

North Kent Woods and Downs National Nature Reserve

Heritage Characterisation Statement

January 2025

Theme 9: Military and Defence

Introduction

This heritage characterisation looks at the historic environment component of the NNR to support the key strategic aims of nature conservation and restoration.

NNRs will provide for high quality research and monitoring contributing to land-based and social environmental science, demonstrating innovation and best practice, and inspiring learning...NNRs provide places for people to connect with nature through access, responsible recreation, discovery and participation. (The Strategy for England's National Nature Reserves. Natural England 2022 V1.1))

MILITARY AND DEFENCE

By Victor Smith

(Location references are taken from Kent County Council's Heritage Environment Record (HER), viz [TQ 67 SE 71], or as six-figure Ordnance Survey national grid coordinates, where an HER entry does not exist, viz [TQ 669.689]. Use of 'the area' refers to that enclosed by the boundary of the proposed Reserve).

Introduction

Although the area of the intended Reserve is not of itself a defensive entity it was, however, the setting for a diversity of military and defence sites established across the landscape during the 20th century. Whether still existing or no longer extant, they were important elements of wider local, regional and national systems of defence. As such, they were designed and positioned variously against the threat of land attack in the event of invasion and bombing from the air. They were essential for the Defence of the Realm and to preserve our freedom. Knowledge of them enriches the history and heritage of the area and presents opportunities for further research and investigation, to advance our understanding of their purpose and place in the wider defensive and national context.

Before the 20th century

It has been suggested that the area might have been crossed by an east-west trackway in the Iron Age and earlier, close to or under what is now the A2, at the side of which evidence of pre-Roman settlement has been found. If such a route existed, it might have been used for the military advance west, whether during the Caesarian invasion of 54 BC, the Claudian one of AD 43, or both. Certainly, by the mid-later

40s AD a prepared road for military and commercial traffic had been built on about this line from the Kent coast to London and beyond. Two rectangular enclosures of postulated Roman date have been noted from aerial photographs in fields at Upper Ifield [TQ 67 SE 71] and, although the question has been raised of their having a possible military signature, there is no proof of this. Despite seemingly no longer maintained, the Roman road would have been a convenient route for elements of the Saxon advance west in the mid-5th century AD. Over time, its condition will have deteriorated to that of a track. Was this used for part of William's military movements to consolidate control after his invasion of England in 1066, or during the rebellions of Tyler in 1382 and Wyatt in 1544? This is, of course, speculation. In 1643, Cobham Hall was the setting for an incursion of Parliamentary troops who seized ammunition stored there.

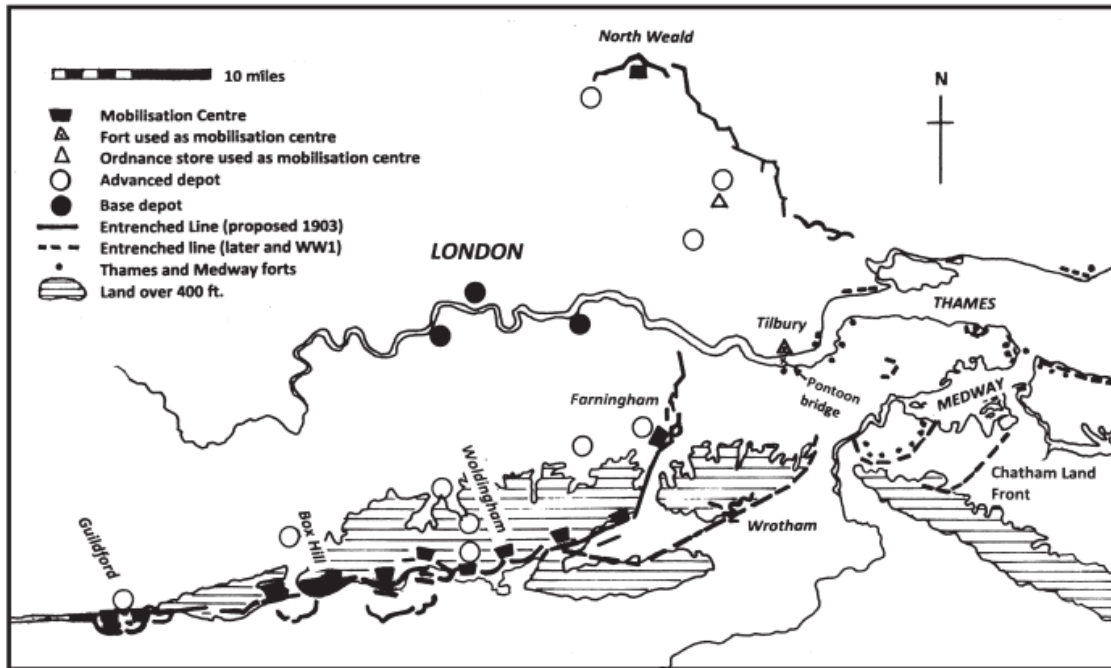
The area was well behind the lines of the post-medieval Thames and Medway riverine defences but figured briefly in 18th century documents reviewing the general terrain and a possible route for a potential invader and a defender. During the French and Napoleonic wars, a semaphore telegraph station was established just outside the area near Gad's Hill [c. TQ 715.709]. This was part of a regional and wider system of strategic military communication which utilised lengthy sight-lines determined by the landscape. Perhaps there are buried archaeological traces. In 1797 the Cobham Yeomanry Cavalry was raised by the Earl of Darnley. A yeomanry unit also appears to have been associated with Cobham later, in the 19th century, and at the start of the 20th. This subject needs research.

In 1896, the historian George M. Arnold reported that 'some years ago in a wood adjoining Battle Street [at Cobham] (such name being of no slight importance in connection with a warlike tradition), a number of bronze breastplates and other bronze implements of warfare were dug up...'. This evidence no longer exists, having been melted down for scrap. Were they from the grave of a warrior having local connections?

The Great War (1914-18)

Anti-invasion defence

The area assumed a new military importance during the Great War when it was judged that there was a serious risk of German invasion. In an elaboration of the contingency planning for the London Defence Scheme (1903), this led to the creation of an epic entrenched line around the southern and eastern approaches to the capital, with a 25-mile extension running east via Wrotham Hill (where there was a camp in 1916), and through the area along the crest of the commanding high ground of the North Downs to Upper Halling. That part of the line within the area was roughly from TQ 672.624 to TQ 698.654, resuming on the east of the Medway and continuing in an arc to Iwade. The area would have been the front line in the event of an enemy advance, when the defences would have been manned by thousands of troops, backed by the fire of artillery, with large mobile forces held in reserve, ready to mount a counterattack. Parts of this line have been detected by the use of LIDAR at the Vigo, Whitehorse Wood and Greatpark Wood. A small section has been examined archaeologically. There will be more to be discovered.



London defence scheme as set out in 1903, with Great War extension, based on TNA WO106/6188 (Victor Smith 2015).

Air defence

Even before the Great War, the revolutionary new technology of air power was seen as having the potential to circumvent the traditional land and sea defences of an island nation. This recognition proved transformative to Britain and was to lead to the evolution of gun defence from the ground, aircraft patrols and interceptors. It was also to leave a small defensive footprint in the area in the form of a battery for a single gun in fields just to the north of Cobham village [c. TQ 668.689] and another, with a searchlight, at Halling [c. TQ 696.647]. These were parts of what came to be the London Air Defence Area (LADA), a gigantic ring of guns, searchlights, fighter stations and balloon barrages around the capital, combining strategic use of the landscape with control of large areas of sky. From time to time there may have been further mobile guns and searchlights in the area. There were certainly other nearby gun and searchlight positions at Singlewell, Higham and beyond. Patrol aircraft and fighter interceptors crossed the area from stations outside it to defend against intruders, such as Zeppelin airships and aircraft flying to and from the bombing of London. Rudimentary civil defence existed in Britain, such as shelters, ground observers and air raid sirens but it is unknown whether these were provided in the area.

Interwar

Despite the refocussing of national defence for security against the French from the early 1920s, the massive new air defence system envisaged for this was hardly implemented, and had no effect on the area. In the meantime, during 1922, the Watling Street was re-established as an arterial motor route and, at once, became a

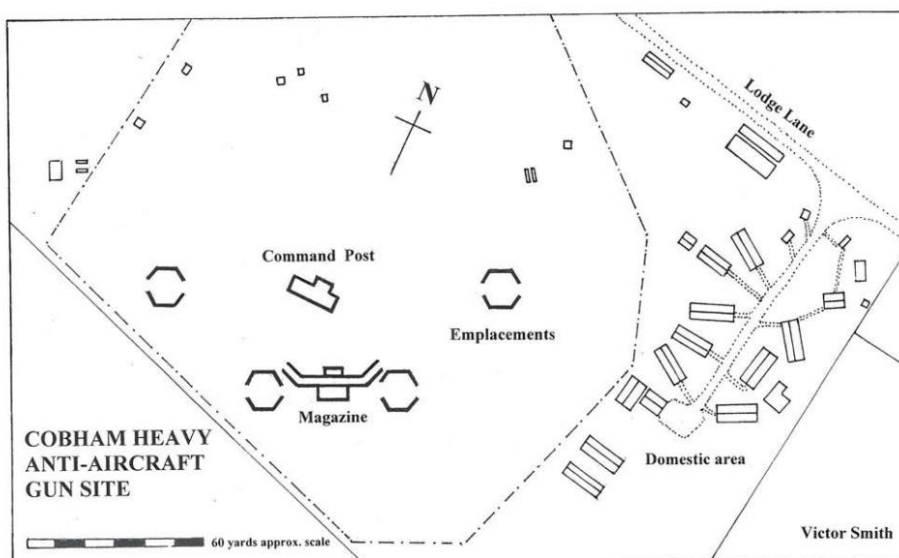
way to be used for military traffic in the event of war, just as were the pre-existing east-west railway through the area south of Cobham and that running north-south along the left bank of the Medway.

Countering France was replaced by the Reorientation Scheme of 1934/5 against a resurgent Germany. By 1937 this had come to embrace a start on planning and building an extensive scheme for a Thames and Medway Gun Defended Area (GDA), intended to close off a large area of sky against enemy air intruders. This was to be supplemented by searchlights. In the same year, as part of a wider scheme to observe enemy aircraft from the ground, a spotting post with a wide sky view was established at Cobham (site unclear). Civil protection had been modest during the Great War but large-scale destruction and mass casualties were anticipated in a future war. From 1935/6 this expectation led to the gradual evolution of comprehensive arrangements in Britain for air raid precautions and civil defence, in which the area was to be integrated.

The Second World War (1939-45)

Active air defence

The area did not figure in AA gun defence until 1939, when a (still extant) 4-gun site was built off Lodge Lane at Cobham [TQ 66 NE 59] on a plateau at the edge of a south-facing valley slope. Its heavy 4.5-in. guns, directed by state-of-the-art fire-control systems, were mounted in concrete emplacements. There was an adjacent accommodation camp, which has left a few traces. The battery scored some successes against enemy aircraft and remained in use until nearly the end of the war. Other heavy anti-aircraft batteries were not far away, but outside the area, at Northumberland Bottom, Denton and Dillywood Lane. There are passed down recollections of mobile anti-aircraft guns mounted on lorries having been based for a time in a wooded area on the eastern side of Woodlands Lane in Shorne.



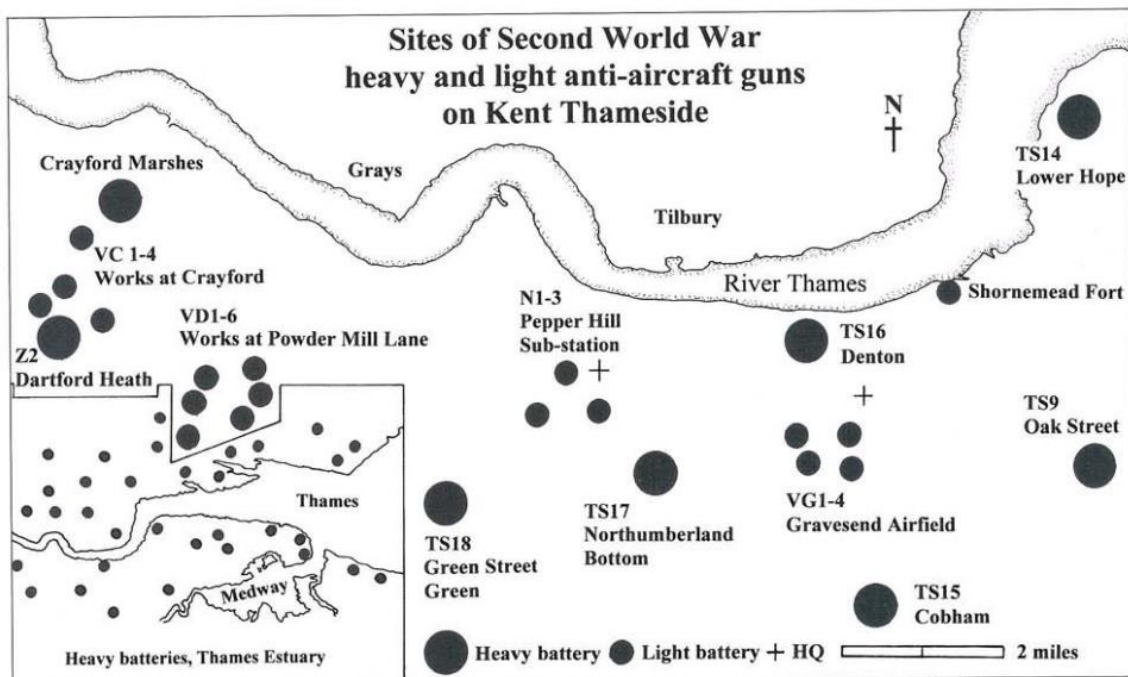
Simplified plan of the Second World War heavy anti-aircraft gun site at Lodge Lane, Cobham, showing a typical battery layout (Victor Smith 2009).

As in the Great War, the area was also crossed by elements of broader strategic belts of barrage balloons and searchlights, sites of the former having been identified at Luddesdown [TQ 66 NE 177/189] and Henley Street [TQ 66 NE 182] and searchlights at Luddesdown [TQ 66 NE 187], Cobham [site unclear] and Shorne [TQ 67 SE 1198]. These have left no apparent traces.

Mound on which was mounted a searchlight at Shorne (PUID 10135) V Smith



Almost certainly there are other such sites awaiting discovery. Supplementing strategic radar detection elsewhere, an earlier-started network of observer corps posts from which to spot and plot enemy aircraft was expanded. One of these probably included the one established at Cobham in 1937.



Map of fixed Second World War air defences on Kent Thameside. There may have been other temporary sites (Victor Smith 2009).

There was also a strong national network of fighter defence stations. The nearest, on flat ground overlooking the River Thames, was just outside the area to the north on either side of Thong Lane [centred on TQ 672.718]. This was a converted civil airfield, renamed RAF Gravesend. As part of an extensive general strategy for airfields, this had a decoy site intended to distract air attackers, at Luddesdown [TQ 688.662] and another outside the area at Cliffe [TQ 729.773], both still retaining their control bunkers. A close defence battery at the real airfield for 4 light anti-aircraft guns [TQ 67 SE 212/1203] was demolished in c. 1965 but may have left some underground traces. Within the area were five dispersed camps, intended to place living areas for the station personnel away from the risk of bombing of the airfield itself. They were officially designated by the War Office as Sites 1-5. These were partly concealed in light woodland in huts at Laughing Water on the north of the Watling Street; Site 2 [TQ 66 NE 75], with three others on the south side in Ashenbank Wood: Site 1 [TQ 66 NE 63]), Site 4 [TQ 66 NE 63], Site 5 [TQ 66 NE 63] and another, Site 3, a few hundred metres to the east [TQ 66 NE 194]. In varying degrees, overgrown hut bases and internal roads survive for all sites as well as 50-seater semi-underground air raid shelters at Sites 2 and 5.

Ashenbank Wood RAF air raid shelter entrances (PUID 10277) V Smith



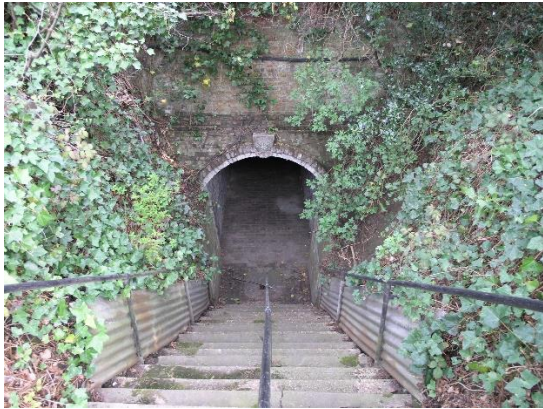
A local recollection is of there having been a timber mast for a war-related purpose in woodland at Shorne. No other details are currently known.

Passive air defence

There would have been air raid sirens to warn the population of approaching enemy aircraft, their sites within the area remaining to be identified. There were also air raid warden posts in the community from which to report to a control centre the effects of any bomb damage and to send out patrols for enforcement of blackout restrictions.

There was one such post under the Rochester Road at Gads Hill [TQ 77 SW 1041], with others remaining to be identified.

Tunnel used as a warden post at Gads Hill, Higham (PUID 10065) V Smith



There were First Aid Posts for treating air raid casualties, one being in the surviving Meadow Rooms at Cobham [TQ 66 NE 190]. For the dead there were war emergency mortuaries, one of which was next to the Rose and Crown public house at Shorne Village [TQ 67 SE 1172] but it no longer exists. Civil defence vehicles, including a fire appliance, were based at Owletts at Cobham [TQ 66 NE 183] and elsewhere. There is a possible former civil defence store at Halling [TQ 76 NW 712].

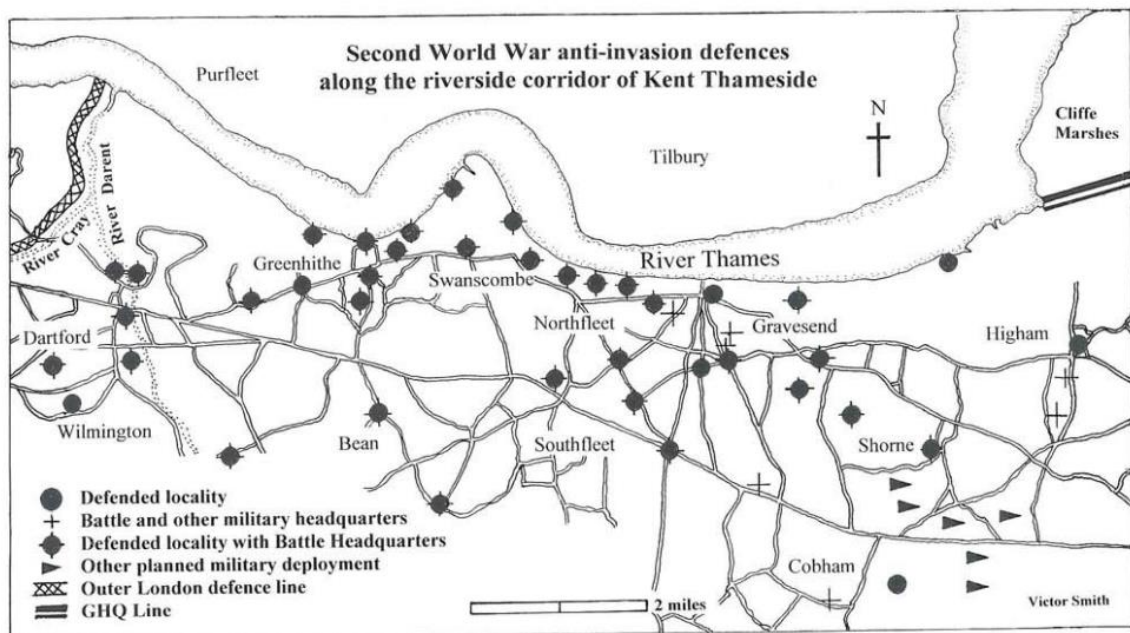
Meadow Rooms First Aid Post at Cobham (PUID 10068) V Smith



Although not assigned priority for the provision of air raid shelters in pre-war planning, the area was nevertheless rated in a map of April 1939 as having Category 'A' vulnerability to air attack. It was to gain a variety of shelters, including kits for prefabricated metal Morrisons and Andersons, which could be applied for, and others made by builders in rear gardens such as the one at Bunny Hill, Shorne [TQ 67 SE 1183] and at Walmer Avenue, Higham [TQ 77 SW 1053] as well as public ones, for example an adapted tunnel under Cuxton Road, Cuxton [TQ 76 NW 713]. The shelters at the dispersed accommodation camps for RAF Gravesend have been mentioned. For the gun detachments there were others annexed to emplacements at the Lodge Lane AA battery. Shelters were also provided for some schools, such as two surface ones at Cobham primary school [TQ 66 NE 73/74/75/76].

Anti-invasion defence

The existence of anti-invasion defences reflects that the area was a possible corridor for an enemy advance inland, whether from a landing in the Thames and Medway or elsewhere in Kent, especially if moving in the direction of London.



Documented anti-invasion defences in Kent Thameside during the Second World War. Subsidiary to these was a proliferation of other points of resistance (Victor Smith).

The area shared in the extensive national strategic GHQ stop line, gaining pillboxes along the left bank of the wide water barrier of the Medway. There is one surviving pillbox at Cuxton [TQ 76 NW 837] and a possible other at Halling [TQ 76 NW 919]. To the west, at Shorne, were designated places for the planned deployment of troops to meet an attack from the east. Road junctions at Shorne and Cobham, as well as at places along the Watling Street, were to be defended to hinder an enemy advance. Railway lines would also have been obstructed. Shorne was a defended nodal point [centred on TQ 692.710] and at Cobham a Vulnerable Point [TQ 66 NE 185]. A spigot mortar position has been found at Shorne [TQ 67 SE 214/1193] and

road obstruction buoys at Thong Lane [TQ 67 SE 388/1151]. Anti-landing obstacles against gliders and troop-carrying aircraft have been reported to have existed in Dene Valley [TQ 66 NE 181/192] The AA battery at Cobham could, if necessary, have lowered its guns to engage land targets. Defending forces would have been a combination of regular troops and the Home Guard. There was a divisional headquarters at Hansworth House at Sole Street [TQ 66 NE 193] and Home Guard Battle Headquarters at Shorne School [TQ 67 SE 1175] and in a hut at the Leather Bottle in Cobham [TQ 66 NE 198] (both having been demolished), with a possible related command post at Hartland House at Sole Street [TQ 66 NE 180]. The physical defences were to delay the enemy, allowing mobile forces to manoeuvre and mount a counterattack. There would have been a multiplicity of anti-invasion defences which await discovery.

Under invasion conditions designated places in Britain were to be controlled by 'Triumvirates' of civil, military and police representatives, working with their respective councils. Within the area these were to be established at Shorne and Halling.

D- Day camp

The area appears to have figured in the national scheme for camps to be used as holding places for troops destined for D-Day and one of these has been suggested to have been at Furzy Leas Wood, Shorne [TQ 67 SE 1181] where there are possible ground traces. Nearby is a possibly linked circular concrete base, likely to have been for a liquid storage tank [TQ 67 SE 250]. From passed down memories there was another small army camp off Woodlands Lane, Shorne, evacuated before D-Day [TQ 67 SE 362]. The camp was struck by a V1 in August 1944. The country around the camp is reputed to have been used for related infantry training. Air operations in support of D-Day were launched from RAF Gravesend.

Pre-Officer Cadet Training Unit (Pre-OCTU) camp, training ground and D-Day holding area.

Wrotham Camp, with five accommodation wings, was a nationally important training centre for potential officers. It was established in 1942 just to the west of the area and in a location which later became Vigo village. At its peak there might have been up to 10,000 placements, supported by hundreds of training staff. It's very extensive training spaces extended east along the crestline of the Downs, well into the area, which it entered at c. TQ 667.625, as well as in other directions to the north and south. It was contemporarily reported to have been the largest training facility of its kind in the world. Like the site at Shorne, mentioned above, from map evidence the camp and the area around it appear to have been embraced within the wider panoply of D-Day troop holding places, when its officer training function was suspended, to be resumed after the landings in Normandy. In the interim, it was arranged that mobile defence columns would be based there, in the event of a

German counter-attack on Britain, should D-Day have been a failure. The camp was closed for military purposes in 1946.

In post war years, this camp as well as the dispersed ones for RAF Gravesend and the domestic area for the Cobham heavy AA battery, were used as temporary accommodation for the homeless.

The Cold War (1948-1989/90)

In however modest a way, few places escaped the effects of the Cold War. The earlier observer corps post at Cobham was succeeded by a new post in 1953 [TQ 66 NE 186], a place from which to spot and report Russian strategic bombers. This lasted only until 1956 and was not replaced by an underground radiation monitoring station, as some others elsewhere in the country were. There was a civil defence detachment at Cobham, with designated (but unknown) premises. In the early 1980s, volunteer units were set up at Cobham, Sole Street, Luddesdown and elsewhere, to support local rural communities in the event of a nuclear attack. These units must also have had the use of designated premises which are yet to be identified.

Britain will be embraced within contingency plans in the event of a future war, but details are unknown.

Historical and heritage significance

Through its military and defensive diversity in the 20th century, the area represents very much broader national strategic purposes, planning and implementation. Use of the landscape and terrain was a crucial feature of defensive development. The Great War trenches along the crest of the Downs are an example of this. These were historically significant as a length of a massive nationally important system which has left comparable archaeological traces elsewhere along the line. From the Second World War were the dispersed accommodation camps for nearby RAF Gravesend, which utilised semi-concealing woodland. These may be compared with such airfield-related sites elsewhere, whether still existing or disappeared. Similarly, the Furzy Leas pre-D-Day troop camp and which has a relationship interest with other known sites in Southern England. There were also the vast training spaces radiating from the nationally important Wrotham Camp, a unique facility, taking advantage of both of woodland and cleared ground, of which parts are in the study area. The training area contained many opportunities for the use of landform for tactical training purposes. As mentioned earlier, this, as well as the Furzy Leas camp, had an episode of pre-D-Day use. The terrain of the area more generally influenced the siting of the many home defence positions which have yet to be fully identified and investigated. Landscape also determined the siting of the dummy airfield at Luddesdown. There were vast numbers of these across Britain, allowing contrast and comparison. As has been noted, the river Medway guided the placement of important anti-invasion defensive positions as elements of the National

GHQ Line of defence, with linked counterparts upstream and across the Hoo Peninsula. The Cobham heavy anti-aircraft battery, complete in its core essentials, is worthy of special mention as a survival of a steadily declining number of such sites, having both common elements and some variations. Despite some intrusion of housing and other development, and the covering of soil and vegetation, settings and spaces utilised for defence and military purposes across the terrain, including in woodland and along the bank of the Medway, remain as a reminder of a once existing large, militarised landscape.

Possibilities for further investigation

The significance and importance of known sites is indivisible from the high probability of archaeological and documentary discovery of many unknown ones. From earlier periods there may be a story to be told of various key episodes of pre-20th century British history, including a possible military role of the east-west route through the area on the line of the modern A2. There is considerable scope for enhancing our knowledge of the possible further utilisation of the landscape for the epic Great War defence line and for air defence, and, not least, for discovering the extent of the exploitation of the terrain for anti-invasion defence during the Second World War, whether of hills, slopes, valleys and the river line of the Medway, together with road junctions and railways. Depending upon location, defensive systems will have included trenches from which to fire rifles and machine-guns, grenade throwing pits, spigot mortar positions, road obstacles, pillboxes, defended houses and other buildings. Perhaps there were also fougasse sites. A large gap in knowledge, but one with potential for investigation, is that of civil defence. Results here would allow helpful comparison with the approaches adopted in other mainly rural areas. Although endowed with a varied range of known military and defensive sites, whether extant or disappeared, the probability of further discovery offers the prospect of the collection of transformative new anatomical and infrastructural information. This would, in consequence, allow the possibility of seeing defence, in and across the landscape much more expansively and fully, at the same time facilitating a better appreciation to be gained of relationships with measures of defence in the country around. Formation War Diaries, council minutes and memoranda, aerial photography, LIDAR, as well as passed down memories and other sources could be of particular value in the journey towards greater knowledge. The training areas of Wrotham Camp are likely to have left some hard traces as well as surface interventions, including roads and concrete and/or brick features, which are reported to have existed. The use of the area for pre-D-Day preparations and troop concentration has considerable scope for investigation. Mapping should be undertaken. Field investigation, survey and reporting of all categories of site should be the objective. For its evidential value, some selective archaeological excavation and/or clearance of surface organic accretion should be considered. Limited activity of this kind has been carried out in earlier years at the dispersed accommodation camps for RAF Gravesend at Laughing Water and Ashenbank Wood. Work should include completion of the already started survey of Cobham AA battery, where some excavation was also carried out.

Public access

Viewing the terrain today, whether from the air or from the ground, does not of itself allow us to imagine its importance as a defended landscape. That is why steps to achieve effective visualisation is key to public understanding, education and, hopefully enjoyment of the military and defence resource, whether of visible features or of those buried or disappeared, and how they fitted in to, and were part of, the wider strategic picture. This can be achieved by combining use of the various types of evidence in different ways to map and present this with suitable explanations, and to produce a graphic and textual appreciation of the defensive anatomy, its purpose, meaning and interest.

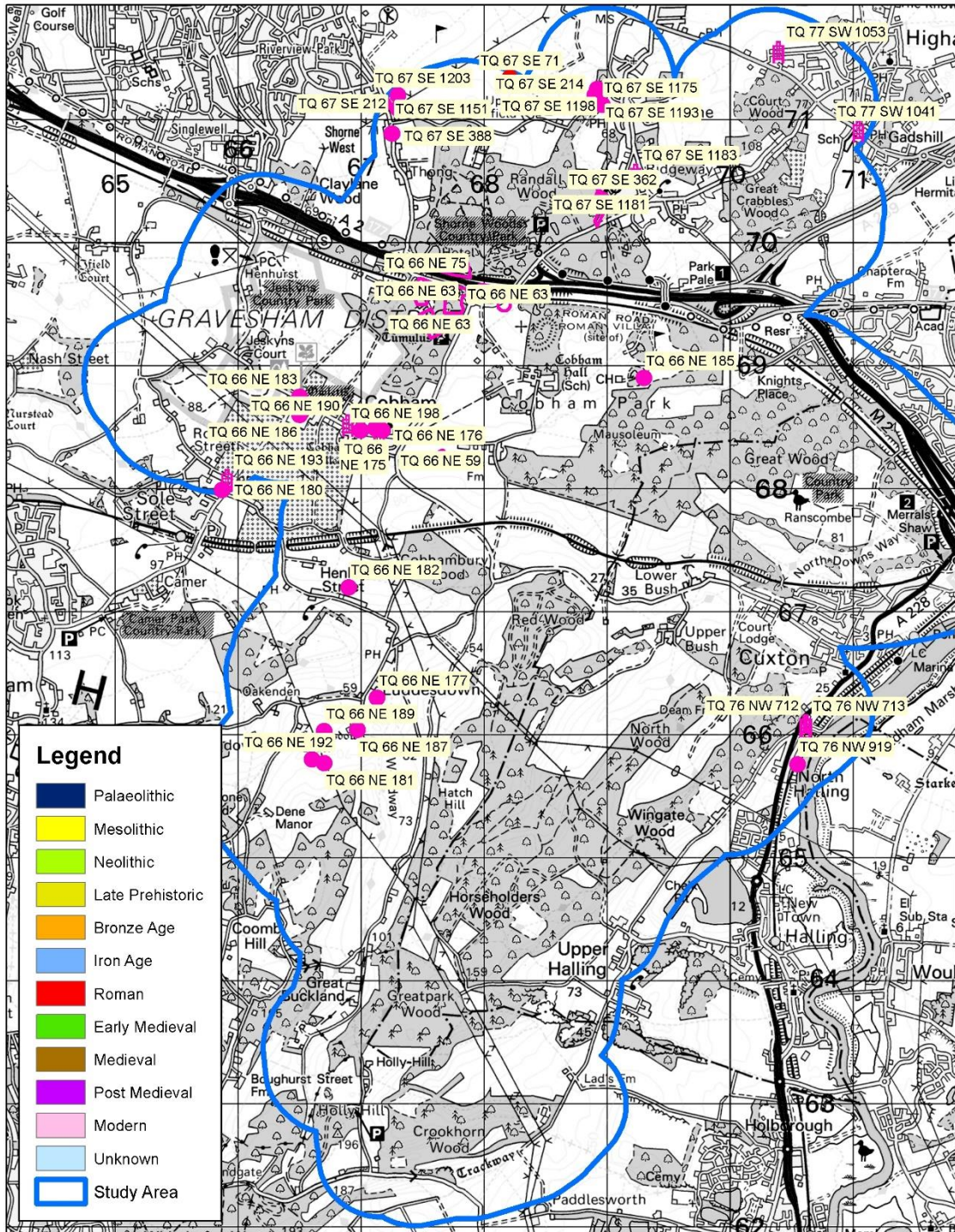
With landowner permission, defence trails might be considered. The dispersed accommodation camps for RAF Gravesend are, in part accessible along leafy and verdant footpaths, with some degree of existing information boarding which could merit revisiting. There is also existing footpath access to the area formerly occupied by part of the Second World War Wrotham Camp, although this is to the west of the study area. At the time of the writer's last visit, this was similarly provided with an information board. Negotiated access to a cleared part of the Cobham AA site might be looked into and highlighting the spigot mortar position in a public area at Shorne is suggested, as well as exploring the possibility of trail access to the control bunker for the dummy airfield at Luddesdown.

A practical approach for sites and places which can be seen and are to be promoted, might be to integrate defence within the broader package of heritage, fostering an awareness of its value and diversity. Alongside this could also be the production of a defence-specific illustrated explanatory leaflet and a presentation on the website of the intended reserve showing the location of each discovered site, many of which are now invisible to view.

Sources and acknowledgments

As requested in the commissioning of this preliminary review of the military and defensive past and assets of the study area, the account is based on the content of Kent County Council's on-line Heritage Environment Record (containing sources), as supplied to the writer. The HER map which accompanies this review lists only those sites on the HER at the start of the study. Additional sites are given as six-figure map references within the text. This has been reinforced by information in the writer's 'Twentieth Century Military and Civil Defences: Part 1 Thameside', Archaeologia Cantiana, CXXX (2010), 1-33 and (with Keith Gulvin), 'Part 2 – Medway' in Arch. Cant. CXXXI (2011), 159-95, both produced as part of Kent County Council's Defence of Kent Project. There is also information from the writer's unpublished archives, from Trevor Bent and, on the Second World War Wrotham Camp, from Paul Baylis as well as from the research of Chris Barrington Brown. The writer is grateful to have been invited to undertake this review.

Kent Historic Environment Record - Defence



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