

Pillbox by Bath Road Woolhampton West Berkshire



**Historic Buildings
Investigation and Recording**



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Pillbox by Bath Road, Woolhampton, West Berkshire

Historic Building Recording and Investigation

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Pillbox by Bath Road, Woolhampton, West Berkshire

Summary

The current project has recorded a Type 28A pillbox, to the east of Woolhampton, prior to its removal in a residential development. The pillbox was constructed in the summer of 1940 (probably July) during a desperate attempt to defend against an anticipated attempted invasion from Nazi Germany. The pillbox was located on the GHQ Line Blue, a section of the main, fixed, defensive stop line that stretched from Bristol, beneath London and up to the fens.

The pillbox would have been supplied with a 2-pounder anti-tank gun and the structure also incorporated a side infantry chamber that allowed for additional small arms fire. The main gun embrasure faced south-west, overlooking a field gently sloping down towards the railway line and the River Kennet, and it would have worked in tandem with a series of other pillboxes in the area.

The structure provides a reminder of a brief but hugely significant period in 20th-century British history, when the country appeared to be on the brink of invasion by Germany. The brief period when the pillboxes were constructed coincided with the fall of France, the evacuation of Dunkirk and the early stages of the Battle of Britain.



1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

- 1.1.1 Oxford Archaeology (OA) were commissioned by Aster Homes Ltd to undertake a programme of historic building recording, focusing on a Second World War pillbox, prior to a housing development at the site (Planning ref: 13/02879/FULD) which will see the removal of the pillbox. The site is located to the south of the village of Woolhampton and it formed part of one of the key defensive anti-tank 'stop lines' constructed in 1940 in anticipation of an attempted invasion from Nazi Germany.
- 1.1.2 The recording was undertaken due to the historic interest of the structure and in expectation of a planning condition should planning approval be granted. Approval for the development was granted but the condition for recording the pillbox was not ultimately attached because the on-site recording had already been undertaken and an interim statement summarising the investigation had been issued in February 2014.
- 1.1.3 A brief detailing the required recording was issued by the West Berkshire Council Archaeology Service (Internal ref WB3870). The West Berks internal reference that the recording was attached to is WB5917. The site code for the project is WOLPBX14.

1.2 Aims and objectives

- 1.2.1 The principal aims of the current work have been:
- To provide an accurate metric survey of the structure;
 - To investigate the structure and enhance understanding of its nature;
 - to record for posterity the pillbox prior to its removal in terms of its construction, history, development, alteration and use;
 - to make the record publicly accessible through a report (a public document) and a project archive deposited with a public institution.

1.3 Methodology

- 1.3.1 The on-site recording was undertaken on 31 January 2014 and comprised:
- The creation of scaled plans and elevation of the pillbox
 - External and internal photographs (black and white prints and digitals)
 - General photographs to show the setting of the structure
 - Descriptive notes to explain the pillbox
 - Historical research of the principal secondary sources
 - Examination of aerial photographs held at the English Heritage National Monuments Record in Swindon

2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Introduction

- 2.1.1 The following account of the invasion defences constructed in the summer of 1940 is largely based on information in *Ironsides Line* by Colin Alexander.

2.2 Invasion defences 1940 and the GHQ line

- 2.2.1 The shocking fall of France in May 1940 to Nazi Germany, following seven months of quiet 'phony war' left Britain in a desperate state and hopelessly unprepared to defend against an attempted invasion by the German forces. The evacuation of Dunkirk left a



vast number of guns, abandoned to the enemy in France and a pitifully thin number of suitable weapons in Britain with which to defend the country.

- 2.2.2 The speed at which the German Panzer tanks had torn through France led to the Government adopting a defensive strategy which accepted that the entire southern and eastern coastlines of the country could not be adequately defended so only a relatively thin defensive 'crust' would be formed here, principally to disrupt the invasion rather than stop it, but a series of anti-tank 'stop-lines' would be formed further inland to isolate and slow the enemies advance and thus allow counter attacks.
- 2.2.3 The vast construction programme was placed under the control of General Ironside and it rapidly progressed in June and early July 1940, immediately before and during the early stages of the Battle of Britain. The key part of Ironside's plan was to form a principal continuous fixed defensive line called the General Headquarters (GHQ) line, inland from the southern and eastern coasts to protect London and the midlands and the industrial north (see inset to Fig 1). The line utilised existing barriers such as rivers, canals and railway embankments and complemented them with pill boxes, anti-tank ditches, tank traps and various types of gun positions. The line was to extend east from Bristol and stretch beneath London before continuing north through east anglia, east Yorkshire and up to Scotland.
- 2.2.4 The concept of the fixed defensive line followed outdated First World War thinking (although it may have been the only option due to the paucity of resources available) and it was criticised at the time. In later July 1940 General Ironside was replaced by Alan Brooke who had more recent battle experience in France and proposed a more aggressive and mobile approach to the country's defence.
- 2.2.5 Following Brooke's appointment an order was issued to halt work on the various stop lines although installations that were already well advanced were completed. The works in the south of the country were relatively well advanced and a continuous defensive line was formed from Bristol to the fens but the proposed northern sections of the line to Scotland were less well advanced and were consequently abandoned.

2.3 GHQ Line Blue

- 2.3.1 One of the most vulnerable areas of the country was seen to be the gentle countryside of the Oxford Plain which offered a good road network and a relatively open route north towards the industrial midlands. To counter this a double barrier was formed as part of the GHQ line: the forward (southern) section was named the GHQ Blue line and followed the Kennet and Avon Canal from the River Avon near Melksham to Reading while parallel to this was the GHQ Line Red which was located further north generally along the line of the Thames.
- 2.3.2 The two lines were within the areas under Southern Command and the importance they were seen to have is reflected in the fact that they were provided with most of the best anti-tank guns from the thin resources available to home defence in the summer of 1940.
- 2.3.3 The route of the blue line, of which the pillbox in the current study formed a part, was planned in the first week of July 1940 and it included four nodal points (key towns) and three bridgeheads which were intended to allow counter attacking troops an unhindered advance across the Kennet and Avon. One of these bridgeheads was located at Woolhampton.



- 2.3.4 The initial plan was to construct 72 shell-proof Type 28A pillboxes along the GHQ Blue line, each provided with a 2 pounder anti-tank gun although only 53 were actually completed.

2.4 Type 28 and 28A pill boxes

- 2.4.1 Approximately 1500 concrete pill boxes were constructed to defend the GHQ line and the large majority of these were relatively light structures intended to house anti-tank rifles rather than larger guns. The number of more substantial pill boxes constructed to house anti-tank guns was less than 400 and these divided into various forms depending on factors such as their location and exact function.
- 2.4.2 The pillbox covered by the current work is a Type 28A which is a larger variant of the Type 28 pillbox. The Type 28 series of shell-proof pill boxes were among the largest pill boxes constructed in Britain in 1940 and they were the only anti-tank pillbox of the seven official main types. They were provided with the relatively modern 2-pounder Vickers Armstrong MkII anti-tank gun which had been used by the Royal Artillery since the late 1930s (Alexander, 1998). The standard Type 28 had a single chamber for the gun and a wide stepped embrasure while the Type 28A had an additional smaller infantry chamber inside to allow small arms (Bren Gun) fire. Externally the Type 28A measured 27 feet by 19 feet.
- 2.4.3 Access was through a large opening to the rear both for the gun and the 10-man crew. The gun would not have been permanently fixed into the pillbox but instead it would have been wheeled into the chamber and positioned in purpose-built floor recesses in front of the main embrasure. Its wheels would have been removed and the trail legs unfolded. The fact that the gun was not permanently fixed would have allowed the option of the gun crew to withdraw to another location if necessary.
- 2.4.4 The Type 28A was the most common type of pillbox built for the 2-pounder gun.

3 DESCRIPTION

3.1 Site location

- 3.1.1 The pillbox is located in the north-east corner of a small field south of the A4 east of the village of Woolhampton. It is situated on top of a south facing slope at 60m AOD over looking the river Kennet valley. The field is bordered by the Great Western Railway Newbury & Hungerford branch line to the south, the A4 to the north and residential housing to the east and west.
- 3.1.2 The pillbox was a Type 28A which housed a small 2-pounder anti-tank gun and had a small side chamber on its western side. It faced to the south-west and covered a smaller Type 22 pillbox on the north side of the river between the railway and river and just west of a crossing point (see Fig 1). The south-east facing machine gun loophole covered two other T28 pillbox's to the east covering the Frouds Lane bridge crossings. The main armament possibly had interlocking fire with these two pillboxes' and another T28 to the west near the Woolhampton Bridge.



- 3.1.3 This would enable a series of inter locking fire from anti tank guns along the line at any point threatened by assault and covering both other defence and crossing points within observation.

3.2 Exterior

- 3.2.1 The pillbox is a Type 28A model with the main ground level embrasure facing south-west and a smaller loop hole for machine gun fire and chamber on the west side. The roof is of reinforced concrete cast with timber plain shuttering (0.38 cm or 15 inches thick). The walls are formed from 1.25 m thick reinforced concrete with plank shuttering marks to the interior and clad externally in single brickwork (bricks 22 x 11 x 7 cm) with special bricks used at the corners. The bricks are bonded with light grey sand cement with a flush finish and there is c.30 cm of exposed concrete around each embrasure. The pillbox is heavily overgrown with ivy over half the roof and rear and east side wall. The brickwork has been damaged by ivy on the exterior and on the south-east embrasure the reinforcing bars are exposed in cracked concrete. There is also building material and small ash trees against its western side and to rear. It has been set into the ground so the main embrasure is at ground level, but the back was open with a hollow to allow access down into the rear.

3.3 Interior

- 3.3.1 The interior is divided into two rooms: the larger room for the main 2-pounder gun is to the south-east while to the north-west is the smaller infantry chamber for small arms fire through loops to front (SW) and side (NW). The inside is filled with soil debris covering half of the concrete floor of the main room and most of the side chamber. The north-east and south-east walls of the main room of the pillbox had been rendered though imprints of the plank shuttering were observed on the dividing wall and in the side chamber. Traces of a white-wash paint finish were observed on the walls and ceiling around the main embrasure below modern graffiti. Similar paint was also seen in the side chamber. Above the main embrasure was the lettering L36 in white paint and could be the number of the pillbox in the line of defence.
- 3.3.2 In the floor of the main room the rear socket (0.52m x 0.14m) for mounting the 2pdr anti tank gun was observed although the two front sockets were hidden beneath the soil debris. In the front centre of the shelf for the three small loopholes (one in main room and two in the side chamber) a 0.22m x 0.15m x 0.35m rectangular hole with a 0.01m wood lining was observed. These were for the mounting of the sustained-fire tripod for the .303 Bren light machine gun. In the rear wall of the side chamber high up in the wall just below the ceiling a 0.25m square vent hole with a dog leg through to the outside wall face was observed. This was the vent to allow fumes out from the pillbox during the firing of guns inside.

4 CONCLUSION

- 4.1.1 The pillbox recorded in the current project forms a reminder of a very brief but hugely significant period in 20th-century British history when the country faced the threat of imminent invasion from the forces of Nazi Germany. In June and July 1940, while German troops were surging through France, work began on the construction of a vast series of inland defences in preparation for the anticipated invasion. It was hoped these defences would hinder the invading forces sufficiently to allow counter attacks which would drive back the enemy.



- 4.1.2 By August 1940 a tactical change towards more aggressive and mobile defence rather than the static defences being constructed led to the construction works being largely halted, although installations that were already well advanced were completed, but a continuous fixed defensive line was formed from Bristol, beneath London and up to the fens.
- 4.1.3 This line was called the GHQ Line and one of the key sections was the GHQ Line Blue which would have helped defend against the enemy moving north through the plain of Oxford towards the industrial midlands. This line was relatively heavily defended with the best of the relatively few guns available to home defence within shell-proof pill boxes. The pillbox in the current work was a Type 28A and would have had a 2-pounder anti-tank gun.

Jonathan Gill

April 2014



APPENDIX A. BIBLIOGRAPHY

Alexander C *Ironside's Line* (1998)

Foot W *Beaches, fields, streets and hills: the anti-invasion landscape of England, 1940* (2006)

Lowry B (ed) *20th-century Defences in Britain: An Introductory Guide* (1996)

Ruddy A *British Anti-Invasion Defences 1940-1945* (2003)



APPENDIX B. SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS

SUMMARY OF SITE DETAILS

Site name: Pillbox East of Woolhampton, Woolhampton, West Berkshire

Site code: WOLPBX 14

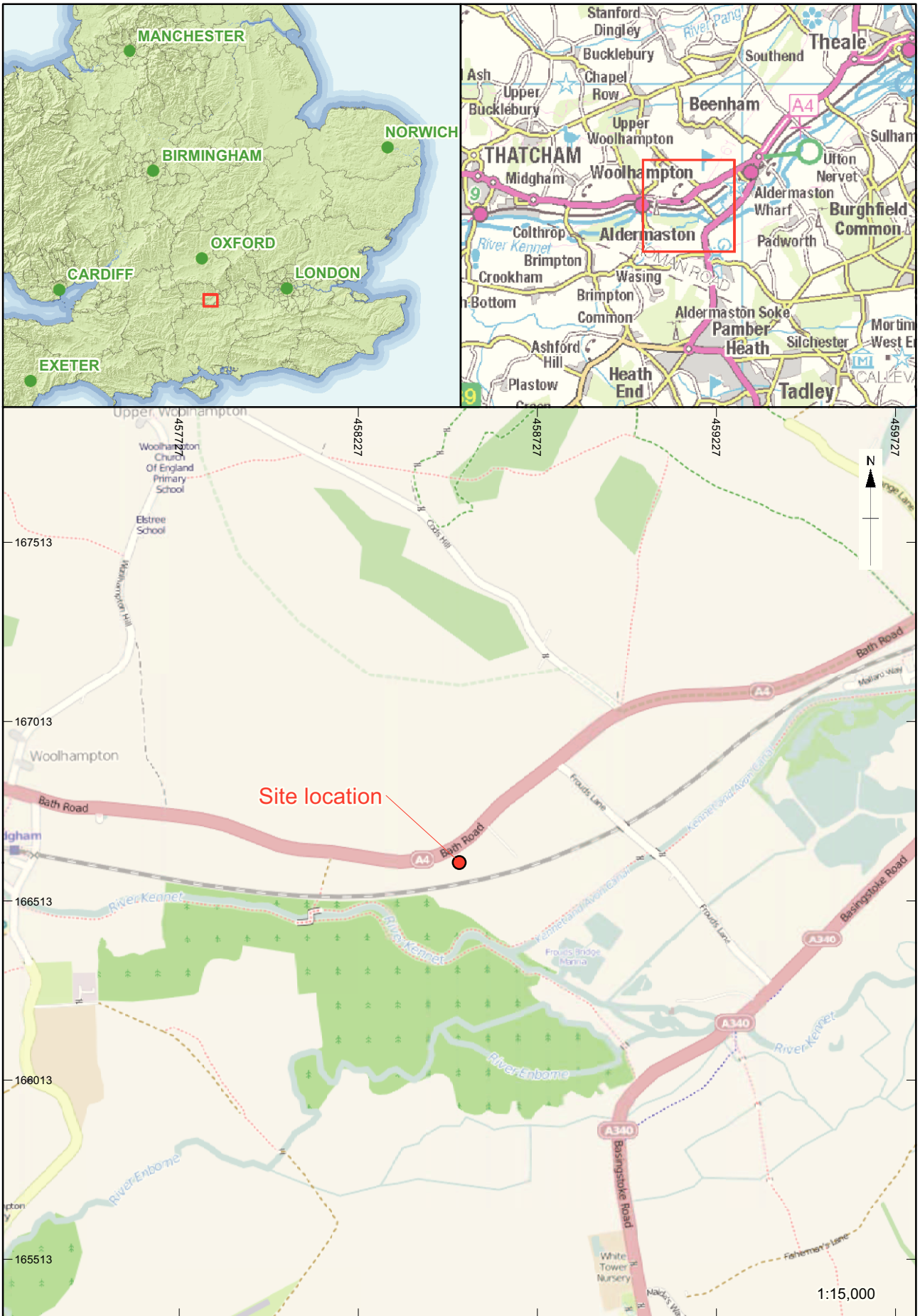
Grid reference: SU 5851 6662

Date and duration of project: The site work was undertaken 31st January 2014.

Location of archive: The archive is currently held at OA, Janus House, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES. It will ultimately be deposited with an appropriate agreed body.

Contents of Archive:

The archive for the current work will consist of four A4 sheets of permatrace with plans and other drawings of the pillbox. It will also consist of photographs (black and white prints and colour slides), negatives and a copy of this report.



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Figure 1: Site location

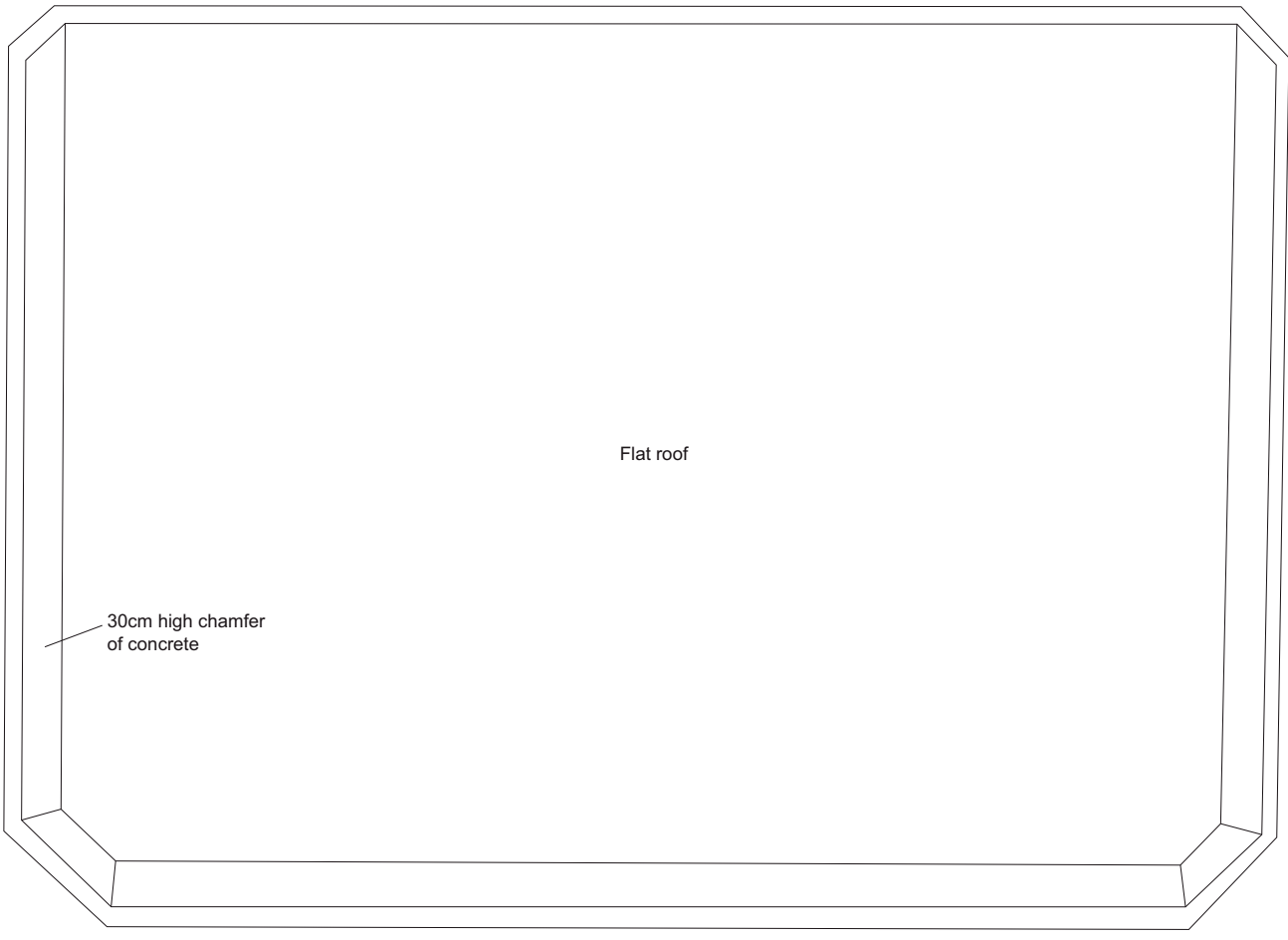
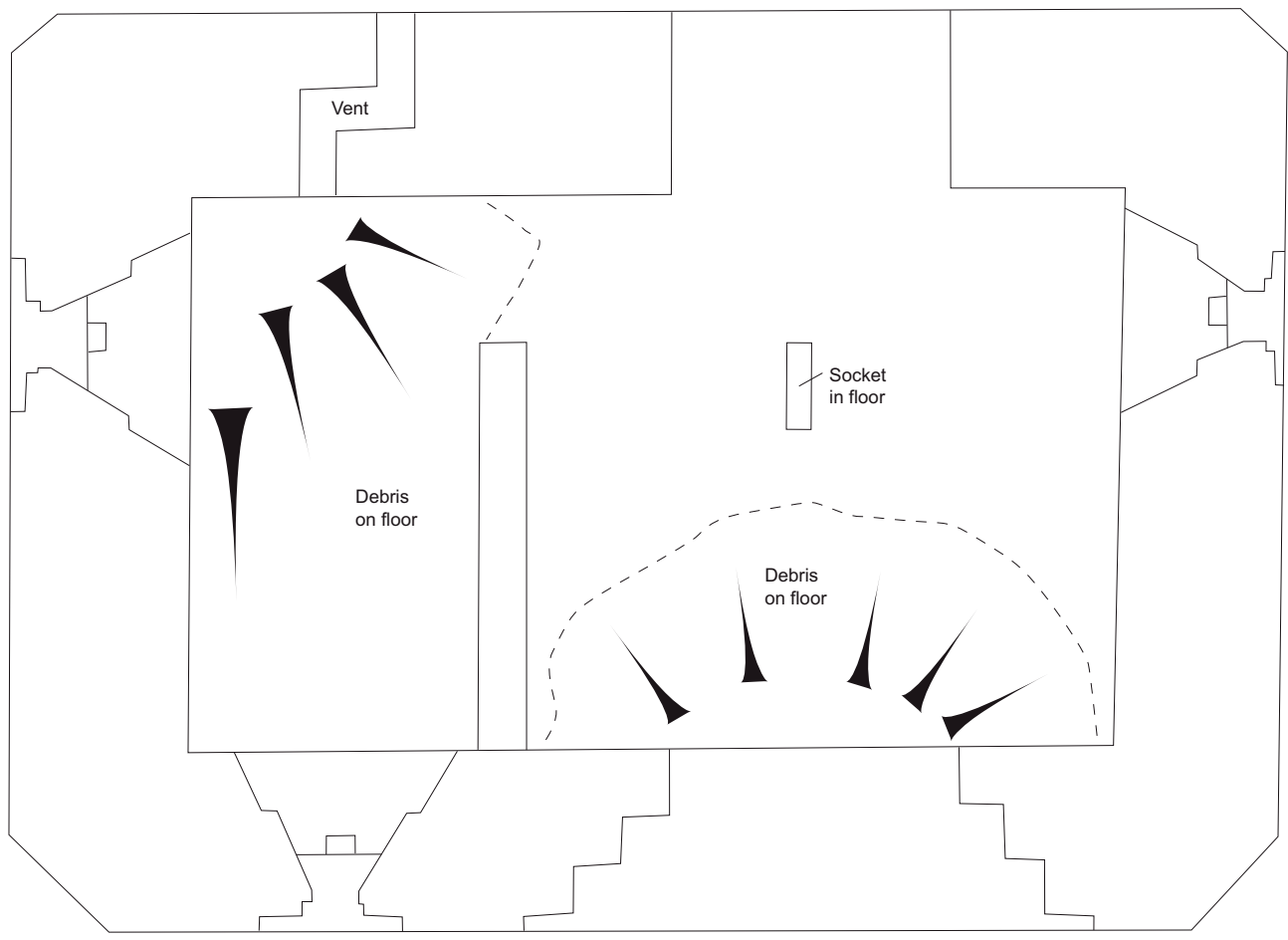
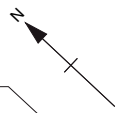
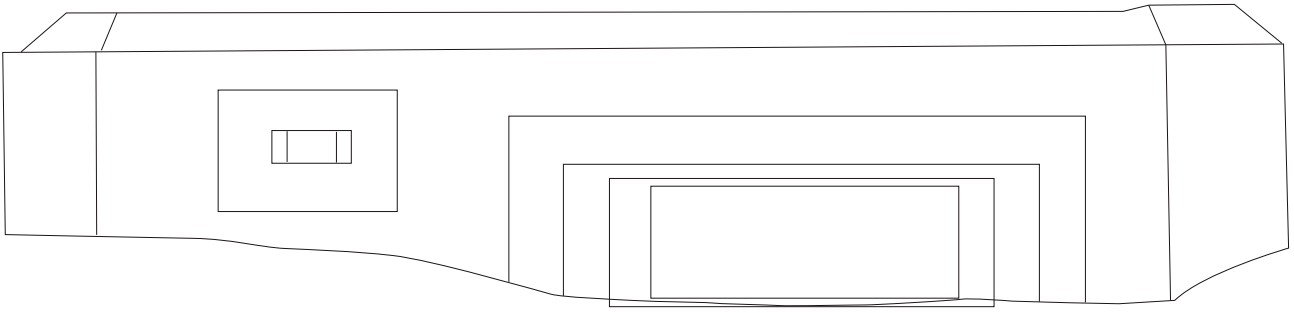
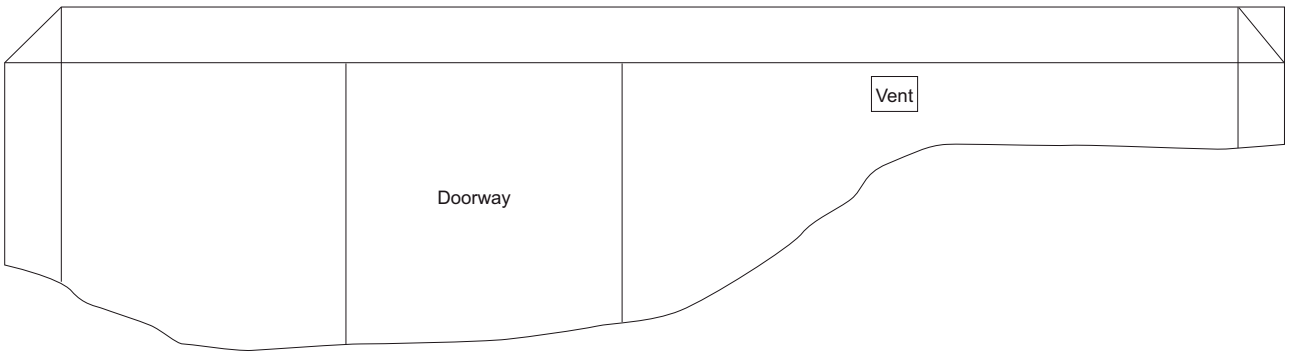


Figure 2: Plans of pillbox

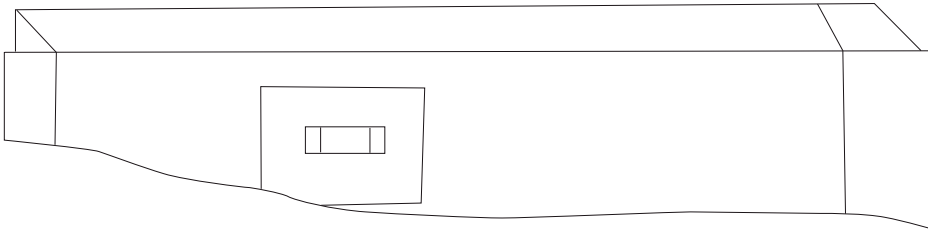
SW Facing



NE Facing



NW Facing



SE Facing

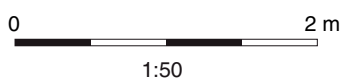
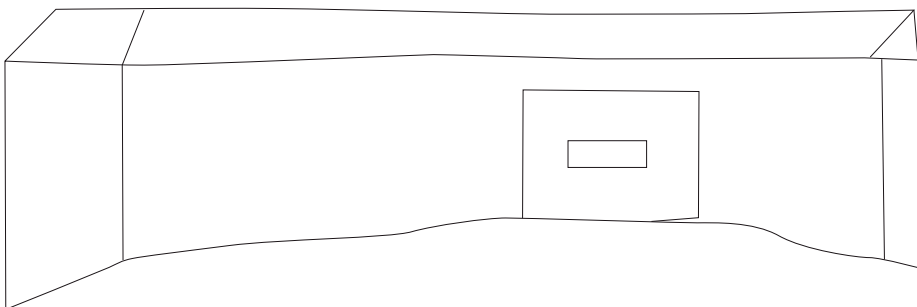


Figure 3: Elevations of pillbox



Plate 1: General view of pillbox from south-west



Plate 2: Main gun loop in south-west face of pillbox



Plate 3: Embrasure in south-west face of pillbox



Plate 4: Detail of south-west wall



Plate 5: Detail of embrasure in SW wall



Plate 6: Detail of south-west wall



Plate 7: General view from north-west



Plate 8: View from north-west



Plate 9: Detail of roof from north-west



Plate 10: Embrasure in north-west wall



Plate 11: Embrasure in north-west wall



Plate 12: South-east wall



Plate 13: Roof detail at north corner



Plate 14: Roof detail



Plate 15: Roof detail at north corner



Plate 16: North-east wall



Plate 17: Loop in SE wall



Plate 18: South-east wall



Plate 19: Detail of vent in north-east wall



Plate 20: Detail of vent in north-east wall



Plate 21: Internal view. NW facing loop in NW room



Plate 22: Internal view. NW facing loop in NW room



Plate 23: Vent detail



Plate 24: NW room looking west



Plate 25: NW room looking SW



Plate 26: Entrance in SE room



Plate 27: Loop detail in SE room looking SE



Plate 28: Loop detail in SE room looking SE



Plate 29: View through main gun embrasure into SE room



Plate 30: View through main gun embrasure into SE room



Plate 31: View out of main gun embrasure looking SW



Plate 32: Vent in NE wall



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