

MEMORIES OF PENSURST DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

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Chapter 3

DEFENDING THE VILLAGE – part 1

The National Home Guard, originally Local Defence Volunteers or LDVs (better known nowadays as 'Dad's Army'), was formed in May 1940. The debacle and evacuation from Dunkirk was then starting to happen. The first bombs to be dropped on mainland Britain had fallen near Canterbury in Kent, about as close to the occupied areas on the Low Countries and Northern France as the Germans could get.

With the rout of the British Expeditionary Force, the start of bombing and the massive build-up of the German Army and the Luftwaffe, there was no doubt at that Hitler had every intention of invading Britain. Indeed, 'Operation Sea Lion' as the German invasion plan was called, was already a deadly serious project.

For the same reasons that the Allies chose as their landing area the shallow sandy beaches of the Normandy coast when they invaded France in 1944, had Hitler carried out his threat to invade England he would have chosen the flat sandy beaches of the Kent coast between Hastings and Folkestone. This was also the most suitable point on the coast closest to London, their primary target. All the main roads, the A2, A21, A22 and A23 led directly there.

Though heavily defended by what remained of the depleted British Army and its supporting part-time soldiers, the most easterly of these routes was the A21. A serious natural obstacle along the way was the River Medway which ran from its source in West Sussex eastwards through Tonbridge, Maidstone and the towns around the mouth of the river such as Rochester, Gillingham and Chatham where it opened out into the Thames estuary and the North Sea.

About half way along this route, mid-way between the coast and London, was the village of Penshurst with its stately home, Penshurst Place. The village is strategically sited where the Medway is joined by its tributary the River Eden, running from the lake at Hever castle. These two rivers which almost encircled the village, together with the low sandstone hills on the northern side, provided natural defences. But while these might have, at least for a time, frustrated William the Conqueror's marching armies, without considerable reinforcement, they would not have held up for long the advance of the tanks and armoured vehicles of the mighty German Wehrmacht.

Pill Boxes

The river crossings were of crucial importance in defending the village. Where the bridge might first have to be used by locals and defenders' vehicles, provision was made to create temporary obstructions with moveable concrete blocks and steel girders. Minor crossings rarely used were blocked by more permanent tank-proof barriers using heavy steel girders set in solid reinforced concrete structures each side of the road. If the adjacent river banks were low and crumbling away, they were reinforced by revetments made of thick oak posts supporting chestnut paling fencing, to prevent amphibious vehicles or people in boats from crossing the river bypassing the bridge. These

were left in place long after the war and provided protection from further bank erosion when the river was in flood and sometimes came in handy as a rest for a fishing rod.

An outer defence giving covering fire for the road bridges was provided by carefully sited permanent gun emplacements called pill boxes. There were several versions of these structures, but around our village the Type 24 pillbox was built. These were regular hexagons in plan with embrasured openings for light machine guns or rifles in five of the sides and a low entrance in the other. Each wall was six or more feet long with some built to a bullet-proof standard of 12 inches (30cm) thickness while others were more solid tank-proof versions with walls about 40 inches (100cm) thick. Internally there was a Y- or T-shaped central anti-ricochet wall, the top of the Y or T nearest the entrance: these



Pillbox near 'The Point'

internal walls also helped support the roof.

The Type 24 pillbox was one of the most commonly used designs. The majority were built during the early summer of 1940 between May-July, by the military supporting recruited civilian labour. As far as possible, they used local materials, so those built around Penshurst were made of concrete and brick. Although put up in a hurry, the quality of the bricklaying was of a high order, the 'brickies' took great pride in their work. One of our relations, Frank Swaffer from Chiddingstone (married to my father's cousin Ruth), a master builder and top bricklayer, was employed in this work for a time before he was called up by the Army.

There was a large pillbox right in the heart of the village at the top corner of Well Field opposite Leicester Square and the Post Office. This had a commanding view and field of fire over the eastern approach to the village down Rogues Hill and across the bridge over the Medway by the Bridge Inn.

There were two more pillboxes covering this crossing, one further up the river near 'The Point' where the river Eden joins the Medway, and another downstream below Elliott's farm, making three in all. Three more were built near the bridge on the B2188 crossing the river Eden south of the village and another three round to the west, where the minor road known then as the 'Coach Road' also crossed the Eden near the weir called Clapper Sluice.



Pillbox at 'Clapper Sluice'



Pillbox by the 'Coach Road'

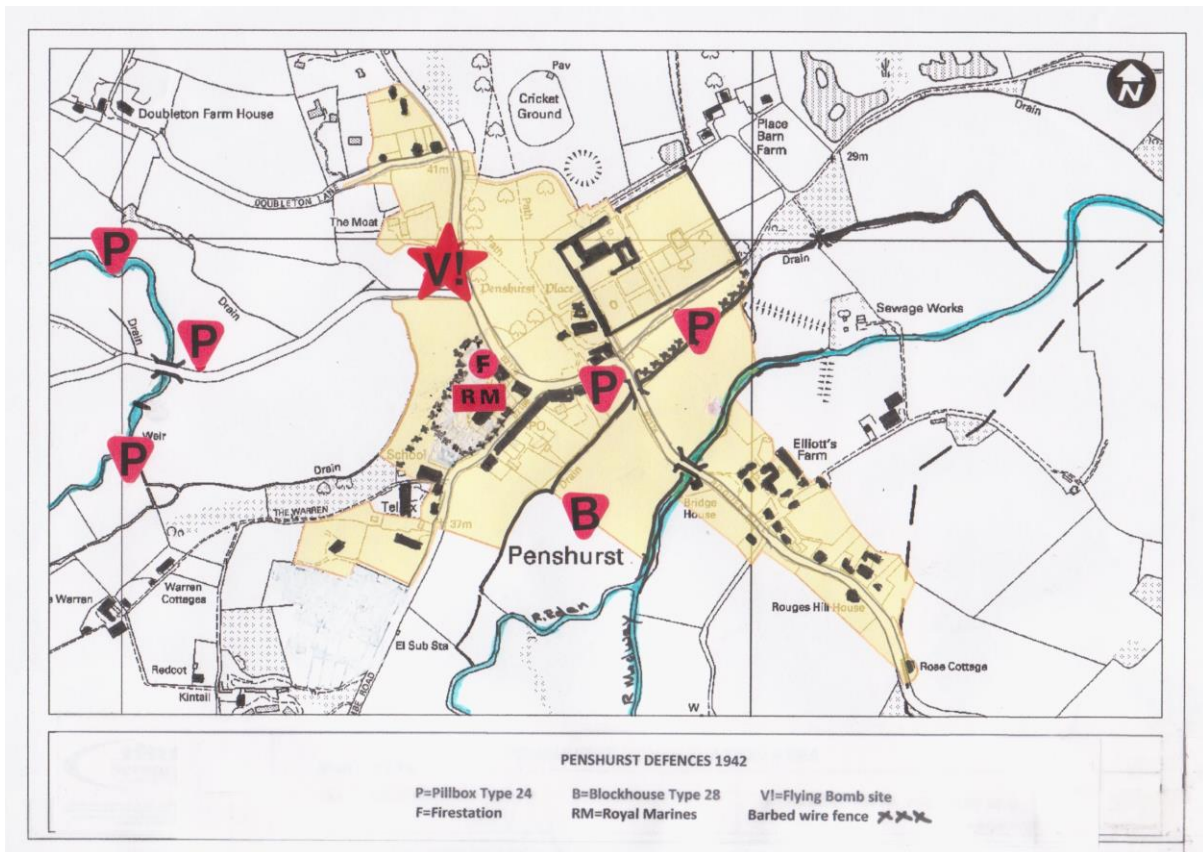
Thus a total of nine of these pillboxes pretty well encircled the village. Their only slight problem was that being sited in low lying positions close to the rivers, they could be liable to flooding and did not have drains to let the water out. The only way the water could get out was by evaporation: sometimes it never did and remained there for months.

Of course they were never used for what they were intended but were really no good for anything else. Their low doors and high steps prevented their use as cattle shelters. Although sheep could get in, all animals are wary about going into somewhere unfamiliar where they cannot see inside. At times they provided temporary cover for other diverse human activities, which often meant that if you did venture inside, you had to be jolly careful where you put your feet. Some of the graffiti they acquired were both informative and entertaining: some downright filthy. Because they were so solidly built and in awkward positions they were difficult to dismantle after the war and some still stand to this day.

Barbed Wire Fence Entanglements

Within the outer defensive ring of pillboxes, close in and around the central area of the village, the Army erected a barbed wire entanglement ring-fence. Supported by six foot high screw-in metal fence-posts, two adjacent coils of barbed wire were stretched out between the posts, securely wired together and pegged down. Another coil was then run out along on top and the whole lot bound together to give a six-foot high, man-proof, viciously spiked, barbed wire fence. Well, I say man-proof, but after close study, we boys were sometimes able to find places where the wire coils had been overstretched, opening them up to leave a gap wide enough for a boy to crawl through. You had to be careful not to get your clothes snagged and watch out where you knelt, but it was possible to get through. There was no real need for this; we just did it to show off. Inside the area enclosed by the barbed wire fences, slit trenches were dug to create firing positions for Bren guns covering

the road junctions and key buildings. The army carried out regular practice drills with these and it was not unusual to arrive home and find soldiers had taken up positions lying under the garden hedge. Living right in the centre of the village, we had to carry out practice evacuation drills, too. Taking with us nothing but our identity cards, gas masks and ration books and maybe a change of clothes, we had to get out of the village and go to a neighbour's house about half a mile away. We were directed to one of the council houses in New Road, where Bill Boyer the local policeman lived with his wife and son Roger, who was in my class at school. Nothing dramatic happened; we just sat down and had tea with them for a couple of hours until Bill said we could go home. Quite an enjoyable afternoon really, but we only had to do it once.



Penshurst defences in 1942

At one time a Bofors anti-aircraft gun site was set up in a sandbagged position near the forge, but to the best of my knowledge it was never fired.

Shelters and Air Raid Warnings

The Village Hall complex stood right in the centre of the village at the junction of the three main roads. It had a large cellar which housed the coke-burning central heating boiler with plenty of storage room for coke and coal. As it was a central large underground area it was decided that this should be the village communal air-raid shelter. One of the sloping coal delivery chutes was fitted with an iron ladder for emergency use as an exit. Problem was that the shelter was never used, there were few public events being held in the hall and most people, including us, preferred to stay at home and hide under the stairs during an air raid.

The village air-raid warning siren was a manual wind-up job sited near the telephone box by the Leicester Arms hotel. If there was a warning of a possible raid, the duty Air Raid Warden sounded the alarm and we all got into the nearest shelter. Mostly what we heard was formations of German bombers passing high overhead on their way to attack the London area. But just occasionally a lone bomber on its return journey might drop at random an unused stick of bombs, usually harmlessly falling in a field somewhere but enough to turn out the Home Guard and the Fire Brigade. The constant concern was the possibility of German parachutists landing, so everyone was encouraged to learn how to challenge by saying "Sprechen Sie Deutsch?" or "Hande Hoch".

As time progressed people were offered their own shelters made of steel panels. The 'Anderson' was intended for use outside and made by bolting together upright steel sheets which curved over at the top to make a tunnel. They were usually reinforced by layers of sandbags. The 'Morrison' shelter took the form of a large flat steel table which you put together indoors and had room enough to crawl under. Covered with a cloth, they looked like any other large square dining table and were a great hiding place for children and dogs.

The Home Guard

Because of the strategic importance of Penshurst, a large Home Guard unit, numbering more than 50 men, was mustered early in the war. A framed group photograph of the Penshurst Home Guard hung for many years above the fireplace in the Reading Room of the Village Club.

Living on the premises I spent a lot of time studying this photograph and even now can picture it in my mind and recall the names of some of the men involved. In the middle of the front row was Major R.D. (Dick) Hoblyn, the Commanding Officer. Sitting next to him was the Rector, Reverend Peveril Turnbull. Other NCOs in the front row included A.G.Guy Pawson, the former Oxford Blue and Somerset cricketer, D.G.'Dick' Goodwin from Nashes Farm, J.M.DuBuisson from Saints Hill House who worked in the City and Sergeant S.S.Sidney Stacey the head gardener at Penshurst Place. Among the others whose names come to mind are A.G.'Twiggy' Branch, Bill Davey a tractor driver from Salmans Farm, Donald Hoblyn the CO's younger brother, Percy Hallett the head carter from Well Place Farm and his son Dennis Peter Hallett who was called up soon after the photograph was taken but was, sadly, one of the few Penshurst men to be killed in the war.

Not in the photograph was the local schoolmaster Reginald 'Reggie' Wiles. He had served with distinction in the First World War and risen to the rank of RSM. But he was bitter and resentful about not being called up again in 1939 to re-join the army, because of his age. Instead, he served in the Royal Artillery Territorial Army unit whose HQ was in Tonbridge. He considered himself above service in the Home Guard.

The headquarters of the Penshurst Home Guard was in the Rifle Range near the school. Between the wars, a kind benefactor had a small-bore rifle range built on part of the land known as the 'Warren' to the rear of 'Fridgie' Tompsett's slaughter house. It was called the 'Lunga Memorial Range' in commemoration of some notable action by the British Army in India. There were a number of Penshurst links to India. The skin of a fully grown tiger hung on the wall at the back of the stage in the Village Hall and the Boy Scouts had 'woggles' made from the kind donation of a genuine leopard skin. Lord Hardinge of Penshurst, who lived at Oakfield, served at one time as Viceroy of India.

For a while, as part of the war effort, the Village Hall was turned into a 'British Restaurant' run by local women volunteers. The stage area was converted into a kitchen with cookers and sinks. It even had an automated potato peeler, worked by turning a handle on a drum that had rotating grinding rollers which rasped off most of the potato skins. 'Most of' meaning about 70%.

The dusty tiger skin was removed from the wall in the interests of hygiene. Funny that: hygiene considerations did not appear to be a high priority in other aspects of the operation. I can attest to this as one who was familiar with the smell from the waste food pigswill bins kept just outside for weekly collection. But presumably the pigs did not mind and the swill was first supposed to be boiled to make 'Tottenham Pudding'. If they were eventually fattened, slaughtered and processed for local consumption into pork sausages by Tompsett's the butchers, maybe even some eaten in the British Restaurant, it formed a kind of perfect food cycle.

The British Restaurant idea was not popular, few people, not even hungry passing soldiers chose to eat there and it was soon closed down. However, the government's 'Dig for Victory' campaign met with much more success. People dug up more of their garden to grow vegetables and even kept a few chickens feeding them on kitchen scraps.

Army Cadets

There was an Army Cadet Force company, an offshoot of the Home Guard that normally also used the Rifle Range as its headquarters. But sometimes they met in the Chiddingstone Causeway village hall because the young lads from the 'Causeway' were included in the recruitment area. One Sunday they held a massed parade of all the cadets in the West Kent area, in Sevenoaks on the famous Vine cricket ground. My brother Robert who was a sergeant in the cadets, took part and my father and I went to watch; presumably we went on the bus. Sadly, when I asked my brother about it, although he remembered the occasion, he had no idea of the identity of the VIP who took the salute.

Before he received his call-up papers to join the Army in 1944, my brother was transferred from the cadets into the regular Home Guard. 'Dad's Army' does not do them justice. They had nothing much in the way of weapons, at least to start with. A local appeal produced some extraordinary weapon contributions, a couple of ancient shotguns and the odd antique rifle. Bob was issued with one of these, an extremely ancient 0.45 calibre single round breech loading rifle. To load a bullet the breech was opened by pulling down a lever, but the bore was so large no modern ammunition could fit it. I think it may have been a trophy of the Crimean War. So they made their own wooden dummy weapons and Bob produced a credible looking 'Tommy Gun'.