

DEFENCE AREA 36

ROYAL MILITARY CANAL: BILSINGTON-RUCKINGE

1. **Area details:**

The defence area is 6 miles S of Ashford and 8 miles W of Hythe.

County: Kent.

Parishes: Bilsington / Ruckinge.

NGR: centre of area, TR 034337.

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

The defence area lies along the line of the Royal Military Canal between Bilsington and Ruckinge, incorporating these two villages and the B2067 road that connects them. To the south of the Canal, the flat expanse of Romney Marsh stretches away, with the sea at its closest point five miles to the south-east. This is a landscape primarily of rich pastureland criss-crossed by many sewers and other drainage ditches. To the north is a line of low, wooded hills, which, before the draining of the Marsh in the middle ages, looked over open water. Some four miles to the east around Lympne, the former sea edge is marked by steep cliffs.

The northern boundary of the area is the road and the higher ground, and the southern the marshland immediately south of the Canal. Arbitrary lines running across the Canal form the western and eastern boundaries. The principal defence foci are centred on the two Canal bridges south of Bilsington and Ruckinge respectively. Viewsheds lie along the line of the Canal and towards the high ground to the north.



Fig. 1 - Looking north from beside the Royal Military Canal east of Bilsington, with the line of low hills marking the northern edge of the defence area.



2. Assessment.

2.1 Defences: [see Map 2]

Defence overview -

Between June and August 1940 a Division Stop Line [1 (London) Division, later 56 Division] was constructed from West Hythe along the line of the Royal Military Canal as far as a point north of Rye, where it was continued west by a Corps Line. These stop lines formed as well part of an intensive grid system of defence, some fortified along their lengths, others only at their junctions. One such line, defended by pillboxes, ran north from Warehorne via Ashford to Charing.¹ This linear defence system was supplemented as well by one in depth based on the all-round defence of nodal points. Charing, Ashford, Hamstreet, and Appledore were all inland Category 'A' nodal points, as well as Lydd, Burmarsh, St. Mary in the Marsh, and New Romney lying on Romney Marsh itself.²

The Royal Military Canal had been built during the Napoleonic Wars against the threat of a French invasion. In 1940, it was to face the key landing point of XIII Corps of the German 16th Army under the Operation Sea Lion plans.

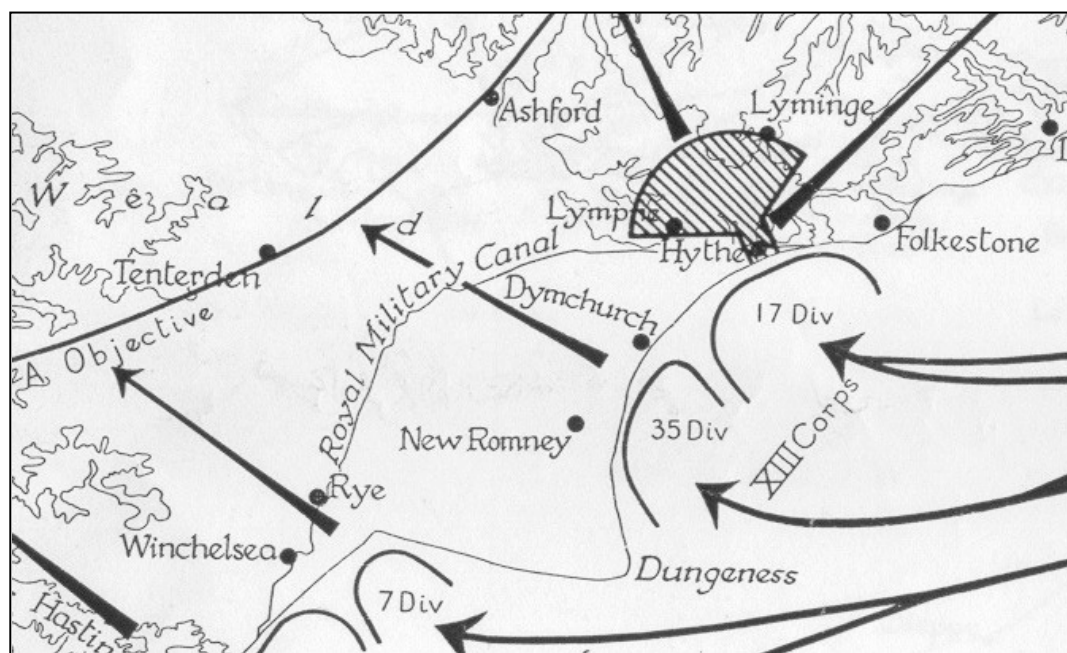


Fig. 2 - Part of a map produced in 1954 by the Historical Section of the Cabinet Office illustrating the German Operation Sea Lion plans.³

Romney Marsh was intensively defended by the British Army. It formed part of 'A' Sub-Area (South) which was divided into three Sectors - 'R', 'S', and 'T'. The area between the sea and the Royal Military Canal, in its length between Hythe and Hamstreet, including the study defence area, formed 'T' Sector. North of the Canal at this point, the area was 'Z' Sector (also termed a 'reserve sub-sector' of 'T' Sector).⁴

¹ TNA: PRO WO 166/1051/1 and TNA: PRO WO 166/4195.

² TNA: PRO WO 199/544.

³ TNA: PRO CAB 146/6.

⁴ TNA: PRO MFQ 1330 [from TNA: PRO WO 166/4640] and TNA: PRO WO 166/1044. South East Command (formed from Eastern Command) used the terms 'Area' and 'Sub-Area' as divisional areas of defence divided into Sectors. In Northern Command, for instance, the use of these terms was



The infantry brigade defending 'T' and 'Z' Sectors during the critical invasion period of June-October 1940 was the 31st Independent Brigade Group.⁵ In October and November 1940, the infantry battalion defending the line of the Royal Military Canal in 'Z' Sector was the 1st Bn. Royal Ulster Rifles, who have left us a detailed map showing their defence positions. When the battalion took over the sector, it commented in its war diary that the positions of the previous defending battalion here were badly positioned and dug.⁶

The 1st Bn. Royal Ulster Rifles occupied six miles of the Royal Military Canal on its centre and right, with its left flank bent back from the Canal for a further three miles towards the village of Aldington. To the front of them, other battalions defended the coast and the Marsh within the Sectors for which the Canal served as a rear stop line. The defences in these areas consisted of pillboxes, minefields, concrete anti-tank obstacles, and anti-tank ditches created out of existing drainage sewers. Defended localities were established with perimeter barbed-wire defences. Open fields were blocked with posts against the landing of enemy aircraft.⁷



Fig. 3 - Royal Military Canal west of Ruckinge bridge showing one of the 'flanks'. Pillboxes were erected at each of these points in 1940 to take advantage of the enfilading fire they allowed.

From June-July 1940, the line of the Royal Military Canal had been fortified with pillboxes, each with a surrounding barbed wire perimeter, erected at each 'flank' [staggered bends to allow enfilade fire], and with the bridges of crossing roads and trackways either demolished or prepared for demolition. Roadblocks also stood at these crossing points, with extensive minefields around them on the Canal's southern bank. When they took over these defences, the 1st Bn. Royal Ulster Rifles adapted and extended them, leaving at least one pillbox unmanned [UORN 8224], and establishing section posts and fire positions for anti-tank rifles, mortars, and anti-tank

reversed, i.e. a Sector was defended by a division and divided into Areas and Sub-Areas - see, for example, TNA: PRO WO 166/953.

⁵ There is no surviving War Diary for this brigade at The National Archives. It is possible it merged with the 131st Infantry Brigade which was replaced in this area by the 169th Infantry Brigade in February 1941. The 135th Infantry Brigade (of 45 Division) was also defending the Royal Military Canal in June 1940 - TNA: PRO WO 166/990 and TNA:PRO WO 166/4500.

⁶ TNA: PRO WO 166/4606. It has not been possible to identify the offending battalion for certain, but it may have been the 6th Bn. Somerset Light Infantry. The 1st Bn. Royal Ulster Rifles were succeeded by the 6th Bn. Border Regiment (TNA: PRO WO 166/4156), and they in turn by the 14th Bn. Durham Light Infantry (TNA: PRO WO 166/4228).

⁷ One battalion in 'T' Sector was the 5th Bn. Royal West Kent Regiment (TNA: PRO WO 166/4640). Included with their war diary is a most detailed map showing their positions centred on Dymchurch and Burmarsh - TNA: PRO MFQ 1330.



guns, as well as digging slit trenches, creating observation posts, and setting up barbed wire perimeters from the leading edge of their positions at the Canal back through the villages behind and onto the higher, wooded land at the rear. The 13th and 15th Batteries of the 3rd Super Heavy Regiment, Royal Artillery also had positions on this higher land with fire tasks on the beaches and the Marsh to the south and east.⁸



Fig. 4 - The bridge over the Canal south of Bilsington village. This bridge was prepared for demolition, whereas the one to the west at Ruckinge was actually blown up. South of both bridges were large areas of minefield and roadblocks surrounded by barbed wire.

Accommodation for the defending troops was in various requisitioned buildings, including schools and church halls. Thirty other ranks were housed in the village hall at Bilsington.⁹ Company headquarters were set up in larger houses and farms, although that of 'A' Company was in the Dance Hall at Ruckinge.¹⁰



Fig. 5 - The village hall at Bilsington which in November 1940 accommodated thirty men of the 1st Bn. Royal Ulster Rifles.

⁸ TNA: PRO WO 166/1044.

⁹ TNA: PRO WO 166/1051/1.

¹⁰ TNA: PRO WO 166/4606.



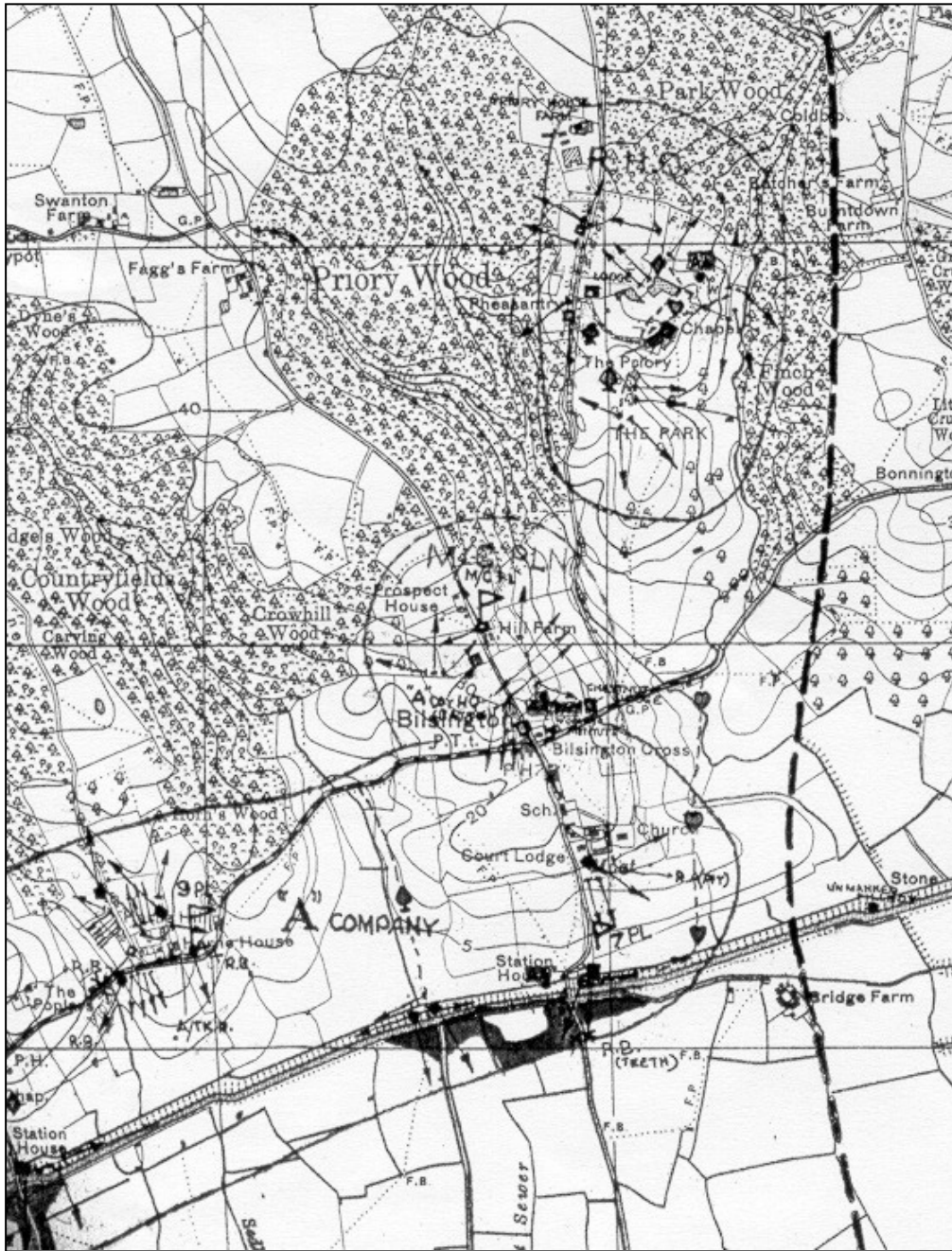


Fig. 6 - Part of a map of October 1940 showing the defence positions of the 1st Bn. Royal Ulster Rifles around Bilsington. The 'black areas' on the south bank of the Royal Military Canal are minefields.¹¹



Fig. 7 - Portion of a German map showing defences along the Canal east of Bilsington. The encircling small crosses represent barbed wire perimeters surrounding pillboxes [triangles].¹²

¹¹ TNA: PRO WO 166/4606.

¹² Südostküste England - Schrägbildreihe II (RAF Museum, Hendon).



In addition to the Field Army troops, the Home Guard played a role in manning defence positions in the villages, both the Cinque Ports and Ashford battalions of the Kent Home Guard being particularly involved.¹³



Fig. 8 - RAF air photograph taken in July 1940 showing Bilsington bridge [left centre] with Bilsington village at the top. The area of the minefield south of the bridge, with its sharp-angled perimeter, shows clearly.

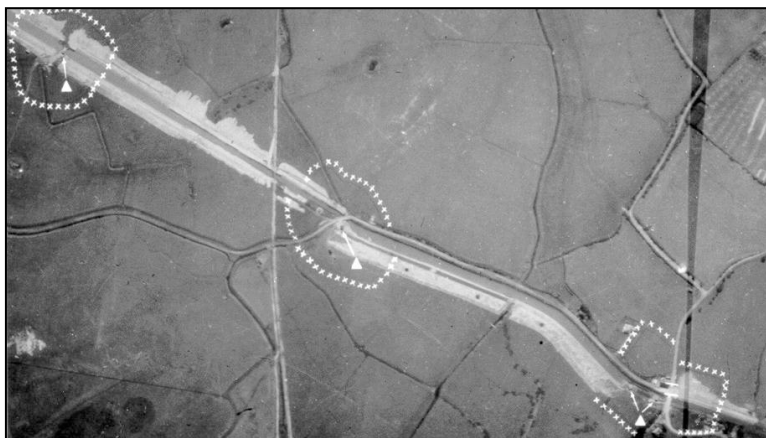


Fig. 9 - German reconnaissance photograph, taken probably in August 1940. It shows an unidentified stretch of the Royal Military Canal with pillboxes surrounded by barbed wire perimeters.

¹³ TNA: PRO WO 166/1044 and TNA: PRO WO 166/4606.



The defence works -

There are few remains today of the intense defence of Romney Marsh, which makes the structures that do remain of exceptional importance given that this was the key area where the main thrust of the German invasion would have come. Within the study defence area, there are three surviving pillboxes on the north bank of the Royal Military Canal, all of the same type - a version of the type 22 infantry pillbox with an attached exterior blast wall protecting the entrance. All three are in relatively poor condition, with the roof slabs of the attached blast walls in danger of collapse. The base of pillbox, UORN 8224, is undermined by water action, which has caused its walls to crack, and its interior anti-ricochet wall has also been removed so that it can serve as a shelter for sheep. No concrete anti-tank gun emplacements appear to have been built, the Field Army relying on anti-tank weapons firing from earthwork positions to the rear of the Canal.



Fig. 10 - Type 22 pillbox, UORN 8224, showing one of the several cracks in its walls.



Fig. 11 - The interior of pillbox, UORN 8224, showing its square embrasures with the fixing points of wooden shelves beneath them. The anti-ricochet wall, made of brick, has been removed so that the pillbox can be used as a sheep shelter.





Fig. 12 - UORN 8223: type 22 pillbox dug into the rampart of the Royal Military Canal. The pillbox has sustained some damage to one of its faces and embrasures.



Fig. 13 - UORN 1759: the best preserved of the pillboxes in the defence area, it stands a few yards from the Canal bank at Ruckinge bridge.

Of the many defence positions, other than the pillboxes, shown on the map drawn by the 1st. Bn. Royal Ulster Rifles [see Fig. 6], the only one where an indication of the 1940 defence can be seen on the ground today is at Herne House Farm on the B2067 road between Ruckinge and Bilsington. Here, in the end wall of a stone barn facing the road, is a loophole blocked up with brick [UORN 16905]. Undoubtedly, this was the 'pillbox' marked at this point on the map, an existing farm building having been



adapted for the purpose of defence. This was a widespread practice which was often cheaper and quicker than constructing freestanding, purpose-built pillboxes. The converted barn also came with its ready-made camouflage.



Fig. 14 - UORN 16905: blocked-up loophole in the wall of a barn. This is on a site marked 'pillbox' on the October 1940 defence map [see Fig. 6]. It guarded a roadblock.

2.2 Landscape:

The landscape of the defence area has altered little in the past sixty years. Ruckinge and Bilsington remain compact villages with few developments, and the countryside around them is largely pastureland for cattle and sheep, as it was in 1940. To the west, however, the settlement of Hamstreet has developed considerably with much new housing.

A designated public footpath runs along the Royal Military Canal, in the Bilsington area on the north bank, but crossing to the south bank west of Ruckinge bridge. For visitors with cars, it is best to park in the villages as there is no space for parking at Bilsington bridge and only a small pull-off point at Ruckinge bridge.

2.3 Statement of Significance:

The principal significance of the defence area is the fact that it lies at the central point of the German invasion had it been launched under the plans for Operation Sea Lion. The landscape thus has a particular importance in the consideration of the anti-invasion defences that were erected here in 1940-1941. As very good documentation survives, including a detailed map of an infantry battalion deployed in defensive positions, it is possible to understand how the early fixed linear defences of the Royal Military Canal stop line were later adapted and extended for the purposes of a more mobile, all-round defence in depth by infantry and artillery units of the Field Army.



The three surviving pillboxes in the area are important reminders of the strategic significance of this landscape in 1940, and retain a particular symbolism of Britain's defiance at this time. The thinly-spread and insubstantial nature of the hardened and earthwork defence works, even allowing for the many components that have long since been removed, also serve to indicate how scarce were resources in terms of weapons and materials at such a key point in the critical invasion danger months of June-September 1940.

It is considered that the pillboxes should be consolidated, and repairs made to the displaced entry porches or blast walls, in order to prevent further damage. Pillbox, UORN 8224, also requires consolidation of its base and repairs to its cracked walls.

Public information on the anti-invasion defences of the Royal Military Canal might be provided by means of an information board.

3. **Recommendations:**

1. That the surviving anti-invasion defence works in the Bilsington - Ruckinge area of the Royal Military Canal be considered of national importance. They enable the defence of this key area in the German invasion plans 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 pillboxes, UORNs 1759, 8223, and 8224, be consolidated and repaired to prevent further damage.
3. That consideration be given, possibly in an initiative with Kent County Council and the local authority, to providing an information board on the anti-invasion defences of the area. A possible site for such a board would be on the bank of the Royal Military Canal at one of the surviving pillboxes.

3. **Supporting material.**

4.1 **Photographs:**

Figs. 1, 3-5, and 10-14 - taken (AWF) during field survey, 12.2.2004.

Fig. 8 - 26F/UK1448 fr.23 (12.7.1940) - NMR.

Fig. 9 - 'Taktisches Luftbildbuch', p46 (?August 1940) - IWM, uncatalogued.

4.2 **Documentary Sources:**

4th Bn. Royal West Kent Regiment War Diary, 1940 - TNA: PRO WO 166/4639.

6th Bn. The Border Regiment War Diary, 1940 - TNA: PRO WO 166/4156.

5th Bn. Somerset Light Infantry War Diary, 1940 - TNA: PRO WO 166/4656.

6th Bn. Somerset Light Infantry War Diary, 1940 - TNA: PRO WO 166/4657.

135th Infantry Brigade War Diary, 1940 - TNA: PRO WO 166/990.

198th Infantry Brigade War Diary, 1940 - TNA: PRO WO 166/1051/1.

1 (London) Division 'G' Branch War Diary, 1940 - TNA: PRO WO 166/710.



Stellungskarte Grossbritannien: 1:25,000 (Sheet 1/73), 8.8.1940 - BLML Y148.

'List of Nodal Points in Eastern Command', September 1940 (from General Headquarters Papers, Home Forces) - TNA: PRO WO 199/544.

'Taktisches Luftbildbuch', 23.10.40 (IWM, uncatalogued).

'Defence Scheme', 31.10.1940 (from 1st Bn. Royal Ulster Rifles War Diary, 1940 - TNA: PRO WO 166/4606.

Südostküste England - Schrägbildreihe II: Dungeness - Dover, 20.11.1940 - RAF Museum, Hendon AC 95/130/1.

'Operation Instruction No.2', 12.12.1940 (from 14th Bn. Durham Light Infantry War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/4228.

5th Bn. Royal West Kent Regiment War Diary, 1941 - TNA: PRO WO 166/4640 [extracted map, MFQ 1330].

2/6th Bn. Queen's Royal West Surrey Regiment War Diary, 1941 - TNA: PRO WO 166/4500.

169th Infantry Brigade War Diary, 1941 - TNA: PRO WO 166/1044.

56 (London) Division 'G' Branch War Diary, 1941 - TNA: PRO WO 166/712.

'Operation Instruction No.1', 27.1.1941 (from 1/6th Bn. Queen's Royal Regiment War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/4498.

'Operation Instruction No.20', 18.2.1941 (from 6th Bn. Cheshire Regiment War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/4195.

Befestigungskarte Grossbritannien: 1:50,000 (Sheet 126), 1.6.1941 - BLML 1305(13).

'Plan to Defeat Invasion', 26.6.1941 (from 2/5th Queen's Regiment War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/4496.

'Operation Order No.4', 26.8.1941 (from 1st Bn. London Scottish War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/4440.

4.3 **Published Source:**

Andrew Saunders & Victor Smith, *Kent's Defence Heritage: Gazetteer Part Two*, KD 78 'Royal Military Canal' (Report for Kent County Council, December 2001).

4.4 **Aerial Photographs:**

26F/UK1448 fr.23 (12.7.1940) - NMR.
 26F/UK1448 fr.2238 (12.7.1940) - NMR.
 US/34GR/LOC14 fr.5 (11.5.1944) - NMR.
 58/2778 fr.134 (1.5.1959) - NMR.

4.4 **Ordnance Survey 1: 2500 Plans:**

TR 0233-0333 (1976) - BLML.
 TR 0434-0534 (1975) - BLML.

4.5 **Defence of Britain Project Database:**

[see 5. 'Annex'].

