

RACE IS ON TO PRESERVE OUR DECAYING CONCRETE DEFENCES, REMINDERS OF BRITAIN'S FINEST HOUR

By Nigel Morris, Home Affairs Correspondent

They were the first line of defence against a Nazi invasion. Between 1939 and 1945, some 28,000 concrete pillboxes were rapidly built to guard coastal waters, strategic road junctions and military bases. Gun emplacements, beach defences, bombing decoys and anti-tank roadblocks also appeared across the country within months of war breaking out.

Many pillboxes have been left to decay gently, offering protection from the rain to the occasional walker, vandal or lost sheep. Others were dismantled in the post-war years as quickly as they were put up, many by farmers paid £5 for each one they pulled down.

After decades of neglect, salvation is in sight for hundreds of overgrown and neglected pillboxes. English Heritage has begun a hunt for the cream of the defence structures to saving them for the nation.

The most complete surviving line of defences – 280 pillboxes and machine-gun nests every few hundred yards – stretches from Seaton in south Devon to Bridgewater in Somerset.

There are also notable clusters around the coasts of the south and South-east. By far the largest numbers were in Kent, followed by Norfolk, Essex and Cleveland. A heavy concentration was uncovered in Surrey, to stop troops advancing on London.

Rows of small concrete pyramids, called "dragon's teeth" and pillboxes were set up near the historic ruins of Waverley Abbey, near Farnham, in Surrey, the oldest Cistercian settlement in Britain. The task of the Home Guard on the site would have been to hold up attacks on the capital and the nearby army base in Aldershot.

Most people then saw them as eyesores but, more than half a century later nostalgia and the perspective of history means they are viewed in a very different light. An English Heritage spokesman said the best would be scheduled as part of its monuments protection programme to add to the handful that have already been saved ad hoc for the nation.

For five years, a lottery-funded group and the Department of

Culture Media and Sport have been listing Second World War defences. Five hundred volunteers surveyed sites, studied maps and German reconnaissance photographs and even traced some of the people who built them.

Six thousand or so pillboxes survive, but only 1,000 are in good condition, with fixtures and fittings intact. Other structures included concrete blocks designed to stop a tank in its tracks. Anti-tank islands were built at many road junctions. At the time barbed wire and flame weapons were put on strategically important beaches and open areas where German paratroops could land were filled with poles, wire and trenches.

George Lambrick, director of the Council for British Archaeology, said: "There was a

staggering array of structures. But a lot are under pressure of one sort or another, whether it be coastal erosion, housing or commercial development."

The Culture minister Kim Howells said: "After wars through history, little heed was paid to protecting structures designed to defend the country. Stones from castles were used to build towns and villages and Martello towers put up during the Napoleonic wars were left to decay. We must be very careful not to wipe out the remaining evidence of how people planned to defend against invaders."



The Second World War emplacements at historic Waverley Abbey, near Farnham, Surrey

Tom Pridgen