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Tynninghame and Hedderwick beach defences - East Lothian





Defending the coast

In times of conflict Britain has always kept a careful eye on her European neighbours for fear of attack or invasion. Never more so than during the Second World War. Following the defeat in Norway and the humiliation of both the French and British armies in Northern France, Britain faced the very real prospect of invasion. Defensive measures were quickly drawn up by General Edmund Ironside, the officer charged with defending Britain, who advocated that fixed defences, or 'Stop Lines', should be established across the UK; and in particular, the construction of beach defences. Described as a 'coastal crust', the defences were designed to delay, restrict and reduce the invading forces until a coordinated response could be mobilised by the British army.

In preparation, the whole coast of the UK was assessed in terms of its potential for invasion and where weaknesses were perceived these beaches were strengthened by the rapid construction of defences. The most self-evident today are the anti-tank blocks: lines of large concrete cubes designed to stop vehicles and tanks from leaving the beach. However, these were augmented by tangles of barbed wire laid between and around them, while other deterrents such as minefields, pillboxes and anti-tank ditches increased their resistance. All were designed to slow the enemy down and restrict their movements to the beach where they would become easy prey for the defending troops and air force.

The East Lothian coastline between Port Seton and Dunbar was appraised as particularly at threat from a seaborne landing due to its gently sloping beaches and relatively sheltered water. In June 1940, Scottish Command identified two especial areas of concern: Tentsmuir in Fife and the beaches to the west of Dunbar – namely those at Hedderwick, and Tynninghame. A document of October 1940, entitled 'Scottish Command Defence Scheme', provides a detailed insight into the plans for these vulnerable areas, together with maps of the fixed defences. These were supplemented by additional works, which were constructed up to at least 1942. Soldiers from across the UK, including hundreds of Polish servicemen, worked for months building the coastal 'crust' in East Lothian and all along the Scottish seaboard.





What now survives

A walk along the shore at Hedderwick and Tynninghame is a walk through the remains of these defences. Some are clearly visible, others require more careful inspection, but a surprising proportion survives. An almost unbroken line of anti-tank blocks once extended from Belhaven Bay to St Baldred's Cradle, a distance of 8km. The Tynninghame shoreline still has a 2.5km long section, including two road-blocks of which the more northerly is particularly well preserved. It comprises two large concrete blocks with slots or holes for the insertion of metal rails and four concrete cylinders that were positioned below them. On the headland of St Baldred's Cradle, itself, are the remains of a number of trenches and partly collapsed pill-boxes, which overlook Ravensheugh Sands. One of the pill-boxes has an inscription cut in the wet cement, which reads 'D.C Middlesex 13 Platoon' - a unit whose presence here is confirmed by other military records. In addition, there are the remains of an observation post perched on top of a prehistoric cairn. This was once intended to direct fire towards the beaches from two large six-inch naval guns located at Bowerhouse, some 5.5km distant. And to the south of St Baldred's Cradle can be found the only intact pill-box and what appears to be an earlier trench.

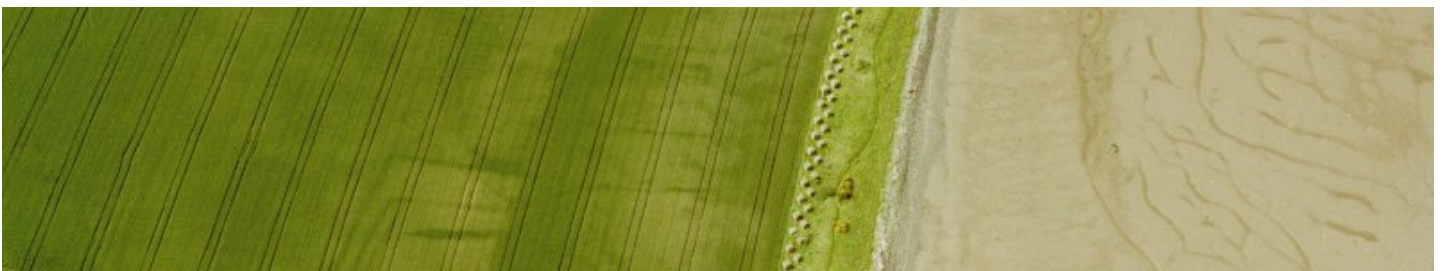
The beaches at Ravensheugh and Belhaven Bay, as well as the tidal basin that lies between Tynninghame and Hedderwick, offered a large flat area of ground suitable for enemy glider or troop aircraft operations. To counter this, a system of 'Anti-Glider Poles' were erected. Long lines of vertical timber posts set within a concrete pipe were laid-out in a grid like fashion to prevent any form of aircraft landing on the beach. There are also once at least five pill-boxes within the tidal basin and along the shore to the south, but these have now been largely been removed

A forestry plantation grows where golf was once played on the links of Hedderwick, but during the war this area was a large minefield and aerial photographs from 1945 show placements of barbed wire demarking this dangerous area. These images also record a system of trenches in the dunes on the seaward side of the plantation. They, together perhaps with those that can be seen beside the surviving pill-box at Tynninghame, are a rare survival of the First World War beach defences. About 700m of the original system can still be traced here, although much survives only as a long shallow zig-zag depression. However, at its north end, the actual trench survives well and measures over 1.5m wide and 1.3m deep. This length of the front line is longer than any surviving in Belgium and illustrates the considerable efforts that were made to fortify the coastline in 1914-18. This defence was not reused in 1940, as it was no longer considered suitable.

Most of the remains south of Hedderwick have been lost, although some concrete blocks can still be observed at Winterfield Golf Course, where they have been piled up to combat coastal erosion.

The unique mix of both First and Second World War defences along this small stretch of the Scottish coast demonstrates the efforts that were made to protect the country from seaborne invasion. Despite efforts to remove entire sections in order to restore the countryside, much still survives recalling those dark and menacing times and the defences that remain are now recognised as an indivisible part of our heritage.

Allan Kilpatrick, Data Management Officer





<https://canmore.org.uk/site/113795/hedderwick-hill-plantation>
<https://canmore.org.uk/site/113704/tyninghame-links-wood>
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