

SAFFRON WALDEN AT WAR

In 1940, after the evacuations from Dunkirk, an invasion of Britain was expected at any time. Defence preparations were undertaken on an unprecedented scale, not only along the coastline facing occupied Europe but throughout the country. However, it is unlikely that many towns of comparable size were protected more than Saffron Walden.

At the junction of eight major roads converging like the spokes of a wheel, it was ringed by defences. Manned by the Home Guard, there were road barriers, weapons pits, minefields and spigot mortars – an anti-tank gun which had a big clout but was not renowned for its accuracy.

To underline the town's importance, immediately to the west lay the route of the country's main defence line, the General Headquarters (GHQ) line which passed through Audley End. To the south was the fighter airfield of RAF Debden, which was heavily engaged in the Battle of Britain.

WHAT SURVIVES

Wartime records list an astonishing 22 spigot mortar emplacements. This was a gun which was normally mounted on a 3'6" diameter concrete pedestal in a purpose-designed pit. Three of these emplacements still survive, the pedestals sticking up above ground with their stainless steel mounting pin on the top. It must have been unnerving for the crew to be told that to improve accuracy fire should be withheld until the enemy tank was within 80 – 100 yards!

Survival along the GHQ Line is remarkable. Bridge barriers, pillboxes, anti-tank blocks and mining chambers all remain much as they must have done during the war.

LEARN MORE

Discover more about Essex's World War Two past at:
www.worldwar2heritage.com

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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www.interreg4a-2mers.eu/en



SAFFRON WALDEN WORLD WAR TWO TRAIL

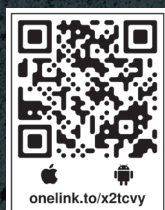


Spigot mortar in pit lined with palings, Shropshire. © Imperial War Museum H30181



An artist's impression of a manned Bridge Barrier and how it worked. Phil Rutt © Arc Creative

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FOLLOW THE TRAIL

This 3.7 mile (6 km) walk can be started in either Swan Meadows car park or from The Common. There is an information board in both locations. The route visits the three spigot mortar emplacements, passes by an air raid shelter built for children at a former school and, for Smartphone users, compares today's scene in Market Square with an iconic photograph of evacuees there in 1939.

Crossing the GHQ Line via a bridge barrier across the River Cam, it skirts Audley End, the wartime Polish SOE (Special Operations Executive) centre, to return to the starting point in Saffron Walden. Audley End House is in the guardianship of English Heritage and can be visited (members free, but otherwise an admission charge applies).

There is no fixed trail through the town although the plan indicates a suggested route to take in the various locations.

START: Car Park, Swan Meadows or Car Park, The Common

LENGTH: Up to 3.7 miles (6 km)

- TRAIL
- PILLBOX
- ✕ PILLBOX (DESTROYED)
- ★ MINED BRIDGE
- ★ BRIDGE BARRIER
- SPIGOT MORTAR EMPLACEMENT
- AIR RAID SHELTER
- ▲ LOOPHOLED WALL
- ⓘ TRAIL BOARDS

