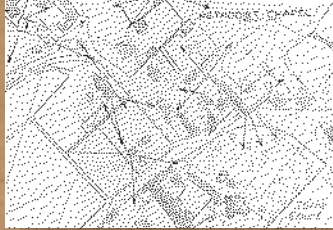


THE SARRE TRAIL

"...prepare the village of Sarre for all round defence, as an example for what might be done to other villages." 1st Canadian Pioneer Battalion War Diary

The village of Sarre developed at a key road junction on the approach to the Isle of Thanet. In 1940 it also controlled one approach to RAF Manston.

In July, because of its strategic importance, the village was turned into a strong-point by the 1st Canadian Pioneer Battalion.



Portion of a map drawn by Canadian Engineers showing the defences of Sarre

Sarre was to be a model defence village. The Battalion was instructed "...to prepare the village of Sarre for all round defence, as an example for what might be done to other villages."

The village was divided into a Company HQ with three platoon areas. Many buildings, including houses were fortified, roadblocks were established and pipe mines were placed under the roads and bridges.

This trail will explore the key sites of Second World War defence around Sarre. We shall explore the methods by which the government hoped to resist enemy invasion and highlight the rich archaeological landscape available to those interested in the history of defence.

The walk starts at The Crown Inn which was used by RAF pilots from Manston during the war. Their names can still be seen scratched on the window glass.

Please note that all the properties featured in this trail are private property.

Starting from The Crown Inn, follow the A28 up the hill to the right.

SARRE

START

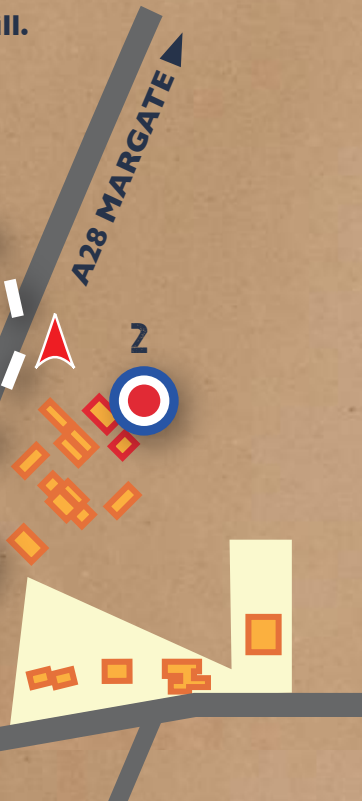
1. PILLBOX

This ruinous pillbox is one of a number of pillboxes which were placed in Sarre during the war. Three of these survive today in the village. Pillboxes are cast concrete guard posts which included weapons ports. There are many types of pillbox, the most common being the Type 22 Pillbox, two of which can be seen in Sarre forming an outer perimeter of the defences to the south. The third pillbox was a Type 23 with a central well for an anti-aircraft gun. These are rectangular and are most commonly found in Lincolnshire rather than in Kent.



Type 23 Pillbox. Copyright Andy Brockman

Continue up the hill.



2. SARRE MILL

Sarre Windmill is a grade two listed smock mill. Built in 1820 by millwright John Holman it was a working mill producing stone ground flour until the 1930s. In the Second World War the height and location of the mill was taken advantage of as an observation post. A number of defences were placed around the mill including machine gun posts and pillboxes.



Sarre Mill defended observation post. Copyright Andy Brockman

Cross the road. The quarry ahead of you is the Underground Headquarters.

3. THE UNDERGROUND HEADQUARTERS

At the start of the war the 1st (London) Infantry Brigade of 56 Division (formerly the 1st (London) Division) was responsible for the defence of Sarre. This brigade was later replaced by the 128th Infantry Brigade and then in 1941 by the 131st Infantry Brigade. The Brigade's headquarters were located at Sarre Court, the large Manor House opposite The Crown Inn. In addition, a large underground battle headquarters was built in the disused quarry.



WWII Nissen Huts by the underground bunker. Copyright Andy Brockman

The ruined wartime Nissen huts on the floor of the quarry were probably built to serve a nearby anti-aircraft battery.

Continue up the road and follow the footpath on the left around the quarry, bearing round to the left. Follow the path down to the road. On the right hand side is the former King's Head public house.

5. THE KING'S HEAD

The King's Head Inn was the central "keep" within the defence scheme where the troops would make their last stand against the invaders. Here Canadian Engineers improvised a giant petrol bomb ignited by phosphorous grenades which could be released to swing across the road and incinerate incoming German tanks and vehicles. There are rumours of tunnels linking various buildings enabling the troops to change location without being seen.



The King's Head unit headquarters. Copyright Andy Brockman

Walk down the hill past the King's Head. Turn right into Old Road. The large house where the road turns round to the left was a defended house. Follow the path for 300 metres to a bridge over the River Wantsum.

6. BRIDGE

Both bridges (this one and the one which you can see to your left) on the southern edge of the village were prepared for demolition. Pipes were placed under the road and filled with explosives with the aim of destroying the bridge and creating a flooded ditch which would be difficult to cross under machine gun fire from the strong-points in the houses.



Defended road bridge across the A28.

Now return to the village by the same path.

4. DEFENDED HOUSES

Preparations were made for civilian houses, such as Sarre House to be fortified as defensive strong points. The houses would be strengthened with thick concrete to protect them from tank and machine-gun fire. The troops manning these strong points would attempt to control the area around them with machine guns to create overlapping fields of fire where any attacker would be fired on from at least two positions. Sarre House was a heavily defended strong-point during the Second World War.

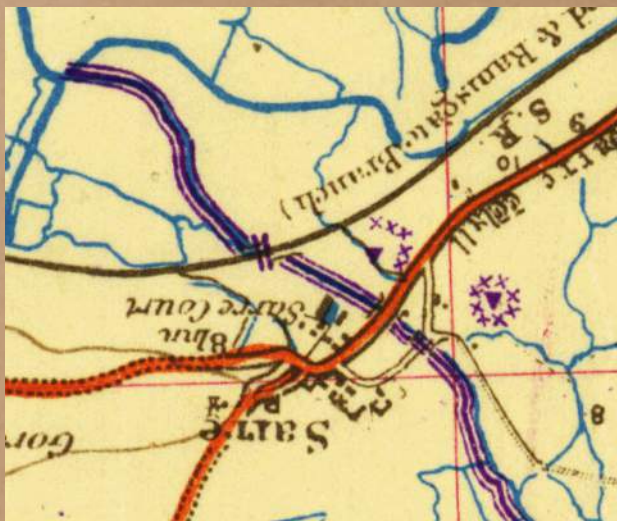


Sarre House was a heavily defended strong-point during the Second World War



The physical evidence of this fascinating period in our history is all around us if you know where to look and public archives are ever expanding.

German Air Force 'Luftwaffe' reconnaissance map of Sarre defences.



Faded lettering of a Second World War sign still evident on a Sarre village wall.
Copyright Andy Brockman



Civilians would play an important part in this plan. In addition to those serving in the Home Guard, the government had plans for a secret civilian resistance, the Auxiliary Units. These Top Secret groups were tasked with slowing down and harassing enemy forces in the event of an invasion. This would be dangerous work. Members were informed that they would probably survive for at most two weeks and their actions might lead to reprisals against the civilian population. Thankfully mainland Britain never saw an invasion and the Home Guard and the Auxiliary Units' training was never tested.

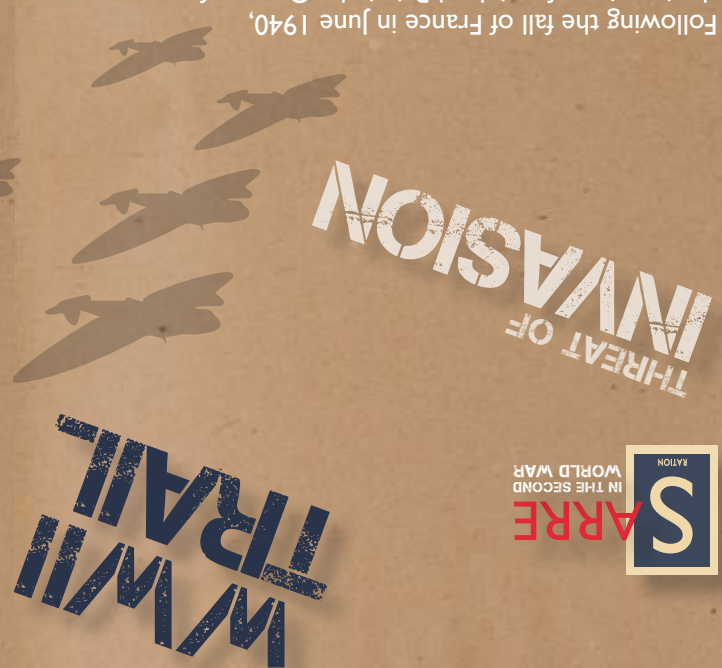
"We shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be. We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender".

If Britain were to be invaded the government intended that the German army would face bitter resistance. In his famous speech on 4th June 1940 Prime Minister Winston Churchill declared.

Nonetheless, the threat of invasion was very real. In preparation for this, the government took a number of measures, including the fortification of beaches along the south coast, the formation of the Local Defence Volunteers (soon renamed the Home Guard) and the building of defensive works such as pillboxes all over the UK.

Following the fall of France in June 1940, the invasion of mainland Britain by German forces looked imminent and rumours about when, where and how the German army would come were widespread. Some even believed that "Fifth Columnists" or parachutists would pose as the Red Cross while another rumour circulated that the invasion would begin with German parachutists dressed as nuns.

The position of Kent, facing the ports on the French and Belgian coast, meant that fears of invasion were particularly strong. On 16th July 1940 the South Eastern Gazette tried to reassure its readers, declaring that the rumours were detrimental to public morale and for this reason "The general public must do their bit by being continuously on guard against false rumours such as these".



WWII TRAIL

Sarre was never actually invaded but the village still felt the pain and dislocation of war.

Children and other people considered non-essential under the Defence Regulations were evacuated. Several civilians were killed when Sarre was hit by German bombs during a major air raid on RAF Manston on 12 August 1940. The Canadian troops helped deal with the aftermath of the incident.

What is left is a unique record of a model defended village which was designed to put into practice Winston Churchill's promise to turn the fields, streets and landing grounds of Britain into a fortress which would never surrender.

FIND OUT MORE

Now you have explored the Government's attempt to prepare Sarre as a potential battlefield, why not look around your own home area to see what remains of the attempts to stop the Blitzkrieg had it come to the streets of Britain over seventy years ago.

You can find out more about the Second World War on the Home Front and the steps taken to defend Britain against potential invasion on these websites:

The Defence of Britain Project:
archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/dob/

The Pillbox Study Group:
pillbox-study-group.org.uk/

BBC History:
bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwtwo/

Information on Second World War defence sites in Kent can also be found on the Kent Historic Environment Record kent.gov.uk/HER

If you know anyone in your community who lived through the Second World War and might have memories of the Home Front why not talk to them and if they agree, record their stories?



Photo Imperial War Museum.

If your community contains surviving buildings from the Second World War such as pillboxes make sure people appreciate them for what they are - increasingly rare and important survivals of a time when Britain's fate hung in the balance. They need to be preserved against the day when the last living witnesses are gone and all that is left to tell the story of perhaps the most momentous summer in British history are concrete, photographs and records in the archives.

HOW TO GET THERE

Car: Sarre is 8 miles from Canterbury and 7 miles from Ramsgate on the A28. Parking and refreshments are available at The Crown Inn.

Bus: Stagecoach services 8, 8A and 9 serve Sarre village from Canterbury and Thanet.

The trail is approximately 1.6km long with parts being off road, so is not accessible for wheelchairs or prams.

Every effort has been made to ensure that all information given in this trail is correct at time of going to print (July 2013). No liability can be accepted by the authors for any loss, damage or injury caused by errors or omissions in this wording. Content advised by Andy Brockman and Rod Scott.

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