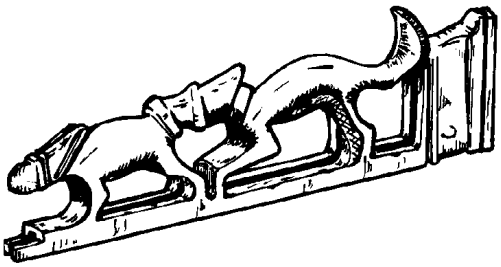
Ampthill & District Archaeological



& Local History Society

Mr. Fred Cowell's Memories of the Ampthill WW11 Defences

Recorded 11th September 1995

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Mr. Fred Cowell's Memories of Ampthill's Defences. - Recorded 11/09/95 Posted 7/11/18

A request made at a Society meeting in September 1995 for information on World War 2 defences in the Ampthill area, produced a very quick and remarkable result. One of our new members, Roy Cowell, arranged for Brian Lazelle, Peter Wood and Kevan Fadden to meet his father Fred, who was a General Foreman with the Bedfordshire County Council during the war. In this post Fred was actively involved in building defence works when they were on or near the highway. He readily agreed to allow us to tape the discussion we had at his home in Maulden.

The tapes range over many war time subjects in the county and the following is a digest of those which have a direct bearing on defence in the Ampthill area.

He was not involved in building the pill box on Hazelwood Lane Hill as it was not on the actual highway, but he did explain some of the techniques he devised when building pill boxes elsewhere in the county. The roof posed the main problem as it is difficult to pour concrete thirteen inches thick over such a large area. He overcame it by using the outer wall of bricks as an up-stand and lining this with corrugated iron. The base was formed on wooden boards closely shuttered and located centrally by an iron pin let in the Y shaped anti-ricochet wall inside the box. Reinforcement bars were placed above the boards before the concrete was poured.


Photo 1. Concrete socket for tank barrier in Dunstable Street.

Top secret at the time, Sherman tanks were assembled in the Stewarby brick works from CKD (Completely knocked down) units imported from the USA, they were road tested in the surrounding area before storage ready for D Day. Complaints were made that the roads and buildings of Ampthill were damaged as they rumbled through the town.
Fred was in charge of constructing a tank turning point at the entrance to the town beside the Bedford road to avoid the problem. This was a faux pas of the time; he was given the plans with all the dimensions in inches rather than feet. Despite Fred's protestations the Clerk of Works insisted that the pad was made to the sizes given. The pad can still be seen where it crosses the footpath, partly covered by the grass verge.
(The granite blocks show no sign of wear or scuff marks which is not surprising when a Sherman tank was 20 feet 7 inches long by 9 feet 10 inches wide and the pad is only approximately 30 feet by 16, hardly big enough for its purpose. It is not recorded what happened but one of our members remembered tanks on the Bedford road approaching the town).

Fred was also involved with making a facility for removable tank barriers across all four approaches to the town. The barriers were made from old railway lines which had a "V"

section cut out and then bent into the shape of "odd leg" hairpins. The two ends were dropped into holes in the road, the leg facing out of town being vertical while the other leg sloped back at an angle similar to a saw tooth. Two rows of the "iron teeth" made up the complete barrier. The rails were manufactured elsewhere and were delivered to the site. Fred's responsibility was to make the holes in the road, line them with concrete and provide cast iron covers which could be replaced when the barriers were not in use. (If the covers were not available a wooden plug was substituted). Fred developed a method of shuttering for the concrete boxes* which was used throughout the county. The rails were very heavy and it took three men to put one in place. The four sites he referred to were described and are plotted on the map. (The location of the tank trap in Dunstable Street was confirmed by the exposure of a concrete socket in the pavement which came to light when the cables for Cable-tel were installed in October 1995). See photograph 1. (No evidence can be seen to locate the exact positions of the others).

*Some of the wood used for the shuttering came from the many sign posts that were removed to confuse the expected invader. The authorities were concerned that location secrecy should be maintained so the mileage to London on the town pump was boarded up, the legend on the four sides are:- TO BEDFORD V111 MILES, TO WOBURN V11 MILES, TO LONDON XLV MILES and DUNSTABLE X11 MILES.

Fred had no recollection of the 29 mm spigot mortar emplacement in the garden opposite the Alameda (see Photo 2) but he remembered building, and the problems of demolishing, a similar emplacement on the other side of the road, immediately in front of the Alameda gates. He explained how the "thimble" of such an emplacement was constructed. He was supplied with what he described as a welded "parrot cage like" structure of steel, with a stainless steel spigot, or pin, on the top to mount the mortar. Once the cage was in position inside a barrel with the top and bottom removed, concrete was poured over it and allowed to set, the structure giving the necessary reinforcement.

At the end of the war Fred was asked to remove the Alameda gate emplacement as it impeded the thoroughfare. Most of the structure was below road level so his crew attempted to cut off the spigot with the intention of burying the rest and covering it over. The spigot defied all their efforts however so they resorted to smashing into the concrete thimble and cutting the reinforcements before removing the complete top of the cage.



Photo 2. A 29 mm Spigot Mortar emplacement in garden opposite the Alameda gates

His team built a similar spigot mortar emplacement near the town pump on the market square, he believes it is still under the ground. They also built a decontamination hut in Claridges Lane for use in the event of a mustard gas attack, one of a series of such huts and hard standings round the county. They were equipped to wash civilians, service personnel, their equipment and vehicles. There was one near Clophill cross roads, for instance, and another behind the Town Hall in Bedford.

He confirmed that a green board which would change colour if contaminated with mustard

gas was attached to the town pump. This was one of many dotted around the country.

Footnote
Fred's memories have been very helpful to the Society when researching local WW11 activities and formed the basis of this report. The recording gives an insight into life at that time and his contacts with local personalities and remains a valuable contribution to local history.

7/11/18