

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

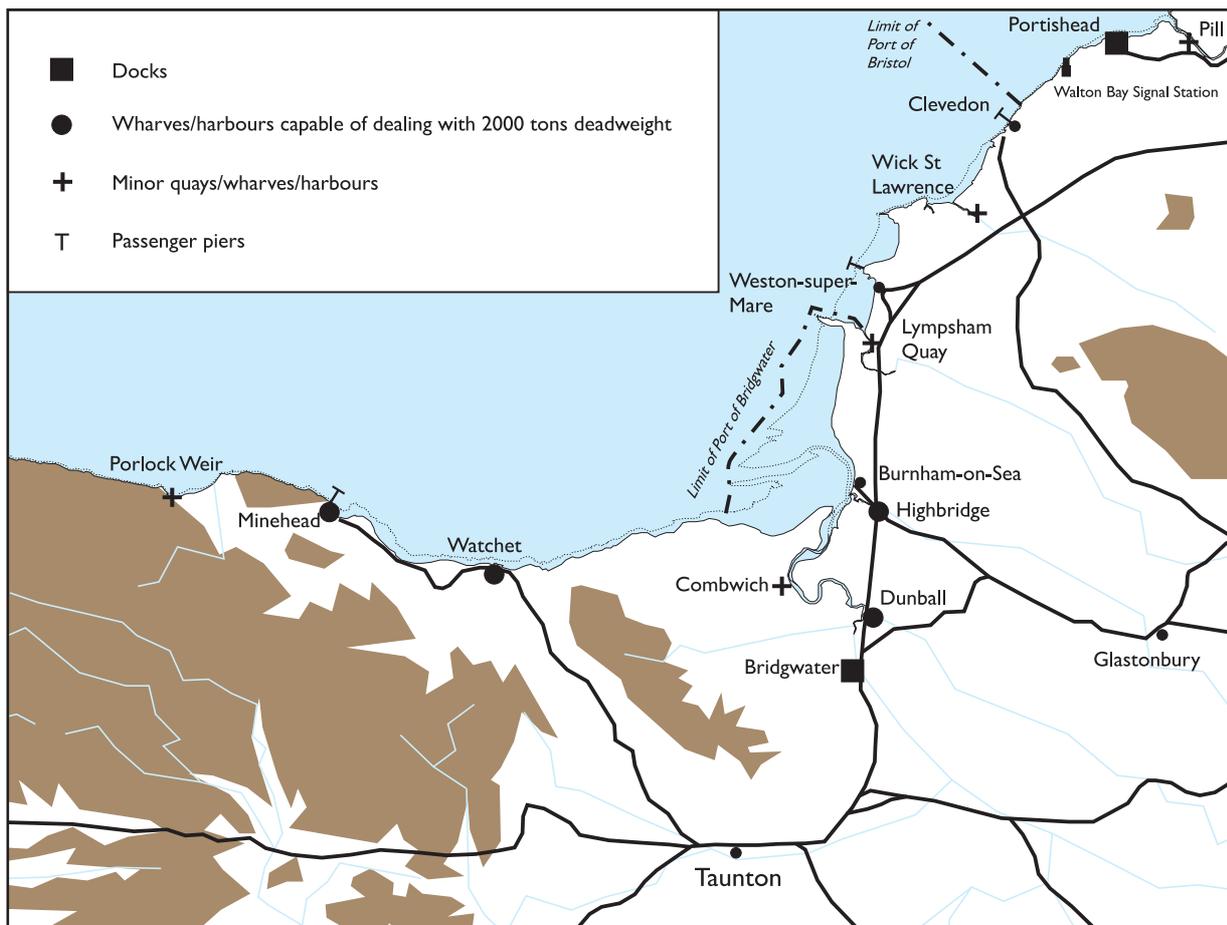
SOMERSET may seem at first sight to be of little maritime strategic significance. It has few harbours: all of them small and none accessible at all states of the tide. Only Watchet, Dunball, High-bridge and Portishead provided facilities for coasting cargo steamers and these facilities were of very modest capacity in terms of the cargo they could handle and distribute by rail. Piers at Minehead, Clevedon, and Weston-super-Mare provided landing points for the Bristol Channel passenger steamers but had no strategic significance. The county does however form the southern flank of the Bristol Channel, an important waterway giving access to the Port of Bristol, to the coaling ports of Newport, Cardiff, Penarth and Barry (all owned by the Great Western Railway) and to a network of waterways leading to the heart of the Midlands. In an age when the whole transport system, particularly the railways and the shipping industry, was geared to carrying the main flows of heavy minerals the shortest possible distance by rail to the nearest port and then by water to the customer, the strategic importance of the Bristol Channel was much wider than its significance to international trade through the Port of Bristol. Somerset was also in close reach of the English Channel and straddled the main communication routes from London and the Midlands to the marine facilities of Devon and Cornwall, notably the naval bases at Plymouth.

These geographical considerations have to be set in the context of the three main maritime strategic issues that affected the home-

land throughout the war. The first was the defence, maintenance and development of international and coastal seaways and the ports and infrastructure that ensured their effectiveness. Britain was utterly dependent on the success of this strategy for keeping open its links and supplies of people and materiel with both the Empire and Britain's allies from day one of the war right through and beyond VJ day. That meant defending its ports and keeping open the seaways to them, such as the Bristol Channel. The second was defending Great Britain from invasion. In the past, invasions had come by the sea, in practice far more commonly and successfully than popularly imagined. Now added to this was the new and then indefinable threat from the air. The third and ultimate element on which victory depended was the successful support of offensive activity directed against the enemy on a worldwide scale. Roskill (1954) summarises this as the ability to 'transport armies overseas, to place them on shore in the chosen theatres, to support and supply them as may be necessary and to shift their bases forward as their land campaigns advance'. In all these Somerset had a modest but important part to play.

The threat from the air, mentioned above, was only one of the ways in which the traditional distinction between naval and military areas of operation became more blurred during the war; there had always been activities such as Coast Artillery which, literally, spanned land and sea. The ability of aircraft to cross land and water with equal ease, however, meant that everywhere in Britain was 'in the front line'

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**Figure 1.1:** Somerset's ports, harbours and passenger piers with their rail links in 1939.

and more relevantly to the present theme, on the way to a maritime target. Thus Somerset's air defences were part of a strategy to defend the industrial heartlands and also the ports of the western coast through which vital supplies flowed. Radar played a critical role here but was also employed to detect shipping. The coast was also important to land-based forces, as an area to defend but also as an area to train for raids, and ultimately, a platform for invasion. It was also useful as the background to live-firing exercises as exclusion areas were easier to establish than on inhabited land.

It is helpful to consider each of these issues as they changed in each of the three phases identified by the *Official Histories* of the Second World War. The first phase runs from the outbreak of war in September 1939 through to the final evacuations from mainland France in late June 1940. Although this phase is

often called Defensive (by Roskill 1954, for example), it was characterised by the immediate implementation of an elaborate system of ocean and coastal convoys and the transportation and supply of expeditionary forces to France, to the Mediterranean and latterly to Norway. As it was so distant from Germany, Somerset was regarded as a safe area to which people and organisations such as the Department of Naval Construction could be moved away from London (Lavery 2006, 74). This phase ends with the evacuation of these forces from Norway and France and the fall of these countries to German occupation, which also meant that Great Britain's ability to blockade Germany by sea was outflanked.

The second phase runs from late June 1940 to the invasion of mainland Europe in June 1944. Britain was faced by German arms operating from stations along the length of the

coastline from the Pyrenees to the North Cape. It brought shipping, ports and manufacturing centres within close range of attack from the air, it brought the sea lanes within range of attack from under the sea and it brought an imminent danger of invasion. In this phase these threats were met and to some extent contained, yet throughout it Britain retained the ability to prosecute its strategic aims in the Mediterranean theatre. From December 1941, war with Japan brought further reverses which by June 1944 were contained but it also brought the firm armed alliance with the United States and the ability to realise the plan to use Britain as the major launch pad for an invasion of mainland Europe, both from Britain itself and from north Africa. The third phase from July 1944 is one in which offensive action predominates with the defeat of Germany in the west and the release of increasing resources to defeat Japan in Burma and support naval operations in the Far East. The threat of invasion may have receded but the struggle to secure the sea lanes, the grim Battle of the Atlantic, continued until VE day.

## A note on sources

The primary source of inspiration for this study has been the extensive but fragmentary scatter of archaeological field monuments across the historic county of Somerset. These have been interpreted with the aid of surviving documentation and together give an insight into the county's maritime history.

The main sources for plans, intentions and activities are in **The National Archives** in the War Office and General Headquarters (GHQ) Home Forces papers. These papers include the war-diaries that Army Field Service Regulations required formation HQs and units to maintain. The object of the war-diary was to 'furnish a historical record of operations and to provide data upon which to base future improvements in army training, equipment, organisation and administration.' The document was classi-

fied 'Secret' and was to be updated daily in duplicate. Many unit and formation war-diaries are available in The National Archives but others have not survived. The war-diaries of HQ staff branches may contain extensive policy papers and operational orders which are extremely useful to the researcher while other war-diaries contain the bare minimum of information. These files include those from the War Office and GHQ Home Forces down to brigade or area HQs. In almost all cases any attached maps or plans appear to have been removed. Likewise some files have been 'weeded' and enclosures which were deemed less important at a later date have been destroyed. Fort Record Books exist for some Bristol Channel forts but those for Brean Down and Steep Holm cannot be located. In the case of the RAF, Operation Record Books have a similar purpose to Army war-diaries. The Air Historical Branch summarised many HQ files into concise histories of aspects of RAF operations but local detail, for example exact grid references of sites, is not included. The **Somerset Record Office** has some useful files on Home Guard and roadblocks but there is very little available about coastal defences. The **National Monuments Record** of English Heritage has an extensive collection of RAF wartime and immediate post-war vertical air photos together with excellent low level oblique photos of some of the Somerset invasion beaches. These often show defences such as trenches or pillboxes although many may not be obvious due to effective camouflage or good siting in shadows. Unfortunately there are no pre-war air photos to compare them with.

There are few **personal recollections** from those who served in Somerset and manned the defences and the more senior commanders and their staff-officers who made the plans, and might explain the rationale behind them, are most unlikely to be still living. Moreover, the serving personnel came from across the UK which would make attempts to contact them extremely difficult and time consuming. On

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1 February 1940, it was estimated that over 5700 troops were serving in Somerset, many in training establishments. In some cases, individuals, particularly those involved with the so-called 'British Resistance Organisation' or RAF Radio Counter Measures, still feel bound by the Official Secrets Act and are reluctant to share their knowledge. Communal memory also appears to be fragile, for example, all recollection of HMS *Iliad* at Watchet has been overlaid by memories of post-war operation of the local ranges.

Reference to **published works** include the *Official History of the Second World War* in particular Roskill (*The War at Sea*) and Collier (*Defence of the United Kingdom*) and a number of Council for British Archaeology reports by Dobinson, together with other local works including Hawkins (*Somerset at War*), Wilson (*Somerset Home Guard*) and Brown (*Somerset v Hitler*). Other references are listed in the bibliography. Particular mention should be made to the use of contemporary military training pamphlets and books published during the war, which give invaluable background information, particularly on organisations, equipment and tactics, for the interpretation of other documentary sources.

Little use has been made of **Internet** sources as there is a growing number of amateur and enthusiast websites on the Second World War, particularly covering pillboxes, which often propagate theories which do not stand up to closer examination. Sadly such theories and suppositions soon become embedded in folk memory and official literature. An example may be taken from the BBC *Peoples War* website where a report includes a mention of the Coast Artillery battery sited in 1940 at Minehead Harbour. The memory of an individual

is quoted as 'they tested the guns and found that they shook the harbour wall so much it wasn't possible to use them.' This story was embellished by English Heritage in their *Severn Estuary Rapid Coastal Zone Assessment Study* (readily accessible on the web), which noted that 'the guns were only ever test-fired once nearly destroying the harbour wall and as a result were removed' (Crowther and Dickson 2008, 212). Examination of the war-diary of 20 Coast Artillery Group in the National Archives shows that the Minehead battery fired a practice shoot of ten rounds full charge on 27 March 1941 while the war-diary of 558 Coast Regiment RA records that on 17 September 1941 the Minehead battery fired a 30 round practice shoot. The battery remained fully operational until 1942 when the Royal Navy had more pressing needs for its guns elsewhere.

Finally acknowledgement should be made of the Somerset County Council **Historic Environment Record** (SHER), with which the authors are all closely involved. This records the field work of many including individual studies and the Defence of Britain project. It serves as the most up-to-date and reliable readily available source of the extent of surviving identified installations and structures in Somerset associated with the Second World War. Similar HERs cover Exmoor and the northern parts of Somerset (once in Avon) and sites mentioned in the text are given the reference numbers (where known) in the HER where further information may be found.

The Somerset HER is available online from [www.somerset.gov.uk/heritage](http://www.somerset.gov.uk/heritage).

Both the Somerset and the Exmoor HERs can also be accessed via the Heritage Gateway ([www.heritagegateway.org.uk](http://www.heritagegateway.org.uk)), which allows cross-searching of local and national records.