

DEFENCE AREA 27

SEMINGTON / WHADDON

1. **Area details:**

The defence area is 2 miles S of Melksham and 2½ miles NE of Trowbridge.

County: Wiltshire.

Parishes: Semington / Holt.

NGR: centre of area, ST 892607.

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

This is a large defence area, which is really made up of two such areas that might otherwise be assessed separately - Semington and Whaddon, one mile apart. Both are important, and, as they are close together and linked by defence works, they are considered together.

The defence area is set in flat Wiltshire countryside around the village of Semington, which until March 2004, when a new bypass was completed, lay on the busy A350 road. To its west is the small settlement of Whaddon, once a village with a church, but now consisting of two farms and a few houses only. The two places are connected by the Semington Brook, by the Kennet and Avon Canal (which passes Whaddon to its south), and by the Trowbridge to Devizes railway line (now disused), the embankment of which still survives. At Whaddon, the Semington Brook makes a junction with the River Avon which curves away here to the north.

There are three foci of the defence area - the two waterways of the Semington Brook and the Kennet and Avon Canal, the village of Semington itself, and the two farms at Whaddon. The waterways, by providing a link to the two settlements, tie the area together. There are various viewsheds within which groups of defence works can be seen - the flat fields west, and also east, of Semington, the junction of the Semington Brook with the Avon from the river cliff at Whaddon, and the line of the Kennet and Avon Canal west of Semington Bridge.



Fig. 1 - The junction of the River Avon with the Semington Brook at Whaddon.



2. Assessment.

2.1 Defences: [see Map 2]

Defence overview -

The defence area, falling within the military South Wiltshire Sub-Area, consists partly of the defences of GHQ Line Green and partly those of GHQ Line Blue, the junction between the two being at Whaddon. Whaddon itself was a defended locality with anti-tank capability and Semington a 'centre of resistance', again designed to resist enemy armoured forces

For a description of GHQ Line Green, see the report on the River Brue: Cripp's Bridge (Defence Area 20) - see as well the map at Fig. 2 within that report. GHQ Line Blue, beginning at Whaddon, followed largely the line of the Kennet and Avon Canal to a point just west of Reading. The Line was surveyed in July 1940 by V Corps, and from September that year it became the responsibility of the Salisbury Plain Area Command. As with other stop lines, it was fortified with pillboxes, anti-tank gun emplacements, and roadblocks, and also served as a demolition belt with bridges and other crossing points mined for destruction in the event of an enemy advance against it. Within the defence area, GHQ Line Blue runs first along the Semington Brook, then joins with the perimeter defences of Semington at the Kennet and Avon Canal, which it follows out of the area to the east.

No documentary source can be found that refers to Whaddon as a defended locality. However, its surviving defence works make it clear that it had this status. Destroyed defence works here, and at Semington, can be reconstructed from air photographs and a Home Guard map that shows the defences of the Kennet and Avon Canal from Whaddon to Stanton St. Bernard.

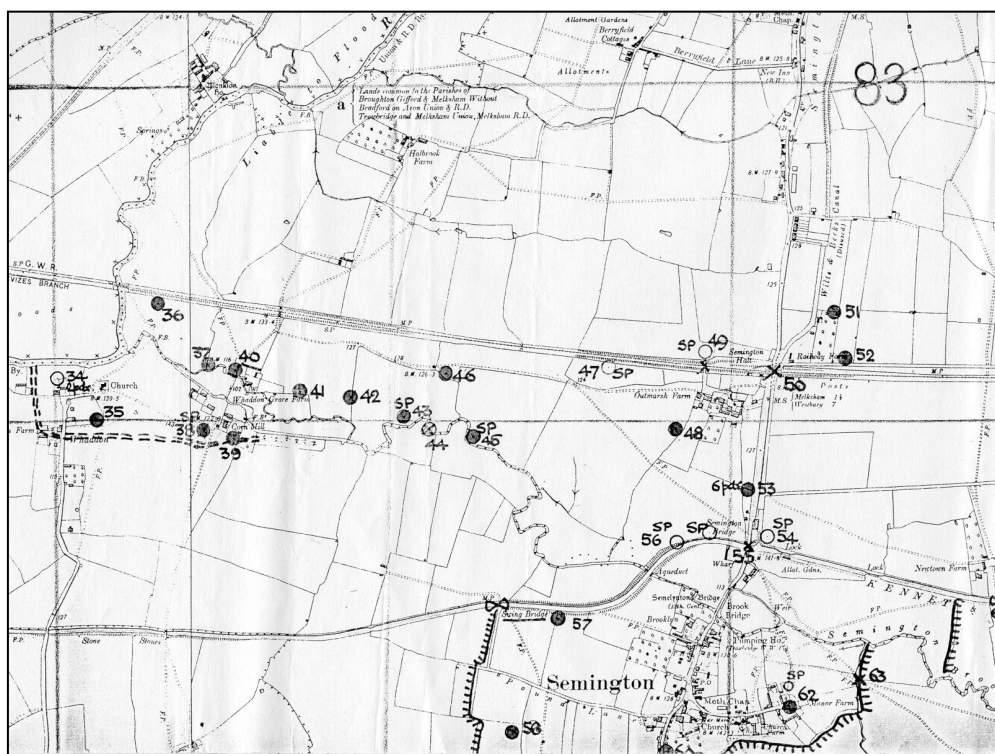


Fig. 2 - Portion of a Home Guard map showing the defences of Whaddon and Semington.¹

¹ The Kennet & Avon Canal Trust (Defence of Britain Project Archive).



A machine-dug anti-tank ditch protected Whaddon and the junction of the two branches of the GHQ Line from the south. Within a perimeter, formed by the ditch and the River Avon and Semington Brook to the north, were concentrated two anti-tank gun emplacements and five pillboxes, as well as anti-tank obstacles, barbed wire entanglements, and possibly land mines. All these were set amongst farm buildings, some of which it is likely were themselves fortified, although there is no surviving evidence for this. It provides an excellent illustration of a fortified place at a critical point in a defence line.

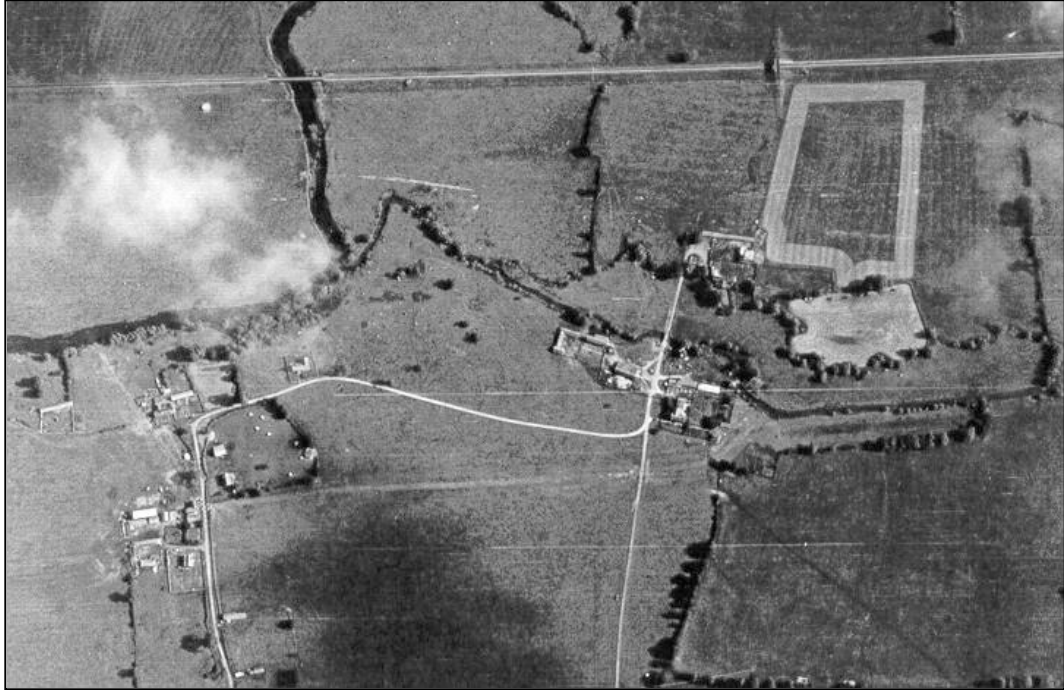


Fig. 3 - Air photograph taken in June 1945 showing the defended locality at Whaddon. The line of the infilled anti-tank ditch can be seen as a faint strip running across the centre of the view south of the trackway. It turns north by the buildings to join the River Avon.



Fig.4 - Part of the Whaddon defended locality, looking at buildings of Whaddon Grove Farm. The photograph is taken from the position of the anti-tank ditch looking north.

Semington's status as a 'centre of resistance' is attested by documentary evidence². In 1941, it had a nominal garrison of 4 officers and 100 other ranks to be drawn from a training battalion of the Royal Signals based at Trowbridge.³ The 4th Bn. Wiltshire Home Guard was also active in its defence.⁴ Semington had a southern perimeter formed to the west and east by existing ditches 'improved' to serve an anti-tank function, and at the centre by an artificially cut ditch. This anti-tank obstacle joined with the Kennet and Avon Canal that served the same purpose to the north. Within the perimeter were four anti-tank gun emplacements, with a further two to the north protecting GHQ Line Blue. It seems perhaps strange, therefore, that Semington was not accorded the status of an anti-tank island, a role given to nearby Melsham and Trowbridge. Certainly, Semington was very well defended, and was an important strongpoint on the western flank of GHQ Line Blue.

Crossings of the perimeter defences of Semington were protected by roadblocks, as were crossings of the railway line to the north. The various road and swing bridges over the Kennet and Avon Canal were blocked with rows of concrete cylinders.



Fig. 5 - Semington, seen in an air photograph taken in June 1945. The line of the machine-cut anti-tank ditch, recently infilled at that date, can be clearly seen towards the south [bottom] of the photograph. The Kennet and Avon Canal runs across the view to the north of Semington.

² TNA: PRO WO 166/6785.

³ TNA: PRO WO 166/1329.

⁴ TNA: PRO WO 166/6785.



The defence works -

A feature of the defence works in the Semington area are the number of massive two-chamber type 28a anti-tank gun emplacements. These were constructed with a mixture of wooden, brick, and breeze-block shuttering. The bricks used were evidently a particular local type, hollow in part and placed end on. Examples of the emplacements survive in good condition: one is used as a cattle shed [UORN 174] and others as stores. Two have been destroyed recently - one to the north of the area on the site of the new Melksham Police Station, and another by a housing development by the former St. George's Hospital. The latter destruction is particularly unfortunate as this was a pivotal point in the southern perimeter defences, and there is space around the new housing here that indicates that it might have been possible to save the emplacement had the requisite knowledge and inclination been in place.



Fig. 6 - UORN 8679: massive two-chamber type 28a anti-tank gun emplacement, one of seven surviving examples in the defence area.



Fig. 7 - UORN 8113: type 28a emplacement commanding the road through Semington, once the busy A350.



There are also examples of hexagonal infantry pillboxes within the area, but several are very badly overgrown and others lie on private land without access. The best example that can be inspected at close quarters was built on the railway embankment north of Whaddon [UORN 200].



Fig. 8 - UORN 200: brick-shuttered type 24 infantry pillbox built by the tracks of the former railway line. It faced south towards Whaddon and the junction of the two branches (Green and Blue) of the GHQ Line.

The defence area contains some good examples of different types of concrete anti-tank obstacles. Outstanding are the cylinders at the bridge over the Semington Brook at Whaddon Grove Farm. Although one has now fallen into the river, the survival of the remaining nine is remarkable in this position on a busy working farm.



Fig. 9 - UORN 179: anti-tank cylinders at a crossing of the Semington Brook at Whaddon Grove Farm.

From the surviving evidence, the principal type of anti-tank obstacle used within the area was the concrete cylinder, and further examples can be found on the banks of the Kennet and Avon Canal. At Whaddon Farm, however, at the extreme west of the area, are some massive anti-tank cubes that formed part of a roadblock on the line of the anti-tank ditch at that point.



Fig. 10 - UORN 8683: conical-topped cylinder, made from a section of concrete drain pipe, by the Kennet and Avon Canal.



Fig. 11 - UORN 172: massive anti-tank cube at the site of a roadblock at Whaddon Farm.

Landscape:

Although Semington has developed with new housing, particularly on its western side, the basic structure of town and country still prevails as it did sixty years ago. The suburbs of Melksham encroach at the north of the area, partly through the development of housing and industrial estates, as well as a sports complex, on the site of a former army camp to the north-east. Land has also been developed near the old railway for a large police station complex. A widened A361 road, with a roundabout, borders the area to the south, and a new Semington bypass carrying the A350 road has recently been completed (March 2004) running across the fields to the east. St George's Hospital, once at the south-west corner of Semington's defences, has become an 'Independent Living Centre', with new housing close by.

Despite some development of Semington, however, the pasture fields on its south-east side where the anti-tank ditch ran still survive. They would seem to be vulnerable to further housing development which might threaten sites, UORNs 8113 and 8688. To the west of Semington the fields through which the western defences ran are still open, but there would appear to be less danger of development here as this is an arable farming landscape.

The railway has fallen out of use, and its river and road bridges pulled down. The Kennet and Avon Canal, however, is carefully maintained, with some new works creating a short length of secondary channel east of Semington. In the summer the canal is used extensively by holidaymakers, and the towpath on the north bank serves as a route for walkers and cyclists.

At Whaddon, the landscape is unchanged, and this is a most attractive place approached by one narrow lane from the suburbs of Trowbridge. A large poultry house has been added to Whaddon Farm, as well as some new structures to Whaddon Grove Farm, but otherwise the buildings and fields are much as they were in 1940. In the area between Semington and Whaddon a few hedgerows have been removed to create larger fields, but basically the pattern of field and lane is little altered.

This is a busy landscape of farming and transport, but with expanses of quiet and solitude away from the major routes that pass through the east of the area. Other than for the Kennet and Avon Canal, it is not on the general tourist trail. For visitors who do come here, the line of the canal provides a ready route, and there is also a network of footpaths and lanes that provide access to almost all of the surviving defence works.

2.3 Statement of Significance:

The two areas of Whaddon and Semington that combine to form this one defence area are each of considerable importance. Semington provides an excellent example of a 'centre of resistance', with all round anti-tank defences, within which a large number of defence works survive, including pillboxes and anti-tank gun emplacements. The survival of these is unusually high in such a part-urban environment where much more deliberate removal in the immediate post-war years might have been expected. Almost all the roofed concrete defence structures, in fact, survive, and there is very good documentary evidence to enable the principal earthworks and lines of obstacles to be reconstructed.



Whaddon is an exceptional site where it is possible at a glance from the topography of the joining river streams to understand the defence strategy that brought the branches of the GHQ Line together here. The site of this defended locality forms a perfect whole, all within one visual envelope, where the surviving structures can be seen against the topography that determined their siting. Again, the excellent documentary and air photographic evidence enable defence works that have been removed, in particular the anti-tank ditch, to be reconstructed.

Further fieldwork at Whaddon should be carried out, with the permission of the farmer, to the east of Whaddon Grove Farm where it is not known if pillboxes marked on the Home Guard map were actually built, and, if so, whether they have survived. Air photographic evidence is also inconclusive. There may also be some surviving evidence of fortification within the farm buildings themselves.

A most interesting and attractive 'pillbox walk' could be set out in the Semington and Whaddon area using the network of footpaths and lanes that enable most of the defence works to be visited.

3. **Recommendations:**

1. That the surviving anti-invasion defence works in the Semington / Whaddon area be considered of national importance. They enable the defence of these sections of the Green and Blue branches of the GHQ Line to be interpreted, as well as the anti-tank defences of Semington itself, and provide evidence of the articulation of the defence and the inter-relationship of its functionally different components. Such interpretation is assisted by the excellent documentary and air photographic evidence of defence structures that were built as part of the overall strategy, but which have now been removed.
2. That consideration be given to setting up a project, possibly with a local archaeological group, to record certain of the defence works at Whaddon Grove farm more exactly, in particular possible pillboxes, UORNs 16356, 16357, and 16358.
3. That consideration be given, in a possible initiative with Wiltshire County Council and the local authority, to establishing a 'pillbox walk' that would take in the defence works in the Semington / Whaddon area. An information board on the Second World War defences, and the GHQ Line in general, might also be set up, possibly at Semington Bridge by the Kennet and Avon Canal.

4. **Supporting material.**

4.1 **Photographs:**

Figs. 4 and 6-11 - taken (AWF) during field survey, 4-5.2.2003.

Fig. 3 - 106G/UK/377 fr.4041 (13.6.1945) - NMR.

Fig. 5 - 106G/UK/377 fr.3159 (13.6.1945) - NMR.



4.2 **Documentary Sources:**

'Southern Command Home Defence Programme, 1940' (map from General Headquarters Papers, Defence Works) - TNA: PRO WO 199/48.
'Report on Reconnaissance of Outer Bristol Defence Position', 18.6.40 (from 48 Division 'GS' War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/578.
[copy of map of 4th Bn. Wiltshire Home Guard showing defence positions on the Kennet and Avon Canal], December 1940 - Kennet and Avon Canal Trust records (Defence of Britain Project Archive).
South Wiltshire Sub-Area War Diary, 1941 - TNA: PRO WO 166/1941.
'South Wiltshire Sub-Area Defence Scheme', 1942 (from 'South Wiltshire Sub-Area War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/6785.
'Operation Instruction No. 20', 16.4.1942 (from Salisbury Plain District War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/6831.

4.3 **Published Sources:**

Colin Alexander, *Ironsides Line* (Historic Military Press, 1999).
(Major) M. Green, *Warwalks: Stop Line Green* (Reardon Publishing, 1999).

4.4 **Aerial Photographs:**

106G/UK/376 fr.3099 (13.6.1945) - NMR.
106G/UK/377 fr.3159 (13.6.1945) - NMR.
106G/UK/377 frs.4040-4041 (13.6.1945) - NMR.
106G/UK/1661 frs.3181-3184 (12.7.1946) - NMR.
CPE/UK/1821 fr.6036 (4.11.1946) - NMR.
CPE/UK/1821 fr.6193 (4.11.1946) - NMR.
58/3021 fr.44 (14.7.1959) - NMR.
OS/70119 frs.178-179 (18.5.1970) - NMR.

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

ST 8661-8761 (1973) - BLML.
ST 8860-8960 (1989) - BLML.
ST 8861-8961 (1973) - BLML.
ST 9060-9160 (1972) - BLML.
ST 9061-9161 (1972) - BLML.

4.6 **Defence of Britain Project Database:**

[see 5. 'Annex'].

