

Faringdon's role in World War II Defence

Located approximately mid-way between Swindon and Oxford on the main A420 East – West road and approximately 2 miles south of the Radcot Bridge (the oldest bridge on the Thames) crossing of the River Thames on the A4095 major North – South route from the midlands to the south of England.

Faringdon has occupied a strategic position in North-South and East-West communications within the country since earliest times.

This fortunate geographical location is the very reason for Faringdon's existence.

In the spring and summer of 1940 after the evacuation of the British Expeditionary Force from France the victorious German Army stood in the Pas de Calais preparing for the invasion of England. The strategic aim of the Germans was to invade England and force the British Government to capitulate in the same way as the French Government had done.

Britain's defences were limited to a coastal fringe which, once penetrated, would permit the German Army to roam freely through southern England. The Germans intention was to move rapidly inland and to attempt to capture the Thames bridges. In June 1940 Faringdon was identified to be a 'Vital Point' and designated as an 'Anti-Tank Island' (a defensive strongpoint) comprising road blocks, pill boxes, fortified houses and loopholed walls.

The defence system of Faringdon was part of 'Stop Line Red' which extended along the River Thames. Radcot Bridge was a major defensive feature located some 2 miles to the north on the A4095. Faringdon Folly was the OP (Observation Post) for the Faringdon Company of the Home Guard which had been formed in late May 1940 following the wireless broadcast appeal by Anthony Eden.

At the foot of Folly Hill on the north side of the Oxford road there is a pillbox still in existence which defended a road block (you can still see the recessed wall on the south side of the road opposite the pillbox which would have been the anchor point for the road block). On the either side of the pillbox on the north side of the road, the roadside wall has been cut down in height to give a good field of fire for the troops in the pillbox.

There are concrete cylinders which would have formed part of a roadblock at the crest of the rise 200 yards on the Oxford side of the pillbox. The local landowner piled some of these on top of each other during the 1980's to give a decorative feature to gateways on either side of the road.

There is a loopholed wall in the building which in 1940 was the Faringdon Police Station.

There was a further road block defended by a pillbox on the A4095 as you descend the hill out of Faringdon heading towards Radcot Bridge. You can still see the place where the wall was repaired after the war.

In the summer of 1940 a number of Royal Engineers and Royal Army Service Corps personnel and a company of Royal Marines were stationed in Faringdon. Their task was to defend the Faringdon strong point assisted by the Home Guard. The presence of the Royal Marines is acknowledged by the naming of

Marines Drive. Later in the war Canadian troops were based in Faringdon and that is also acknowledged by a road name - Canada Lane.

Faringdon was at the centre of a network of roads and had its own railway station and connection to the main line railway network.

A number of airfields, army camps and other military installations were located within a few miles of Faringdon and the town was always busy with military traffic passing through on the main roads.

Local military installations included airfields at RAF Watchfield, RAF Shellingford, RAF Brize Norton and from 1943 US Air Force units at RAF Grove and RAF Kingston Bagpuize. Army units were located all around the area including the secret Auxiliary Units training base at Coleshill House and the Royal Military College of Science at Shrivenham. Smaller units were located at a number of searchlight sites and anti-aircraft sites dotted around the area.

In late 1943 a battalion of US troops were located in Faringdon. They were part of the US Ordnance Corps and Quartermaster Corps and were tasked with organising and running an ammunition and supply depot. In the period leading up to the allied invasion of Normandy supplies of artillery shells and other ammunition were stacked in open storage along the sides of the roads all around the town. Supplies were delivered and despatched in trucks and also from Faringdon station.

Many Ordnance and Quartermaster personnel were coloured troops under command of white officers. A rigid colour discrimination existed in the US Army and coloured troops and white troops were kept separated even using separate 'pubs and leisure facilities. The US troops were accommodated in nissen huts and tents in the grounds of Faringdon House.