

Account of Purley on Thames

Pill Boxes

R000191

Just before you get to the Roebuck, on the north side of the A329 is a strange concrete building almost hidden in the bushes. For those of us that can remember the war we can recognise it immediately but for the younger members it is somewhat of a mystery.

Let me take you back to 1937 when war with Germany was looming. The Home Office began preparations to meet three very apparent threats. The first was bombing from the air and several designs of bomb shelter for domestic use were built. There was the Anderson – an arrangement of curved corrugated iron sheets which could be assembled to cover over a hole you dug in the garden and to which you had to go when the sirens sounded. You were supposed to place all the soil you had dig from the hole on

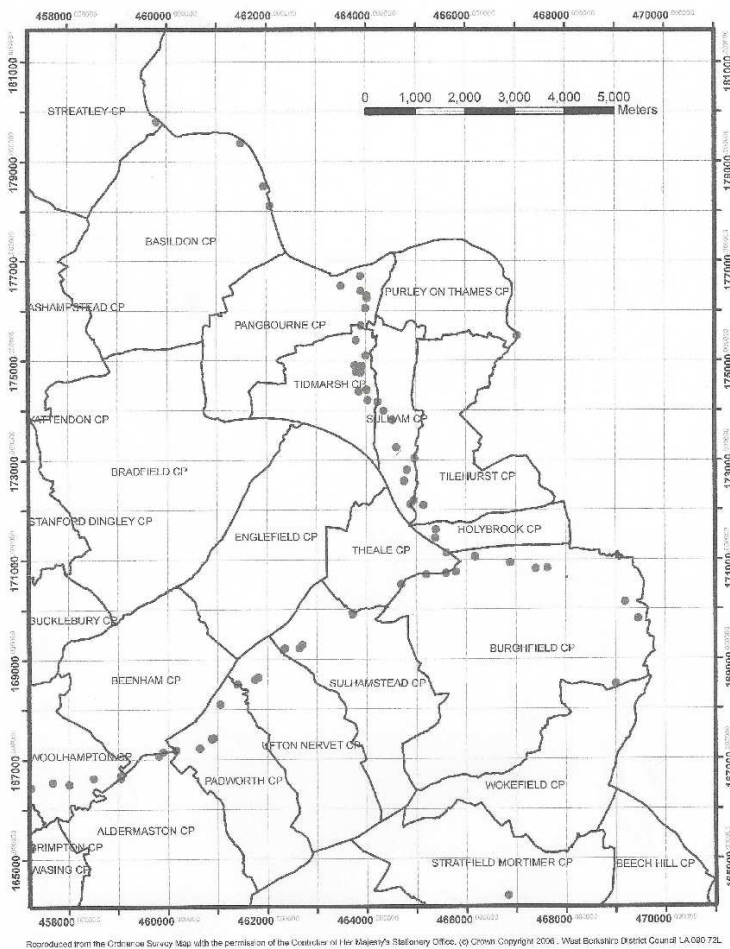


The Purley Pill-box near the Roebuck

top to camouflage it. My grandparents had one of these and they were absolutely useless as at the first sign of rain the water flooded into the hole so they were always dark and dank. The second most popular ones were the Morrison. These were great fun for children. They consisted of a sort of metal table which you could hide under when the sirens sounded and eat off it when they didn't. My Aunt had one and we used to make a camp there. The best advice is what we did – shore up the staircase and put a bed under it – I was sleeping there with my mother and baby brother when a bomb dropped in front of the house and blew it in and we were quite safe and snug, although the house was unusable after that. We were lucky as we evacuated to Gloucestershire and another family moved in. Then the house got a direct hit and they were all killed.

The second threat was gas. This had been used by both sides in the First World War and people were really terrified of it as there were still lots of men from that war around to tell the tale. Everyone was issued with a gas mask when war broke out. Children got one that made them look like Mickey Mouse, Babies were issued with a respirator box that was more likely to suffocate them than save them and adults got a traditional respirator mask in a small cardboard box which you were supposed to carry around with you all the time and put on as soon as the siren sounded. As school children we had regular practices – the head rang a bell and we all put on our masks and dived beneath our desks. As it turned out gas was not used.

The third threat was invasion. The first line of defence was to stop them even trying to invade by denying the Germans air and sea superiority and this is what actually succeeded but we were constantly told to be on our guard against German paratroopers dressed as nuns but what we were



Map of sites of Pill boxes to the west of Purley

supposed to do about it was never very clear. The second line of defence was obstacles on the beaches and guns on cliffs. These were backed up the Home Guards who were initially called Local Defence Volunteers. If this line failed then the plan was to fall back to a number of defensive lines across the country until they reached the Thames which was the last line of defence.

You can still trace these defensive lines as they are marked by pill boxes made of concrete of a type that had been developed in the First World War to protect machine gunners. They had a horizontal slit through which one could fire and were mostly of hexagonal shape as this eliminated sharp corners which could be attacked by heavy artillery and which allowed the gunners to have overlapping fields of fire. These pill boxes were often supplemented by tank traps and other obstacles but these have all gone now. They started building the pill boxes (that is what our concrete construction is) in May 1940 and they went on until late summer when the result of the Battle of Britain was more assured. During this

time some 15,000 of these were built and a very large number of them have survived.

They were built in one of two ways. The first was to build wooden shuttering and then pour concrete inside, reusing the shuttering on the next box when the concrete had set. The second was to build a brick skin instead of the shuttering and just leave it in place to give added protection. They were then painted or disguised in some way to make them look like a mound of earth or a farm building.

The only time most of them were used however was in practice for the D-Day invasion when they were used as targets by Allied gunners as the Germans were known to have constructed their own and they were trying to find the best way of destroying them. About a third of those built have been destroyed – mostly in 1944 – the rest have just been left and abandoned, as has ours. In later years there was a campaign to get rid of them but they were built of very good concrete and after a few years the concrete hardened and they were almost indestructible. Several attempts were made to blow some of them up but they did more damage to the surrounds than they did to the pill boxes. Nowadays many of them are listed buildings!

Some years ago Berkshire County Council Archaeology Department did a comprehensive survey of the ones in Berkshire and they are all now listed on the Sites and Monuments Record. The main line was known as the GHQ line and through Berkshire it followed the River Loddon then cross country to Burghfield and along the Kennet and Avon Canal before turning north through the Sulham Gap to join the Thames at Pangbourne and thence along the Thames westwards. Our box was a guard covering the road from Reading and was not part of the main line.