

CASTLEMARTIN'S LITTLE BIT OF TOBRUK

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Located in the far south west of Wales, the county of Pembrokeshire juts defiantly out into the Irish sea. In the winter, its rugged coastline is lashed by gales rushing in from the Atlantic. However, during the summer, its golden beaches are bathed in warm sunshine, drawing many visitors to the area.

There can be little doubt that, when these visitors walk along the coast path or sail on the quiet waters of the Daugleddau River, very few if any give a second thought to the troubled history of the area. The evidence is all about to see; Iron Age forts, medieval castles, Victorian forts, Second World War airfields etc. The majority of these structures were built to either resist invasion or to consolidate an invader's gains.

Located a few miles to the south east of this Henrician blockhouse is Castlemartin Range. This site can trace its origins back to the late 1930's, when plans were being made to expand the British Army in anticipation of a conflict with Nazi Germany. Originally, the War Office had intended to establish the range near the village of Coshleston. However, at the last moment, it was decided to construct Merriem Camp and its associate ranges on the coastal plain near Castlemartin.

Today the Castlemartin Tank Range is not only renowned for its excellent range facilities, but also for its coastal scenery, geology, wildlife, and its archaeology. During 1993, the knowledge of the archaeology of the range was substantially increased by two

three wartime sites of particular interest were noted;

- 1 RAF Warren, Chain Home (radar), Air Ministry Experimental Station No 70, West Lane, Warren.
- 2 Tank range blockhouses, target railways and bombing target, Trevalen Downs, St Govan's Head, Bosherton.
- 3 Tobruk shelters and associated structures, The Pole, Linney Burrows, Frainslake, Castlemartin.

RAF Warren was a 'West Coast' type Chain Home or CH station, equipped with four 325-foot guyed steel 'pencil' transmitter masts and two 240-foot timber receiver masts. It was sufficiently complete for operations to begin by 24 June 1940, although further work was



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Over the years, due to its numerous beaches and harbours, Pembrokeshire has offered a means of access to many invaders including Owain Glyndwr (1405), Henry Tudor (1485), and most recently the French invasion of Fishguard (1797). Indeed, it was Henry Tudor's flamboyant son, King Henry VIII, who initiated the construction of two artillery blockhouses overlooking the entrance to Milford Haven in 1538. The fragmentary remains of the East Blockhouse, Angle, was the subject of an archaeological survey commissioned in 1993 by the Defence Research Agency.

surveys. The first was carried out by Dyfed Archaeological Trust as a watching brief during the 'electrification' of the range, and the second as a part of a survey of disused 19th and 20th century military buildings, commissioned by the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park.

During the latter survey, over 100 features were inspected, and a wide variety of structures identified, ranging from trench and mound anti-glider ditches, through to a Stanton air raid shelter. The structures visited were scattered all over the tank range, and

carried out after this date. By February 1941, its function had been recognised by the Luftwaffe and it appeared on their target maps for the area.

RAF Warren acted as the 'parent' for the nearby Chain Home Low (CHL) radar station at St Twynells (AMES 70A), which became operational in July 1940. The site consisted of two Transmitter (Tx) Blocks, two Receiver (Rx) blocks, a Stand-by Set House, a Transformer Blockhouse, four Army Guard-Huts, an air raid shelter, and a small complex of huts.

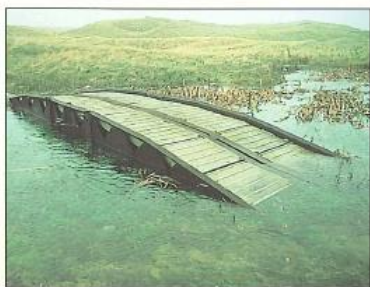
The second group of interesting structures are located on Trevalen Downs, which occupies the extreme south-east corner of the range, terminating in the towering cliffs of St Govan's Head. The Downs were used as a target area for tanks during the Second World War, and six of the original range blockhouses survive, one still functioning as a Lookout Post.

Each blockhouse is flanked by a pair of rough limestone walls, and consists of a small concrete room which is protected to the rear by a thick turf covered rock revetment, intended to absorb the odd stray round. The blockhouses have the appearance of Iron Age burial chambers, which, considering the ancient landscape, seems remarkably appropriate. Two pairs of the blockhouses are linked by tramways for moving targets.

During the early 1950's, Trevalen Downs gained a new use as a bombing range, being used predominantly by the Royal Navy. The bombing target remains

extant. It consists of three concentric stone circles centred on a stone cross. The cross is aligned on the cardinal points and the shafts terminate as stone arrow-points. Although this target is disused, a Royal Navy helicopter air-to-ground range still exists a little to the west on Newton Down.

The final, and perhaps the most intriguing group of structures to be considered are located on Linney Burrows, overlooking the broad sweep of Frainslake Sands and Blucks Pool beaches. The group consists of two observation posts, a pair of oval plan brick emplacements linked by a concrete ramp, two rectangular emplacements, and five complete and one blasted



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'Tobruk' shelter. In addition, an 'Army Track' steel mesh road runs through the area, crossing Frainslake Stream by way of a Churchill Bridgelay, 30-foot Tank Bridge.

The observation posts are semi-sunken, rectangular in plan, constructed of brick with pillars at each corner to support the flat reinforced concrete roofs, and are entered at the rear. The roofs of both observation posts have been on the receiving end of the explosive effects of 'Beehive' or similar shaped charges, leaving a neat circular hole blasted through the reinforced concrete of each roof. This damage was probably the handiwork of Royal Engineers attached to the 79th Armoured Division.

Associated with the observation posts are a pair of small, low brick walled emplacements linked by a concrete ramp, which produces an overall 'dumb-bell' plan. Each emplacement is entered by a small opening in the rear wall, just wide enough to walk through. It is uncertain what weapons these emplacements were intended to accommodate. Each emplacement is sufficiently large to accept a small field gun, but unfortunately there is no access for a wheeled gun carriage, unless planks were used to form a ramp. The low wall enclosing the emplacements could not have provided a great deal of cover, and it can only be assumed that the weapons used had their own shields, or sandbags were provided for their protection.

Due to the nature of their location and construction, the observation posts

and the dumb-bell emplacements appear to have been built as anti-invasion measures during 1940-41. However, the nearby 'Tobruk Shelters' and associated concrete emplacements present a number of problems in assessing both their date and function.

The Tobruk Shelter was a combined sentry and defence post built by the Italian Army, during their North African Campaign. The Australian Division of the British 8th Army was amongst the first Commonwealth units to encounter these shelters when they attacked Tobruk in January 1941. The Tobruk Shelter was a very simple yet effective fieldwork. It consisted of a small sunken chamber with a circular hole in the roof through which a soldier could keep watch, and fire his gun. The roof of the shelter was flush with the ground surface, thus presenting a very difficult target to spot and assault.

Upon their arrival in North Africa, the Afrika Korps was quick to adopt the Tobruk Shelter, giving it the name 'MG-Postenstand'. The Germans developed the shelter as an integral part of many of their 'Atlantic Wall' defences, ranging from the simple sentry post, through to a design armed with a tank turret.



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Six Tobruk Shelters conforming to the German design 'Typ 58c, 80 cm Ringstand für M.G.' are known to have existed on the Castlemartin Tank Range. All six were located on, or either side of, 'The Pole', a low limestone ridge which separates the beaches of Blucks Pool and Frainslake Sands. One overlooking Frainslake Sands has been blown apart by a demolition charge, however the remainder are all extant. The extant shelters are all built of reinforced concrete, and are shuttered internally using trench sheeting. Three are profiled into the headland and thus required no external shuttering. The other two are situated on sand dunes, and were shuttered externally with sandbags. The sandbags have long since decayed, leaving an indented rough surface.

The two shelters set in the dunes are associated with a pair of rectangular emplacements. Each emplacement consists of a reinforced concrete floor enclosed by concrete and sandbag walls. The walls are attached to the floor at

intervals by steel reinforcing rods. The walls have a remarkably rudimentary construction, consisting of sand filled bags, encased in concrete, shuttered by trench sheeting, held in place by steel picket posts. The northern emplacement has vertical walls, whilst the southern example has 'battered' or sloped walls. The southern emplacement is in poor condition, and the walls have been damaged by gunfire.

All of these defence works are well sited, commanding good fields of fire which interlock, and enfilade both Frainslake Sands and Blucks Pool beaches. The rectangular emplacements are set respectively some 150 metres back from each of the beaches, and due to their elevation, would have been very difficult to spot. The emplacements may have been built to accommodate artillery, but the existence of load-bearing reinforced concrete floors and wide entrances suggest that they were intended to be used by tanks in a 'hull down' fire support role.

The Tobruk Shelters and the two emplacements pose a number of problems, which have as yet to be answered. Were these structures erected as part of an anti-invasion defence scheme, or were they constructed for training purposes?

It is known that anti-invasion defences were prepared on the Castlemartin Tank Range, and that two 75 mm field guns were issued to Merrion Camp in 1940. Similar preparations were also made on the Lulworth Tank range, including digging emplacements for tanks to operate 'hull-down'. On the other hand, the British Army are not known to have constructed any Tobruk Shelters for 'Home Defence'.

The most likely answer, but one which still remains to be proven, is that these structures were built in the summer of 1943, for the 79th Armoured Division (Hobo's Funnies) - the unit tasked with overcoming German fortifications during the invasion of Europe. During August and September 1943, it came to hone its skills on the Linney Head battle-training area. A variety of reproduction German fortifications were built, and realistic battle practices were undertaken, to perfect beach assault, lane gapping, and other necessary techniques.

Today, these mouldering concrete structures stand as stark reminders of the momentous events of 50 years ago. As memories grow dim, and with the relentless passage of time, they are already slipping into the realms of history.

1 Tank Range Blockhouses and target tramway, Trevallen Downs.

2 Bombing Target, Trevallen Downs.

3 30 foot tank bridge, Frains Lake stream.

4 Tobruk shelter, Linney Burrows.
Photos: Roger J C Thomas

