

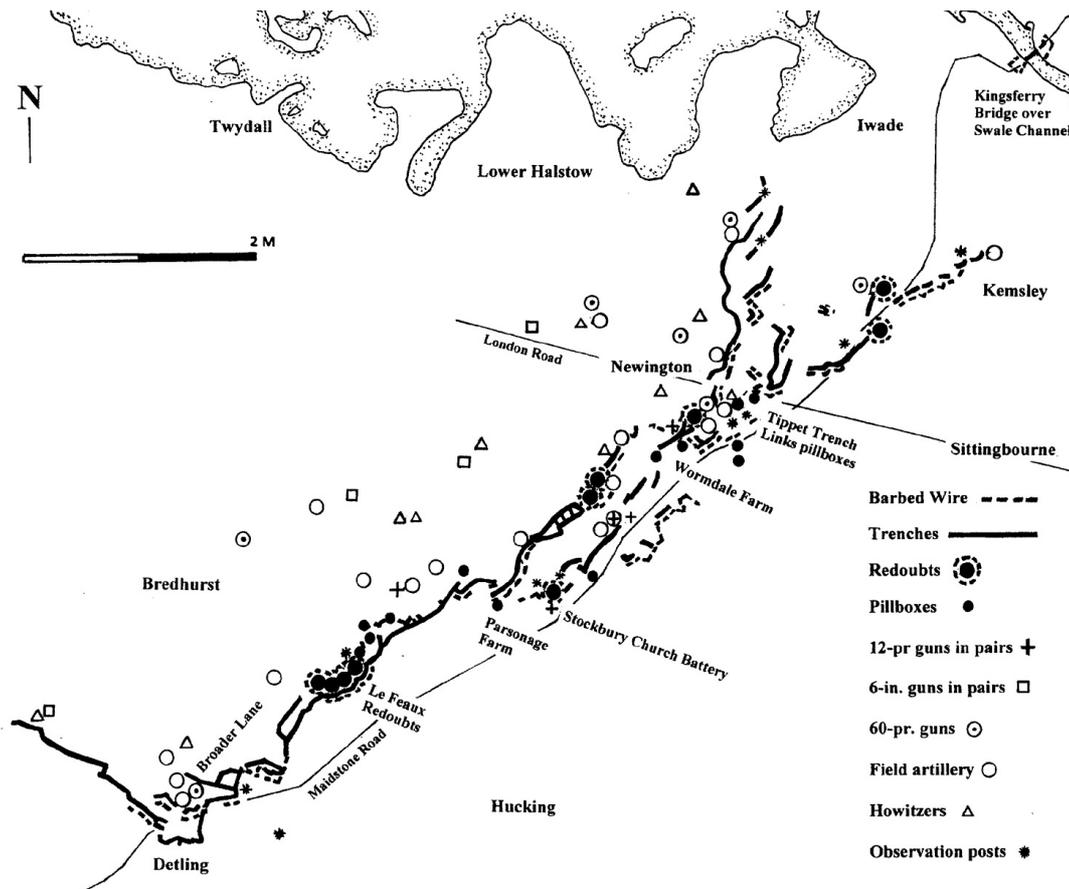
The importance of the site of the Kent Showground to military history.

Although the importance of RAF Detling in WW2 is well known the broader history of the area is less well understood. The historical record suggests that the first evidence of military activity commenced with the use of the site of the future Thurnham Castle, south East of the site, as a watch tower by the Roman Army. The key aspect of this decision was the height advantage offered by the ridge giving defenders excellent views into the plain below. It was then developed by the Saxon noble Godardis, becoming Godard Castle. By the 12<sup>th</sup> Century the site had become a fortress for the de Say family and later Robert de Thurnham. He commanded the English fleet for Richard 1<sup>st</sup> but died on crusade and the 'castle fell into decay being abandoned as a fortification by 1215.

To the North East of the site there is a quite well preserved Motte and Bailey Castle built under the orders of Bishop Odo of Bayeux a key supporter of William 1<sup>st</sup> in 1066 and a cleric that served in the Battle of Hastings. The original structure featured a raised earth Motte with an adjacent Bailey or enclosure protected by a ditch and palisade. Bishop Odo made Earl of Kent by William 1 and ruled England in his absence in Normandy. However he was disgraced in 1082 after an apparent plot to usurp William's heir, William II, and having forfeited his lands he left for the Crusades dying in Sicily in 1097. By this time the castle had passed to Aubervilliers and by the 13<sup>th</sup> Century to Nicolas de Criol. Ultimately the site became part of the Manor of Binbury providing the name 'Binbury castle'. The existing stone walls probably date from his period and are examples of a rare walled bailey. The other example is to be found at Thurnham Castle close by.

Had the Armada of 1588 been successful there is a good chance that the Spanish Army would have stormed Maidstone before moving on to the capital, but this did not occur. Kent being in the heartland of Parliament was relatively peaceful in the English Civil War, 1638-51, the Royalist Army of the Second Civil War passed to the South West in 1648 before being defeated at Maidstone by Sir Thomas Fairfax. Although fortifications were built around Chatham and along the Medway from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century plans for the defence of these key Naval bases and stores did not include the area around Detling.

On the outbreak of the Great War in July 1914 it appeared possible that German would attempt an amphibious landing in Kent possibly to attack the Royal Navy's facilities at Chatham or with great ambition. Once again the importance of the high ground running roughly South West to North East from Maidstone to the Swale estuary became a key piece of ground for defence. The anti-invasion lines stretched between Detling (close to Maidstone, Kent) to the Swale and Sheppey crossing. Then along the north coast and high ground of Sheppey from Sheerness to Shellness. Called the Chatham Land Front it developed into an impressive piece of military engineering.



It was constructed from 1915 used for training troops destined for the Western Front including engineers and infantry and used some of the new developments in technology including pillboxes. The mainland section mainly comprised several lines of trenches and wire entanglement supported by hundreds of machine gun positions, pill boxes and buried redoubts and other strong points. Positions for artillery were allocated to the rear. The Swale was crossed by pontoon bridge, the Medway entrance was boomed and the whole of the Sheppey north coast had battery and artillery positions that could turn inland and provide covering fire as well as against amphibious landing.

Linked to the Land Front was the importance of aerial reconnaissance and from 1916 RNAS, later RAF Detling was constructed and used by both Naval and Army aircraft until 1919. By 1918 Detling was at the end of a 'Patrol Line' for British aircraft to intercept enemy attackers. It was also on the very edge of the anti-aircraft outer 'Gun Fire Line' defending London. Binbury Manor was used for the first experiments to detect incoming enemy aircraft using a Sound Mirror. This was constructed as a disc cut into a low chalk cliff in 1915 and then copied for use elsewhere.



An example of a 'pill box' formed using corrugated iron with some camouflage on the 'enemy' side

The area around Detling formed a 'refused flank' semi redoubt with extensive trenches, barbed wire field and heavy artillery with observation posts to the front. Critically the artillery used here was the latest type rather than the obsolete equipment used elsewhere on the front.



A section of the defence line in woodland. Note the presence of large irregular flint identical to those found at Detling. Here the trenches are the 'command type' built up rather than dug in although both types were used.



Is this the same feature in Murrain Wood?

After the Great War this was little to show of RAF Detling. With a grass landing strip and canvas hangers and tents little remained in the post war period until the site was redeveloped by the RAF on the eve of the Second World War and became operational in 1939. The motto of RAF Detling was 'Dare to be wise'.

The station was occupied by a variety of squadrons during its operation service and the aircraft types include those for anti shipping operations and Spitfires and two engine bombers.



RAF Detling showing position of existing trench

The airfield was subject to a Luftwaffe air raid on 13<sup>th</sup> August 1940 in which 67 personnel were killed, including the base commander, and 94 injured. The raid was complicated by bad communication with The Observer Corps who tracked the raid and a misunderstanding on the ground concerning the identification of the aircraft involved. The airbase was in use throughout the war and decommissioned in 1959. Following the use of paratroops and gliders in the invasion of France and Low countries in 1940 the risk of airfield being captured by airborne forces became apparent. This would have been a key element in any Nazi invasion of Britain, Operation Sealion. These defenses could also be incorporated into a stop line built in roughly the same area as the Great War Chatham Defense Line. The ridge provided a location for the original 'Diver Belt' of anti-aircraft guns to shoot down V1's from June 1944 until the belt was moved closer to the coast.



WW2 Pill Box on Detling Hill

The area around Detling is rich in military archeology and multiple layers of military history stringing from the Roman period to the Second World War reinforce the significance of the site. The importance of the ridge means that some of the 'new' structures utilising existing defenses such as the pillboxes and other shelters built into the Binbury Motte and Bailey.

A search of the Kent County councils Historical Maps indicates just how much survives in the area.

<https://webapps.kent.gov.uk/KCC.HeritageMaps.Web.Sites.Public/Default.aspx?entity=monument&recid=MKE17210>

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# First World War Fieldworks in England

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## Medway to Swale Defence Line, Kent Isle of Sheppey, Kent

The Isle of Sheppey is tactically significant as a result of its northern face overlooking the Thames estuary. The town and Naval base of Sheerness occupies the northerly point of the island and controls the entrance to the Medway. Pre-existing defences along the coast of Sheppey were extended and improved following the outbreak

of war, with new works being added, which served both training and defensive purposes. Eventually an extensive frontage was developed with wire entanglements, redoubts and trenches that defended the coast from Sheerness, in the north-west, to Shellness, on the south-east corner of the island (Smith 2016: fig 8). The fortifications were also supported by gun batteries both on the island and as part of the Stockbury Valley defences (Smith 2014). The trenches mirrored those seen elsewhere with defence in depth, provided by multiple lines of trenches and they also integrated and improved localised defences to strategic installations, including the Eastchurch airfield and Kingsferry Bridge (Anstee & Smith 2014: Sheppey, fig 2). The frontage was also strengthened by the construction of clusters of concrete pillboxes. The defence works also extended beyond the coastal crust, with arms reaching back inland, as well as detached positions along higher ground overlooking the marshes and intended to create killing zones into which the enemy were funnelled (Smith 2016: 79). The use of terrain and detached, fortified positions not only prefigures defensive strategy in the Second World War in Kent and Sussex, but also the use of detached fortification set out in the 1908 Manual; however, the extensive nature of the fortifications resembles the trenches of the Western Front, with trenches and fire connecting redoubts, strong points and pillboxes. They expressed defence in depth intended to delay enemy advance until counter attacks could be initiated (Smith 2014a).

## Stockbury Valley

The defences of Sheppey were not restricted to the defences of the barbed wire island alone. A defence system was set out to the south-west of the River Swale, running along and behind the London Road (now the A2). The defences were intended to impede an enemy advance, deny them use of the London Road and to protect road and rail. These defences, which ran south from Sheppey and then south-west to Detling, have been extensively investigated as part of the Defence of Swale project (Smith 2014). Like the Sheppey defences these works were of a complexity comparable to the Western Front, including a series of pill boxes and, where the geology allowed, submerged machine gun emplacements, notably at Tunnel hill, above Chestnut Street but evident elsewhere in the defences too (Smith 2014). The Defence of Swale project has seen significant elements of the defence scheme recorded, allowing the level and complexity of fieldworks, supporting barbed wire entanglements and pillboxes to be readily understood (Anstee & Smith 2014: fig 2; fig 14) and contemporary photographs and original plans held in the Royal Engineers Museum Library have supported efforts to identify extant remains (Anstee & Smith 2014: fig 11 and fig 16). These works should be seen as part of an integrated scheme with those on Sheppey itself, not only were the fieldworks © HISTORIC ENGLAND 44 61 - 2017

mutually supporting, the heavy guns in fixed batteries on Sheppey and in prepared emplacements such as Church Battery above the Stockbury Valley were sited to provide mutual support (Anstee & Smith 2014: fig 26), while 37 positions for mobile artillery were also prepared (Smith, Anstee & Mason 2014).