



The Hundred Parishes

An introductory article about PILLBOXES and SPIGOT MORTAR EMPLACEMENTS

This article focuses on two types of structure that have survived since they were installed in World War II. Fortunately, none were ever used for the military purpose for which they were intended.

Many of us are familiar with pillboxes: those squat concrete buildings dotted around the countryside, often overgrown and merged into the landscape. Many will be aware of their connection to the Second World War but their origins go back further.

The purpose of the pillbox was to protect a gunner while offering him a good line of vision. The concept was developed in the First World War and first used in 1917. Early constructions were of a circular shape, hence the term pillbox. In the Second World War they were first used by the British Expeditionary Force in Flanders.

The last batch of pillboxes was built some 80 years ago to resist a possible invasion of this country by Germany. Thousands were installed in 1940-41, many in coastal locations or in defensive lines across the south and east of England. Others were built to form a box around London, but stray examples appear in other places.

Pillboxes varied from the one-man Tett Turret to big emplacements for two pounder anti-tank guns. The most common shape was hexagonal. The Royal Engineers decided on the sites and they were built to government specifications by local contractors, although in practice the work was often carried out by volunteers who were paid a "dole". It is thought that about 15,000 were constructed, of which perhaps two-thirds survive.

Within the Hundred Parishes about 45 were built, mainly as part of a line stretching between Chelmsford and Cambridge, often beside the Chelmer and Cam rivers which formed a natural anti-tank barrier.

The pillboxes were virtually obsolete as soon as they were built, being designed for an invasion that never came.

In Great Waltham parish a "World War Two Trail" of around 4 miles passes thirteen surviving pillboxes around Hartford End with informative interpretation panels. This one is along the trail near Littley Green. Some of Hundred Parishes walk 102 follows part of this trail.





The large pillbox pictured above is in Wendens Ambo, in the middle of a field close to the road to Saffron Walden – and strategically positioned close to the River Cam.

The pillbox on the left is in Tilty, not so obvious with an outer brick skin and corrugated iron roof. It stands close to the River Chelmer.

Pillboxes were all built of concrete, pouring the mixture into moulds (known as shuttering or formwork) that had been made from wooden planks or sheets of corrugated iron.

Once the concrete had set hard, the moulding was removed.

This is the limited view from inside a pillbox, clearly showing the use of plank and corrugated iron as the moulding. The resultant concrete seems ever-lasting and almost indestructible.



Another WWII trail passes through parts of Saffron Walden and Audley Park. Several interpretation panels along the route include one on London Road, Saffron Walden outside the Uttlesford District Council offices. Close to the panel is another survivor from the 1940s: an emplacement for a “spigot mortar”. A mortar is a lightweight weapon that fires explosive shells. Thousands of spigot mortars were issued to the Home Guard in 1941 and 1942 in preparation for a possible invasion.

Concrete bases were constructed at strategic defensive points, each topped with a round spigot upon which the weapon could be mounted and swivelled. Each position would be manned by three soldiers, crouching in a pit some three feet deep around the concrete gun emplacement. The mortars had a limited range, so they were to be fired only when the enemy tank got within about 100 yards. Fortunately, the Home Guard never had to use them.



The emplacement shown above is on the outskirts of Newport, near the bottom of Sparrows Hill.

Nowadays, these spigot mortar emplacements can be spotted because of the stainless-steel spigot. Only a few inches in diameter, the spigots are mostly still bright and shiny after more than 80 years.



The spigot on the right is about 4 inches tall and is to be found in Stansted Mountfitchet, now quite hidden in bushes in Church Road, not far from the railway line.

Further surviving spigot mortar emplacements can be seen around the Hundred Parishes. A second in Newport survives on the east side of the Debden Road railway bridge.

There are two beside the River Chelmer opposite the former brewery at Hartford End in Great Waltham parish.

In Leaden Roding, an emplacement is clearly visible just a little north of the mini roundabout.

Saffron Walden has another spigot mortar emplacement at the beginning of Catons Lane, now accompanied by an interpretation panel and shown here.

If you are aware of any additional spigot mortar emplacements within the Hundred Parishes, please let us know by using the Feedback facility on the Hundred Parishes website.

More information on spigot mortars, pillboxes, etc can be found on the website of the Pillbox Study Group: <http://www.pillbox-study-group.org.uk/other-wwii-defensive-structures/spigot-mortar/>



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Any comments or suggestions for improvement may be submitted by using the Feedback form on the website. The website has many short articles on various aspects of The Hundred Parishes, as well as introductions to individual parishes and to a number of local celebrities, and an extensive What's On section. More than a hundred walk route descriptions can be freely downloaded, with each of the hundred parishes featuring in at least one walk.