

The Dragon's Teeth of Cripp's Corner - The Hidden Evidence of Britain's Anti-Invasion Defences of 1940

This corner of Southern England is rightly known for its strategic position in defending Britain's front line from invasion or attack from across the Channel. The visual evidence for this, that spans more than two thousand years, can be seen throughout East Sussex and the Romney Marsh; from the prehistoric hillfort on the Isle of Oxney to the Military Canal on Romney Marsh and its corresponding coastal line of Martello Towers. To the west lies the Roman shore fort of Anderida at Pevensey, Norman castles in Hastings and Lewes, and the later medieval castles at Bodiam and Herstmonceux. The presence of battlefield sites of national importance at Hastings (1066) and Lewes (1264) give silent testimony to the fierce conflicts fought close to our homes in centuries past.

But here at Cripp's Corner there is important evidence too of the most recent anti-invasion fortifications dating back to the Summer of 1940. Hidden amongst the hedgerows is the best-preserved example in Britain of an almost complete and undisturbed tactically important "Stop Line", hurriedly constructed after the disaster of Dunkirk to defend southern England from an expected German invasion.

Hitler's invasion plan, codenamed *Operation Seelöwe or Sealion*, was a grim reality in those darkest of days of World War Two, making the threat of invasion very real. Back in 1939 the Germans had identified Camber Sands, Winchelsea, Bexhill and Cuckmere Haven as the most suitable landing sites, should a seaborne invasion of Britain prove necessary. The plan was for up to one German Armoured Division to be landed on each of these suitable beaches, from which a bridgehead could be established inland and then the German armoured units would break out into open Sussex countryside. Had they been successful then it was up to the British Reserve Divisions and the Home Guard to stop them. But as we now know, the collapse of the British Expeditionary Force in the summer of 1940 and its evacuation from Dunkirk, had resulted in a massive loss of our military equipment. The most serious losses were in heavy machine guns, artillery, tanks and especially anti-tank guns, and it would take time to make good the losses. In the meantime, the Army and Home Guard would have to rely on improvised anti-tank weapons and obsolete rifles and artillery pieces.

So, between July and October 1940 hasty preparations were immediately put in hand for the country's defence against invasion by sea and air. Britain now knew of Germany's blitzkrieg tactics and could respond, albeit with very limited military assets. After Dunkirk and the capitulation of France the Germans controlled most of western Europe, so it was not known from which

direction the enemy might come or where he might land in the event of a seaborne invasion. General Ironside, Commander-in-Chief Home Forces, had to produce a scheme to defend many hundreds of miles of coastline (the 'coastal crust'), and to provide a substantial inland barrier (the GHQ Line), as well as mobile reserves behind the Line. In the event, the Germans would opt, in their planning for *Sea Lion*, for the shortest crossing route, and that was across the Channel to the East Sussex coast.

In that critical invasion danger period of the summer and autumn of 1940, 45th Division of XII Corps defended the East Sussex coast and its hinterland. The defensive plan of this Division, dated October 1940, shows Cripp's Corner to have been designated as a 'fortress' within the Rear Sector of 'B' Sub-Area, surrounded by a continuous anti-tank obstacle that was either natural or artificial. The long perimeter defences of Cripp's Corner were allocated to 'T' Company 22nd (Battle) Battalion, Sussex Home Guard. The Home Guard had been trained in unarmed combat and booby trap techniques, and in the event of a breach of our coastline, it was their job to delay the invading forces.

Cripp's Corner lay between two west-east Stop Lines: 45th Division's Stop Line to the south passing through Battle, and a XII Corp's Stop Line to the north following the River Rother. The evidence of this Corps Stop Line can still be seen in the network of pillboxes that follow the north bank of the Rother near Bodiam Castle.

The defensive plan required 45th Division to delay any German advance from the beachheads at tactically important physical features (and Cripps Corner was one of these) so that the RAF and our meager artillery resources could attack concentrations of German Armour. To do this they constructed a network of 750 anti-tank concrete blocks or 'Dragon's Teeth', which were placed in single lines to the north of Cripp's Corner, to the west at Swailes's Green, to the south adjacent to the Car Park at Sedlescombe Organic Vineyard, and to the north-east between the B2089 and B2165 roads.

In addition to the construction of the main anti-tank barrier, roadblocks were set up, pillboxes built, and various houses and other buildings placed in a state of defence. This massive construction programme was carried out by 205th Field Company Royal Engineers, with the assistance of several civilian contractors, between 20th August and 19th September 1940. The anti-tank blocks (when fully exposed) stand nearly seven feet high and are five feet square with chamfered sides to their tops, representing some 131,250-cu. ft. of poured concrete. The digging of the holes in which they were set must have been a massive undertaking, much of this probably done manually.

Cripp's Corner's hedgerows hide the finest surviving example in the country of a World War Two Stop Line with its concrete anti-tank perimeter defensive

line of Dragon's Teeth. Would it have been effective and for how long could it have held up a determined German Armoured advance? Seventy-six years later we can be thankful that they were never tested for real.



Just three of the 750 "Dragons Teeth" Tank Traps at Cripp's Corner today.

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References

Defence Areas: a national study of Second World War anti-invasion landscapes in England. William Foot, Council for British Archaeology, 2009
https://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/defended_cba_2005/downloads.cfm
<http://www.pillbox-study-group.org.uk/other-wwii-defensive-structures/anti-tank-obstacles/>

Neil Clephane Cameron has added some reference information:

The country's remaining 1940 defences were given Listed status some years ago, and the National Archives hold a good number of the records relating to their planning and placement.

For me to two best books on the subject are:

'Pilboxes', by Henry Wills, 1985, ISBN 0-436-57360-1

Although focusing primarily on the pilboxes themselves, Wills does refer to other structures such as dragons teeth. For example on p.44 he states: '*At Battle, Sussex, the day's scores by the Royal Air Force in the Battle of Britain were recorded on some obstacles.*' Unfortunately I have have been unable to find those inscriptions.

He also gives a series of maps covering the UK, and a gazetteer with grid references.

'Beaches, fields, streets, and hills', William Foot, 2006, ISBN 1-902771-53-2

This is the result of a UK-wide survey by English Heritage and the Council for British Archaeology. Whilst comprehensive in coverage, it is sadly not definitive (e.g. Battle is not covered). It deals with selected areas, setting them with clear, coloured maps and sets out their functions (tactical and strategical). The National Archives' document references are quoted for each area to facilitate own research.

The system at Cripps Corner gets coverage as a 'nodal point defence', pps 522-528 (including whether each component is extant or removed, again giving grid references).

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