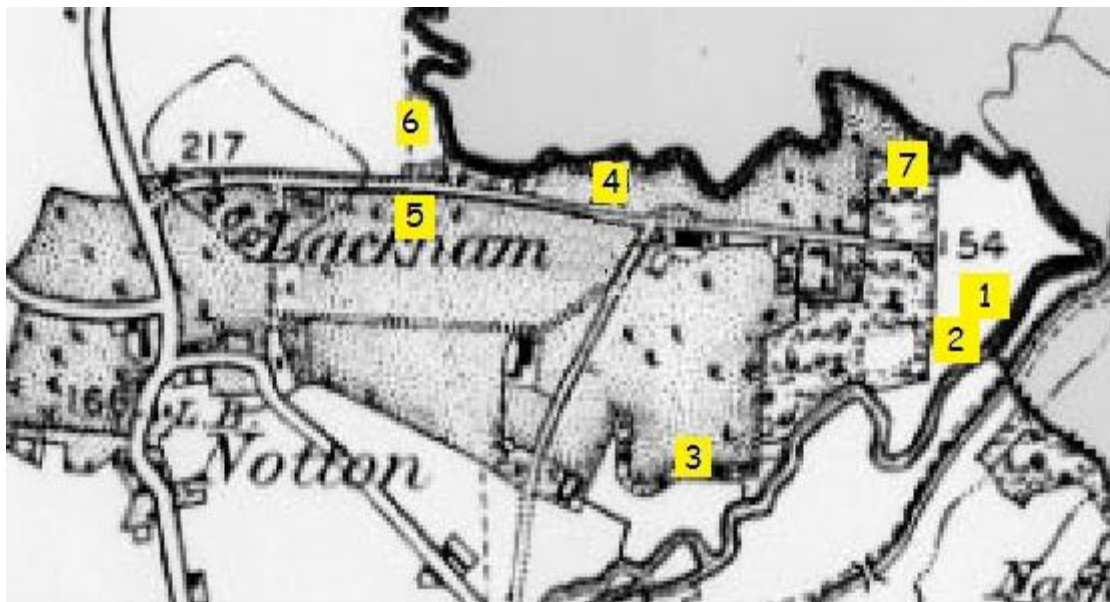


Lackham's World War II hardened field defences, or Lackham's WWII "Pill boxes"

Tony Pratt ¹

In northern Wiltshire there are a number of pill boxes to be found, possibly the best known being the defensive line stretching between All Cannings and Devizes. Lackham is unusual in still having 6 of its original 7 pill boxes in existence. These were put in place during the Second World War possibly to defend the Rover Avon line or to defend the estate when it was home to General Patton, prior to D-Day. The owner of the estate, Maj. Holt, was paid 10 shillings a year extra compensation for the ground that the pill boxes stood on, as most of these were outside the area requisitioned by the War Department and also, presumably, because it is was unlikely they would be removed once hostilities ceased, as proved to be the case.



No maps from the period have been discovered that show the location of the structures; there is a map showing the land that was requisitioned by the War Office, and this indicates that the military held the drives, the area around the house, the woods and the entire area between the woods and the river, but the structures are not shown.

¹ Estate Historian, Lackham Museum of Agriculture and Rural Life Trust ©Tony Pratt 2008

Number 1

Grid Ref: ST 92996 69999



1.1 View from the south west, R. Avon to the right



1.2 View from the bank of the River Avon looking north east

No. 1 is a Type 24 structure. This type is an irregular hexagon in plan. The rear wall is the longest at about 14 feet (4.3 m), and has the entrance, with an embrasure on either side. The other walls here are 8 feet (2.5 m), on the longer die for this type which varied between 7-8 feet in length. Each has a single embrasure.. Internally there is a Y shaped anti-ricochet wall (the top of the Y nearest the entrance), which helps support the roof. It is located on the top of the bank of the River Avon and is clearly visible. The brickwork is in very poor condition and substantial amounts have fallen off, revealing the concrete construction. Interior access is possible although there is much broken brickwork inside. The floor is very muddy in wet weather.

Number 2

Grid Ref: ST 92925 69946



2.1 View from the south east R. Avon to right



2.2 View from the bank of the River Avon looking north east

No. 2 is a Type 24 construction. The brickwork is in even worse condition than No. 1. Access to the interior is possible and it is dry and relatively uncluttered.

These first two structures are very close to each other, and were emplaced to guard the Hunting Bridge, which spanned the River Avon approximately midway between the two. The two pictures below show them as seen from the bridge support



The illustration below is the only known view of the Hunting Bridge, and was taken from the western bank of the Avon just below one of the pill-boxes. The label 1 indicates the location of the Wilts & Berks canal



All that remains today is the bridge support pier. This is seen in the foreground of the next illustration where it is hidden in the clump of blackberries visible on the other side of the R. Avon. Although not clear in the illustration above it is possible that another pillbox was located in the fold on the land between the river and the canal but it is uncertain if this is the case and nothing can be seen there now.



Piers of the Hunting Bridge, looking east along the line of the bridge.

The objects behind the patch of blackberries on the eastern side of the river are on the Wilts and Berks Canal which runs parallel to the R. Avon here.

Number 3

Grid Ref: ST 92382 69702



3.1 View from the South

Pill box 3 is another type 24 but in much the best condition of any on the estate; the brickwork is sound and none have fallen. When initially surveyed a large beech tree had come down and was lying on top of the structure. There did not appear to be any damage.

Access is possible to the interior and it is dry and tidy. This pillbox was sited to give control of the Rey Mill area of the river, Rey Mill itself is clearly visible through the SW firing slit

Number 4

Grid Ref: ST 92198 70187

This structure no longer exists, it was removed in the mid 1960's. Until recently it was thought that this structure was located in the field west of the Back Drive, close to the junction of the front & Back Drives. This was incorrect; in 2017 information on it was given by Tim Culling, whose father was Vice principal at Lackham for very many years. Tim and his sisters were brought up on the estate in the 1960's - 70's. In a letter he recorded that

I have very vivid memories of the demolition of the seventh (which I think, by the way, from looking at the photos was also a type 24). We were allowed to watch the demolition team do their work (health and safety nowadays would have had us stand about a mile further away than the couple of hundred yards that we retreated on that hot day!). The first attempt to blow the box up involved a spectacular explosion, a dust cloud that extended a hundred feet into the air and a surviving and pretty much undamaged pill box once the air cleared. The guy in charge was clearly embarrassed and determined not to have a repeat defeat. So he installed what must have been a mega-ton of dynamite for the second attempt, we retreated a further ten yards or so and the explosion could, apparently, be heard in Trowbridge. All that was left once the dust from that one settled was a very large hole in the ground, not far from where the weather station stood then and still stands now. A great day - well, at least it was for a small boy whose career ambition at the time became (briefly) to train as a demolition expert!²

² Tim Culling Nov 2017 *pers. comm.* My thanks to Tim for telling me about the demolition and his time at Lackham, and for allowing me to reproduce his account. (Auth.)

Number 5

Grid Ref: ST 91487 70265



5.1 View from the south east

This is a type 21 structure, situated just inside the wooded area west of the fields west of Lackham House, at the top of the slight rise on the Front Drive. It faces across the pasture land towards the House and the Back Drive, and lies directly to the south of the Front Drive. The drive can be seen in the background of figure 5.1.

Currently the brickwork is in good condition with little damage, but there are substantial trees growing against the northern side and brambles are growing over it, obscuring it from view from the Drive. It is likely that the tree roots will damage the structure in the future if they have not already done so.

Number 6

Grid Ref: ST 91703 70401

This is a Type 26 structure, one of those made from pre-fabricated sections. The type 26 was square in plan, each wall being 10 feet (3 m) long. There is a door in one side and embrasures in each of the remaining three with no internal

walls The walls here are constructed to bullet proof standard, about 18 inches (45 cm) thick. It is therefore much smaller than any of the others and is positioned on the northern side of the estate, at the confluence of the River Avon and a small brook that runs in from the west. Much of the structure is above ground. The entrance trench is to the south of the main body of the structure. The panel forming the western side of the entrance trench side has partially collapsed on top of the eastern side, and access is difficult. Inside the structure is sound and dry and cramped.

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6.1 View from the high ground to the south



6.2 Southern entrance

Number 7

Grid Ref: ST 92890 70336



7.1 Entrance on south side

This is another Type 24 octagonal structure, located at the north eastern end of North Wood, and so upstream of numbers 1 & 2. It is now completely enclosed in the woodland but is situated on a rise immediately south of and above the river bank. The brickwork cover is in excellent condition, one of the best preserved on the estate and the condition inside is good. Little idea of the field of fire can be gained because of the woodland growth but it would have commanded a long reach of the river north and east of the House.



7.2 Embrasure on eastern side, note brick skin

Although still fairly common in southern England these defensive structures are increasingly at risk. At Lackham almost all of the structures are still in place and are part of the continuing history of the estate. It would be unfortunate if they were allowed to disappear through neglect.