

# DEFENCE AREA 13

## WAVERLEY ABBEY

### 1. **Area details:**

Waverley Abbey is 2½ miles SSE of Farnham.

County: Surrey

Parishes: Farnham / Tilford.

NGR: centre of area, SU 870455.

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

The defence area lies in the valley of the River Wey as it flows south from Farnham. At the site of the medieval Waverley Abbey, the river makes two large loops forming a broad valley floor beneath wooded river cliffs. The busy B3001 road runs from Farnham through the valley and crosses the northernmost of the river loops at Waverleymill Bridge.

Around Waverley Abbey, the area is characterised by open pasture fields, and to the north by the parkland of Waverley Abbey House. On the higher ground to the east and south, however, there is sandy soil bearing extensive woodland. At Waverleymill Bridge there is a small settlement of houses amongst which is Stella Cottage. Close by are the gates to Waverley Abbey House, and a small car park providing access for visitors to the English Heritage property of Waverley Abbey.

The area is defined by the river loops and by viewsheds formed by the wooded higher land north, east, and south of Waverley Abbey. Its principal focus is at Waverleymill Bridge.

### 2. **Assessment.**

#### 2.1 **Defences:** [see Maps 2 and 3]

*Defence overview -*

Between June and August 1940, GHQ Line 'B' was constructed south of Farnham, following a course first to Godalming, and then to Shalford south of Guildford, from where it ran east below the North Downs to make a junction at Penshurst with the Newhaven to Hoo branch of the GHQ Line.<sup>1</sup> In the sector south of Farnham, the Line was heavily defended to prevent enemy forces crossing the River Wey from the west and south. Because the river itself was not considered a sufficient anti-tank obstacle, an anti-

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander, 'Ironsides Line'.



tank ditch was dug across the river loops at Waverley, crossing the B3001 road west of Waverleymill Bridge and running on the east side of the Waverley Abbey ruins, eventually rejoining the Wey near Tilfordmill Bridge to the south.

Behind this line, the high ground of Crooksbury Hill and Crooksbury Common dominated the valley beneath. The denial to the enemy of this high land was a key to the defence of Aldershot in any attack from the south. A further Command Line ran from the River Wey near Moor Park House via Runfold and Tongham to Ash. Its purpose was to protect the east flank of Aldershot.<sup>2</sup>

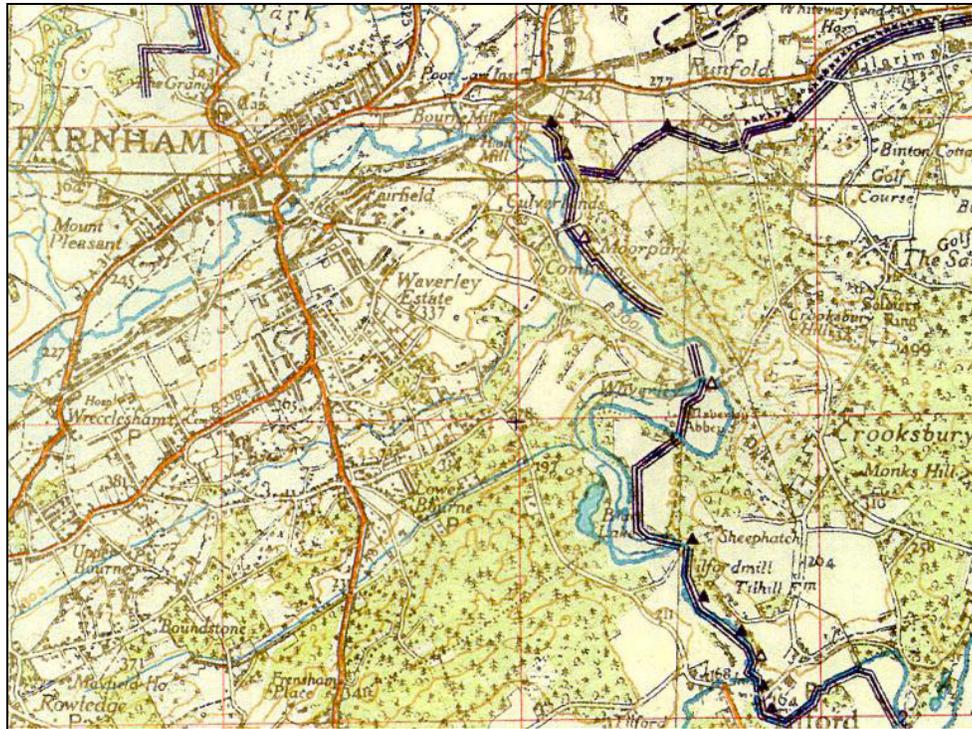


Fig. 1. - Portion of an Ordnance Survey one-inch map, enlarged by the Germans to the 1:50,000 scale and overprinted with defence information obtained from aerial reconnaissance. The course of GHQ Line 'B' [purple lines] south of Farnham is shown: the anti-tank ditch can be seen cutting across the river loops at Waverley. A Command Line also runs towards the east of Aldershot. Triangles represent the sites of pillboxes.<sup>3</sup>

The course of GHQ Line 'B' south of Farnham passed through the Bordon & Longmoor Sub-Area of Aldershot Command, with a series of defensive posts, strongpoints, and roadblocks established along the River Wey. These included Waverley, and to its north, Culverlands, and to the south and east, Tilford and Elstead.<sup>4</sup> Farnham, an important communications centre, was also a designated 'focal point'. Defended localities were set up at these points: the one at Waverley was named, 'Stella Cottage', after the house east

<sup>2</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/151 (map).

<sup>3</sup> Sheet 124: Befestigungskarte Grossbritannien 1:50,000 (BLML).

<sup>4</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/151



of Waverleymill Bridge.<sup>5</sup> Four roadblocks, formed of concrete cylinders, were constructed here - at the bridge, on the roads to the north-east and south-east, and across a track running to Moor Park House. The bridge was commanded by a 2 pdr. anti-tank gun emplacement, and light machine gun pillboxes and another anti-tank gun emplacement were positioned a little to the west at the crossing of the anti-tank ditch.

*Fig. 2 - Air photograph taken in December 1948, showing the winding course of the River Wey at Waverley with the wooded countryside around. The lake of Waverley Abbey House is at the centre, and the ruins of Waverley Abbey lie by the trees to its south. The*



*filled in line of the anti-tank ditch can be seen crossing the open fields within the loops of the river, and, to the north, the ditch ran parallel with the river, cutting off its various smaller loops.*

<sup>5</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/1264.



The roadblocks at the Stella Cottage defended locality were manned by troops from 'B' Company of the 2nd Bn. Surrey Home Guard, and this company would almost certainly have had a role in the other defences at Waverleymill Bridge. The Field Army troops assigned to this sector were from the 4th and 5th Canadian Infantry Brigades.<sup>6</sup>

The line of the anti-tank ditch crossing the river loops, infilled possibly before the end of the war, can be seen as a 'crop mark' in post-war air photographs. Evidence of the strengthening of the banks of the River Wey, and the cutting off of various loops by an artificial ditch, can also be made out. North of Waverley Lane, the ditch probably survives as a water-filled drain which makes a junction with the River Wey [UORN 14871].

*Fig. 3 - Section of the anti-tank ditch of the GHQ Line photographed on 24th July 1940: the location*



*is not Waverley Abbey but is somewhere in the Farnham area.*

The point where the anti-tank ditch met the River Wey alongside Waverley Abbey was also covered by a pillbox, and concrete anti-tank obstacles blocked the gaps between the end of the ditch and the river banks. It is a possibility that use was made of the Abbey ruins themselves for defence positions, but, if so, there are no surviving structural traces [see also footnote 7].

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<sup>6</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/1264 and Alexander, 'Ironside's Line', pp59-60.





*Fig. 4 - Air photograph taken in 1975. The course of the anti-tank ditch can be made out as it runs parallel with the southern edge of the Waverley Abbey House lake, turning at a sharp angle to pass to the east of the Waverley Abbey ruins [bottom centre].*

#### *The defence works -*

The anti-tank gun emplacement, with its attached open courtyard area, in the car park at Waverleymill Bridge [UORNs 7207 and 9983] forms a unique defence structure that survives in near perfect condition. The castellations placed on the wall tops are a rare survival of such treatment for camouflage purposes. The 2pdr. emplacement is positioned to fire across the line of the anti-tank ditch which passes in front of it, supported by the pillbox, UORN 9988, that lies just to its east. With the now vanished pillbox in the grounds of Waverley Abbey House [UORN 9992], and the anti-tank 'pimples' ('dragon's teeth') [UORN 9981] blocking the gap between the ditch and the



edge of the road, this group of defences protected the crossing of the B3001 road by the anti-tank ditch. The four roadblocks of the Stella Cottage defended locality, including one on Waverleymill Bridge, lay a few yards to the east. The defences here consisted of a large 2pdr. emplacement that survives in the garden of Stella Cottage [UORN 16756] commanding the bridge and the line of the anti-tank ditch beyond.



*Fig. 5 - The loopholed wall [UORN 9983] pierced for rifle and LMG fire attached to an anti-tank gun emplacement [right -UORN 7207]. The castellations, formed roughly with brick and mortar, have been added to break up the line of the wall for camouflage purposes.*



*Fig. 6 - UORN 9983: detail of one of the loopholes. The '1940' is original.*

The anti-tank 'pimples' to the east of the Abbey ruins (where the anti-tank ditch reached the river) [UORN 9974] provide further good examples of these concrete obstacles, constructed in three (or more) rows. Close to them is a tree that still bears the inscription, although now scarcely visible, 'Bond, Sgt. Pioneer Corp [sic], 1941'. Dug into the south bank of the river opposite the Abbey is a square type 26 pillbox positioned to fire north along the anti-tank ditch [UORN 9973], in good condition although overgrown.

*Fig. 7 - UORN 9981: anti-tank 'pimples' ('dragon's teeth') now lined up on the bank of*



*Waverley Abbey House lake. These once blocked the gap between the end of the anti-tank ditch and Waverley Lane.*



*Fig. 8 - UORN 9973: square pillbox, now heavily overgrown, on the far bank of the River Wey opposite Waverley Abbey ruins. It would have been able to fire along the anti-tank ditch which reached the river here.*

2.2 / Landscape:



There has been little change in the landscape of the defence area since the Second World War. The Waverley Abbey ruins at that time were surrounded by trees and overgrown, a condition that lasted until at least the late 1950s.<sup>7</sup> They are now cared for by English Heritage, and laid out with interpretative information boards

The land within the southern of the two river loops was quarried for gravel in the 1950s, undoubtedly resulting in the removal of all evidence of the anti-tank ditch that crossed here. The quarrying may also have led to the destruction of a number of defence works [e.g. the conjectured UORN 13764]. Waverley Abbey House lake was drained and restored in the immediate post-war period as its banks had been damaged by the anti-tank ditch. Waverley Abbey House itself is used today as a training college. Other than for these details, however, the enclosed and densely wooded landscape of the valley of the River Wey appears substantially as it was in 1940. There seems to have been little new building, and the main change witnessed today is the busyness of the B3001 road.

Many of the defence works can be inspected from the car park at the gates to Waverley Abbey House and by taking the footpath that leads to the Waverley Abbey ruins. A footpath leads from beside Stella Cottage to Moor Park House (now the home to various businesses), and several additional pillboxes and anti-tank obstacles can be viewed along this route.

### 2.3 **Statement of Significance:**

The Waverley Abbey defence area presents an excellent example of a sector of the GHQ Line as it passed through the enclosed and wooded Surrey landscape. The area enables us to understand the importance of the 'front-edge' anti-tank obstacle of the Line, which followed natural waterways wherever these were of sufficient width, depth, and steepness of bank for the purpose, but, when not, was continued by a purpose-dug, revetted ditch of precise dimensions. At Waverley, the construction of the ditch, in angled lengths, across the meadows of the river plain, enabled it to be covered at set strongpoints by both anti-tank and machine gun fire. Had the banks of the River Wey itself been chosen as the main anti-tank obstacle here, its winding course, in places beneath sharply-rising river cliffs, would have been less easy to defend. The Waverley Abbey defence area shows the engineered anti-tank ditch to its best advantage within its surrounding topography.

Several of the defence works within the area are important examples of their type. Both the anti-tank gun emplacements [UORNs 7207 and 16756] are of unusual design, and the loopholed courtyard to the rear of UORN 7207 is likely to be unique. The overall surviving condition of this structure, with its details of castellations and the date '1940', is excellent. The fields of anti-tank 'pimples' are also relatively rare. They are a size of

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<sup>7</sup> See photographs in the Ministry of Works file, TNA: PRO WORK 14/1376. The ruins were inspected in 1942 and 1943 and no damage from the military works found. This makes it unlikely that defence positions were prepared amongst the ruins. In 1947, there was a short-lived proposal by the new owner of Waverley Abbey House to dynamite the ruins in order to build a racecourse.



obstacle that is easier to remove, or destroy in situ, than the larger cubes and cylinders found elsewhere. Pillboxes are also well represented in the defence area. A type 24 [UORN 9988] and type 26 [UORN 9973] stand within the Waverley Abbey river loop, and to the north of the area, by the side of the track to Moor Park House, two further type 24s can be found, together with a type 28 anti-tank gun emplacement.

The differing components of stop line defence, surviving as they do in an area adjacent to an English Heritage property, and with good public access to most, make the defence area of particular importance. This is an intriguing and compelling section of the GHQ Line that takes a while to understand in its strategic context. A 'pillbox walk' within the area, extending north to Moor Park House, could readily be established.

### 3. **Recommendations:**

1. That the surviving anti-invasion defence works within the Waverley Abbey defence area be considered of national importance. They enable the defence of this section of GHQ Line 'B' 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, in a possible initiative with Surrey 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 Waverley Abbey car park adjacent to the structures, UORNs 7207 and 9983.
3. That consideration also be given, in a possible joint initiative with Surrey County Council and the Farnham Museum, to setting out a 'pillbox walk' centred on the English Heritage property of Waverley Abbey. On-site interpretation might be provided [see 2. above], and descriptive literature produced. This would add to the educational and amenity value of the area.



4. **Supporting material.**

4.1 **Photographs:**

Fig. 2 - 541/217 fr.4021 (29.12.1948) - NMR.

Fig. 3 - H2473, 24.7.1940 - IWM, London.

Fig. 4 - NMR 888/325 (25.7.1975) - NMR.

Figs. 5-8 - taken (AWF) during field survey, 1.4.2001 and 29.6.2001.

4.2 **Documentary Sources:**

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

Befestigungskarte Grossbritannien: 1:50,000 (Sheet 124), 1.6.1941 - BLML 1305(13).

'Bordon and Longmoor Sub-Area Defence Scheme No.3', June 1941 (from Bordon and Longmoor Sub-Area War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/1264.

Bordon Sub-Area War Diary, 1942 - TNA: PRO WO 166/6722.

'Waverley Abbey: Works', 1934-1953 - TNA: PRO WORK 14/1376.

'List of Defence Works Remaining in South West Surrey', 1960 - Surrey Record Office CC 204/3.

4.3 **Published Source:**

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

4.4 **Aerial Photographs:**

CPE/UK/1982 fr.1336 (11.4.1947) - NMR.

541/217 fr.4021 (29.12.1948) - NMR.

543/1426 fr.0043 (28.8.1961) - NMR.

NMR 888/325 (25.7.1975) - NMR.

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

SU 8646 - BLML.

SU 8645 - BLML.

SU 8644 - BLML.

SU 8745 - BLML.

4.6 **Defence of Britain Project Database:**

incorporating records from the Surrey Defences Survey, 1980s-1990s. [see 5. 'Annex'].

