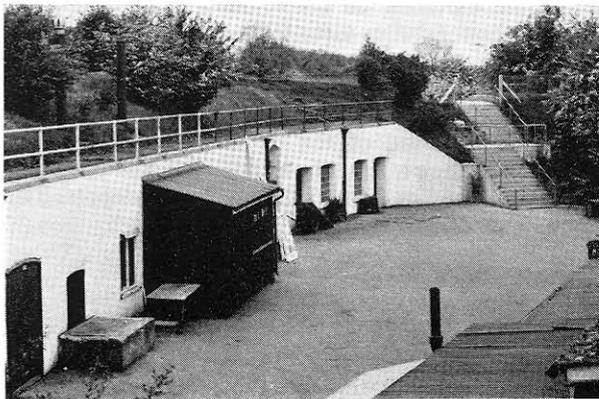


Fig. 3. Interior of the Henley Grove Centre

The mobilisation centres are not to a single design. There are several different types but even within types no two have been found to be exactly similar. The following three examples give some indication:

1. At the Farningham mobilisation centre (Fig. 2) the magazines were covered with an earthen mound and shelters with loopholed shuttered doors and windows placed behind. A partly loopholed wall and loopholed metal gates close what remains of the gorge. This is a variant of the type to be seen at, for instance, Box Hill and Betchworth. The two passages which pass from the body of the work into the forward ditch at Farningham are a feature so far unrivalled in any other centre visited.

2. At the Henley Grove centre (Fig. 3) magazines and casemates are provided under the



Fig. 4. Entrance (gorge) of the Henley Grove Centre

rampart which surrounds a courtyard or parade. A loopholed guardroom and metal gates were provided at the gorge (Fig. 4).

3. The Woldingham centre was provided with a rampart and metal fence but there are no traces of a ditch to be seen. The site contains two flat-topped magazine buildings (Fig. 5), one of which has a house built over the top.

While there is some variation in the overall design of the centres, the component parts show some general similarity.

The Magazines

The chambers of the magazines are either of simple vaulting or have flat ceilings. There are separate chambers for shell and cartridge. The illumination of the chambers was done externally from behind plate glass placed in recesses in the walls, oil or candle lamps being used. Usually, these recesses are served by a formal lighting passage such as was used in permanent forts and batteries of the

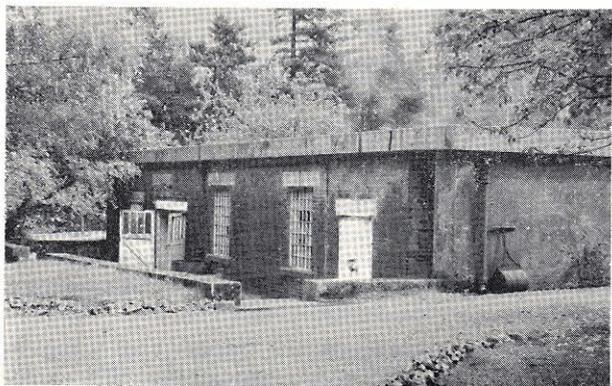


Fig. 5. The magazine of the Woldingham Centre



Fig. 6. The Farningham Centre cottage

period. The arrangements ensured that no naked flame was taken through an area where explosives were present. Often included is a small lamp room and another chamber of similar size for fuses, tubes and small arms ammunition. A corridor or lobby in front or at the side of the chambers was used by personnel to change into special clothing kept there for working in the magazines. Sometimes issue hatches are fitted, again of the same type as used in permanent forts. Replenishment of the ammunition was to be made from the advanced depots.

The Other Accommodation

Simple though strongly built casemates for stores and shelter were built under the ramparts. Where shelters are disposed to form a gorge, loopholed metal doors are fitted and windows with external metal shutters, also with loopholes. Here again, there is an analogy in the field of permanent forts; loopholed metal shutters, albeit of the internal type had been fitted to the windows of the gorge barracks of the forward Royal Commission forts in the Thames estuary.

The Extra-mural Accommodation

The mobilisation centres were never actually manned, but attached to most of them outside the defended area is a small brick cottage or lodge for the resident "caretaker" who looked after the valuable ammunition and stores. These houses are of a standard type (Fig. 6). Sometimes there is also a barn-like building (Fig. 7). Some regard the latter as the place where the artillery for the line was kept. However, the writer has not yet found evidence to support this. From the oral evidence of a caretaker in 1906, no artillery had ever been supplied at least in the case of one centre. It seems far more

likely that the guns would have been at Woolwich and in the possession of the units which were to occupy the line in time of war. One of these buildings bears a painted identification "Mobilisation Tool Store"; the latter function would seem more acceptable, since the centres were to keep tools as well as ammunition.

Fighting Role of the Mobilisation Centres

Many of the centres were built in situations retired from view of the country. However, they were certainly regarded at the time as possible redoubts or redoubts to prolong the defence, if the line in the vicinity were captured. The main offensive firepower would have been provided from the artillery batteries to be built when invasion seemed imminent. Some of the centres such as those at Pewley Hill, Reigate and Halstead have a command of the country and could easily take an active part in the defence of the line as artillery or infantry positions. Pewley Hill has a deep, concrete-revetted ditch in the same manner as the almost contemporary Chatham land-forts. At Reigate the ditch is U-shaped and unrevetted; it has a metal fence on the counterscarp. The Halstead centre is shown on construction plans as having a ditch similar to the one at Pewley but with formal gun-emplacements set into the rampart. Unfortunately, this centre is now a secret government research establishment and access is forbidden.

All the centres do at least have a degree of self-defence capability, albeit of a superficial nature. The obvious and deliberate provision for this is at the gorge. The forward parts of the centre's are less obviously provided for and there is no suggestion of any offensive capability, but then the centres were not intended to be forts. However, the existing ramparts gave a certain amount of cover and no doubt the facility for improving these, together with positions for field pieces or machine-guns, could be easily found as required.

To sum up, the mobilisation centres may be said to be magazine stores with a certain amount of defensive potential. The use of mounded earth protection for magazine and casemates, unrevetted ditches (where provided) and spiked fences was fully in accordance with the thinking of the day. The areas of exposed masonry and the architectural monumentalism of former years were no longer tolerated.

Fortunately, there was no war situation in which the London Defence Positions were brought into being. In any case, it was not long after the mobilisation centres were constructed, that confidence in the Royal Navy was restored. After 1905,

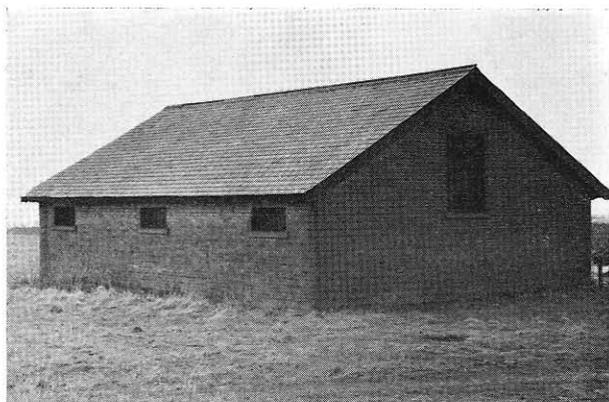


Fig. 7. The tool store at the Farningham Centre

when Viscount Haldane became the Secretary of State for War, the idea of the London Defence Positions was dropped and the mobilisation centres were abandoned and later sold off.

Today, the mobilisation centres are in varying condition. Some have for instance been converted into homes, scout and field-study centres and mushroom farms, while others are just derelict. Fortunately, a few of them are now scheduled historic buildings and it is hoped that others will achieve this status. It is also to be hoped that at least one of them will be properly preserved and made open to the public.

Finally, the provisional nature of this article should be emphasised. The writer is carrying out a detailed study of the London Defence Positions for the Kent Defence Research Group of the Kent Archaeological Society. This study will include more detailed observations on the mobilisation centres together with an assessment of the military value of the defence-line. A full report is to be prepared. Anyone who has any information he thinks may be of value, is invited to contact the writer at 65 Stonebridge Road, Northfleet, Kent.

Sources and Acknowledgements

Among the sources the writer found useful in the preparation of this article were notes on the London Defence Positions by Mr. D. W. King of the Old War Office Library, *The Handbook for the London Defence Positions* (1903), held in that place, a memorandum on the demolished Denbies centre prepared by the Surrey Archaeological Society and lastly, but not least, a thesis on the historical and political background by Mrs. G. Rosamond, which was very kindly lent to me.

I should like to thank the owners and occupiers of the various mobilisation centres for their kindness and patience in letting me visit.