

## **GLHS Report January 2021: 'Wooler in World War II – a Defended Village'**

Glendale Local History Society is grateful to Alan Sture for kick-starting the second half of the Society's 'lockdown' season with its first webinar presentation via Zoom: *'Wooler in World War II – a Defended Village'*.

Few would believe that Wooler had held such a significantly important, defensive position during World War II – all was revealed with Alan's well-researched and illustrated analysis and explanation. He started by posing three thought-provoking questions: (a) "Was Wooler a rural backwater or a key defence point for the entire region? (b) If it was key, then why was it so important? (c) Would the Germans really have invaded this part of the country?", and continued by explaining why Wooler was a noteworthy place requiring substantial defences. Alan also explained that, contrary to popular belief, there was considerable anti-invasion planning before Dunkirk, and that the threat of invasion continued after the Nazi attack on Soviet Russia.

The inter-war years created the conditions for the preparations that took place. The armed forces had been considerably reduced to be virtually ineffective. From the time of the German withdrawal from the League of Nations in 1933 to the outbreak of war in 1939, plans were formulated, argued over and re-formulated. From 1938 onwards, the general public became involved, with the distribution of gas masks, digging of shelters and air raid precaution practice. Not until 1940 was the necessity and availability of manpower for home defence considered critical - most of British military manpower having been focussed on supporting the BEF in Norway, Belgium and France, with home defence reliant on British air and naval forces. In late 1939, thought was given to a possible invasion from North German ports to strategic areas, including the Tyne-Tees region. Military planners also considered a potential enemy assault, via ports or beaches, from the far north, aiming south to strategic targets of the North East, Midlands and London. "GHQ Lines" and "Stop Lines" were developed in 1940 when measures were taken to prevent enemy movement in priority inland areas. Alan also explained that the rapidly changing circumstances, along with three changes of Commander-in-Chief, Home Forces within a short time span, each with a different approach to the threat of invasion, led to the frenetic activity of the spring and summer of 1940.

Clear potential route-lines were illustrated on Alan's maps with the diagrammatic anti-tank 'Stop-lines' – Wooler was at an intersection of two of these in this area. As a result of a mammoth effort from 1940 onwards, manufacturing over 18,000 pill boxes nationally, Wooler eventually boasted no fewer than 13 plus pill boxes which encircled the village, many of which still stand today, along with a variety of strategically-placed road-blocks – varying designs were described and superbly well illustrated. Pill boxes were initially manned by thinly spread Home Defence Forces but later by the Home Guard until this form of protection was abandoned.

Alan then detailed information concerning some of the people involved, from the regular military units to the volunteers of the Home Guard, Auxiliary Units, Women's Land Army and other support services. This was followed by a slight digression to talk about RAF Milfield, a substantial self-contained base but whose personnel interacted with Wooler in many ways.

This gives only a flavour of his clear informative presentation. For the illustrated talk presentation and his conclusions please visit: [www.glendalelocalhistory.org](http://www.glendalelocalhistory.org) link: 'Talk Reports - January 2021'.