

How To Record a Pillbox



The pillbox, often incorrectly referred to as a 'bunker', is the archetypal structure of First and Second World War defences in the UK. These often small structures are constructed from reinforced concrete, and feature embrasures within their walls to allow the occupants to fire a variety of weapons from the relatively safe confines of the pillbox.

The pillbox was first used in the UK during the First World War as part of the now almost forgotten anti-invasion defences of the East and South coasts. Invasion and coastal raids were a recurring threat throughout the First World War, with vast coastal defences constructed to counter the ongoing risk at the time.

During the Second World War, construction of pillboxes commenced following the fall of France in June 1940. Once again, the coast was significantly fortified to counter the threat of invasion. Changes in defensive strategy and doctrine soon saw pillbox construction officially halted in February 1942. Pillboxes were constructed over a period of just 20 months, with most constructed during the first 16 weeks of this period.

The pillbox remains one of the most widely recognised aspects of the defensive landscape, but is often neglected in terms of detailed recording.

This guide outlines what to look for when recording wartime pillboxes for CITiZAN.

A checklist can be found on the back to help you keep track of what to record.

BE AWARE Entering a pillbox is done so at your own risk. Pillboxes should only be entered if it safe to do so and only if you can see clearly within the structure. Pillboxes are often used as bat roosts and it is a criminal offence to disturb one. Do not enter a pillbox if you suspect it is used as a bat roost, if it unsafe to do so, or if the entrance is sealed. Pillboxes on private property require landowner consent to access. It is your responsibility to seek out and secure landowner consent **BEFORE** you access them. Remember that pillboxes often sit within protected landscapes, such as SSSIs.

What To Record

There are several important features to record when investigating & recording wartime pillboxes for CITiZAN.

Firstly, if possible and safe to do so, take a look around the external surfaces of the pillbox to get an idea of the structure and its location. Keep an eye out for any unique features, such as period graffiti or modifications to the pillbox.

Next, consider and record the following observations-

Shape in Plan

The shape in plan of the pillbox gives us an indication of what it looks like from above. This can be useful in determining whether the pillbox was constructed using one of the known drawings produced by the Directorate of Fortifications and Works (DFW/3), or whether it is a localised or unique design.

Even minor variations on the DFW/3 drawings can be an indicator of a unique or localised pillbox design which has not been identified through documentary research.

Orientation

This is simply the direction in which the pillbox faces. This can tell us a lot about the pillbox, such as the expected direction of advance of invading forces, as well as what key strategic points in the landscape the pillbox was sited to cover. The direction a pillbox faces is opposite the entrance to the structure. The entrance to a pillbox would be constructed facing away from the expected direction of advance, allowing the pillbox to be garrisoned or evacuated if it came under concentrated attack. You can use compass bearing to record this direction, e.g. North, East, South-East etc.

Wall Thickness

Recording wall thickness is very important. It can give us clues to the intended role of the pillbox and the severity of the attack it would likely encounter.

During the Second World War, a wall thickness of 0.38m of reinforced concrete was considered bullet-proof, while a thickness of 1.06m was considered shell-proof. First World War era pillboxes often have a much thinner wall thickness and it is currently believed that there was no standard specification issued for their construction.

Number of Embrasures and their Orientations

Recording the number and location of embrasures within the walls of the pillbox is another important aspect of a CITiZAN pillbox record. The direction the embrasures face can be recorded by using compass bearings. Make a note of whether the embrasures are flat-sided or stepped. If the embrasures feature a recess on the lower interior surface, this can be an indication of the type of Light Machine Gun in use within the pillbox. Most pillboxes were intended to house Light

Machine Guns, such as the Bren. However, it was also possible to fire a rifle from these embrasures too.

Anti-Ricochet Wall

Pillboxes often featured an internal anti-ricochet wall. The purpose of this was to absorb bomb splinters and bullets that entered the interior of the pillbox, stopping the crew from being killed or seriously injured. The shape in plan and thickness of this anti-ricochet wall should be recorded.

An external wall covering an entrance is referred to as a 'blast wall'.

Surrounding defensive features

Are there any other defences surrounding the pillbox? The pillbox was once part of a wider defensive landscape, much of which has now been lost. Pillboxes were often surrounded by supporting trenches and barbed wire. Trenches often survive as low-lying earthworks or shallow depressions in the ground, but are frequently ignored. Take a quick look around the vicinity of the pillbox and see if you spot anything. Any trenches, or other supporting defences you do find can be recorded separately.

You may also spot other pillboxes located close-by. You can mention these and their relative location in relation to the pillbox you are recording in the site description.

Defensive Landscape Context

The pillbox was once part of a wider defensive network focussed on protecting the immediate area in the event of an invasion. The defensive network was planned meticulously, with each defensive position having a specific task to fulfil. Identifying this context is extremely important and can help explain why a pillbox was sited where it is within the landscape.

Have a look around and see if you can identify any obvious features the pillbox was sited to defend. In coastal environments this is often the surrounding beach but can also include other features; such as beach exits and areas that can be accessed by infantry, anti-tank obstacles such as anti-tank blocks, and even sea walls or flood defences. When sited inland a pillbox would often be sited to cover bridges and river crossings, anti-tank ditches or roadblocks, road and rail junctions, and the perimeters of important buildings or factories.

Consider that the landscape may have changed considerably since the pillbox was in use.

A simple description of what you think the pillbox was sited to defend is very useful and helps us to build up a picture of the pillbox's wider context. Your observations can be recorded in the site description for the pillbox you are recording.

Well Done!

You have created a record of a pillbox! You are now ready to upload your record via the CITiZAN app or website (citizan.org.uk). By taking the time to take a closer look at these wartime structures you have helped to add further detail to the CITiZAN record.

Pillbox Recording Checklist

- Take a look around the pillbox and make initial observations
- Identify and record pillbox's shape in plan
- Record pillbox's orientation
- Measure and record wall thickness
- Count the number of embrasures and record their orientations
- Is there an anti-ricochet wall? Record its shape in plan and thickness
- Can you spot any other defences in the vicinity of the pillbox?
- Record the defensive context of the pillbox
- Upload your record via the CITiZAN app or website