

# DEFENCE AREA 14

## CUCKMERE HAVEN

### 1. **Area details:**

Cuckmere Haven is 2½ miles E of Seaford and 6 miles W of Eastbourne.

County: East Sussex.

Parishes: Seaford / Cuckmere Valley.

NGR: centre of area, TV 515978.

### 1.1 **Area Description:** [see Map 1].

The defence area consists of the Cuckmere Valley south of Exceat Bridge, which passes between high chalk downland to west and east and reaches the English Channel at Cuckmere Haven, a seafront of broad shingle banks backed by marshland and pasture. On the eastern side of Cuckmere Haven, the downland rises to form the famous Seven Sisters white cliffs. The Cuckmere River follows a winding course to the north, accompanied for part of the distance to Exceat Bridge by a canalised branch of the river on its western side. At Exceat is the visitor centre of the Seven Sisters Country Park, which manages the land to the east of the river, and on the south-west side of Exceat Bridge is the Golden Galleon public house. The land to the west of the river is owned by the National Trust.

The area is bordered by the shoreline to the south, by the downland heights to the west and east, and by the A259 Seaford - Eastbourne road passing through Exceat. The main focus of the area is the shoreline and the high land on either side, which provides a distinct viewshed within which the majority of the surviving defence works lie.



*Fig. 1 - The Cuckmere Valley looking north towards Exceat Bridge.*



## 2. Assessment.

### 2.1 Defences: [see Maps 2 and 3].

#### *Defence overview -*

From June 1940, work was put in hand to defend this area against the threat of German landings by sea and by air. Cuckmere Haven was a specific assault target under the plans for Operation Sea Lion, being one of the landing beaches of the 6th Division of the German 9th Army. For defence purposes, it fell within the Seaford Sub-Sector of 'C' Sub-Area defended by 45 Division, this division being replaced in 1941 by 55 Division.<sup>1</sup> The Cuckmere River marked a brigade boundary, with at first troops from the 136th Infantry Brigade on the west side of the river and from the 135th Infantry Brigade on the east.<sup>2</sup> By October 1940, the 135th Infantry Brigade had been replaced by the 219th Infantry Brigade, this brigade in turn being replaced by the 165th Infantry Brigade (part of 55 Division) in 1941. By March 1941, it was the 164th Infantry Brigade that was in place to the west of the river.<sup>3</sup>

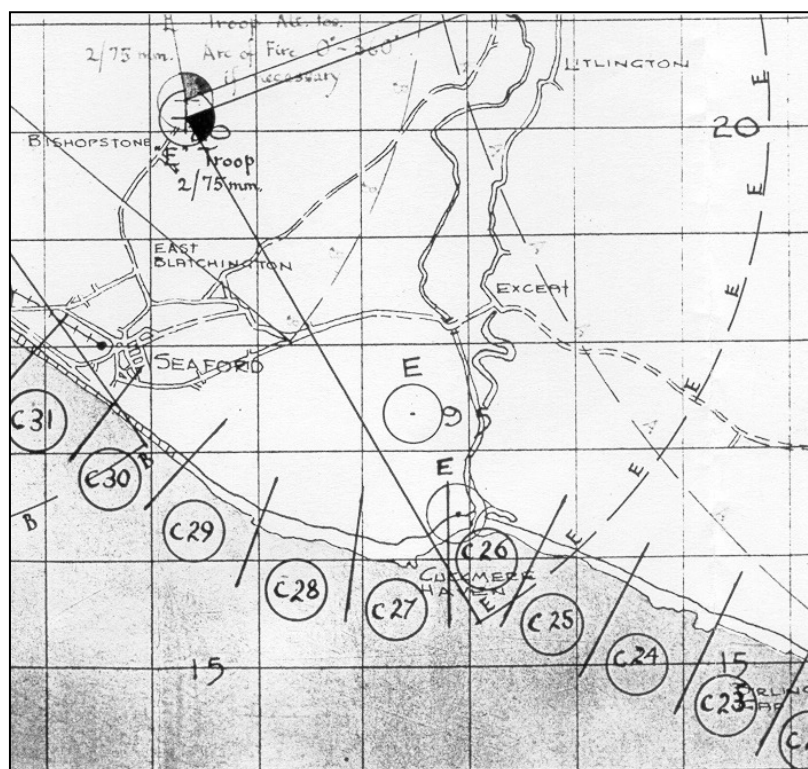


Fig. 2 - Portion of an October 1940 map showing Cuckmere Haven and its beach sector designation of 'C26'.<sup>4</sup>

The defence of the coastline at Cuckmere Haven was backed by a system of defence in depth which made use of a grid pattern of lettered defence lines or 'fences' that themselves joined up with Corps and Division stop lines running west-east across the Weald on the north side of the South Downs. One such line, WS-WT, followed the course of the river from Cuckmere Haven to Horsebridge, north-west of Hailsham. Nodal points supplemented this system

<sup>1</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/536.

<sup>2</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/990 and TNA: PRO WO 166/992.

<sup>3</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/1072; TNA: PRO WO 166/1038; and TNA: PRO WO 166/1037.

<sup>4</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/1072.



of area defence, sites being at Friston, Polegate, and Hailsham.<sup>5</sup> The Downs themselves were patrolled by a special unit known as Downsforce consisting of 120 riflemen with an anti-tank battery. Their particular concern was airborne landings on the downland between the Rivers Ouse and Cuckmere.<sup>6</sup>

In June 1940, two platoons of the 7th Bn. Devonshire Regiment were in position at Cuckmere Haven.<sup>7</sup> By October, the defence locality had grown to be one that was defended at company strength, and the 10th Bn. Royal Sussex Regiment were stationed here, probably on the east side of the river, with a platoon of the 6th Bn. Cheshire Regiment occupying the Coastguard Cottages to the west. These troops had two 7pdr. guns.<sup>8</sup> By March 1941, 'A' Company of the 9th Bn. The King's Regiment was positioned on the west side of Cuckmere Haven. This company, known as the Cuckmere Garrison, had medium machine guns, and were supported by two guns from an anti-tank battery of the Royal Artillery. A further company covered the exits to the Cuckmere Valley and its approaches from the north, manning positions to the west of Exceat Bridge and on Cradle Hill further north.<sup>9</sup> The east bank of the Cuckmere River was also continuously patrolled and a defended locality established at Exceat Bridge to guard this crossing of the river.<sup>10</sup> 'B' (Seaford) Company of the 16th (Lewes) Bn., Sussex Home Guard would also have had a role in manning these rear defences.<sup>11</sup>

Defence works were built at Cuckmere Haven from June 1940. In mid-July 1940, the War Diary of the 562 Field Company Royal Engineers records that unit siting pillboxes on the west side of the river.<sup>12</sup> By August 1940, a German air reconnaissance photograph shows an extensive concentration of defences.



*Fig. 3 - German reconnaissance photograph of Cuckmere Haven, August 1940.*

<sup>5</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/1072 and TNA: PRO WO 199/544.

<sup>6</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/4354.

<sup>7</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/992.

<sup>8</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/1072.

<sup>9</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/4354.

<sup>10</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/1038.

<sup>11</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/1072.

<sup>12</sup> TNA: PRO WO 166/3800.





Defences ran on either side of the valley for most of its length from Exceat, but were concentrated principally on the sea front. An anti-tank ditch was cut on the eastern side of the Cuckmere River to the foot of the cliffs. It was continued to the east bank of the river by a line of concrete anti-tank obstacles. On the west bank, there was a further anti-tank ditch, formed from a pre-existing waterway and fronted by massive concrete blocks and an anti-tank wall. To the east, a cluster of pillboxes was built at the foot of the steeply rising land. Extensive use was made of minefields, laid behind the beach but also extending inland for a considerable distance, particularly below the slopes of the downland to the east of the river.<sup>13</sup> The minefields and other groups of defences were ringed with barbed wire. From 1941, anti-tank scaffolding was placed in a continuous run along the beaches on both sides of the river. On the flanks of Cuckmere Haven, the high downland was extensively trenched against enemy aircraft landing. To the west lay the coastal batteries at Newhaven, from where the southern branch of the GHQ Line also began its route towards London



*Fig. 4 - Air photograph of Cuckmere Haven taken in 1947, showing the beach front and the eastern downland heights, with the Cuckmere River, accompanied by a complicated pattern of waterways to its west, flowing into the sea. The lines of the anti-tank ditches are very clear.*



*Fig. 5 - Portion of an RAF air photograph taken in February 1942 showing the line of anti-tank cubes [UORN 14830] running to the sea on the west side of the Cuckmere River. The coastguard cottages can be seen towards the right.*

<sup>13</sup> See map with TNA: PRO WO 166/4354.



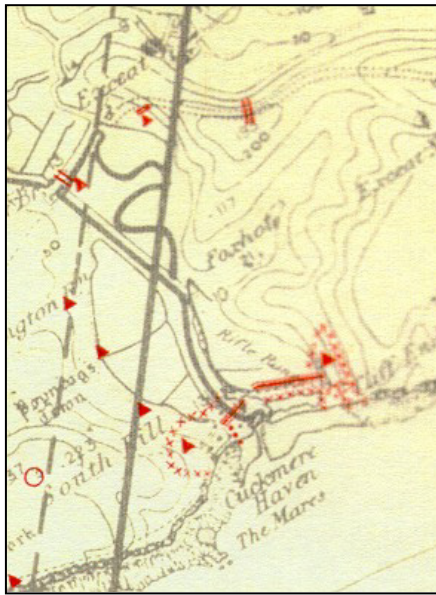


Fig. 6 - Portion of a German map dated November 1940 showing the defences at Cuckmere Haven. Pillboxes [triangles], barbed wire perimeters [small crosses], anti-tank blocks [small circles], as well as anti-tank ditches and roadblocks, are given.<sup>14</sup>

Good use was made of the topography of Cuckmere Haven for its defence, the anti-tank obstacles being sited on or behind sea banks or making use of existing natural waterways. Air photographs suggest that various streams and drains to the north of the sea front were also converted to anti-tank defences: close examination shows rounded and out-turned ends to some water channels. The grazing land to the west of the river is divided into a chequer-work

pattern of fields by a system of steep-sided drains that would themselves have provided a formidable obstacle to the movement of armoured vehicles. The heights to each side of the valley provided ideal positions for machine gun and artillery emplacements.

The defence area was also used at various times during the Second World War as a decoy site protecting Newhaven harbour, as a departure point for cross-Channel cables (post D-Day), and as a practice artillery range and coastal assault training area.<sup>15</sup>

#### *The defence works -*

There is a good representation at Cuckmere Haven of the different components of coast defence. The anti-tank ditch [UORN 11621] on the east side of the river survives in a silted state, and on the west side a further water-filled length can be seen. Here, the ditch is fronted by a line of massive anti-tank blocks and an anti-tank wall that together form an outstanding survival [UORNs 8609 and 8610]. A further line of smaller blocks stands on the east side of the river [UORN 807].



Fig. 7 - UORNs 8609 and 8610: anti-tank blocks and anti-tank wall on the west side of the Cuckmere River. The line of blocks was continued at an angle to the riverbank (beyond the bank in the mid distance), supported by two pillboxes (demolished) [see also Fig. 8]. Behind the bank to the left is the western anti-tank ditch.

<sup>14</sup> Südostküste England - Schrägbildreihe IV (RAF Museum, Hendon).

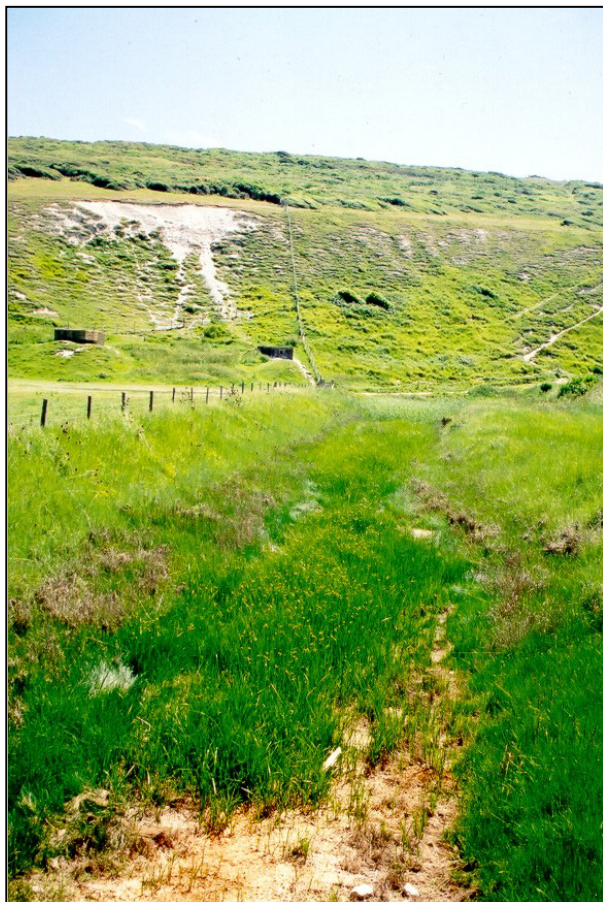
<sup>15</sup> Longstaff-Tyrell, *Front-Line Sussex*.







*Fig. 8- Post war photograph (c.1950) accompanying an Admiralty report on the beach of Cuckmere Haven. The defences on the west side of the river are particularly clear, with two pillboxes supporting the line of anti-tank blocks near the river.*



*Fig. 9 - UORN 11621: the surviving section of the eastern anti-tank ditch, with pillboxes at the foot of the cliffs beyond [from left to right, UORNs 806 and 803].*

On the high land to the east, and at the base of the rising cliffs, is a cluster of five pillboxes that still present a formidable aspect. [see Figs. 9 and 10]. Different types of pillboxes structure, some of a variant form, are represented here, and each can be inspected at close quarters. Good examples of circular type 25 pillboxes can also be seen [UORNs 1495 and 1496]: the former stands in a precarious position undermined by erosion, and work is needed to consolidate it. A pillbox also survives on the heights to the west of the river [UORN 8604]. The sites of several destroyed pillboxes are also known. For instance, at the crossing of the Cuckmere River at Exceat Bridge, there was a roadblock covered by a pillbox, and another pillbox also stood alongside the Golden Galleon public house. These pillboxes were probably destroyed shortly after the end of the war, but one near the Coastguard Cottages [UORN 14670] was demolished as late as the 1980s.



*Fig. 10 - UORN 803: a variant form of a type 23 pillbox, dug into the base of the eastern cliffs.*

## **2.2 Landscape:**

Aerial photographs show that this area remains substantially as it was in 1940. There is less scrub cover today on the downland slopes, although conversely the Outbrook Bank to the west is now heavily wooded whereas it used to be largely clear of vegetation. Also, north and east of the Exceat visitor centre, the thick woodland of Friston Forest has grown from plantations first made in the inter-war period. Behind the original line of the eastern anti-tank ditch, and butting up against the surviving section, is now an open area of water, formed in the 1980s using a pre-existing stream for its north-east side. There used to be a tramway (or light railway) running the length of the valley, following the route of one of the present paths: it is not known if this tramway was functioning during the war or when it was closed down.

Current proposals by the Environment Agency to flood parts of the Cuckmere estuary in a project to reinstate saltmarsh and mudflats would presumably





submerge those defence works not situated on higher land to west and east, namely the anti-tank blocks and wall, as well as the two lengths of anti-tank ditch. This would be regrettable as these are significant remains of the 1940 defence.

There is excellent public access to the defence area by footpaths from the visitor centre of the Seven Sisters Country Park, and from Exceat Bridge. The Vanguard Way runs on the west side of the Cuckmere River, and the downland above the Coastguard Cottages is a nature reserve. Many thousands of visitors come to Cuckmere Haven every year, and the country park is used extensively for school trips and adventure activities.

### **2.3 Statement of Significance:**

The Cuckmere Haven defences provide a very good example of coastal anti-invasion defence in a location that has excellent public access. It is documented that this would have been a key point in the German invasion. The surviving combination of differing types of coastal defence works - pillboxes, anti-tank ditches, and anti-tank blocks - coupled with a ready appreciation of the defence components that have now been removed, make the area one of particular importance. The symbolism of this location, flanked by the iconic white cliffs, spells out well the message of Britain's defiance in 1940.

## **3. Recommendations:**

1. That the surviving anti-invasion defence works in the area south of Exceat, to the east of the Cuckmere River, be considered of national importance. They enable the defence of the area to be interpreted, and provide evidence of the articulation of the defence and the inter-relationship of its functionally different components. Such interpretation is assisted by the documentary evidence provided in this report of defence structures that were built as part of the overall strategy, but which have now been removed.
2. That the surviving anti-invasion defence works on the seafront west of the Cuckmere River also be considered of national importance. They complement the defences on the east bank and enable the totality of the defence of the coast at this point to be appreciated.
3. That consolidation of type 25 pillbox, UORN 1495, be carried out so that it may be preserved in situ.
4. That 1. and 2. above be considered as areas for a 'pillbox walk', It might be possible to establish such a walk, in an initiative with the local authority, the Seven Sisters Country Park, and the National Trust, with on-site interpretation provided by means of information boards.





#### 4. Supporting material.

##### 4.3 Photographs:

Figs. 1, 7, and 9-10 - taken (AWF) during field survey, 28.6.2001.

Fig. 3 - 'Taktisches Luftbildbuch', p31 (August 1940) - IWM, uncatalogued.

Fig. 4 - CPE/UK/1947 fr.2006 (22.1.1947) - NMR.

Fig. 5 - MSO 31167 fr.4046 (19.2.1942) - NMR.

Fig. 8 - TNA: PRO ADM 326/162 (c.1950).

##### 4.2 Documentary Sources:

135th Infantry Brigade HQ War Diary, 1940 - TNA: PRO WO 166/990.

136th Infantry Brigade HQ War Diary, 1940 - TNA: PRO WO 166/992.

562nd Field Company Royal Engineers War Diary, 1940 - TNA: PRO WO 166/3800.

'Einzelheiten und technische Angaben über die englischen Befestigungen', August 1940 (Imperial War Museum, uncatalogued).

'List of Nodal Points in Eastern Command', September 1940 (from General Headquarters Papers, Home Forces) - TNA: PRO WO 199/544.

'45 Division Defence Scheme', October 1940 (from 45 Division 'G' Branch HQ War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/536.

'Taktisches Luftbildbuch', 23.10.1940 (Imperial War Museum, uncatalogued).

Südostküste England - Schrägbildreihe IV: Selsey - ostw. Seaford, 20.11.1940 - RAF Museum, Hendon AC 95/130/1.

'C' Sub-Area Defence Scheme', December 1940 (from 219th Infantry Brigade War Diary - TNA: PRO WO 166/1072.

'Seaford Defence Scheme', 24.2.1941 (from 9th Bn. The King's Regiment War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/4354.

'Operation Instruction No.22', 15.3.1941 (from 164th Infantry Brigade War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/1037.

'Operation Instruction No.1', 20.3.1941 (from 165th Infantry Brigade War Diary) - TNA: PRO WO 166/1038.

Befestigungskarte Grossbritannien: 1:50,000 (Sheet 134), 1.6.1941 - BLML 1305(13).

Admiralty Beach Intelligence Records: Cuckmere Haven, 1952 - TNA: PRO ADM 326/162.

##### 4.3 Published Sources:

Peter Longstaff-Tyrrell, *Front-Line Sussex* (Sutton Publishing, 2000).

Peter Longstaff-Tyrrell, *Operation Cuckmere Haven* (Gote House Publishing, April 2001).

##### 4.4 Aerial Photographs:

26J/UK1058 fr.F1 (29.7.1940) - NMR.

MSO 31167 fr.4046 (19.2.1942) - NMR.

US/7GR/LOC347 fr.3027) (27.5.1944 - NMR.

CPE/UK/1947 fr.2006 (22.1.1947) - NMR.



- 4.5 **Ordnance Survey 1:2500 Plans - BLML.**
- 4.6 **Defence of Britain Project Database:**  
[see 5. 'Annex' below].

