

AN AUXILIARY UNIT 'HIDE' (OPERATIONAL BASE)  
AT CILYBEBYLL, NEATH AND PORT TALBOT

*Martin Locock [1]*

INTRODUCTION

In May 1940, the prospect of imminent invasion of Britain led to the creation of the Home Defence Executive under Sir Edmund Ironside. The fall of France followed shortly afterwards, requiring the preparation of a strategy for the defence of the island by a small mobile reserve and limited support from fixed defences and the newly-formed Home Guard.

The creation of a 'coastal crust' of defended and obstructed possible landing sites was supplemented by a series of 'stop lines', exploiting natural barriers enhanced by obstacles and strongpoints, to delay an invasion force and protect the central areas (Wills 1985). The most significant of these lines was the GHQ line, running from Edinburgh and Bridgwater to London. In Wales, successive rivers were chosen, including the Rivers Wye, Usk, and Neath (Locock 1994; Kerr 1994). The limited number of crossings were protected by pillboxes, and arrangements were made for the demolition of unwanted bridges.

In June 1940, a new military formation was created, 'Auxiliary Units, Home Forces', to operate as a guerilla force 'to act offensively on the flanks and in the rear of any German troops who may obtain a temporary foothold in this country' (PRO WO 199/738) To perform this role, small teams of 'local men who know their countryside intimately' were recruited from the Home Guard and given specialist training in sabotage. The Units were organised into patrols, a leader and six men, and each patrol had a specially-constructed Operational Base (also called a hide or hide-out), usually hidden in woodland, to store munitions and to occupy in the case of invasion; it was envisaged that the patrol would lie up during the day and emerge at night to carry out its activities (Bradford 1992). In order to preserve secrecy, the Auxiliary Unit structure was kept separate from the local command and the Home Guard, and the recruits were encouraged to conceal their role from constructed their friends and families.

THE AUXILIARY UNIT OPERATIONAL BASE

The primary requirements for the OB were that they should be concealed, habitable and reasonably weatherproof. A standard design was used, comprising an underground chamber, roofed with corrugated iron: the end walls were brick, with a brick shaft at one end leading to the main entrance, and an escape at the other end with a second brick shaft, measuring c. 2.5m x 4.5m (PRO WO199/1517). The shafts were concealed by camouflaged trap-doors. Because of the camouflage and secrecy associated with these buildings, they are poorly represented in records of known sites from the period (see for example Locock 1996).

The example at Cilybebyll, in woodland 100m northwest of Plas Cilybebyll house (SN 750 043: it is on private land), survives in good condition (fig. 1); the author was invited to investigate the site by the landowner. On the surface, the OB is visible as a slightly-raised area; at the north end, the shafts are visible as brick features, no longer hidden by a trap door. There is little doubt that when constructed it would have been concealed from all but the closest scrutiny (fig. 2).

The interior now has a flooded floor. A winch arrangement on the entrance wall survives: this may have been attached to an aerial for radio communications or to the trap door. An alcove on the east side of the door may have been for the radio equipment.



Figure 1: Interior showing corrugated iron roofing and escape opening.



Figure 2: The surface, showing escape shaft

#### THE ROLE OF THE CILYBEBYLL SITE

Although no documentary evidence for the OB has been located, its location is significant, in wooded land to the north of the Neath valley. Had an invasion force arrived in southwest Wales (perhaps using Milford Haven as a deep-water harbour, and perhaps starting from Eire, as was feared at the time), it would have encountered resistance at Carmarthen - New Quay (Glover 1990), Ammanford, the River Loughor, the Swansea valley, the Neath valley and the River Taff (Redfern 1998).

Each stop line would have forced a delay while a set-piece assault was prepared. If the small number of bridges strong enough to take tanks were demolished, temporary engineering works would also have been required; one of the key functions of the pillboxes guarding river crossings was to prevent their seizure by parachute forces to forestall their demolition.

Thus it was planned that the invading force would have been held up on the west bank of the Neath valley for days or weeks; in the meantime, the Auxiliary Unit patrol would have numerous opportunities to cause further disruption and delay.

The occasion for use did not occur; there was some discussion in the latter stages of the war about the future of the OBs, along with the disbanding of the Auxiliary Units (PRO WO 198/738), and although demolition of the sites was proposed, many seem to have been simply abandoned, and survive as monuments to a short period when the tranquil landscape of the Neath uplands was viewed as a possible battle zone.

### *Acknowledgements*

The author is grateful to Richard Bowen of Plas Farm, and to Roger Thomas (English Heritage) and Jenny Hall (Cambria Archaeology) for their assistance with the research.

### *References*

Bradford, G, 1992, The British resistance movement, 1940-44, *Secret Armies* 51.

Glover, D G, 1990, A Command Stop Line at Rhos Llangeler with further references to Pembrey and Burry Port, *Carmarthenshire Antiquary* 26, 81-90.

Kerr, A G, 1994, Defence of the Usk and Wye valleys, *Loopholes (Journal of the Pillbox Study Group)* 9 (September 1994), 2-4.

Locock, M, 1994, The Neath valley defences, *Loopholes (Journal of the Pillbox Study Group)* 7 (March 1994), 17- 21.

Locock, M, 1996, The archaeology of the Second World War in Gwent, *Monmouthshire Antiquary* 12: Essays in honour of Jeremy K Knight, 68-72.

Public Record Office, 1940, WO 199/738 *Auxiliary Units, Home Forces by Col. D Gubbins.*

Public Record Office, 1941, WO 199/1517 XC 17277 *Auxiliary Unit shelter, C E 9 Corps, drawing no. 2/11/41.*

Public Record Office, 1941, WO 198/738 *Economy in manpower: note by Col. C Dubbins.*

Redfern, N I, 1998, *Twentieth century fortifications on the United Kingdom 2: site gazetteers, Wales*, unpublished report to Cadw: Welsh Historic Monuments, CBA, York.

Wills, H, 1985, *Pillboxes: a study of UK defences 1940*, Leo Cooper, London.

(1) *Glamorgan-Gwent Archaeological Trust, Ferryside Warehouse, Bath Lane, Swansea SA1 1RD*