

DEFENCE AREA 28

PORTHCURNO

1. Area details:

Porthcurno is 9 miles SW of Penzance and 3 miles from Land's End.

County: Cornwall.

Parish: St. Levan.

NGR: centre of area, SW 386223.

1.1 Area Description: [see Map 1].

The defence area of Porthcurno consists of the steep-sided valley containing the village of Porthcurno and its cable station, as well as the small, sandy beach to the south (Porth Curno) overlooked by high cliffs. A road runs down the valley to the village, before turning west towards St. Levan. The north boundary of the area is at Bodellan, marked by a turn in the road as the ascent from the sea is completed. To the west and the east, the boundaries are the steep valley sides, while to the south are sea, sand, and cliffs.

The main focus of the area is at the beach with the steep slopes and cliffs overlooking it. A second focus is at Bodellan at the northern edge of the area, while a third lies around the former cable station, now a museum. A good viewshed is formed by the beach and its enclosing cliffs.



Fig. 1 - The sands of Porth Curno overlooked by pillbox, UORN 3272.





Fig. 2 - Air photograph taken in 1946. Porth Curno beach can be clearly seen, while the cable station and village are at the centre, and Bodellan at the top where the road curves.

2.1 Defences: [see Map 2]

Defence overview -

Porthcurno lay within No.3 Sector of the Lands End District, part of the Cornwall Sub-Area of the military South Western Area.¹ The Cornish peninsula was cut in two

¹ TNA: PRO WO 166/1252 and TNA: PRO WO 166/4732.



by a stop line running between Fowey on the south coast and Padstow on the north. Wadebridge, Bodmin, and Lostwithiel were designated anti-tank islands on the line.²

Because of the presence of the transatlantic cable station, which was almost certainly a designated Vulnerable Point³, the Porthcurno area was made up of a number of 'defended localities' - one at Porth Curno beach, another at the cable station itself, and probably another to the north at Bodellan.⁴ In October 1940, detachments from 'D' Company of the 11th Bn. West Yorkshire Regiment were defending Porthcurno, with, later in 1941, additional troops from the 7th Bn. Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry. One N.C.O and seven men were stationed on the east beach at Porth Curno, with the same number on the west beach. Seventy-four rifles, two Bren guns, one anti-tank rifle, one 2in mortar, and 17,560 rounds of .303 ammunition were available for the defence of Porthcurno. On the cliffs a little to the east of the study area, eight projectors of the 102nd Anti-Aircraft 'Z' Battery RA were positioned.⁵



Fig. 3 - The cable station at Porthcurno, now preserved as a museum. During the Second World War, operations concerned with the cable system here were carried out in tunnels bored into the rock of the hillside behind. These were constructed between June 1940 and May 1941.

Porthcurno cable station was a vital centre of communications, the start point of an electronic link over a physical infrastructure connecting not only with North America but with all the countries of the British Empire. Its security was so important that, not only was special attention given to its ground defence against possible enemy raiding parties or from aircraft attack, but the operations, and critical components, of the station were placed underground in especially bored tunnels.

² TNA: PRO WO 166/1252.

³ The documentary evidence to confirm this has not yet been located.

⁴ TNA: PRO WO 166/4732. Documentary evidence for Bodellan as a 'defended locality' has not been found, but the group of three pillboxes here is significant.

⁵ TNA: PRO WO 166/1056 and TNA: PRO WO 166/4732.



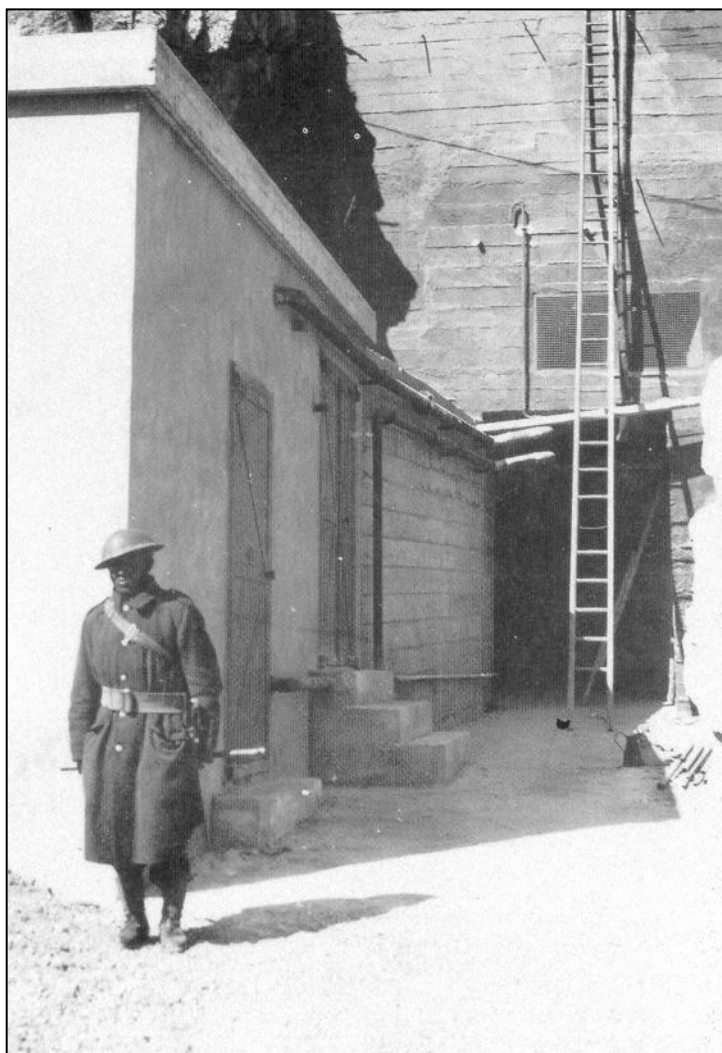


Fig. 4- Sentry on duty outside the entrance to the wartime tunnels of Porthcurno Cable Station.



Fig. 5 - The restored entrance to the tunnels [left] at the Museum of Submarine Telegraphy today.

The defence works -

Despite the removal of the majority of the defence works from the area, six pillboxes - a surprisingly high number - survive, and three others have only been destroyed in recent years. Of particular importance is the highly unusual curving pillbox [UORN 3272] on the western slopes above Porth Curno beach. Despite its vulnerable position at the very edge of an eroding slope, this is still in excellent condition. Another square pillbox just forward of it [UORN 3271] is also at the edge of a steep slope and vulnerable to a landslide.



Fig. 6 - UORN 3272: looking at the east facing embrasures of this unusually shaped pillbox, built of concrete blocks. It stands at the edge of a slope. [see as well Fig. 7].



Fig 7 - The interior of pillbox, UORN 3272.

On Percella Point on the east cliffs above Porth Curno beach is a pillbox in excellent condition [UORN 3191]. It has an open-roofed chamber at the rear where a weapon was mounted for anti-aircraft fire. Close by are inscriptions in cement daubed on a rock made by troops in 1940, one or two of which can still be read.



Fig. 8 - UORN 3191: pillbox made of concrete blocks, with an open rear chamber for anti-aircraft fire.



Fig. 9 - The best-preserved of the inscriptions on the rock adjacent to pillbox UORN 3191.

To the north of Percella Point, two rectangular pillboxes stand side by side with a footpath passing between them. They would have formed a strongpoint protecting Porthcurno from the east. These pillboxes are very much overgrown with ivy and other vegetation, and consideration might be given to removing this overgrowth so that the structures can be seen more clearly.

At Bodellan, to the north of the defence area, there was a group of three type 24 hexagonal pillboxes, of which only one now survives. The other two were removed in recent years to facilitate road widening. The pillboxes probably formed a defended locality protecting the approach to Porthcurno from the north.



Fig. 10 - UORN 3280 [left] and UORN 3282, looking east. The two pillboxes are heavily overgrown.



Fig 11 - UORN 3269: type 24 pillbox protecting the northern approaches to Porthcurno.

A number of pillboxes have long since been removed, including some on both sides of Porth Curno beach, as well as others at the cable station and within Porthcurno village. A photograph survives in the archives of the Museum of Submarine Telegraphy showing a pillbox disguised as a bus stop shelter [see Fig. 12].

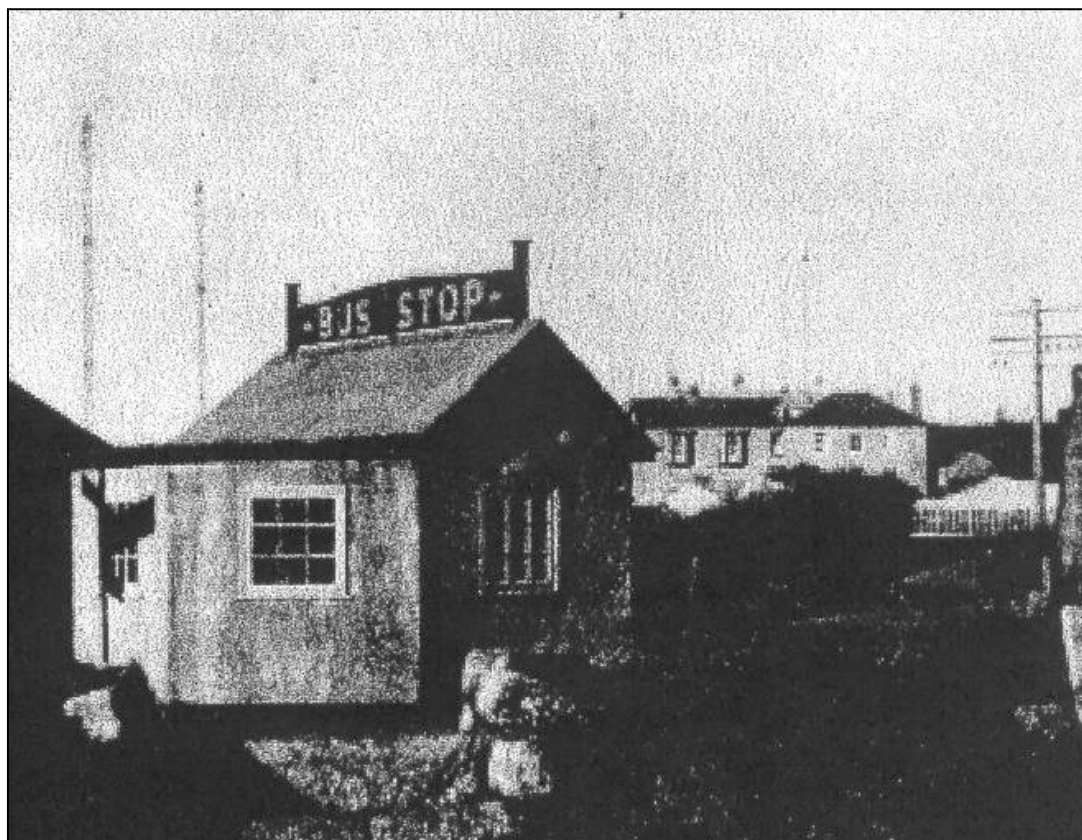


Fig. 12 - Pillbox, probably in Porthcurno village, that was camouflaged as a bus stop shelter.

A recent removal in recent years, which is to be much regretted, is that of a type 24 pillbox that stood on the site of the Minack Theatre on the western heights above Porth Curno beach. For years it served as the box office for the theatre, but a purpose-built construction has now taken its place.

2.2 Landscape:

The principal changes in the landscape of the defence area have been caused by the needs of tourism. The original cable station has been converted into a museum, and the underground wartime tunnels opened to the public. A large car park caters for visitors both to the museum and the beach. The Minack Theatre is also a popular venue for visitors. Essentially, however, this small settlement, with its cliffs and beach, has changed little in the last sixty years.

There is public access to all the pillboxes in the defence area, with the possible exception of UORN 3269, which, although close to a public footpath, is nevertheless on the far side of a field that should not be entered when it is in crop.

2.3 Statement of Significance:

Porthcurno provides an interesting example of the defence of a 'vulnerable point' in conjunction with the overall coastal defence of the region. The organisation of the



defences into 'defended localities' is instructive, and several of the pillboxes within these defended localities can still be seen.

Individual defence works are important because of their unusual type and their good surviving condition. In particular, the curving pillbox, UORN 3272, and the pillbox, UORN 3191, with its open rear bay, are rare variant types, both in an excellent state of preservation. Close to UORN 3191, the surviving inscriptions serve as an important reminder of the historic context of these defences. The Museum of Submarine Telegraphy, with its galleries set in the wartime tunnels, also serves to emphasise the importance of the area in the Second World War.

3. **Recommendations:**

1. That the surviving anti-invasion defence works at Porthcurno be considered of national importance. They enable the coast front and inland defences of the cable station 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 of defence structures that were built as part of the overall strategy, but which have now been removed.
2. That consideration be given to cutting back the vegetation growing on pillboxes, UORN 3280 and UORN 3282, to enable them to be viewed more easily.
3. That the inscriptions adjacent to pillbox, UORN 3191, receive some form of transparent protective covering.
4. That consideration be given, in a possible initiative with the Cornwall County Council, to providing information for visitors to Porthcurno on the Second World War defence of the area. Such information could be displayed on boards by the public car park.

4. **Supporting material.**

4.1 **Photographs:**

Figs. 1, 3, and 5-11 - taken (AWF) during field survey, 20.1.2003.
Fig. 2 - 3G/TUD/UK/210 fr.5072 (13.5.1946) - NMR.
Figs. 4 and 12 - Museum of Submarine Telegraphy, Porthcurno.

4.2 **Documentary Sources:**

'Operation Instruction No.9', 28.7.1940 (from South Western Area War Diary)
- TNA: PRO WO 166/1252.
'Operation Order No.1', 13.10.1940, and 'Operation Instructions No.5',
18.1.1941 and 15.3.1941 (from 11th Bn. West Yorkshire Regiment War
Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/4732.
'Battle Order', 4.6.1941 (from 203rd Infantry Brigade War Diary) - TNA:
PRO WO 166/1056.



4.3 **Published Sources:**

W.F.A. Bell, *Porthcurno in Wartime* (Museum of Submarine Telegraphy, Porthcurno, reissued 2000).

Peter Hancock, *Cornwall at War, 1939-45* (Halsgrove, 2002).

4.4 **Aerial Photographs:**

3G/TUD/UK/210 fr.5060 (13.5.1946) - NMR.

3G/TUD/UK/210 fr.5072 (13.5.1946) - NMR.

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

SW 3822-3922 (1963) - BLML.

4.6 **Defence of Britain Project Database:**

[see 5. 'Annex'].

