

DEFENCE AREA 38

SIDLOW BRIDGE

1. Area details:

The defence area is 2 miles S of Reigate.

County: Surrey.

Parishes: Reigate / Salfords and Sidlow.

NGR: centre of area, TQ 258471.

1.1 Area Description: [see Map 1].

South of Reigate, the River Mole flows in a winding course from east to west within a flat river plain consisting largely of broad, open meadows grazed by cattle and horses and intersected by various water channels. The river, which carried the main GHQ Line, is some twenty-five feet wide with relatively low banks.

At the crossing of the Mole by the busy A217 Dovers Green Road, the small settlement of Sidlow has grown up, consisting largely today of some housing, a pub, a farm, a garage, a 19th century church (damaged by bombing during the war), and the road bridge - Sidlow Bridge. A low ridge followed by footpaths runs towards the east on the north side of the river.

The defence area is bordered to the north of Sidlow Bridge by an arbitrary line drawn across the flat landscape, to the west by the settlement of Sidlow, and to the east and south by the course of the river and by White Owl Farm and Kinnersley Manor. The focus of the area is Sidlow Bridge and the pillboxes lying to the east of the bridge, with a viewshed set within the curving river plain and marked to the north by a tall pillbox [UORN 2481].



Fig. 1 - 1947 aerial photograph showing Sidlow Bridge at the centre, with the River Mole winding a course from the west to the south-east.



2. Assessment.

2.1 Defences: [see Map 2]

Defence overview -

Sidlow Bridge lay on GHQ Line 'B', at a point where it had left its route parallel with the North Downs to follow the course of the River Mole towards the south-east, to link up eventually with the Rivers Eden and Medway. [For a description of GHQ Line 'B', see Defence Area No. 12 - the Dorking Gap].

In August 1940, Sidlow Bridge lay within the Dorking Sub-Area of the military Home Counties Area. Because of the strength of the defences at Sidlow Bridge, ascertained from the surviving evidence today, it undoubtedly formed a defended locality, probably manned by troops from the 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade of the mobile reserve of VII Corps.¹ Sidlow Bridge commanded the direct road approach across the River Mole towards Reigate, which, together with adjacent Redhill, were not only Class 'A' nodal points, but, at Reigate Hill, contained the headquarters of South-East Command. Other adjacent nodal points lay at Horley to the south-east, and at Godstone and Limpsfield.² Sidlow Bridge was also probably a defended crossing point on the system of grid line or 'fences' that divided up the Weald [see Defence Area No.12 - the Dorking Gap].

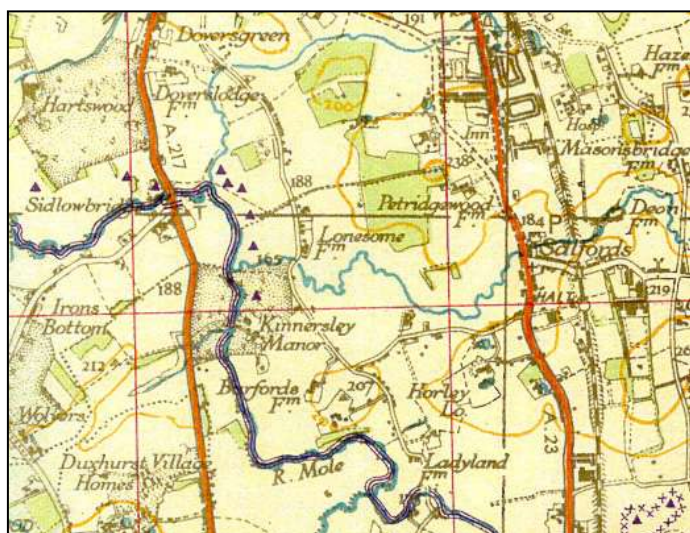


Fig. 2 - Portion of German map showing Sidlow Bridge and the defended course of the River Mole which was strengthened as the principal anti-tank obstacle.³

The defended locality of Sidlow Bridge was heavily fortified, and the bridge prepared for demolition, with a roadblock to its south near the junction with Irons Bottom Road. On the south-east side of the bridge, a double-line of anti-tank cubes strengthened the river approaches. Infantry pillboxes to the north-east of the bridge, and a 6pdr. anti-tank gun emplacement, were ranged on the river crossing, and pillboxes were positioned as well to the north-west. On this western side of the A217 road, the defence was continued in depth towards the outlying suburbs of Reigate, with many pillboxes being positioned within the chequer-work pattern of fields and woods to the north of the river. [The positions of some of this concentration of pillboxes are shown on Map 2, but most are beyond the border of

¹ Alexander, *Ironside's Line*, p65.

² TNA: PRO WO 166/1214.

³ Sheet 125: Befestigungskarte Grossbritannien 1:50,000 (BLML).



the study area and lie on private land to which access without permission is impossible].



Fig. 3 - Aerial photograph taken in 1969 showing Sidlow Bridge [upper left] and pillboxes following the course of the river towards the south-east.

The defence works -

The run of infantry type 24 pillboxes to the east of Sidlow Bridge, together with a 6pdr. anti-tank gun emplacement, is complete. Although one or two are now in poor condition, with substantial portions of their exterior brick shuttering lost, none has been destroyed. The anti-tank gun emplacement [UORN 2458] is in a messy condition, being used as a cattle shelter, and is of the same type and design as others to be found on the GHQ Line in Surrey and Kent [see, for example, UORN 2434, within Defence Area 16 - Penshurst]. The circular holdfast to mount the 6pdr. gun is still in position.

Two type 24 pillboxes [UORNs 2475 and 2476] stand in line with the anti-tank gun emplacement, being sited on a low ridge above the river. To the north can be seen a tall pillbox positioned on a low hill that dominates the skyline [UORN 2481]. Further type 24 pillboxes, some badly overgrown, stand alongside the footpath that runs towards White Owl Farm (built since the war). North of this farm at the corner



of a wood, and with no public access, is a damaged all-brick pillbox with pre-cast embrasure surrounds [UORN 2467].



Fig. 4 - UORN 2458: anti-tank gun emplacement mounting a 6pdr. gun firing towards Sidlow Bridge.



Fig. 5 - UORN 2476: type 24 infantry pillbox with large sections of brick shuttering apparently deliberately removed.

Further to the south are more infantry pillboxes, one [UORN 2469] positioned within the loop of a side stream from the river. Close by, the banks of the Mole were evidently not considered sufficiently steep or high to serve as an effective anti-tank barrier for they were reinforced by over thirty pyramidal-topped concrete cubes on both sides of the river [UORN 2455]. These form a remarkable survival in a remote location and show what the cubes at Sidlow Bridge, removed in the 1950s, would have looked like. The river banks may also have been cut vertically and revetted in places, although there is no surviving evidence of this.





Fig. 6 - UORN 2467: an all-brick pillbox with pre-cast embrasure surrounds, in very bad condition.



Fig. 7 - UORN 2477: an embrasure of a reinforced concrete, brick-shuttered pillbox.



Fig. 8 - UORN 2455: anti-tank cubes strengthening the banks of the River Mole as an obstacle to enemy armoured vehicles.

2.2 **Landscape:**

The landscape of the defence area is substantially the same as that of sixty years ago. There are more buildings in Sidlow itself, and the road is very much busier, but otherwise there has been little development. To the east of the area, White Owl Farm has been constructed since the war.

A footpath follows the course of the Mole to the east of Sidlow Bridge enabling many of the pillboxes to be inspected at close quarters. Further south, another footpath crosses the river, and from this, by walking at the edge of a field, the anti-tank cubes [UORN 2455] can be reached. To the west of Sidlow Bridge, the important concentration of pillboxes all lie on private land to which there is no access without permission.

Parking at Sidlow Bridge on the A217 road is very difficult, but there is a limited pull off area for cars by the side of Irons Bottom Road close to its junction with the main road.

2.3 **Statement of Significance:**

Sidlow Bridge was an important defended locality on GHQ Line 'B' with a concentration of hardened defence works that survive virtually complete. The pillboxes and anti-tank gun emplacement to the east of the bridge show how fire was focused on the bridge itself as a crossing of the main anti-tank obstacle. Further south, the anti-tank cubes lining the river banks are an important reminder of the efforts made to strengthen natural obstacles to form a more secure anti-tank barrier.

The study area covers the defence works at the bridge and to the east of it, but a major concentration of pillboxes lies to the west of the bridge and should be field surveyed additionally. The positions of many of these structures has been confirmed through air photographs, but their surviving condition and some individual locations need to be checked by fieldwork. Permission would need to be obtained to enter this land for this purpose. Details of these additional pillboxes have been included in the listings of defence components [See 5. 'Annex'].

The condition of the pillboxes and anti-tank gun emplacement closest to the bridge is poor, and attention should be given to removing their overgrowth and preventing their use by cattle and (apparently) by squatters.

An information board on the Sidlow Bridge defences could be erected close to the bridge, although there would be a problem with parking for interested visitors arriving by car. A short 'pillbox walk' could also be drawn up.

3. **Recommendations:**

1. That the surviving anti-invasion defence works in the Sidlow Bridge area be considered of national importance. They enable this section of the defence 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 to carrying out further fieldwork to the west of Sidlow Bridge, perhaps by a local archaeological group, that could obtain the requisite permission from landowners to examine defence structures known from air photographic evidence but not surveyed for this report.
3. That consideration be given to clearing overgrowth from the defence structures close to Sidlow Bridge and preventing their use as cattle shelters, although continuing interior access for public inspection would be desirable.
4. That consideration be given, possibly in an initiative with Surrey County Council and the local authority, to providing an information board on the Second World War defence of Sidlow Bridge. This should be sited near to the bridge itself, ideally next to a lay-by on the main road so that car-borne visitors can stop to read it. A 'pillbox walk' could also be devised and included with the publicly available information.

4. **Supporting material.**

4.1 **Photographs:**

Fig. 1 - CPE/UK/1982 fr.2283 (11.4.1947) - NMR.

Fig. 3 - MAL/69085 fr.167 (1.11.1969) - NMR.

Figs. 4-5 and 7-8 - taken (AWF) during field survey, 2.12.2003.

Fig. 6 - copyright: Cyril Urquhart (Defence of Britain Project Archive).

4.2 **Documentary Sources:**

Home Counties Area 'G' War Diary, December 1940 - TNA: PRO WO 166/1214.

Befestigungskarte Grossbritannien: 1:50,000 (Sheet 125), 15.12.1940 - BLML 1305(13).

4.3 **Published Source:**

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

4.4 **Aerial Photographs:**

106G/UK/1035 fr.3067 (27.11.1945) - NMR.

106G/UK/1062 fr.3107 (15.12.1945) - NMR.

CPE/UK/1982 frs.2282-2284 (11.4.1947) - NMR.

MAL/69085 frs.142-143 (1.11.1969) - NMR.

MAL/69085 frs.163 and 167 (1.11.1969) - NMR.

MAL/69085 frs.182-184 (1.11.1969) - NMR.

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

TQ 2446-2546 (1973) - BLML.

TQ 2447-2547 (1972) - BLML.

TQ 2646-2746 (1973) - BLML.

TQ 2647-2747 (1973) - BLML.



4.6 **Defence of Britain Project Database:**
[see 5. 'Annex'].

