The Defence of Walberswick, 1939-1945 Part I: The Coastal Crust

The year 2010 will see the 70th anniversary of one of the largest construction projects in British History: the programme of coastal defences built during the summer and autumn of 1940 under the threat of German invasion. As anyone who was walked the beaches of East Anglia knows, the remnants of these coastal defences are often close at hand. The remains of pillboxes, concrete blocks and gun emplacements sometimes sit incongruously alongside beach huts, footpaths and bird watching hides. Although Second World War defences do not have the antiquity of the Roman Shore forts, medieval castles or Martello towers, they are an important part of the history of Britain’s fortifications and represent a significant archaeological resource. For the past six months a project within the School of History at the University of East Anglia has examined the 1940 coastal defences at Walberswick in Suffolk. The project has primarily been concerned with the production of a series of 3D computer ‘flythroughs’ of the reconstructed defence landscape that can be viewed elsewhere on this website. Such is the amount and quality of historical and archaeological information that has come to light during the course of the research, however, that a more formal account of Walberswick’s role in coastal defence seemed necessary. The discussion below examines the defences in this part of Suffolk in 1940 and further papers on the defences in 1941 and 1943 will be placed on this website in due course.

The research on Walberswick hosted by this website takes as its starting point the recent work on Second World War defence landscapes by Dobinson, Foot, Osborne and others, that has done so much to establish the subject as one for serious academic research. In the case of Suffolk, new studies have rapidly expanded our knowledge of coastal defences in the county from prehistory to the Cold War, with the years 1939-45 occupying a justifiably prominent position. The present investigation hopes to contribute to this ongoing work by offering a detailed in-depth case study of a small area; the value of such an approach having been highlighted as one method of driving research on the subject forward. There are also good academic reasons for undertaking this research at Walberswick. The area has already been identified by English Heritage’s Defence Areas Project, itself based upon the Defence of Britain 1

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1 Itself a project based upon D. Sims, ‘Defence Against Invasion: The Suffolk Coastline, Aldeburgh to Walberswick, 1939-1943’ (Unpublished MA Dissertation, University of East Anglia, 2008)
2 It should be stressed that, while acknowledging their importance, this piece does not discuss civil defence, the role of the Local Defence Volunteers (later the Home Guard) or the ‘social’ aspects of coastal defence, such as the requisitioning of land or local movements of population. It also does not consider in detail the links between the coastal crust defences at Walberswick and its connections with vulnerable points and stop lines or the role of the Air Force and Royal Navy. For discussions of several of these aspects in a local context see M. Osborne, Twentieth-Century Defences in Britain: Suffolk (2008).
3 For the Defence of Britain Project see, http://www.britarch.ac.uk/cba/projects/DOB/; C. Dobinson, Twentieth-Century Fortifications in Britain vol.2 Anti-Invasion Defences of World War II (CBA, 1996); M. Osborne, Defending Britain: Twentieth-Century Military Structures in the Landscape (Tempus, 2004)
5 With much of the new information based upon analysis of aerial photographs undertaken as part of the National Mapping Programme, S. Newsome, ‘The Coastal Landscapes of Suffolk during the Second World War’, Landscapes 4 (2003), pp. 42-58; C. Hegarty and S. Newsome, Suffolk’s Defended Shore: Coastal Fortifications from the Air (English Heritage, 2007); the best account of the Second World War defences at Walberswick is to be found in Foot, Beaches, pp.120-128. In the research for this project aerial photograph interpretive maps prepared by Suffolk County Council and entries in the Suffolk Historic Environment Record have been invaluable.
6 As suggested in The Defence of Britain website ‘The way forward with anti-invasion studies is undoubtedly by local studies using all the documentary resources together with detailed fieldwork’ ‘The Defence of Britain Project: A Review’ url: http://www.britarch.ac.uk/projects/DOB/review [accessed 15.7.08].
Project, as one of two locations in Suffolk where coastal anti-invasion defences are both coherent as a group and lying in well-preserved landscape contexts. While the results of local studies inevitably have limitations in terms of applicability elsewhere, an argument can be made for Walberswick being representative of other sites on the east coast. A case study approach can, of course, also be invaluable in shedding light on the details of history that, cumulatively, inform a bigger picture. In this particular instance it is hoped that the research presented here will not only make a contribution to the study of Second World War defence landscapes but also stimulate more work in East Anglia and beyond.

**Walberswick**

Walberswick is a coastal village in east Suffolk, the nucleus of which is the village green which lies to the south of the mouth of the river Blyth. Where the Blyth meets the sea is the entrance to Southwold harbour which takes its name from the larger town of Southwold that lies to the north of the river. During the Middle Ages the Blyth was navigable and for centuries Walberswick was a thriving fishing and coastal trading settlement. The community’s former wealth, as so often the case in East Anglia, is reflected in the architecture of the parish church which boasts a fine Perpendicular tower. In the early twentieth century Walberswick was much in favour as a seaside resort and as a haunt for artists and today is still one of Suffolk’s busiest tourist destinations. The extensive marshes that make up much of the lower Blyth valley are coveted by birdwatchers as are the large expanses of heath that make up much of the hinterland, with both environments much valued as historic landscapes with considerable biodiversity. Much of the area’s history and landscape is bound up with the coastline and this remains true today, with considerable debate surrounding the viability of existing sea defences and the feasibility of managed inundation of low lying areas as a policy against coastal erosion.

If proximity to the sea brought benefits in the past, then it has also exposed Walberswick to external threat. During the Second World War Walberswick, in common with much of Britain’s coastline, was considered a potential landing ground for German invasion. The detailed surveys of the east coast by the military characterised this part of Suffolk as having:

> Certain well-defined spurs [Aldeburgh, Thorpness, Sizewell, Dunwich and Walberswick] along which run the main approaches inland and are divided from one another by marshy areas [and cliffs] where the streams run into the sea. This formation will necessitate the capture of the spurs by an invader before ingress inland on a large scale can be made. It therefore lends itself to defence by strong locations on the spurs, the intervening marshes being made as impassable as possible.\(^7\)

As will be seen below, much about the defence of Walberswick relates to the denial of this particular spur to any potential invader and preventing movement, particularly by vehicles, further inland. The perceived vulnerability to invasion of this part of the east coast was heightened by the large expanses of heath that lay inland. Together with its suitability for armoured vehicles it was also deemed an excellent landing grounds for airborne troops. It is unsurprising that army commanders considered this part of the

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6 *Suffolk from the Air*, p.99. The other is Bawdsey Point

7 TNA WO166/329 (War Diary, XI Corps), ‘Defence Scheme, Landing Places’.
east coast ‘a very dangerous locality’. The combination of potential invasion beaches coupled with a vulnerable hinterland ultimately led to the creation in this part of Suffolk of a familiar anti-invasion landscape of anti-landing ditches, stop lines, designated vulnerable points and other static defences. Walberswick was, of course, only one part of this much wider scheme, but it is specifically the coastal defences up to the end of 1940 that are discussed here.

**Defence Prior to May 1940**

On the declaration of war in September 1939 the defence of east Suffolk, including the coast, was the responsibility of the 4th (Territorial) Suffolk Regiment. With only a single unit tasked with guarding half the county, there could be no attempt to defend the whole area; rather, particularly vulnerable points, such as the radar station at Darsham were designated for protection. During the first few months of the war the idea of a full-scale German invasion was deemed a remote possibility, particularly during the autumn and winter when weather conditions would have precluded any large-scale beach landings, but the eventuality was considered and possible counter-measures explored.

A systematic strategy of national coastal defence was laid down in November 1939 in the issuing by Commander in Chief of Home Forces General Kirke of the ‘J. C. Plan’. The plan laid down in some detail the actions to be taken in the event of an invasion. A significant German incursion, it was believed, would have to take the form of an attempt to land troops via a port that had already been captured by paratroops. On the East Coast the most likely target was thought to be Harwich. The J. C. Plan placed great emphasis on the defeat of enemy airborne troops in the belief that if any paratroop landing could be contained, then a general invasion attempt would fail. In accordance with this strategic thinking, troop levels in Suffolk were increased with 163 Infantry Brigade and supporting artillery assigned to coastal defence, with their primary task the countering of any airborne attack until mobile reserves could be brought into the area to defeat the invaders.

Despite the build up in troop levels there was an acceptance that, if it happened, any German invasion in force could not be prevented, but could be slowed up. The Brigade Headquarters admitted as much in its Operating Instructions ‘We can and must … inflict as heavy casualties as possible on the enemy and disorganise him during the actual landing. Our second and more important task is to prevent him exploiting an initial landing success by blocking all main approaches until such time as Tps [troops] from the mobile Division can arrive in the area and effectively deal with the enemy’. Such a strategy was partly dictated by the low numbers of troops defending the coast: at this time, the 2nd/4th Essex Regiment, for example, with a strength of approximately 450-500 men, were responsible for defending seven miles of coastline and a hinterland of some six miles. On the ground, those areas thought

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9 TNA WO 166/4707 (War Diary, 4th Suffolk Regiment) 5.9.39.
10 TNA WO166/1 (War Diary, GHQ Home Forces), ‘Proceedings of GHQ Conference, 30.10.39’.
11 TNA WO 166/1036 (War Diary, 163 Infantry Brigade), ‘Movement Order No.1 31.10.39’; with the component infantry units being 2nd/4th Essex Regiment, 5th Royal Berkshire Regiment and 7th Royal Berkshire Regiment. A mobile reserve was made up of 17th/21st Lancers and one battery of 55th Anti-Tank Regiment.
12 Ibid, ‘Operation Instruction No.1 18.11.39’
attractive for airborne landings and the roads leading inland from the beaches were defended by troops with prepared positions, but the impression is one of insubstantial defences that could have done little in themselves in the event of a major attack; one junior officer described how his instructions were to hold a beach until outnumbered and then withdraw to a prepared inland strong point consisting of ‘a hole in the ground with a couple of sandbags.’ 13

The speedy German victory in the west during the spring and summer of 1940, however, fundamentally altered the strategic situation and an invasion of Great Britain became a real possibility. On 28th May the Chiefs of Staff advised the War Cabinet that in their view it was highly probable that Germany was setting the stage for a full scale attack on Britain. They considered that, from the German point of view, the most hazardous phase of any invasion attempt would be the actual beach landing and went on to comment that:

‘Unless, therefore, we can ensure that the enemy is met on the beach by every possible form of defence, guns (within the limit of the numbers available) rifle fire, wire, obstacles and demolitions, he may get that first and all-important foot-hold on our territory which will enable larger and heavier forces to be landed subsequently.’ 14

The Commanders-in-Chief completed their instructions by recommending that labour should be mobilised and the necessary work on the beaches begin immediately. The result was the ‘coastal crust’, a linear series of defences constructed under the direction of General Sir Edmund Ironside who has replaced Kirke as Commander-in-Chief Home Forces on 27th May. Much has been written about the characteristics of these defences, their place within a broader scheme of resistance, and their potential effectiveness. 15 What follows below is an account of how the coastal crust took shape at Walberswick.

The Chain of Command
Responsibility for the defence of Walberswick lay with Eastern Command, with XI Corps the major formation tasked with implementing schemes of defence. As part of unit rotation on 18th April 1940, a fortnight before the German attack on France, 55 Division assumed responsibility for coastal defence in Suffolk. One of the division’s constituent units, 164 Infantry Brigade was assigned the area of coastline from Pakefield to Aldeburgh. Initially, two battalions held the coast (the 9th Battalion King’s Regiment from Aldeburgh to Sandymount Covert and the 2nd/4th South Lancashire Regiment from Sandymount Covert to Pakefield) with a further battalion (1st/4th South Lancashire Regiment) held inland as a reserve. 16 The German assault on France and the Low Countries on 11th May 1940 led to some hasty re-deployments. The 1st/4th South Lancashires were pushed up to the coast to the north of 2nd/4th South Lancashires who themselves were assigned a new unit boundary. 17 It is the activities

14 TNA CAB 80/12 Chiefs of Staff Committee (40), 406 ‘Invasion of the United Kingdom’ 29.5.40.
15 Osborne, Defending Britain, chapter 1; Foot, Beaches, passim; for Suffolk in particular, Hegarty and Newsome, Suffolk’s Defended Shore, chapter 3; M. Osborne, Twentieth-Century Defences in Britain: Suffolk (2008).
16 TNA WO 166/4680, (War Diary 2nd/4th Battalion South Lancashire Regiment), ‘Home Defence Scheme, 29.4.40’
17 The Battalion HQ and ‘A’ company were at Blythburgh, ‘B’ and ‘D’ companies in Southwold and ‘C’ company in Walberswick.
of the 2nd/4th South Lancashire Regiment, specifically ‘C’ Company who were tasked with defending Walberswick, that are of interest here (Figure 1).

The Defenders: The 2nd/4th South Lancashire Regiment

The 2nd/4th South Lancashire Regiment was a Territorial Battalion embodied at the start of the war. At its heart was a cadre of pre-war servicemen who had the responsibility of bringing together and galvanising the larger numbers of less experienced men filling the ranks. The lack of equipment and limitations of training that characterised the British Army as a whole at this time, and the Territorial Army in particular, are more than evident from the unit’s war diary. In terms of the battalion’s structure, however, it was very much organised along the lines that would become standard for the British Army after Dunkirk. A series of entries in 1940 record the piecemeal build up of equipment and stores. In late July, for example, the battalion reported that it had finally received its full compliment of small arms and ammunition and that it was fully kitted out with the Army’s new ’37 Pattern battle dress - the first time since the outbreak of war that it had achieved uniformity in equipment. By the end of August the situation had improved further, but the battalion still lacked its full compliment of specialist weapons.

The war diary also records that the battalion spent considerable time undertaking training. Initially the focus was on basic infantry skills such as weapon practice, but in time built up to exercises with neighbouring units. It was during such an exercise that the battalion suffered its only fatality throughout its time at Walberswick. There are also glimpses of a unit subject to a considerable turnover of personnel as new drafts came into the ranks and more able men were drawn off to other units. The large influxes of recruits probably explain why for much of its time in Walberswick the battalion (at least on paper) was over-strength.

A telling assessment of the battalion from within its own ranks is given in the war diary for November 1940, just before the unit was moved into the general reserve and is worth quoting at length:

This month, with a move into G. H. Q. Reserve coming within a few days of the start of November, may be said to mark a definite stage in the career of this Bn.

In April when the Division moved to East Anglia the Bn comprised approximately one third Territorials, one third 1st and 2nd intake and one third April intake. The latter had not even finished their recruit training when the crisis in May drove everyone to strenuous defensive work.
There was no Carrier platoon, no Motor Cycle platoon and the Mortar platoon had no Mortars. Rifle companies had not got their 2” Mortars, Anti-Tank Rifles and the transport was primarily old hired vehicles. Personal equipment was mixed and incomplete.
On leaving East Anglia the Bn moves with all ranks equipped except for small deficiencies. Transport not up to strength but almost entirely W.D. Complete in Mortar 3” and 2”.
Anti-Tank and Carrier platoon complete and with training which its regular opposite number would have been glad of when war started. Every man exercised in Rifle, Bren and Anti-Tank Rifle with some experience of 2” and 3” Mortar firing and a very considerable experience of night work and active service conditions even if primarily defensive.
12 Tommy guns have been added to its equipment and a Motor Cycle platoon added to the establishment.
Physically the Bn is extremely fit and if not yet marching fit (a test of the reserve company in this last month has shown that the company would do 15, 15 and 13 miles on consecutive days without strain at 3 miles in 50 minutes).

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In addition to the above it must be added that innumerable calls have been made for first class volunteers for a variety of unit forces and that even during this month 110 men have had to be drafted to the Bn to make up the Bn to 950 and, in other words, to replace these volunteers and the unfit who have now been weeded out.  

Such sentiments would indicate that, although perhaps only fully recognised with the benefit of hindsight, that in May 1940 there were some significant shortcomings in the unit. It could also be seen as ironic that the very task for which they were employed that summer was actually one of the mechanisms by which they became fit for service.

The War in the West
The day before German forces began their offensive in France and the Low Countries the battalion received a warning of possible invasion and its response was to immediately dispatch a platoon to the radar station at Darsham. The following day the battalion took up war positions on the coast. The battalion was charged with the defence of Southwold and Walberswick with ‘C’ Company tasked to defend Walberswick itself and the area to the south of the river Blyth. The company area comprised Walberswick itself and a stretch of coast approximately one mile to the south of the village. The company headquarters was at a requisitioned house ‘The Towers’ close to the parish church and of the three platoons of ‘C’ company, one was in Walberswick itself defending the beach and harbour area, another was to the south west overlooking ‘Town Salts’ and the third to the south again as far as Hoist Covert and overlooking Corporation Marshes. The three sections from each platoon were themselves arranged in a linear formation so that the men of ‘C’ company occupied a line that stretched for over 1.5 miles.

The Defence of Walberswick, 1940: Company Dispositions
According to the war diary, the company proceeded, from 12th May onwards, to dig fire trenches from which they could defend the area in the event of an invasion. A particularly valuable map from 16th May 1940 shows the battalion’s scheme of defence in some detail, with the location of section positions and arcs of fire for Bren guns, rifle and Boys anti-tank fire (Figure 2). A point of interest is that (unless there was a radical re-organisation in late May or June and for which there is no evidence) the siting of the defences that were to take shape during the summer and autumn of 1940 took place at a very early stage. In effect, the later works – where the use of concrete often aids survival - were essentially additions to a scheme that had been worked out and put in place before Ironside set in motion his programme of works later that month.

Some sense of the factors structuring ‘C’ Company’s dispositions can be gauged from the siting of individual positions and the topography. The platoon based in Walberswick itself (with the Platoon Command probably based at position L), to judge from their arcs of fire and the eventual siting of pillboxes, was concerned with defending the river and the area where incoming ships could discharge their consignments. The platoon further to the south (with the Platoon Command probably based at position I) faced a section of beach, but with the capacity to provide anti-tank fire in support of those troops defending the river. The third platoon (with the Platoon

\[^{20}\text{TNA WO 166/4680, Summary end of October 1940.}\]
\[^{21}\text{Which is not to say that, had invasion happened, the battalion would not have resisted tenaciously. The Corps, Brigade and Battalion war dairies all comment that morale was good.}\]
Command probably based at position F) was charged with defending an area of marsh, but their arcs of fire indicate that a further task was to prevent the attack of paratroopers from the north. While there is no surprise that the harbour area was singled out for defence, the length of the company line suggests that thought had been given to the possibility that Walberswick might have been captured by troops landing on beaches to the south and moving inland over the marsh.

The Archaeology of Trenches
The map of dispositions from 16th May 1940 relates closely to the evidence from the archaeological record and aerial photographs, but not exactly. The map appears to be a general scheme of defence drawn up four days after the battalion began preparing their positions, a process that continued for as long as approximately 4-6 weeks. While the majority of positions on the ground match the dispositions on the map exactly, a small number do not. In the case of the latter is seems most likely that the local field commanders adapted or changed their allotted locations very early on in the operation as a response to very local circumstances. In terms of surviving archaeology, those positions in Walberswick itself are almost non-existent; while this is due in large part to post-war clearance, the difficulty in finding them on aerial photographs suggests that they were either heavily camouflaged or that existing buildings may have been converted for military use. Those south of the village are visible on aerial photographs and, particularly where subsequent land use allows, have been preserved in earthwork form.

The basic elements of the infantry defence are trenches for ten man sections, known as ‘fire trenches’. Their form is of some interest as they were constructed at a time when the morphology of infantry defences was undergoing revision. In contrast to the substantial structures that had evolved during the First World War, in the late 1930s experiments were being made with a narrower trench that would eventually become the standard pattern for the British army during World War II. Official photographs taken in France during 1939-40 show both kinds of construction, indicating that a diversity of practice in the BEF at that time. Photographs of the anti-invasion defences in 1940, including a particularly valuable set of examples from East Anglia showing a mock attack on the beaches at Great Yarmouth, show very simple structures much more akin to the newer design.

At Walberswick there is variation in the form of the infantry trenches, even within an individual platoon of three sections, but all conform closely to the ‘official’ appearance and dimensions laid down in the 1936 All Arms Manuel of Field Engineering and subsequent training pamphlets. Where exact locations can be identified on the ground, the fire trenches are generally sited on the forward slope of the ridgeline above the coast, allowing the maximum field of vision over the coastline, again reflecting instructions in military manuals. A particularly well-preserved example at Hoist Covert in Walberswick is slightly sinuous in length with

22 Or both. Heavy camouflaged positions are noted in the unit war diary, such as positions disguised as fishing huts, but do not specifically mention Walberswick.
23 See photographs in the Imperial War Museum, in particular F 2212, F 2038, F 3504, F 3551, O 223, O 415 all showing trenches of various designs in use by the BEF.
24 Imperial War Museum H2699, H 2702, H2703.
26 Ibid, Chapter 10
firing bays slightly to the front (Figures 3-5). Archaeological excavation at this trench in 2009 demonstrated that it was provided with a substantial firestep at the front. Given the sandy nature of the soil, subsidence and collapse must have represented a particular problem and the presence of iron stakes suggests a timber revetment with metal supports. The rough and ready nature of the position was also suggested by the recovery of an iron door lock, acquired from the vicinity and pressed into use as part of a revetment.

The form and character, not only of the trench at Hoist Covert, but also those of other positions visible in aerial photographs, confirms the impression of fortifications that conform closely to the instructions laid down in training manuals. Some, especially those at Positions ‘C’ and ‘F’ are section fire trenches sinuous in plan, but others, particularly at Position ‘I’ are more complex in character. Here they construction would appear to be more akin to fire pits for two or three men which were then linked up with shallower communication trenches. In due course, such communication trenches could themselves be made deeper with the result being a substantial network. The length of time recorded in the unit diary for their construction, which implies substantial structures, together with their form, suggests that the 2nd/4th South Lancashires in the summer of 1940 constructed trenches that were more reminiscent of First World War design, rather than the type that would eventually become the norm for the Second. This confirms the picture of a newly mobilised unit, dealing with an urgent task alongside equipment shortages, very much completing their task ‘by the book’.

The Coastal Crust: Chronology
Walberswick provides a good case study of the piecemeal way in which the different elements of the coastal crust were put into place over the course of several months. As has been seen, the initial war positions of the 2nd/4th South Lancashire Regiment were put in place soon after the German invasion of France. The first phase was the digging of entrenchments and the placing of barbed wire on the beach areas. The latter comprised wire entanglements of ‘concertina’ type, which were laid along the beach, parallel to the sea, just above high water level. Similar entanglements were also placed around the infantry positions. By late May efforts were in place to improve the overall defence landscape with some rudimentary, but potentially effective, works. Sluices were opened so that the surrounding marshes were flooded and bridges over drainage dykes were destroyed or removed. Two trawlers were sunk at the mouth of the Blyth to prevent craft entering the harbour. The line of the Dunwich river was also utilised as an anti-tank obstacle.

In the middle of June the other elements characterising to the coastal crust began to appear. The Emergency Coastal Defence Battery established at Southwold probably became serviceable at some point between 6-18th June, which gave a much greater degree of protection to the harbour. Mines for use on the beach were delivered on

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27 TNA WO 166/1037 (War Diary, 164 Infantry Brigade) ‘Operational Instruction No. 5 27.5.40’
28 Although not recorded for the Southwold battery, the neighbouring batteries at Aldeburgh and Sizewell were reported as ready for action on 6th and 18th June respectively and so that at Southwold probably became operational at around the same time: TNA WO166/11 (Eastern Command Royal Artillery Coast Artillery War Diary); TNA WO 166/1835 355 (Coast Battery, Sizewell, War Diary)
17th June and by the end of the month rows of anti-tank cubes were in place to the battalion’s front, almost certainly including those at Walberswick. 

The provision for field artillery was also increased during June and into July. Taking the area from Sandymount covert to Southwold, on 1st June 1940 some five field guns were able to fire on this part of the coast. By mid July, this number had increased to thirteen and would remain at this figure until October. The quality of ordnance had improved too; 136 Field Regiment, for example, who had one Troop at Sallow Wood Covert were re-equipped with a full compliment of 75mm field guns in late August.

In early July specific anti-tank capability was provided by the arrival of 115 Field Regiment, Royal Artillery equipped with ex-Royal Navy 4-inch guns mounted on the back of lorries. The Regiment, armed with six of these new mobile anti-tank guns, was assigned to 164 Infantry Brigade’s area between Aldeburgh and Benacre. One gun was located to the west of Sallow Wood Covert to defend the two roads leading inland from Walberswick. The task of all six guns was to engage and destroy enemy tanks and to fall back if necessary, on recce d positions as far inland as the Back Line, the stop line running parallel to the coast approximately 5 miles inland.

By the end of June the 2nd/4th South Lancashire’s battalion war diary was able to report that the forward companies had ‘completed very good defensive positions’. It was not for another month, however, until the end of July, that the war diary could report that the defended positions were ‘all finished’ and that there were now (my italics) ‘fifty concrete pill-boxes either complete or under construction’. The clear implication here is that the pillboxes, very much the iconic symbol of coastal defence today, were relative latecomers to the scene in this part of Suffolk. If this is the case then it has an interesting implication for the section positions as it would seem that the pillboxes were added to existing trenches possibly as late as ten weeks after their initial construction. Where, as at Hoist Covert, a section of communication trench connects pillbox and fire trench it would seem that the pillbox and its connecting trench was simply an extension to the existing section position, or that part of the existing trench system was heavily re-built to accommodate the new concrete structure. Either way, the chronology from documents would suggest that, although the time span is short, the infantry defences seen at Walberswick are of at least two phases of construction.

Such a conclusion is also suggested by the location and form of two concrete structures closely associated with the probable platoon command positions. These two structures are similar to the infantry pillboxes, but their purpose is confirmed by

29 For engineering works in the Walberswick area the War Diary of 558 Field Company Royal Engineers is frustratingly brief and comprises a single sheet that simply lists works completed in the previous three months. The list of works is, however, impressive and one explanation for the brevity of the diary might be that record keeping was not a priority during a demanding period; TNA WO 166/3796 (War Diary, 558 Field Company Royal Engineers).

30 1x18pdr (Dunwich), 4x25pdr (Darsham).

31 The additional guns were 4x6’ Howitzers (Henham Park) and 4x9.2’ howitzers (Sotterly). A similar build up can be observed further south in the area from Sandymount Covert to Aldeburgh, where the number of field guns rose from, 3 to 18 between June and October 1940.


33 TNA WO 166/1037 (War Diary 164 Infantry Brigade), ‘Operation Instruction No.11’, 5.7.40
entries in the relevant unit war diaries, which give military grid references for artillery observation points at these two locations. ‘E’ Troop 136 Field Regiment at Sallow Wood Covert used that at Position ‘E’, while that at Position ‘J’ was for 72 Medium Regiment at Henham Park. When the latter unit arrived at Walberswick on 15th June, they established an OP in the church tower, indicating that their concrete structure was not yet in place. The only circumstantial evidence for the exact date of construction comes from an aerial photograph of 8th July, which appears to show a gap in the hedge where ‘J’ would come to be sited and also considerable activity in the area of the village itself, possibly indicting that pillbox construction was underway.  

It would seem, then, that the individual elements of the coastal crust defence at Walberswick came together at the end of July 1940, albeit if some parts of the concrete structures were still under construction. By this stage the 2nd/4th South Lancashires were well dug in with section trenches with attendant pillboxes surrounded by barbed wire. The beach and harbour area had been provided with Dragon’s teeth, anti-tank cubes, mines and was heavily wired. The artillery support was integrated with the infantry and a mobile reserve was also in place.

**Defending Walberswick**

The question of what would have happened had a German invasion of Britain taken place in 1940 has provided a fruitful breeding ground for counter-factual historical investigation, but the evidence presented here does permit some analysis of how the defence of Walberswick was to be conducted.

Denying any invader access to the harbour was obviously a priority; Emergency Coastal Batteries were only established in areas deemed to be particularly vulnerable and the blocking of the river together with the concentration of wire, minefield, dragon’s teeth and anti-tank cubes in and around the mouth of the Blyth attests to the perceived value of the area for any invader. It was the fact that the harbour was the first entry point for armoured vehicles wishing to move along this particular ‘spur’ inland that accounts for the greater concentration of defences in this area. The numbers of infantrymen allocated to this section was limited, however; only one platoon, one third of the company strength, defended this area. Perhaps in recognition of this, the company’s Boys Anti-Tank rifles were detached from their parent platoons or so located so as to concentrate their fire in this part of the line. Perhaps because of the limited manpower, a great reliance seems to have been placed on the use of field artillery to bolster the defence. The two designated SOS target areas for the guns at Sallow Wood covert lay in this area: one forward of the beach immediately in front of the village and the other just to the north of the river mouth (Figure 6).

The fact that two thirds of ‘C’ Company’s strength lay not in the village, but in the fields to the south, suggests that an attempt to capture the village via a flanking assault from the south was a major consideration. In terms of topography, the most heavily defended parts of the line were concentrated on two small promontories where, alongside section positions, artillery observation posts and probably the platoon HQs were located. Given the distance between here and beach it is highly unlikely that rifle fire on the beach itself would have been effective. Instead, it would seem that the

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34 English Heritage (NMR) RAF Photography, RAF/2/BR11/14 Frm.34 (8.7.40).
enemy was to be stopped by rifle and Bren gun fire as they crossed the marshes which, in the view of senior commanders, could only be crossed by ‘determined’ infantry. The beach itself was to be defended primarily by the placing of barbed wire entanglements and again by artillery fire. Such arrangements seem to pre-figure the clear operating instructions that are evident the following year, in 1941, where the importance of artillery fire on troops on ships off shore and on the beaches directly in front of obstacles was emphasised. It is also of interest in the light of some of ‘C’ Company’s positions that the artillery was instructed to direct fire in areas where the ‘application of adequate small arms fire … is difficult’. It is probably significant to the scheme of defence that the concrete artillery OPs are sited so as to give a clear view of the whole coastline, again something laboured in later operating instructions. That at E is close to the highest point in that part of the line, while that at J is to the front of the infantry positions, and had invasion happened, the spotters within would have been the closest troops to the enemy.

The linear form of defence employed at Walberswick ensured that the Company was strung out over a front of 1.5 miles and, without the use of radios, it is not clear how effective command and control would have been possible. There is some evidence that this was appreciated at the time with some attempt made to ameliorate the difficulties of communication. The only place where there is substantial deviation from the dispositions from the defence plan is at the end of the line, the right flank of the company line. To judge from a destroyed pillbox that was dragged to its current location during field clearance during the 1960s (Position D), in 1940 a section post lay to the north of its ‘official’ position. The topography would suggest that the move was to cover a natural depression that would have been ‘dead ground’ in 1940. The plan of dispositions indicates that this part of the line was also tasked with firing on any paratroops converging on Walberswick from inland, which would also help explain the change of location.

It is probably significant that the greatest deviation from the plan of dispositions occurs at the most exposed part of the line, where the limitations of the scheme of defence are most apparent; in this way, the changes made on the ground made early in May 1940 in fact pre-empt the tactical considerations of ‘all round defence’ that resulted in major changes in coastal defence made the following year. At the last, it is worth recalling that the defences were not designed to throw an invader back into the sea, but rather to disrupt and delay any German force. Once ashore enemy movement was to be a slowed down further by a litany of smaller roadblocks, obstacles together with more formal stop lines, all of this in an effort to buy time for mobile reserves to converge and defeat the attackers. To this end, the men of ‘C’ Company, along with the other troops defending the coast, were tasked with a simple mission in the event of an invasion: to hold their lines for as long as possible. The reality of this situation is no-where more explicitly seen than in the Unit Diary of XI

35 TNA WO166/329 (XI Corps War Diary) ‘XI Corps Artillery Instruction No.1, 7.4.41’
36 Ibid. It is also of interest that the artillery was tasked with combating the activities of paratroops.
37 In particular the move to all round defence and strongly defended forward localities, see Foot, Beaches. The new thinking is particularly well summarised in XI Corps’ Operating Instructions (TNA WO 166/329 (XI Corps War Diary) ‘Operational Instruction No.45 29.11.40’ ‘The organisation of the forward defences in adequate depth … assumes more pressing importance. To achieve this it will be necessary, with the present garrison, to substitute for the present linear defence a system of defence of strong localities capable of all round defence and protected by a tank obstacle on the flanks as well as in front. The adoption of this system will of necessity involve gaps in the beach defences’.
Corps, ‘There can be no question of withdrawal on the part of any troops detailed to hold specific defences. Such troops will hold on to the end’.38

Almost at the moment when the defences were reaching their completion, however, senior officers were raising concerns as to their potential effectiveness. The speed with which the coastal crust had been completed was praiseworthy, but the number and location of some pillboxes was a cause for concern. The comments made by General Majendie the commander of 55 Division are particularly telling:

I am very much concerned that we are going pill-box mad, and losing all sense of proportion in the matter of siting defences. The lure of concrete is leading us away from first principles. The countryside is covered with pillboxes, many of which will never be occupied, many could never serve any useful purpose, and many face the wrong way. Much labour, money and material have been wasted. I realise that this is largely due to haste and the desire to get something done quickly … I wish to emphasise that a concrete pill-box with the weapons at our disposal cannot be regarded as forming an adequate defensive post. It should form part of a small defensive locality. On occasions it may have to stand alone – naked and ashamed – but only when local conditions make this unavoidable.39

While all these comments are probably not directly applicable to Walberswick, where the majority of pillboxes appear to be integrated with other defences, it is instructive that, relatively early in 1940, questions were being raised as to the nature of the defences. In many respects these comments anticipate the widespread criticisms of the coastal crust that would take place later in the year.

**Stand down**

Following the defeat of the Luftwaffe in the Battle of Britain in September 1940 the immediate threat of German invasion diminished. By the end of October the 2nd/4th South Lancashire’s were in a position to evaluate their achievements over the summer. The unit war dairy reflects a sense of pride in their achievements in the face of equipment shortages, a lack of trained manpower and months of hard work commenced under a perceived threat of invasion. Such a feeling undoubtedly stemmed in part from the physical changes that they had wrought on this part of Suffolk. By the autumn of 1940 the landscape of Walberswick that they were charged with defending had been transformed. Minefields and barbed wire entanglements now covered much of the beach, which was also lined in places with Dragon’s Teeth and divided up by rows of anti-tank cubes. The mouth of the river had been blocked, surrounding marshes flooded and the village and the surrounding farmland and heath were lined with military entrenchments with concrete defences. In comparison with April, the physical transformation must have been dramatic, and in due course the changes on the landscape moved some civilian residents to express their thoughts in verse:

The bridges have all disappeared  
The sluice is turned about

38 TNA WO 166/329 (XI Corps War Diary) ‘General Principles’ 30.6.40’.
39 TNA WO 166/688 ‘Appendix 1 Pill-Box Complex’ 5.8.40. This document is a written instruction from the commander 55 Division to brigade commanders, which was attached as an appendix to the Division War Dairy summary for August 1940.
To keep the water on the marsh
Which always kept it out
The beach is barricaded now
The lanes are mud and mire
The footpaths and the lovely walks
Are strewn with barbed wire
Big guns firing all around
Shells burst with all their might
And aeroplanes overhead are flying day and night
O Walberswick, O don’t despair good times will come again
When war is done and peace declared prosperity will reign 40

Winter 1940
The diminishing likelihood of an at least imminent German invasion did not mean
that coastal defence was neglected or troops stood down; rather, the years up to 1943
saw considerable effort put into strengthening defensive works. The evolution of
coastal fortifications was itself part of a more general change in military thinking
concerning how defences should be engineered, partly stemming from a need by the
High Command to explain why the BEF had been defeated in France. 41 As early as
July 1940, senior commanders were advocating a move away from static lines of
defence and the idea of a coastal crust, to the idea of ‘all round defence’, where
specific localities in a given area were heavily defended.

In early November 1940, the 2nd/4th South Lancashires, along with the rest of 164
Infantry Brigade were rotated into the General Headquarters reserve and relieved of
their coastal defence duties. The achievements of the summer were obviously a source
of pride in the battalion, but for 125 Brigade who replaced them, the defensive works
put in place left much to be desired. The Brigade’s assessment of their new areas was
damming: ‘The defences are linear all down the beaches, and they just ‘happened’. The 55 Div[ision] stuck pillboxes, gun pits, guns etc just where they wanted them. We
shall have to round the area up and make it into a defensive area.’ Reports on the
nature of the defences also reveals that much of the work of previous months was
already starting to disintegrate:

‘Mines have also been placed on the beaches, but the sea sucks them out to sea up to
50 yards out from the mine fields as marked on the maps. Anywhere near the sea side
of the mine fields is dangerous. The mine fields are very well marked on the maps,
but of course they are moved by the action of the sea. One of the best defences is the
natural defence – the sea. The sea blows up very rough, and especially so during the
winter months. When we get fixed up we shall have to re-organise these defences, but
the General is of the opinion that nothing should be done until the Spring, if we did
any digging now it would not be worth while’. 42

The 6th Lancashire Fusiliers, who replaced the 2nd/4th South Lancashire’s, initiated a
move away from linear defence, but the majority of the works were left to the 10th
Cameronians who from late February 1941 spent a considerable amount of time
creating entirely new defensive positions. Where existing trenches and positions were

40 S and C Adams, ‘Walberswick Then and Now’. Both were long time residents of Walberswick.
41 French, Raising Churchill’s Army, pp.189-190
42 WO166/975 (War Diary, 125 Infantry Brigade) ‘Points from Brigadier’s Conference, 17.10.40’.
sited in places that were also suitable for the newer all round defended localities they were simply re-used or adapted. Where they were not, then whole trenches were simply abandoned. Evidence from aerial photographs shows that abandoned trenches were not immediately filled in, but rather they seem to have been kept open. This may have been part of a policy of deception; in effect, they became decoys for any Luftwaffe reconnaissance aircraft, or, more likely, they served a valuable purpose as entrenchments for training purposes. Excavations at the trench at Hoist Covert yielded spent cases that had been fired as late as 1943 and bullet holes on its associated pillbox suggest that it had been used for target practice.

**The Defences Today**

The surrender of Germany in May 1945 brought an end to the necessity for the wartime coastal defences, which soon became an unpleasant reminder of the events of 1939-45. The removal of at least the most obvious defences at the most popular pre-war beaches and tourist resorts was undertaken relatively rapidly. Most of the earthworks in and around Walberswick in 1940 were still extant in 1945 when they appear on RAF aerial photographs, but were probably filled in soon after. The concrete defences are more durable, however, and some anti-tank cubes, pill-boxes and Observation Posts are still extant today.

The trenches associated with the concrete defences are by their very nature more ephemeral and tend to survive as earthworks only where the subsequent land use is favourable to preservation. In this respect this part of Suffolk is extremely fortunate in that large parts of the coastline around Dunwich are now in the care of the National Trust, the RSBP, Natural England and Suffolk Wildlife Trust, whose management practices have preserved substantial quantities of military archaeology.

The considerable changes to the defence of Walberswick made in 1941 will be the subject of a further piece on this website, to be placed here at a later date.

Robert Liddiard
David Sims
School of History, University of East Anglia, October 2009
Figure 1. Map showing dispositions of ‘C’ Company 2nd/4th South Lancashire Regiment and other coastal defences in Walberswick, 1940. A detailed description of each position is provided in the Appendix accompanying this paper.

Figure 2. Map of 16th May 1940 showing dispositions and fire plan for ‘C’ Company 2nd/4th South Lancashire Regiment. The red arrows indicate Bren gun fire, the green arrows rifle fire and the black arrows Boys anti-tank gun fire (TNA WO 166/4680).
Figure 3. Plan of section trench with pillbox at Hoist Covert, Walberswick

Figure 4. Cross-section of excavated area HC 01
Figure 5. Cross-section of excavated area HC 02

Figure 6. Battery locations, Observation posts and ‘SOS’ tasks around Walberswick, 1940.
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