

# The battle to conserve our wartime defences

Pillboxes are a key part of our military heritage, says a group fighting for their preservation

Jack Shamash

At the top of a hill overlooking the village of Ewshot in Hampshire, there is a line of concrete pillboxes — each with a commanding view of the countryside. This piece of ground once had a great tactical significance. If a company of German soldiers was advancing, Tim Denton, of the Pillbox Study Group, says, a machine gun pointing out of the front of the pillbox would have killed dozens of them.

In the dark days of the Second World War about 28,000 pillboxes — small concrete and brick fortifications — were built around Britain. They are now largely overgrown with vegetation and in poor repair. However, to many enthusiasts and historians, they are an important part of Britain's military heritage.

By June 1940 German forces had taken Poland, Norway, France, Belgium and Holland. The British Army had lost almost all of its equipment at Dunkirk. Fearing a rapid German invasion, the government ordered a series of defensive "stop lines" to be built. These were designed to halt any German tank advances and consisted of ditches, concrete obstacles and — most notably — carefully sited pillboxes.

The Pillbox Study Group, which has a website, newsletter and several hundred members around the world, is trying to raise the profile of pillboxes that are now falling into disrepair. Tim Denton, who is an expert on the mass of pillboxes around the Basingstoke Canal, calls them "vitally important". "They're as important as Hadrian's Wall or Dover Castle," he explains. Most of the "stoplines" were around the coast, designed to prevent German forces from getting inland. In addition there was a "Greater London stop line", designed to hold up any advance on London.

But the most significant fortifications were on the Main GHQ Stop line, which ran from the Bristol Channel to

the Thames Estuary. The pillboxes around Ewshot were part of this and were particularly important because they covered Aldershot, the headquarters of the British Army.

Here, the pillboxes were carefully positioned to cover any German advance. The local canal was used as a giant anti-tank ditch. In places where tanks might get across the canal, special concrete blocks known as "dragons' teeth" were placed on the embankment.

"The pillboxes all have their own character and had to be blended into the terrain," Denton says.

The pillboxes were built to Ministry of Defence specifications by local builders. They consisted of a thin shell of bricks, into which was poured a mass of concrete and steel. The structures at Ewshot are mainly Type 24 pillboxes, with angled fronts and 5in-thick walls. They have internal blast walls, to prevent ricochets, and asbestos flaps, in case the Germans tried to burn out the occupants with a flamethrower.

Although the concrete is virtually indestructible, on many boxes the brick facing is starting to fall off. Some boxes have been weakened by tree roots, some have filled with water and others have been attacked by vandals.

For Denton, pillboxes have become something of an obsession. He spends much of his free time cleaning and repairing them and gathering precise data on their location and construction.

Until recently, few people cared about the pillboxes' fate. They were seen as an eyesore and in many cases farmers were actually paid to destroy them. Only about 6,500 survive today. But their importance is now being widely recognised: English Heritage has listed 51 pillboxes.

The National Trust is also keen to support them. Every year — usually in May — it plays host to Home Guard re-enactments. Enthusiasts dress up in authentic uniforms and give demonstrations to the public at pillboxes

around the North Downs in Surrey.

The National Trust has also started to spend money on maintaining the boxes. Robert Hewer, the trust's head warden for the North Downs, explains: "We clean the boxes and have started a programme of removing trees that could damage them. At some stage we may even have to do building works to preserve them. They are a testament to the people who built them and a lot of people can still remember when they were built."

The National Trust is applying for government funds from Natural England, under the Higher Stewardship Scheme. It argues that the boxes are an important part of the rural scene and should be given public funds for their upkeep.

*For more information on the Pillbox Study Group visit [pillbox-study-group.org.uk](http://pillbox-study-group.org.uk)*





**Do not alight here: this pillbox was disguised as a bus shelter in 1944**





This pillbox used to sit on top of the cliff at Happisburgh, Norfolk, before coastal erosion took its course. Now enthusiasts are trying to protect the 6,500 that remain

