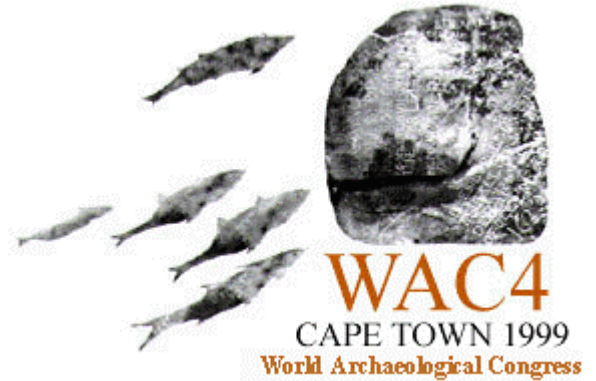


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Social Space and Social Control: Movement and Management within World War Two Military Sites in Britain

Michael J. Anderton
 Project Coordinator
 Twentieth Century Military Recording Project
 Aerial Survey
 National Monuments Records Centre
 RCHME
 Kemble Drive
 Swindon SN2 2GZ
 United Kingdom

(0)1793 414855 (direct) (0)1793 414859 (fax)
 Email: surserv@rchme.gov.uk

Introduction: a site worth seeing

At the outbreak of peace in 1945 military sites in Britain were either destroyed, re-used or left to decay. A small number continued as military bases while others were destroyed by landowners and farmers; encouraged by the governments' financial incentives to remove buildings such as pillboxes. Those which were left to decay are now few in number (as the project I am currently involved in emphasises), but a small quantity of them have survived to a reasonable enough standard that they can be recorded, or in some cases preserved through current heritage legislation, for future study.

These monuments of the Second World War have taken on a cultural significance within our generation which goes beyond the realms of their previous

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post-war roles as subjects for ‘anorak’ enthusiasts or their use as childrens’ ‘playgrounds’ (as I fondly remember one particular pillbox). During the fiftieth anniversary of VE Day in 1995 military sites in Britain were again given an opportunity to enter the arena of national heritage. Why it happened at this particular time would take another paper to discuss the matter in full. However, it is reasonable to question here why the sudden ‘re-appearance’ of these sites, which protected our nation from threats in Europe, became a source of national pride at the same time as a euro-sceptic government were in charge of Britain’s heritage structure.

The remaining military sites in Britain can be seen to have taken on a wider, cultural and political significance as symbols of our past, and future, within European history in the last decade. It is an element familiar to those who analyse sites such as these throughout the world, and it is widely and eloquently discussed elsewhere in this session. What is less likely to be considered, or indeed discussed, is how these sites operated as entities within a nation at war. How much did they reflect the nations’ contemporary social, political and cultural attitudes and aspirations?

In Britain these sites are too often seen as shells of buildings which are to be recorded as such, and then placed within the profile of contemporary, and more recent, official, historical accounts of the Second World War. Is it really so difficult to assess the contemporary nature of these sites? Within this paper, primarily using anti-aircraft batteries as examples, I would like to establish if we can use theoretical techniques developed from such topics as anthropology, sociology and psychology, and which have been successfully employed in archaeology, to analyse social movement and the use of ‘space’ at these sites.

Space, Structure and Meaning: archaeology and social landscapes

Archaeology has, in the last twenty-plus years, made good use of anthropological, sociological and psychological theories to examine the social meanings of space and structures in earlier societies and cultures. From the major- to the micro-analysis archaeologists have proposed ways of understanding how both societies and individuals defined their ‘place’ within the spaces they occupied. It is now judged that ‘space is both a reflection of cultural codes and meanings [as well as] a reflection of practical activities and functional requirements’ (Engelstad 1991: 50). The physical landscape has become more than just a series of humps and bumps covered in good or

bad land; whole areas can now be seen as part of a complex element in the journey through spiritual and secular life. Groups of buildings are defined by observable rules regarding the way in which they are approached and utilised by individuals and communities; and within individual buildings family, social and gender hierarchies can be observed.

At the major level of study, landscape analysis reveals a complex arrangement between physical and mental entities. It is an arrangement which creates the narrative within which an individual and a society/culture-group perform or act-out their daily and long term actions. Earlier monuments are very often re-used as part of the next generations' cultural signifiers; although they are not always used in the way they were originally intended (cf. Barrett et al 1991). The key point here is the fact that they are still part of the story/narrative which defines the social dynamic for societies and individuals alike. The work of Roymans (1996) is a good example of how this sort of work can 'map' a social landscape. He shows how, within the southern Netherlands and northern Belgium, an ideological ordering of the landscape developed to form an inner and outer circle of areas which defined aspects of social activity. Within the inner circle were the more essential, living elements of social activity such as houses, cattle, meadows, fields and man. In the outer circle elements such as gallows, pagan cemeteries, forests, heathlands and moors concentrated upon more ethereal, darker elements.

Analysing anthropological evidence at the macro-level of social space Lyons (1996) has shown how the domestic structures in Déla, northern Cameroon reflect more than just the culture of a singularly identifiable social group. Buildings in the area comprise a mix of round and rectilinear structures; and at first glance there would appear to be little indication that either type had any particular cultural significance. However, as expected, this is not the case, and when statistical analysis is carried out on the families who dwell in these structures a clearer picture of cultural groupings within Déla comes to light. Four ethnic groups can clearly be identified within one single community; each being visible through their use of a particular style of building (for example, the Mura group are equally divided in their choice of building; while the Wandala group are firmly in favour of rectilinear structures (90 per cent)).

Social space at the lowest, micro-, level of society can, for the purposes of this paper, be constituted as the buildings in which individuals and societies live and work.

At this level much information can be gained about family and social units, and the way in which their roles are developed and defined through the, otherwise, invisible rules which constitute the narrative of daily life. It has been shown that within the Inuit winterhouses of Greenland social and gender groupings are visible in the material remains excavated from these structures (Møbjerg 1991). However, what was also an important element in this study was the knowledge that these 'houses' were used on an irregular, cyclical basis and were cleaned out prior to each new occupation. A clean artefactual palette, and the fact that the winterhouse was known to have been last inhabited in the first half of the twentieth century, meant that some of the original occupants could be interviewed in order to examine the validity of the analysis of the excavated material.

The above cases are a brief example of the plethora of studies now available to the archaeologist which have provided the means with which they can interpret earlier cultures. What has not been asked is how these types of studies fare when set against the analysis of more modern material such as World War Two military sites. So far the furthest archaeologists seem to have gone in applying these techniques is the examination of seventeenth-century vernacular architecture and its place within the landscape (Johnson 1994). More modern sites have not been subjected to this scrutiny and it seems that the interpretation of 'post-medieval' or 'modern' structures is a job for social psychologists and architects. Whilst their work has proved useful to a degree in interpreting human interaction on a wider, more general, scale, the study of shopping arcades (Shields 1991), Victorian psychiatric hospitals (Bartlett 1994) and twentieth-century domestic building plans (Brown 1990) does not provide the more intimate level of understanding of social and cultural discourses required by the archaeologist.

How then can we begin to contemplate the social nature of military sites in Britain using theoretical techniques? The answer is fairly straightforward, it is first necessary to examine how the sites and buildings have been recorded to date. From this we can then attempt to apply some of the theories discussed above to these sites.

Barrack Synopsis (War): The Voice of Officialdom

Histories and accounts of military sites in Britain during World War Two tend to concentrate on the wider picture. Following in the tradition of military history writers

the focus is upon campaigns, battalions and brute force. More attention is given to shell types than human nature and this has been apparent throughout my research for this paper. One can forgive such items as the propaganda pieces printed during the war for this approach (HMSO 1943); but one would hope that as time and academic debate moved forward more imaginative, and relevant, methods of examining these sites would have been used.

At the risk of being tedious, but to emphasise my case, I have taken the liberty of including two examples of the genre. The first example is from Longmate's volume *Island Fortress* (1991: 513). He reports the words of a battery commander recalling the action at the Dover coastal batteries when the 'Cromwell' signal was given (a code-word which was meant to signal the German invasion, but was on this occasion used 'on exercise'): "at the order 'stand to' ... all the guns of the defences were loaded ... additional trays of ammunition were brought up on the electrical hoist ... and were stacked to the rear of the guns". The second example of this style does produce smatterings of social activity, but one episode comes at the expense of manly bravado and, presumably, the death of an enemy pilot and his crew; whilst the other is a somewhat surreal paean to the success of wartime gunnery activities. The extracts in question come from I. V. Hogg's *Anti-Aircraft: a history of air defence* (1978) and concern, respectively, the fact that a crew manning an anti-aircraft battery who brought down an enemy bomber never had to buy a drink in the local pub for several weeks afterwards (*ibid.*: 103); and that one London council were so concerned that council-house lavatory basins were cracking because of the vibrations from a nearby anti-aircraft battery that they wanted the guns moved (*ibid.*: 104).

If we have no hope of gaining any insight into how military sites may have operated on a social scale from books such as these we must ask if can we glean any knowledge from published surveys of the original buildings themselves (particularly in view of the fact that these surveys are conducted, and written up, by archaeologists)? A search of the literature suggests that we cannot. All three of the reports I have read by the RCHME on surveys of anti-aircraft batteries concentrate on the buildings themselves. In other words a great deal is written about the fabric and structure of each sites' surviving component parts, but no attempt is given to gain even a passing insight into the human nature of these sites (Brown and Pattison 1997; Oswald and Kenney 1994; Riley 1995).

What then of contemporary architectural plans? Will they provide us with the detail we need to apply theoretical analysis? The *Barrack Synopsis (War)* (Dobinson 1996: 177) document was issued by the War Cabinet to cover the provisioning of military domestic sites, and set out to ensure that the buildings were based upon standard designs from the Department of Fortification and Works (DFW). Identified by standard design numbers they were very much institutionalised forms of architecture. The closest we could get to social buildings, namely accommodation hutting, came in standard designs and lacked the partitions apparent in modern houses which may have given some indication of social hierarchies (cf. Brown 1990). The DFW though should not be described as lacking in imagination. They had, count them, three separate designs for field latrines - single deep trench type, double deep trench type and single bucket type (Dobinson 1996: 208). 'Armed Forces for the use of' one presumes!

It seems then, that as far as physical evidence is concerned, we have one option left to consider: that of the general layout of these sites. Whilst many sites have been demolished, and others now lack all of their component parts, we can gain an insight into forms of military control (and thus the contemporary social order) through the examination of contemporary layouts of the sites. Analysis of anti-aircraft and coastal battery plans show that the guardroom and the officers quarters were located close to the site entrance; while the soldiers quarters were located near the heart of the site, close to the artillery weapons. The guardroom being located at the entrance is militarily self-explanatory but locating the officers quarters at the entrance gives a visible example of contemporary social control. No soldier entering or leaving the site would have been able to do so without being visible to the officers; thus emphasising the officers control over the soldier in both a military and a social sense. The soldiers journey through his social narrative was reinforced with images of his social status through the prominent location of the officers quarters.

In addition to the above, the location of the soldiers quarters near the guns could be seen as a sensible location; the men being 'ready for action' at a moments notice. However, the guns were often in action for long periods and placing the soldiers accommodation farther away would have been an ideal move for them. Unfortunately, doing this would have resulted in a huge renegotiation of the social narrative at the site; the huts would have been located opposite the officers quarters. The new location would have equalised their position, both physically and mentally,

with the officers. This would have broken contemporary norms of social structure and was thus not considered.

Step forward that woman! - alternative social dialogues within military sites

Apart from the layout of sites', and the minimal amount of social information these provide, our one remaining option is to examine the testimony of individuals involved in the daily operations of these establishments. Contemporary accounts were used with great success by Møbjerg (1991) in her corroboration of the excavated remains of Inuit winterhouses in Greenland, and I should like to explore here how applicable this may be for examining World War Two military sites in Britain.

As discussed earlier, the remains of military sites are empty shells, generally lacking in any artefacts which may be constituted as culturally significant. There are two instances where unauthorised paintings and graffiti appear on the walls of buildings, but these give no indication of social elements; merely showing caricatures of operational aircraft types and unpleasant anatomical suggestions directed at Adolf Hitler and the Nazis (Lowry 1996: 6; Thomas 1994: Figure 28).

As with the accounts of sites and their operations discussed earlier, there is a great lack of accounts which go beyond the gung-ho, up and at 'em approach. I have, however, found one particular account of life in an anti-aircraft battery which provides enough information to warrant analysis using theoretical techniques. Examining the account of Vee Robinson (1996), using the ideas of social 'laws' and interactions as part of a wider form of narrative discourse (a la Foucault), there is a great deal to be learnt about these military sites.

Foucault's ideas revolve around the notion that whilst there is a main 'text' of social norms to be read as a surface narrative; below that many series of sub-texts and alternative discourses are likely to take place. In essence, life is not one long, uncomplicated string of 'dialogue' between people, a straightforward division between classes, genders or cultures. Individuals generally, and often without being conscious of it, operate on a more 'subversive' level; constantly challenging and reinterpreting the social norms they are surrounded by.

The image of anything military is one of a homogenous fighting machine, wheeling and standing to attention at the bark of a single order. However, this narrative does not take into account that the whole is made up of a substantial number

of parts; and that these parts are human beings. In particular they were human beings from many different backgrounds drawn together for one purpose, and one purpose alone. This said, the 'cream' (for cream read higher classes of society) still remained at the top, with the remainder of the 'milk' being expected to abide by the external, civilian social system that this division perpetuated.

Robinson emphasises the way in which individuals were, from day one, indoctrinated into this social narrative with recruits being 'inspected, injected, tested and physically graded' (ibid.: 12). She does though also go on to stress how much the Royal Artillery's attempt to turn recruits into 'khaki robots' (ibid.: 24) did not strike at the core of the individual: 'underneath the khaki we were still very much individuals' (ibid.: 24). It was this 'individuality' which came to the fore on numerous occasions, and emphasises how a social sub-narrative operated within the wider discourse of the contemporary military system.

Robinson's accounts of life in an anti-aircraft battery show that military norms were only maintained to a certain degree. Individuals were very much involved in creating sub-narratives within the system. Uniform in the military is, to all intents and purposes exactly what it purports to be. It is designed to promote a homogenous, uniform, herd-like feel which inspires the notion of team-work. However, individuals being what they are alternative actions are deemed necessary. As ATS personnel, rather than Royal Artillery Regiment staff, the women manning anti-aircraft batteries were not entitled to wear the insignia of the Artillery Regiment (white lanyards and grenade-flash badges). Many of the women did, however do just that, breaking the strict homogeneity that is military rule. In addition, many of them wore officer-issue ties (a finer quality product) (cf. Kerr 1990: 57-8; Robinson 1990: 45). This may seem a trivial 'fashion statement' but it can also be interpreted as an attempt at breaking down the social divide.

More major efforts to create an alternative narrative to the social order were carried out by groups of individuals in the name of the collective body. Two examples stand out from within Robinson's accounts. The first incident concerns the ordering of two ATS girls to clean the accommodation of two sergeants. This was not an ATS duty and it was felt that the girls must make a stand to prevent this happening again. Subsequently, the hut (which accommodated two men in a space which twelve soldiers lived in: a social statement in its own right) was transformed from the pigsty it resembled when the work began, into a veritable palace. Wild flowers were placed

in shaving-mug ‘vases’, the floors were scrubbed and the beds exceptionally well made. However, the girls also added some ‘personal touches’ to their work: the arms and legs of pyjamas were sewn up and the beds were ‘apple-pied’ (the sheets folded in half underneath the covers) and leaves and dirt were placed within the folds of the sheets (Robinson 1990: 97-8). The result of this was Alternative Discourse 1 Military Discipline 0.

In the second incident the visit of a high ranking officer required a great deal of spit and polish around the camp in order to ‘impress’ the visitor: cleanliness equating to efficiency in the Royal Artillery. Unfortunately the visit came at a time when our Russian allies were suffering heavy losses in the Battle for Stalingrad. Resentment was running high amongst some people that not enough was being done to help the Russians. As the parade was mustered and brought to order one gunner decided to voice his resentment, declaring that ‘Britain blancos while Russia bleeds’ (Robinson 1990: 121). This expression of sentiment was very much against the normal discourse which was supposed to prevail in the military, and as a result the parade sergeant ordered the culprit to step forward for suitable punishment. What happened next shows how a collective response can subvert the ‘traditional’ narrative. Three male gunners immediately stepped forward, and they were followed seconds later by the whole parade. No response was given by the sergeant in charge and the parade was duly dismissed. Alternative Discourse 2 Military Discipline 0.

Conclusion: Where do we go from here?

Theoretical analysis of the military sites in Britain during World War Two can be achieved; though at a major analytical scale the sites are not suitable for the type of assessment used to examine cultural landscapes. Military sites are subject to the need for operationally-efficient placements, and take no account of prevailing agricultural, religious or other socio-cultural needs. In the case of anti-aircraft batteries they can also be of an extremely transitory nature, being delivered to the place of need (i.e. against German V-weapons during Operation Diver).

Social narratives can be seen on a limited scale when the layout of a site is analysed, but not, at first site, where individual buildings are considered. Whilst the buildings are shells and there is a lack of artefactual deposition with which to provide any measure of their past social roles there is a window of opportunity to examine social interaction within military structures. The work of Robinson (1990) provides us

with an example of how social narratives were subverted at these sites; but more work now needs to be done with other veterans as to how individuals and groups functioned within buildings, and the site as a whole.

Veterans of both World Wars have been interviewed by the Imperial War Museum, London for their oral history archives, and these archives provide a wealth of information regarding technical operations and general day to day military life. What these interviews have failed to do though is ask the questions we as archaeologists would find more useful in understanding social interaction within military bases and their buildings. Questions regarding domestic layouts within huts, living space per individual, domestic hierarchies in huts, etc., etc. would provide us with the sort of material needed to turn building plans and empty, concrete shells into living, breathing cultural artefacts which reflect the contemporary social culture in which they were erected.

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