

PUBLIC ARCHAEOLOGY

Defended areas of World War II

The Defence of Britain Project, completed in 2002, recorded many sites and identified landscapes where defences survive fairly intact in their physical context. Their future management is now under discussion

The Defence of Britain Project, co-ordinated by the Council for British Archaeology, ran from 1995 to 2002 and, in particular, harnessed the enthusiasm of volunteers, amateur archaeologists and military historians to record Britain's World War II anti-invasion defences. During the final years, the project became closely aligned with the work undertaken by English Heritage on other significant areas of 20th-century fortifications.

As well as promoting this subject to a wide and increasingly diverse audience, and attracting much media attention, the Defence of Britain Project built up an impressive database of the World War II anti-invasion defences, the great majority of which were erected in the few weeks from June to September 1940 against the imminent threat of a German ground attack. The database records 12,464 sites in England, of which some 9,000 survive, including 5,500 of various forms of the ubiquitous pillbox (or

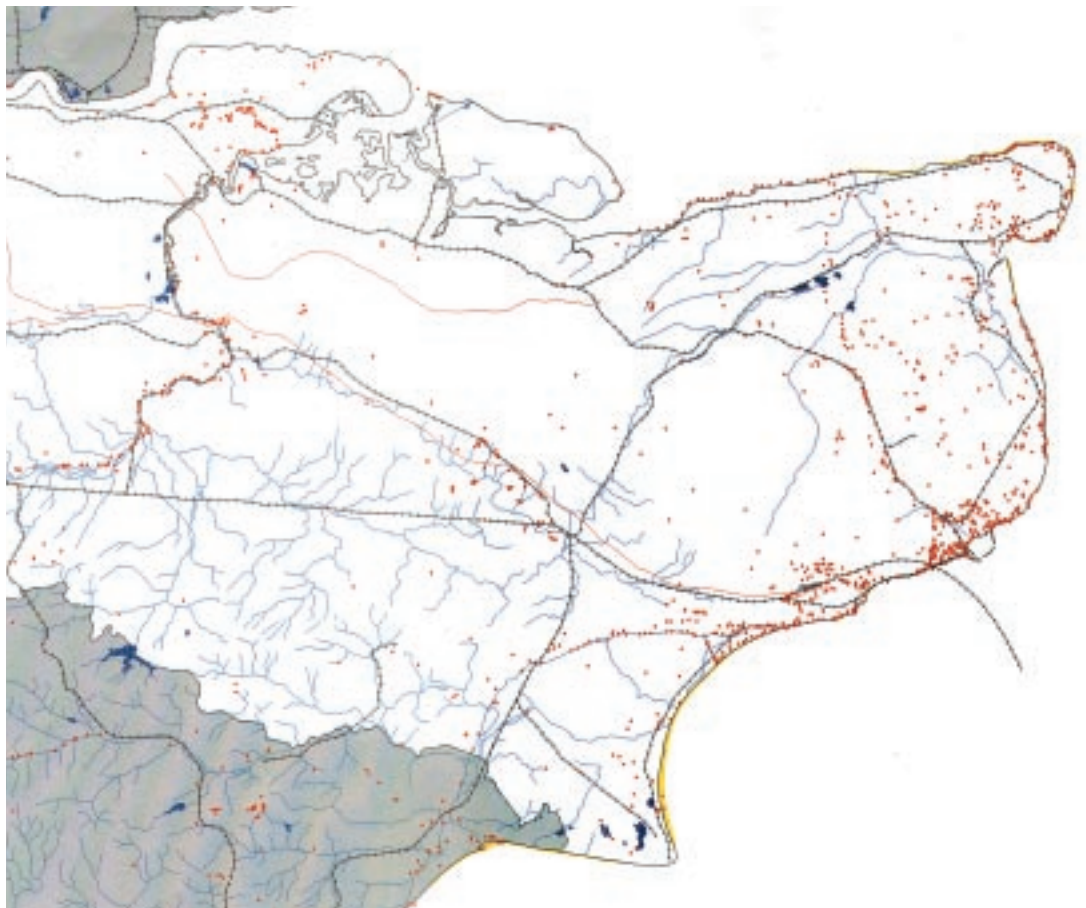
'hardened defence work'), perhaps 20% of the numbers built. For further information and details of surviving structures, and the facility to search by country, area, monument class, or condition, search the database online on the Archaeology Data Service website: http://ads/ahds/ac.uk/catalogue/specColl/dob/ai_q.cfm

A new two-year project, known as the Defence Areas Project, commissioned and funded by English Heritage's Monuments Protection Programme (MPP), now seeks to draw upon the Defence of Britain work, and to add substantially to it, so that a selection of structures may be proposed for preservation, either individually or in relation to others in discrete areas of defence.

Defence structures

The first, and more straightforward, work of the new project has been the preparation of lists of structures arranged by 'anti-invasion monument

The structure of surviving anti-invasion defences in South-East England: this would have been the key area of German attack. Each red dot represents a single anti-invasion defence structure recorded by the Defence of Britain Project



types', further categorised by their surviving condition and stability as recorded by the volunteers. Seventy-three monument types have been identified, ranging from the different forms of pillboxes (for instance, types FW3/24 – the most common – and FW3/27) to spigot mortar emplacements (a Home Guard weapon, the firing positions of which can still be found), anti-tank ditches (the largest system of defensive earthworks ever built in England, now almost entirely infilled, but still visible in places as crop and soil marks), army headquarters buildings, flame warfare installations, anti-tank blocks, observation posts, loopholed walls, Home Guard stores and so on. The list is lengthy, with many variations on a standard form. Some ten thousand structures have been listed and categorised, the lists presented to English Heritage in rank order by type.

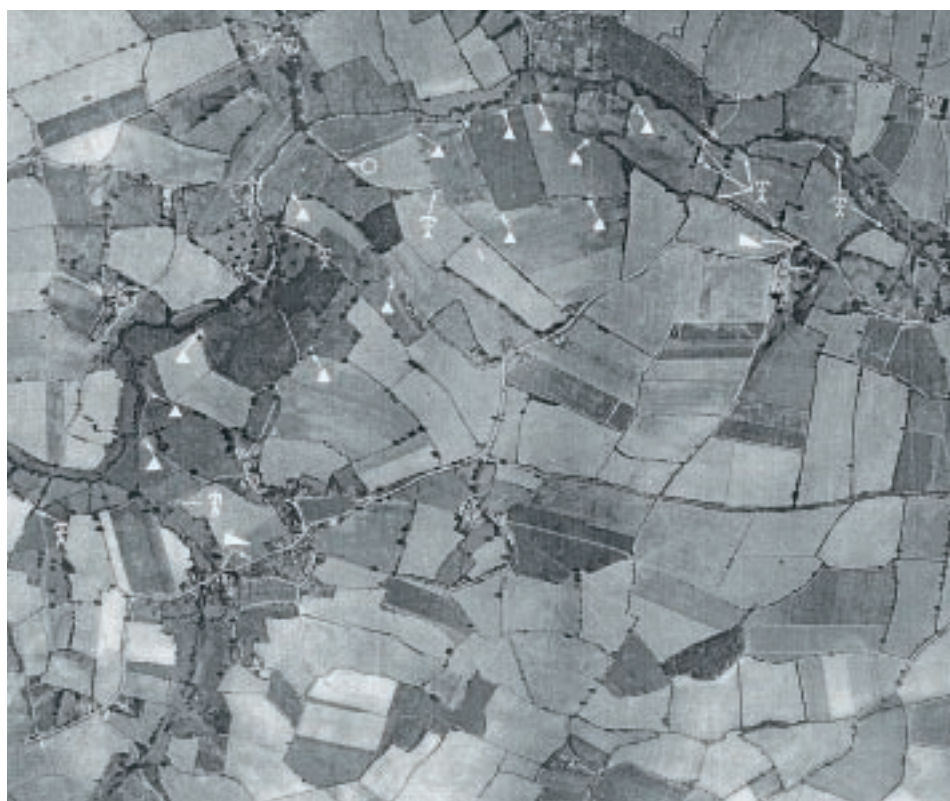
These sites will be assessed by English Heritage, using the Secretary of State's non-statutory criteria, and a combination of the best and most typical surviving examples of each type will be considered for protection, by scheduling (where a future use is envisaged) or listing. Most pillboxes that meet the criteria and are demonstrably of national importance are likely to be recommended for scheduling, even though some have been adapted for new uses: a planning application was recently submitted to convert a standard pillbox to a small café; others have been converted to public conveniences.

Defence areas

Since July 2002, some sixty discrete areas have been identified where components of anti-invasion defences survive well in landscapes substantially unaltered from those of 1940. All meet the criteria agreed with English Heritage for identifying significant surviving defence areas: differing but inter-related monument types, good survival in a clear visual envelope and a physical environment largely unaltered from the time the defences were established, ideally with public access. In addition, these areas have been selected to reflect different national defence strategies, such as coastal, stop line (linear anti-tank barriers) and area (the defence of towns and villages); examples fall within each of English Heritage's nine regions.

Following a 2001 pilot project examining three landscapes, the methodology is now used for the full national study. Each area will be assessed through both documentary sources and

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fieldwork, and the results published in a report including detailed maps of each defence component within its physical context.

New documentary sources

This is exciting work, for the subject matter is new and the documentary resources largely unexplored, although significant work on anti-invasion defences of this period was undertaken for MPP by Colin Dobinson in 1995 and 1996. Aerial photographs at the National Monuments Record are being used to establish the totality of defence in each area before the post-war clearance of many sites, as well as to evaluate landscape change. Further work will be carried out on documents at county record offices and the Public Record Office. Although many have been destroyed – for example, the tens of thousands of files of the War Office's Lands Branch which took the land for the building of the defence works under the Defence Regulations – many survive and have yet to be fully evaluated. The designated military areas and districts of Britain, as well as Army Commands and units, from Corps and Divisions down to Battalions and Companies, drew up detailed defence schemes. Many survive at the Public Record Office among Home Forces War Diaries and include comprehensive lists of the defence works built, complete with six- or eight-figure

German reconnaissance photograph showing defence works following the line of the River Chelmer in Essex. Almost all these sites survive today



Section of unfilled anti-tank ditch, with pillboxes behind, at Cuckmere Haven, East Sussex

military grid references that can be converted to those of the National Grid. There is, however, no easy index to the location of the defence schemes, and a trawl has to be made through each unit to build up a picture of what they were defending and when. Though this process can be speculative and lengthy, the rewards are often spectacular as the whole strategy of defence for key areas can be obtained; the details of what was built can be compared with modern survival.

Pillbox disguised as part of the Manor House in Acle, Norfolk



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These documents will be cited in the final reports to aid further research.

Another source of information, only recently identified, is the Luftwaffe's reconnaissance in 1940–1 of defence works that were hurriedly being built to keep the German Army at bay. The aerial photographs and maps were captured by Allied forces at the end of the war, and the bulk of this material is now at the United States National Archives, awaiting assessment. Enough also survives at the Imperial War Museum and the British Library Map Library to show its value, and relevant material will be used by the Defence Areas Project. The pilot project has shown it to be accurate, often filling gaps in surviving British documentation.

Future management

Only recently have World War II defence works been accepted as part of the country's long history of fortification.

Sites, however, are still being removed at an alarming rate, ahead of construction and transport links, and through erosion and decay. Coastal erosion, in particular on the east coast of England, is a major threat to structures strategically sited on cliffs and beaches (Thomas, 12–14). By ensuring that they are recorded on Sites and Monuments Records (SMRs) and the National Monument Record, however, they can be managed through the local planning process, either by preserving *in situ* or recording prior to removal. Recording sites on SMRs also provides

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