

Chapter 10

SURREY'S DEFENCES

Remains of defence works can be seen in Surrey, from prehistoric hill forts, through the castles still to be found in several towns, to the mobilisation centres of the 1890s and the camps, pillboxes, buffer depots and airfields of the twentieth century.

The London Mobilisation Centres

These were part of a line of defence to the south and east of London which was planned in response to public fear of invasion but was never completed. These may often be seen on Ordnance Survey maps marked as 'old fort' or 'fort dismantled' but they were not forts and are not all dismantled.

Although most European capital cities already had their ring of defensive forts around them, London did not see the need for this as it had always been assumed that the Royal Navy could adequately protect our shores. However, during the 1880s doubts began to be expressed about their ability to do this and Colonel (later General) Edward Hamley MP prepared a plan to defend the capital which was put before Parliament in 1889.

The scheme was for an entrenched line 72 miles long to have been dug by the London Volunteers once a warning was received. In preparation for this the government arranged for a series of storehouses, known as 'mobilisation centres', along the route of the line, to be built, and it is these which became known as forts. They may often be identified by street names such as Fort Road. These buildings were used as stores for tools and materials for digging the entrenchments as well as for storing munitions to be used by the troops who would man the defences. They were really magazines which had some potential for defensive use.

South of the Thames mobilisation centres were built from Guildford to Farningham, and north of the river from the estuary round to North Weald. It was felt that the way to London along the Thames was adequately guarded by permanent forts which had been built about 20 years earlier. There were nine 'forts' in Surrey, built between 1893 and 1902, from Henley Grove in the west, Pewley Hill, Denbies, Box Hill, Betchworth, Reigate, Alderstead and Foster Down to a pair of artillery magazines at Woldingham, one of which has a house built upon it. They were usually positioned so as to have a view suitable for infantry or artillery positions in the event of an attack from the south.

[Page 126]

All the forts still exist except that at Denbies which was demolished in 1970. All the centres had brick-built caretakers' cottages and stores, most of which remain. The easiest installation to see is that at Box Hill where the cottage and store form the National Trust café and information centre while the fort itself, together with appropriate interpretation boards, may be seen behind these. Reigate Fort is now cared for by the National Trust and is open to the public.

By 1905 the scheme was abandoned and the centres were sold, often to the original owners of the land, and they are re-used as stores, youth centres or homes, or are derelict.

Twentieth Century Defences

The most numerous defensive features date from the twentieth century and these are also the most obvious.

Dating from the First World War there are systems of training trenches such as that at Old Park, Caterham, though many others probably await recognition for what they are. Anti-aircraft emplacements and camps, such as Woodcote Park near Epsom, are easily confused with their counterparts from the second global conflict which were often in the same locations. A large example of the latter type, the Canadian Forestry Corps camp, was to be found in Windsor Great Park, complete with a fully operational sawmill which produced wooden huts for other camps at home and overseas. On this site, too, aircraft were assembled and flown from Smith's Lawn.

Among civilian establishments requisitioned for war service was the National Rifle Association camp at Bisley. This also served during the Second World War, when many more temporary camps were set up, many under canvas, as the build-up of forces for D-Day got into full swing. Then even some of the county's roads, for example Mickleham by-pass, were used as temporary vehicle parks. Other sites to be found gently decaying include ammunition dumps such as those at Ranmore Common and Leith Hill. Among the more unusual wartime uses of civilian sites — of which little evidence is left — was the utilisation of Wanborough Manor House near Guildford as a Special Operations Executive (SOE) training base for agents who went to the continent to help European resistance movements.



Anti-tank gun emplacement, Moor Park, Farnham.

As the time for the invasion of 'Fortress Europe' approached, once again the county took on a largely Canadian flavour as Canadians made up the majority of the troops based in this part of southern England. One of the largest camps, called Tweedsmuir, was set up on Thursley Common in the west of the county; its outline is still clearly visible. Just down the road at Elstead, a tank regiment was based with its vehicles secreted under the many trees around the village. Part of the headquarters occupied a house by the village green which is still marked with loopholes in the garden wall.

[Page 127]

Loopholes are to be found throughout the county, too, in some 2,000 pillboxes which are still extant in the 1990s. These, in a wide variety of designs and variants, lie largely on the GHQ Line which passes west to east through the county following any available defensive line. A particularly fine example of their use is around Sidlow Bridge, south of Reigate, where some eleven pillboxes cover the river crossing in two rows, the first close in and the second further back in the edge of surrounding woodland. Where existing defence lines were not to be found, anti-tank ditches were dug which have largely become invisible through agricultural activity and development but are occasionally mistaken for archaeological evidence of

earlier crop marks. At points where defence lines crossed roads and byways, concrete road blocks are often to be seen, though other obstacles such as lengths of steel rail have virtually disappeared.

Most of these works were to have been manned by regular troops but the Home Guard would also have played a part and evidence of their activities can occasionally be found in such things as mountings for their spigot mortars, the Blacker Bombard. An example at Farncombe, Godalming, is used to support a fence post. Auxiliary units, though ostensibly part of the Home Guard, were the British Resistance, and a number of their hideouts still exist, though often partly demolished as in the case of one behind the Rural Life Centre at Tilford. Other pillboxes were erected in rings around strategic sites such as army garrisons, camps and airfields; examples protecting airfields are still to be found at Redhill and Fair Oaks.

[Page 128]

Also of strategic importance were the many operations rooms for the RAF and command bunkers for the government or military planners. The former were sometimes located in town centres, as in the empty butcher's shop in Godstone Road, Caterham, while the command bunker below Wentworth golf course at Virginia Water has been re-used for storage.

The Cold War of the 1950s and 1960s led to the building of buffer depots, like those at Betchworth, Redhill and Shalford, to store a regularly changed emergency food supply around the county from which rationed supplies were to have been issued following a nuclear attack. Numerous new bunkers were also built beneath the county for various purposes, from regional government centres to fallout-monitoring posts. Despite the warming of East West relations, many remain although decommissioned. Nevertheless their locations are not generally known and, save the Royal Observer Corps posts, such as that at Clandon, will provide opportunities for research by future generations.

Airfields

During both World Wars, Surrey played a significant role in the defence of the country. Although during both conflicts civil and personal flying were severely restricted, technical developments in aircraft, engines, radio and navigation aids were accelerated as a result of wartime investment.

In 1914 Brooklands was the premier flying training field in the country, with ten schools turning out more trained pilots than any other airfield. At the outbreak of war, Hugh Locke-King, the owner and creator of Brooklands, immediately offered the site to the government. The War Office took over on 5 August and the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) designated Brooklands as an Aircraft Acceptance Park to receive new aircraft for military purposes.

The RFC at the outbreak of war had only five squadrons, with 125 planes and 1,100 officers and men. Official government policy was that there was no conceivable role for the aeroplane in war, and initially it was used only for reconnaissance and spotting for the artillery. By 1918 however, Britain was producing 3,500 planes a month, many of them either built at Brooklands or manufactured locally and flown from there.

Number 8 Squadron RFC was formed at Brooklands in January 1915 and completed training there before flying its B.E.2C aircraft out to France in April. A .303 Lewis gun was mounted in the nose cockpit of a Vickers Gunbus at Brooklands and is credited with shooting down its first German plane, a Taube mono-plane, over southern England on Christmas Day, 1914.

In late 1915, to counter the Zeppelin raids on London, a number of defence airfields were established. Those in Surrey were at Beddington by Croydon, the neighbouring field at Waddon, at Hurst Park racecourse, on Wimbledon Common and at Kenley by Warlingham.

[Page 129]

Kenley remained in RAF service up to 1965 as a fighter station. In the Second World War it played a major part in the Battle of Britain, as did the civilian aerodrome at Croydon which was taken over by Fighter Command. Gatwick did not have an active role during the Battle of Britain but was itself bombed several times, though without damage or casualties. Number 29 Army Co-operation Squadron arrived in September 1940, the first of many based there for the remainder of the war. Squadrons, including a Canadian one flying Mustangs, played a major role in the build-up to the invasion of France in 1944.

Croydon became a fighter base with Hurricane squadrons and was attacked a number of times by the Luftwaffe. Thursday 15 August 1940 was 'Black Thursday' when, at 6.15 in the evening, the airfield was heavily bombed, as were Kenley and Biggin Hill. Hurricanes of 111 Squadron shot down several Dorniers but damage to the airfield, and particularly to the adjoining industrial estate, was heavy, and some hundred casualties were reported. The press next day referred to 'scarred but cheerful Croydon'.

Several emergency and dispersal airfields were set up, usually without a permanent runway or buildings, at Horne, Fair Oaks, Lingfield, Egham, and again at Hurst Park. In 1942 the Canadians constructed an airfield at Dunsfold, where Mustangs and Mitchells, including a squadron of the Royal Dutch Naval Air Service, flew many sorties before and after D-Day over the English Channel and into France, afterwards continuing to provide support for the Arnhem and other campaigns.