

Nether Stowey OB July 2018

Excavation record

Entrance

The initial survey had identified that the visible doorway in the concrete block wall was not the exterior entrance to the OB. The excavator with broad smooth blade was used to scrape back the surface from 1 foot from the doorway outwards. Excavating approximately 6 inches down from the surface there was a lip identified 6 feet from the doorway, which appeared much firmer than the rest of the material being scraped back. Two pieces of glazed 4-inch diameter pipe also appeared at the surface. The surface was cleaned and this revealed a darker area extending from the doorway for 6 feet with the surrounding area composed of a much denser red brown soil. This was approximately the width of the doorway. Separating the two materials on the north side was a continuous line of corrugated iron in a vertical position. Exactly 6 feet from the doorway was a small piece of corrugated iron bent at right angles headed towards the other side. The corrugated iron was very fragile and corroded. In the centre of the darker area, 6 inches from the doorway was a bent piece of heavier duty corrugated iron

Excavating from this level identified 3 pipes in a line from the north side of the doorway to the south side of the darker area furthest from the OB. The pipe nearest the doorway was smashed into fragments. The next pipe was intact but almost vertically embedded. The third was at an angle of approx. 45 degrees intact other than the collar end which had been damaged by the digger blade. The pipes were associated with fragments of timber and corroded nails. The pipes were excavated and on removal were found to have an impressed logo added prior to being glazed.

Further machine followed by hand excavation into the darker material allowed the vertically aligned corrugated sheeting on the north wall to be cleared to the level of a concrete floor. Adjacent the doorway was a vertical piece of 4x2 timber with the broad edge against the corrugated iron. A piece of three steel core insulated wire was found on the bottom concrete slab floor running close to the north wall. It turned upwards xx inches from the doorway, running in the groove of the corrugated iron. A small length of 1 inch diameter steel pipe was found in the fill just above the level of the floor at the same position as the vertical wire section. The wire was traced into the fill of the main chamber on the north side. On the south side a short section of corrugated iron was found to the base of the fill tilted inward from the top. This section was at the east end of the fill. The floor of the area was composed of concrete slabs laid end to end that were 3ft ½ inches long and at least 2 foot 9 inches wide.

Interpretation

The findings show that there was a narrow tunnel extending 6 feet from the extant concrete block wall. The tunnel had corrugated iron walls composed of vertically aligned sheets at least 6 feet tall, as otherwise the doorway would have been shorter. This was held in place by timber framework and nails. The positioning of the glazed pipes indicates that there was a line of pipes running above the tunnel at least three lengths long. The close association of the timber fragments and nails suggests that there was either a timber roof to this tunnel or a timber frame and corrugated iron roof. It is possible that the heavier duty corrugated iron fragment may have been part of this roof. The roof with pipework on top appears to have collapsed into the tunnel. The tunnel was at least 7 feet high based on the height of the doorway. The east end of this tunnel was measured at 2 feet 9 inches, wider than the doorway. It is likely that there was a shaft opening to the surface at this end, although no definite evidence of this was identified, nor any evidence of a mechanism for a hatch.

West end shaft

At the west end of the main chamber is a brick chamber accessed by a doorway. The chamber was excavated downwards from the surface by machine. This was because it was loosely filled with mixed debris, making manual excavation unsafe due to the risk of collapse. A large quantity of mixed metal debris was removed including metal feeder, a TV aerial and chicken wire and a smaller wire mesh, none of which appeared to be of wartime manufacture. Once a firm solid fill was reached the surface was cleared by hand and excavated evenly to a depth of 6 inches further. The doorway was 2 feet 6 inches wide, the chamber being 3 feet 2 ½ inches wide and 3 feet 1 ½ inches long. The westerly brick wall was blank.

The south wall contained a 4-inch glazed pipe set horizontally 2 inches down from the top of the wall, 4 feet 1-0 ½ inches from the ground surface. The centre of the pipe was placed 1 foot 9 inches from the east wall. A further 4-inch glazed pipe rose vertically from behind this wall precisely aligned with the end on pipe visible. The top of this pipe was broken during excavation.

The north wall was largely composed of two 2-foot 3-inch internal diameter concrete pipes set one on top of the other. The top north and south walls showed evidence of a corrugated sheet set lengthways between these walls to provide a roof at this level. The upper of the concrete pipe sections was blind ending with concrete blocks inside it. The lower section was the first section of a 39 feet long tunnel composed of concrete pipe sections (see tunnel exit). Looking along this tunnel the light at the end of the tunnel could be seen. The brick walls are unusually for an OB constructed of wire cut extruded bricks with 12 holes (pots). Between the north wall of this chamber, the east (end) wall of the main chamber and the concrete pipe was a void. There appeared no purpose to this and it may represent a void left during construction.

As the OB was to be backfilled it was decided not to excavate deeper within this chamber. The depth meant that further extensive excavation would be required to go deeper safely.

Interpretation

It appears that this chamber was not as first thought an entrance or exit shaft. There is evidence that it had a corrugated iron roof 4 feet 8 ½ inches below the ground surface. The purpose appears to have been to allow the escape tunnel to exit perpendicular to the main chamber axis. The tunnel extends in a straight line away from the chamber. The blind ending section of pipe appears to have been used as a storage area, though this is an unusual arrangement, and possibly it was being used as a decoy exit, with the true exit disguised by a doorway or similar to deceive anyone pursuing the OB's occupants as they attempt to escape. The smaller glazed pipes formed a hot air vent placed at the top of the chamber. It may be that the escape tunnel formed the inward cold air ventilation as no evidence of other vents around the shaft was found.

Escape tunnel exit

The escape tunnel exits 39 feet from the entrance in the small chamber of the OB. A trench 3 feet by 3 feet was excavated over the terminal sections of the tunnel to identify if this had been tunnelled into position or placed in a trench dug from the surface and covered. The soil above the pipe sections was reddish brown and there were no contrasts to indicate where a cut was made. The soil was loose and in places there were areas of dark brown topsoil. The terminal section of concrete pipe was 2 feet 11 inches long with a lip of 2 ¼ inches to interlock with the next section. At the end were two complete circles of red clay brick curved interlocking hollow sections. Previous

excavation at the very end had revealed a partial third row of these bricks and a loose brick. These were 9 inches by 5 7/8 inches on their outer surfaces. Immediately on top of the concrete pipe were found 2 short lengths of lead covered cable.

Interpretation

The tunnel was built from 2-foot 11-inch concrete pipe sections laid end to end with no sealant. The terminal end of the tunnel had at least three rows of red curved bricks for some unidentified reason. The presence of the pieces of lead coated wire cable on top of the concrete pipe confirm that these were constructed by a trenched technique rather than tunnelled. This type of wire was only used pre-war. It is known that some OBs had lighting for the escape tunnel from a battery.