Ampthill & District Archaeological &

Local History Society



Ampthill Defences World War II

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Cover picture: The Observer Corps.
They did valuable work watching the skies from a bunker on Cooper's Hill.
Here they march through the centre of Ampthill to the funeral of Observer H. White on March 8th 1940.

Left hand row 1/ Harry King. 2/ Leslie Swaffield. 3/ ? 4/ Jim Ingle. 5/?
Right hand row 1/ Reg. Stearn. 2/ Jack Thompson. 3/ ? Frank Adams. 4/ John Wood. 5/ Frank Woodward 6/ ?
Special Constable Reg. Deller. Bystander Joe Middleton.

An archaeological survey of evidence for WWII activities in Ampthill Bedfordshire combined with historical and oral references where they could be obtained. Most of this work was carried out in the late 1990's.

World War II ended more than sixty years ago but it has left a lot of scars, even in a small town like Ampthill. Memories that had become dim were re-awakened by the recent celebrations marking the 50th anniversary, and many anecdotes and recollections were committed to history. This is to be welcomed as we all tend to forget that occurrences which are common place to us can be strange and of immense interest to future generations.

This Society has taken an archaeological look at Ampthill to see what scars there may be on the landscape and buildings in the area, still bearing silent witness to the activities of the population during those worrying years when an invasion was expected at any time. History tells us that the home defences were, by and large, left to the older generation of the time, too old to serve in the armed forces, and those too young for call up. In the critical year of 1940 they had little or no training and very few weapons, but were determined to protect their homes and families. Improvisation and response to War Office instructions were the orders of the day.

The centre of Ampthill is clustered round the cross roads from Bedford to Dunstable and Shefford to Woburn. The evidence found to date suggests that the main defences were concentrated on those roads except for the Royal Observer Corps post which was on the top of Cooper's Hill. This station was used to watch for enemy aircraft rather than active defence. In the event, as the invasion did not take place, the work of the Observer Corps probably made a bigger contribution to the war effort than anything else in this area. The information they collected helped to build a picture of enemy aircraft activity in East Anglia as a whole. Unfortunately the Observer post has been levelled and very little trace remains today but enough is visible to pin-point where it was.

Examples of desperate measures.

One of the more bizarre plans for defence can still be seen at the Wingfield Club in Church Street. Iron rings were let into the walls on each side of the road to facilitate stretching a wire across to catch enemy motor

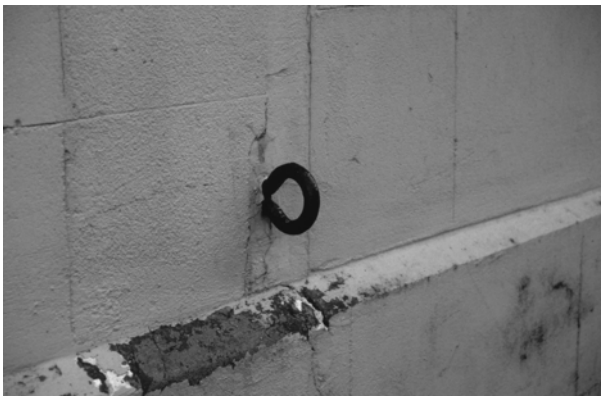


Photo 1. Iron ring set in the wall of the Wingfield Club 27 Church St.



Photo 2. Similar ring in wall on opposite side of the road.





Photo 3. Left. Ring in 48 Bedford Street.
Photo 4. Ring in Transformer wall opposite.



Photo 5. Ring in Woburn Street hidden behind wisteria at No 29.



cyclists at neck height. Similar rings can be found in Bedford Street, in the house wall at No 48 opposite one in the surrounding wall of an electrical transformer. No rings remain in Dunstable Street but a post war photograph shows one set in a wall since destroyed. There is no ring in the opposite house wall but substantial iron railings which survived the salvage campaign may have served the purpose. One Ring survives in Woburn Road hidden by wisteria at No. 29.

Photo 6. Post war photo of Dunstable Street a ring can be seen in the wall next to the telegraph pole. Note the white paint on the poles to assist visibility in the "Blackout".

LDV Instruction No. 8 1940.
Motorcyclists can be swiftly, effectively, and silently disposed of by stretching a wire across the road about 3 feet above the ground.

Pillbox on Bedford Road.



Photo 7. Pillbox with the remains of a trench leading to the road

Most people are aware of the pill box in the field at the top of Hazelwood Lane Hill on the Bedford Road. As this is a very solid construction and off the actual highway it has been allowed to remain, the only obvious damage since it was built caused by frost action. When measured for record purposes it was found to have been built to the specifications issued by Branch FW3 of the War Office Directorate of Fortifications and Works in June 1940, and was known as a type 22, the most common standard pillbox.

It is hexagonal in shape with walls 7 ft 6 ins long (2.30 m). A firing loop or embrasure on each of the five plain walls cover a wide arc of fire, while a small loop on the western face covers the entrance. The size of the openings suggest they were designed for rifle or light machine gun use. The door is in the western wall facing into the hillside, the least vulnerable in the event of attack. Inside, a "Y" shaped wall with the top of the "Y" facing the entrance was built to protect the troops from ricocheting bullets which may have entered the pill box. The remains of shelves under the loops, or at least the stain shadows of where they had been, can still be seen on the inside walls.

As a local innovation, which one would expect in the immediate area of the London Brick Company, the structure walls were built with LBC Phorpress bricks as opposed to the all concrete construction specified by the War Office. The top, was made of reinforced concrete; cast in position using an up-stand of bricks to form the outside, and "shuttered" underneath with planks. Impressions of the wood grain can be seen in the concrete. (There was no sign of corrugations as described by Fred Cowell when recorded by members of the Society, (see acknowledgements).

The position of the pillbox, in relation to the road is curious, for although it commanded the road from Bedford, the fire power was very limited. A potential enemy would have to be within a very short range before they came into view. It is set just below the ridge on the dip slope, or the town side of the hill, allowing no view into the valley.



Photo 8. One of our members Louise Buckle, locating the suggested look out point for the survey.

Associated Earthworks.

The earthworks around the pillbox proved to be of great interest and importance as they are extremely well preserved. A small, round, hollow on the scarp slope of the ridge some 81 metres to the north, photo 8, would, if contemporary, have given an excellent view into the valley and across the plain towards Bedford. We can reasonably assume therefore that this was a lookout point and if provided with a land line would have given fair warning to the defenders of an enemy advance. In retrospect it would seem the lookout point would have been a better site for the pillbox although it would have gone against the instructions given by the War Office who advised keeping such structures off the skyline.

The trench leading from the road to the entrance of the box is of such a depth that it allowed a soldier to walk with his head below the skyline.

On the opposite side of the road to the pillbox a slit trench was cut through the very high bank leading to a complex of trenches, currently protected by a spinney of trees which are undoubtedly less than fifty years old.

Map showing position of Pillbox and Trenches- Guarding Bedford Approach

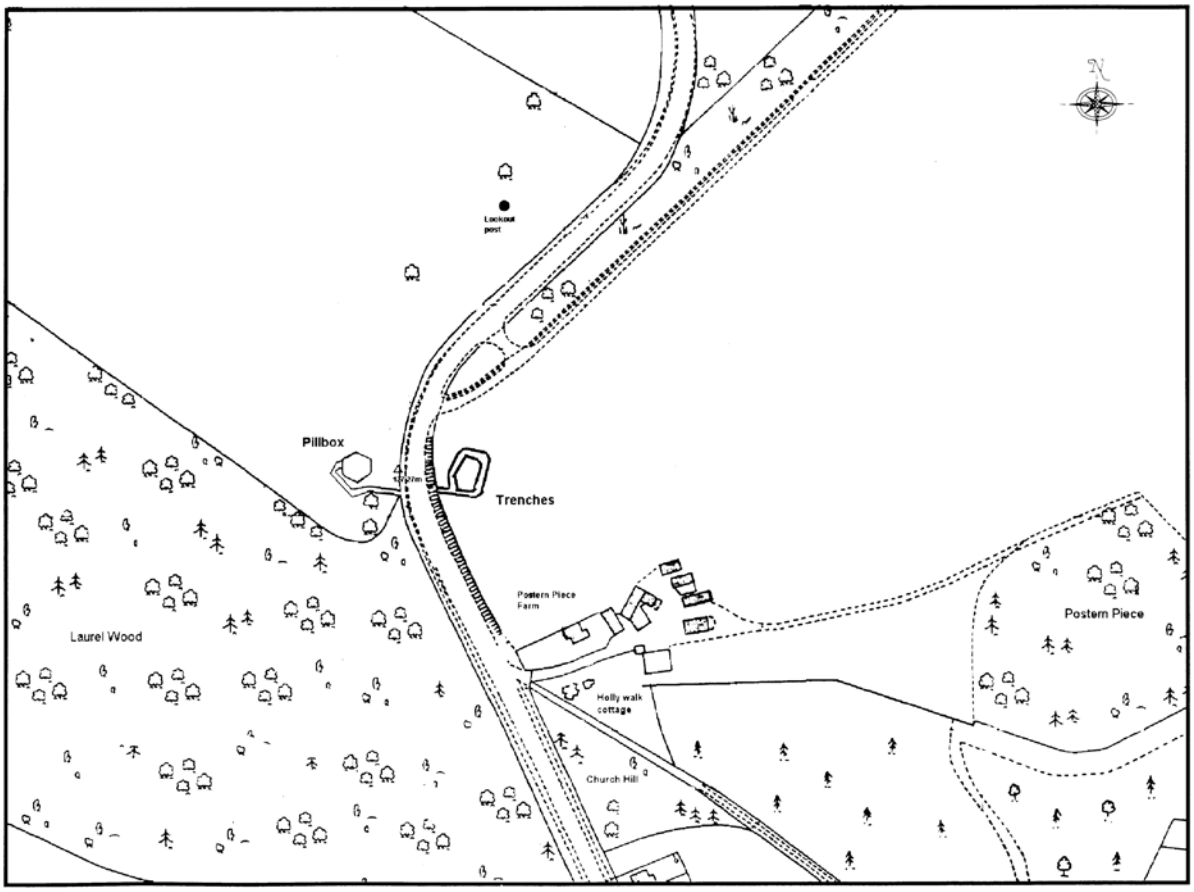




Photo 9. Trenches as they were in 2009. In addition to commanding the road into Ampthill they gave a view to the East across the surrounding fields.



Photo 10. View of pillbox from the trenches across the road.

(Confirmed by contemporary aerial photographs) The trenches overlook the road and adjoining fields to the East giving a better view than that afforded by the pillbox but it is still limited.

Tank turning pad.



Photo 11. View from town across tank pad.



Photo 12. View into town, turning pad part covered by verge.

On the western side of the Bedford road, closer to the town there is an area of small granite blocks set in concrete across the verge and footpath. The blocks were laid in 1944 as a hard pad to facilitate turning Sherman tanks when on test runs from the nearby Stewartby brickworks. The tanks were shipped over from the USA in completely knocked down form (CKD) and then assembled and stored in the brick kilns before being sent to France. The tanks were stopped from entering the town as they had been causing considerable damage to the roads and buildings. The turning pad was constructed by



Photo 13. A Sherman tank similar to those assembled at Stewartby landing on the Normandy beach.

County Council workmen under the supervision of Mr. Fred Cowell who allowed us to record his WW11 Memories in September 1995, he believed it to be a mistake, the measurements given were in inches rather than feet, the Clerk of works insisted they should be adhered to which meant the pad was not large enough to be effective.

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 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.

Bombard or 29 mm Spigot Mortar.



Photo 14. Complete emplacement now buried under a rockery at 41 Woburn Road.

On the approach road to the town from Woburn, under a rockery in a cottage garden opposite the Alameda, there is a 29 mm Spigot Mortar emplacement, complete with the concrete "thimble". The "thimble" is a barrel shaped block of concrete with a stainless steel spigot sticking out of the top, on which the mortar pivoted, just above ground level. The whole thing was set in a brick surround approximately 4 ft (1.22 m) deep with two spaces for ammunition lockers. The photograph shows the emplacement as it was in the 1960's when it was exposed before the rockery was built. The "thimble" appears to have been formed in a forty five gallon barrel with the top and bottom cut out with, no doubt, what Fred Cowell described as a "parrot cage shaped"* reinforcement in the middle. (Using a barrel was standard practice in other parts of the country, but not by Fred Cowell). According to Fred a similar emplacement was built on the other side of the road by the Alameda gates. As it was obstructing the highway it was destroyed by the County Council soon after the war and it was his job to supervise its destruction. He recalled the stainless steel spigot was too tough to cut so they broke into the concrete thimble and cut through the reinforcements. They then buried the rest under the road.



Photo 15. The "Parrot cage" reinforcement in a Potton garden.

A "parrot cage" reinforcement has turned up in Potton and is now used as a garden ornament. The spigot and rotation plate is clearly shown. When this was buried in concrete it obviously formed a very ridged mortar platform .



Photo 16. Reinforcement bars set in concrete on the Market Square.

Members of the Society remembered an emplacement on the Ampthill Market Square. When the Square was given a "facelift"in May 2000 a watch was kept to see if it re emerged. Just in time a workman was seen struggling with a pneumatic drill trying to break out a concrete block he had found beneath the surface. Permission was immediately sought to carry out an emergency "excavation". The Society was permitted, with the full co-operation of the Company J Crowley (Maidstone) Ltd., to clean up the area after their work had finished for the day. Exactly as described by Fred when destroying the Alameda gates' emplacement, the top of the thimble had been broken into and the twelve reinforcement bars cut through to remove the spigot. Some of the surround wall still existed and was of a similar layout to the emplacement by the Woburn



Photo 17. Ampthill Market Square after the restyling. A comparison with Photo 16. shows exactly where the spigot mortar "thimble" was located, almost in line with the edge of the pedestrian crossing.

Road. The exact position has been recorded, it was very close to the animal drinking trough, removed from the square in the 1960's. It is clear that the mortar could only have been effective when commanding Church Hill, guarding the approach from Maulden. Extreme accuracy would have been necessary to avoid major damage to houses in Church Street. (Not an attribute normally associated with such weapons).

We have verbal evidence of a fourth emplacement in the garden of the late Randolf Underwood at 41 Bedford Street.

The four emplacements tally with the reported number of spigot mortars allocated to the Ampthill Home Guard. See *Development of "A" Coy 3rd Battalion Home Guard Platoon 1. Ampthill.*

Removable Barriers .



Photo 18. Concrete socket under pavement in Dunstable St.

A number of members remembered "steel barriers" lying on the roadside at the top of Hazelwood Lane Hill (Near the trenches mentioned above) and on the Maulden Road. These were described by Fred Cowell as being made from old railway lines partly cut through 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 "teeth" were manufactured elsewhere and were delivered to the site. The rails were heavy and it took three men to lift one into position. Fred supervised making the concrete sockets in the road with cast iron covers* which could be lifted as required. The timber used for shuttering the concrete was in some cases from road signs which had been removed to confuse the enemy. Good timber was in short supply.

He said the removable barriers were situated on the four main roads into the town and their approximate positions are marked on the map below. The site in Dunstable Street had already been confirmed by observing the trenches made in October 1995 when Cabletel installed their television cables. A substantial concrete socket under the pavement forced them to deviate the line.

* In some areas blocks of wood served to fill the sockets.

Guard Points

Apart from the trenches and pillbox, guard points have left no traces but a number of members mentioned the railway tunnel's north entrance as a regular lookout point. Subsequent information suggested they were manned by the Barton Home Guard.

Decontamination Centre.



Photo 19. Aerial photograph taken 1951 of Claridges Lane showing decontamination and Nissen Hut.

Fred told us about a decontamination centre which he erected in Claridges Lane, the site has since been built over but an aerial photo taken in 1951 clearly shows the building. Typically the buildings were blast and gas proofed and contained a water tank, a boiler, an undressing area, eye douche and showers. An example of a decontamination centre is shown in Fig 1. A closer study of the photograph reveals a Nissen hut shaped feature which may have been an air-raid shelter. On the other side of the lane the Civil Service headquarters can be seen, now a private house. We have no details but such buildings were either purpose built or, if existing, modified to deal with mustard gas contamination.



Photo 20. War Weapons Funding Week 1941, directions covered by boards.



Photo 21. A similar view in 2018 less the boards.

He also mentioned a similar centre near the Clophill A6 crossroads and another behind Bedford Town Hall.

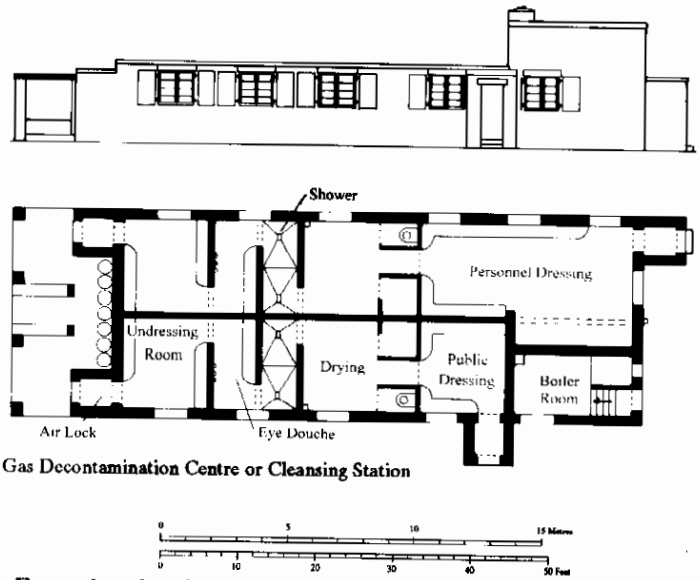


Fig 1. *Examples of surface shelters; warden's hut; gas decontamination building*

In addition to removing signposts to avoid helping the enemy more permanent markers were covered or obliterated. The directions on the town pump:- TO BEDFORD V111 MILES, TO WOBURN V11 MILES, TO LONDON XLV MILES and DUNSTABLE X11 MILES were boarded up see Photo 20.



Photo 22. Aerial photograph taken by the RAF in 1947.

Ammunition Storage.

As was the case in many parts of the country, Ampthill, and the surrounding villages were in effect major storage areas for ammunition. The woods were full of Nissen huts packed with mysterious green boxes with yellow writing painted on the outside. The huts were made of corrugated iron painted black in the shape of a tunnel with the ends covered with fabric to keep out the weather. Any road where the grass verge was wide enough was utilised for storage, even on the edge of town. A good example is shown on the above photo taken in 1947 just before the huts were dismantled. At the bottom of the picture seven black squares can be seen. This is surprising to us as they were within yards of the cluster of huts inside the park where German prisoners of war were billeted. Any question that the contents of the huts were benign can be dispelled by reference to an explosion caused by a motorcycle which ran off the same road and into a Nissen hut just over the parish boarder in Millbrook on July 9th 1946. The motorcyclist did not survive. In recent years the author has been shown the end cap from a 40 mm shell case found on what is now a golf course near the location.

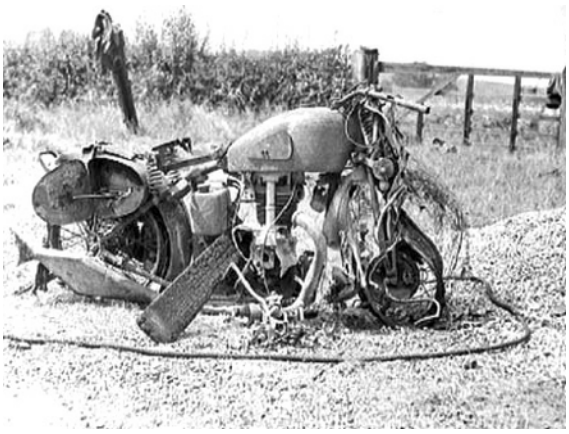


Photo 23. Left. The remains of the motorcycle after the explosion.

Photo 24. Right. Troops clearing up where the hut had been.



Careful study of aerial photographs taken on the same 1947 RAF survey in surrounding parishes show many huts or hut foundations on the roadside verges ready to be broken up . The foundations show up as white on the photographs.

In the local woods narrow gauge railway lines with heavy flat topped trucks were used to transport the boxes, the trucks proved an attraction to young children in the area who used them to "joy ride" when the soldiers were not about.

An example of a rail terminal and lorry loading area can still be seen in Chicksands wood near Shefford with an original nissen hut near by.

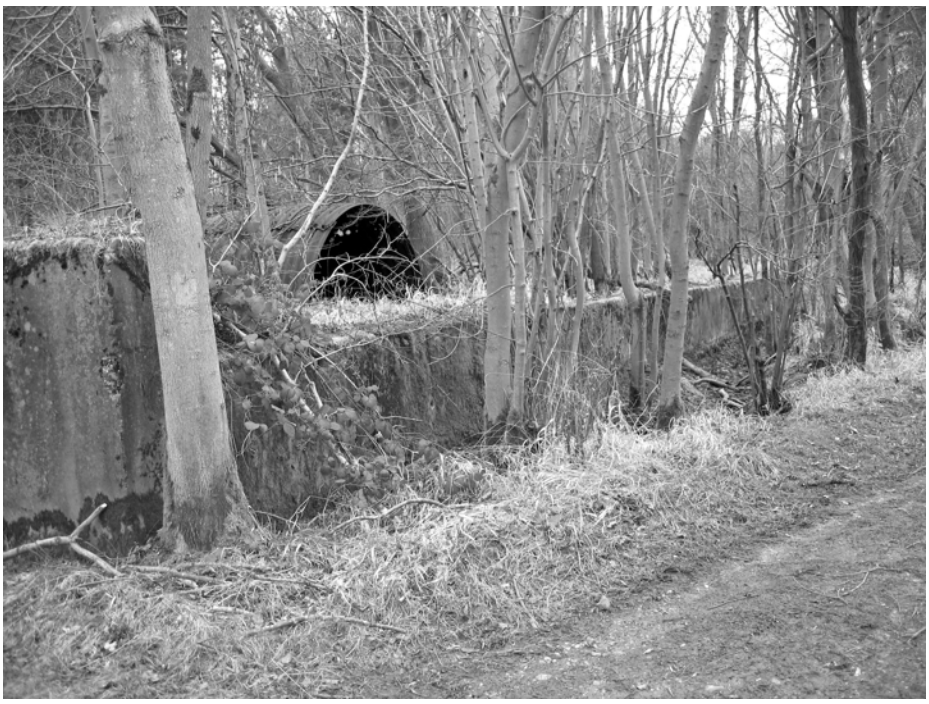


Photo 25. Concrete rail terminal and loading bay with nissen hut. April 2009.

The Royal Observer Corps.

As previously mentioned the Observer Corps played a big part in the defence of the country by their observation of enemy aircraft throughout the land. Reporting to a network of centres they helped a flagging airforce to protect our skies. Their contribution during the Battle of Britain earned the "Royal" title. Photo 26 gives some idea of the Ampthill scene. Top right shows the sand bags of an air raid shelter next to 110 Dunstable Street, the headquarters of the Civil Defence. The kerbstones were painted black & white to help vehicle drivers at night who had headlamps almost obliterated due to the "blackout". The Observers wore a near civilian uniform with berets and arm bands. The left marker, Reginald Stern was wearing battle ribbons from an earlier conflict.



Photo 26. The Observer Corps on funeral parade. 1940.



Photo 27. Site of the Corps post from the north 2010.

The observation post was on the highest point of Cooper's Hill known locally as "The Firs". The name coming from the fir trees that were cut down by the Canadian Foresters in WWI. (*See 126th Coy Canadian Forestry Corps).* The effectiveness of the position designated "Mike 2 Post" was demonstrated on 24 th February when Leading Observer E Woodland tracked a Mosquito XVV11HK 304 as it circled and crashed in Woodside field, Flitwick. His report was used at the ensuing enquiry .



Photo 28. Site of Royal Observer Corps Post 2010.

The aircraft, on a training run from No 51 O.T.U. Cranfield suffered spar failure killing the pilot Sgt. J. Bonnevit and navigator Sgt. J.W.G. Muncaster.

All that remains visible on the post's site at present is the concrete capping over the bunker that was constructed underground c. 1947 as a lookout site for nuclear attack during the cold war. The bunker was filled in by a local builder in 1993. The WW11 position was described by a local resident as a U shaped sandbagged enclosure, above ground, equipped with binoculars, a table, and a form of range finder to track aircraft.

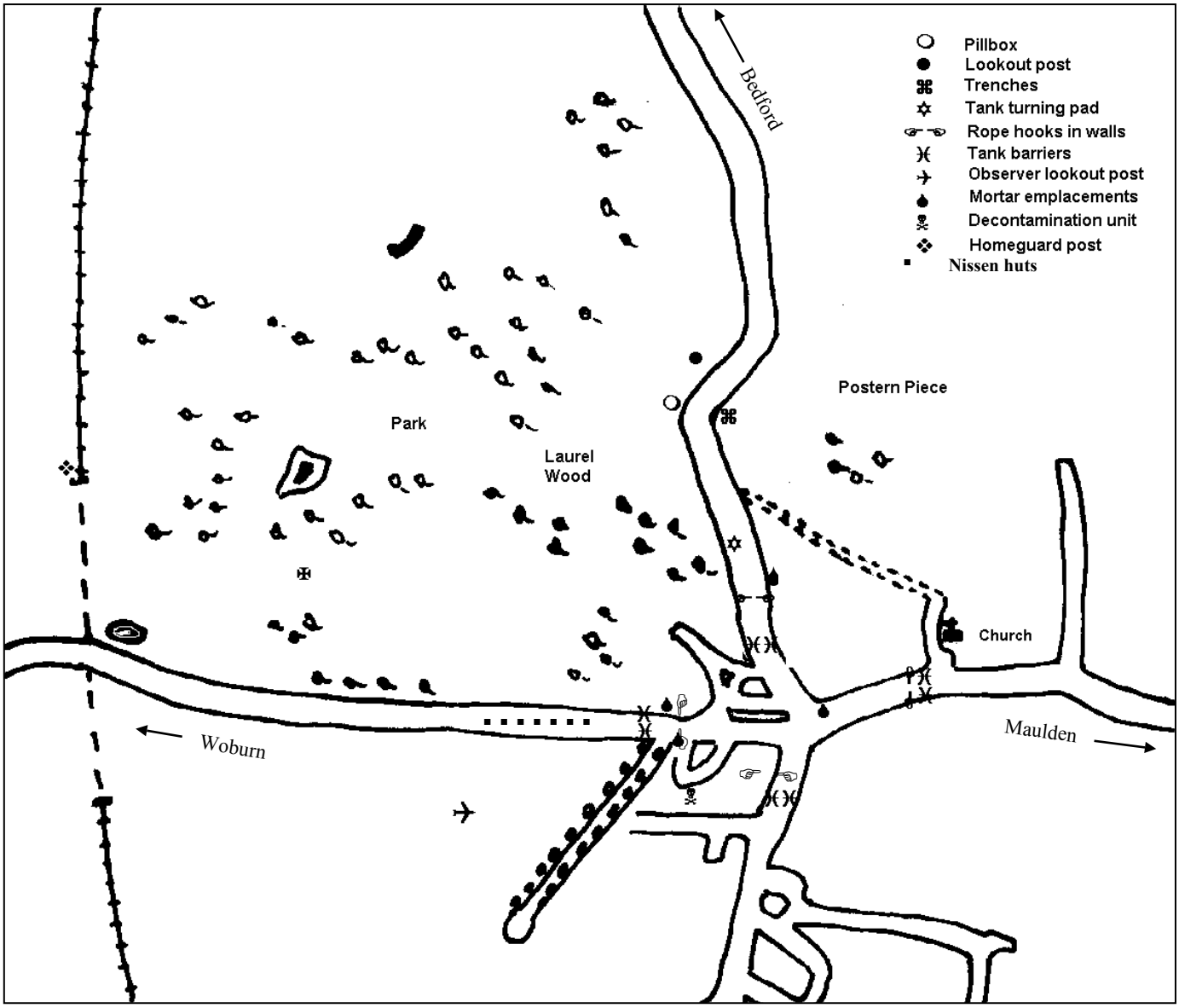


Fig 2. Sketch of defence positions taken from actual evidence on the ground or trusted sources.

Their only cover was a wooden hut nearby with two camp beds, very necessary as the site was manned twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. The ROC were stood down on the 12th May 1945 but were reformed in 1947 to man the underground bunkers.

Acknowledgements

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The Society Members who helped with their memories and contacts.

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Photographs

1-5, 7-12, 14, 16-18, 20, 21, 25, 27, 28 taken by the author.
13 Unknown.
6, 23, 24, 26 from the Bedfordshire Times archive.
16. from Beds CC, photographer Trevor Ball.
19. Britain from the Air EAW037765(1951) detail.
22. RAF archive.
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