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0 250 500 Meters

Highbury Hill, Appledore Road, Royal North Devon Golf Club, Golf Links Road, Broad Lane, Long Lane, Water town, Long Lane, Primrose Lane, Sandymere, The Pill, The Skern, Grey sand Beach, Westward Ho! Beach

Northam Burrows, Sandymere, The Skern, Westward Ho! Beach, Grey sand Beach

1. INVASION DEFENCES

ROUTE DESCRIPTION

ACCESS INFORMATION

With care, cross the golf course in a south easterly direction. Look carefully for some slight depressions in the ground. They appear to run in a series of lines. Look closely and you might see the remains of old concrete sandbags amongst the dunes. Some are exposed approximately 400m further along the coast path, just beyond the fenced off area of the dunes. You can take a short detour to see them, then return to this point before continuing on the trail.

Where the pebble ridge was thinnest, barbed wire obstructions and minefields were dug-in. These were interspersed with small sandbag emplacements and trenches. Look closely and you might see the remains of old concrete sandbags amongst the dunes. Some are exposed approximately 400m further along the coast path, just beyond the fenced off area of the dunes. You can take a short detour to see them, then return to this point before continuing on the trail.

The walk starts and finishes at the visitor centre. Follow the coast path along the fence line to view the estuary mouth.

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### WORLD WAR II LEGACY AND THE NORTHAM BURROWS LANDSCAPE

In the early stages of World War II Britain stood alone. Germany had occupied much of mainland Europe. An invasion seemed imminent.

The Germans might choose to cross the English Channel, but it was possible that less likely parts of the country might also witness an invasion. This quiet, undefended backwater of the North Devon coast was one such place.

With its wide open estuary mouth and large, flat, open landscapes of saltmarsh and intertidal sands, Northam Burrows was vulnerable to attack. This was the sort of place where the Germans could stage an invasion—the sizeable open areas might allow tanks and troops to co-ordinate their forces before moving inland.

The summer of 1940 saw the rapid construction of coastal defences at the Burrows. However, by 1943 the tide of war had changed. Having been joined by its allies, Britain was now adopting a more aggressive stance towards Germany.

During the later stages of the war, the military significance of this landscape had evolved. Those structures that were originally used to defend the coastline were now re-purposed and used for invasion training. The similarity of North Devon's coastline to that of Normandy, the chosen invasion point for D-Day, hadn't gone unnoticed. It was the perfect practice ground.

The themes of coastal defence and invasion training are intermingled among Northam Burrows' remains. A short walk across this landscape reveals a story of this pivotal period during World War II.



### GETTING TO NORTHAM BURROWS

The nearest train station to Northam Burrows is Barnstaple. From the bus stop just outside the station you can travel to the site by bus-route 21, Barnstaple to Westward Ho!.

The Sandymere Road/Jackets Lane stop in Northam is the nearest drop-off point. Approximate journey time from Barnstaple is 45 minutes.

If travelling by car, follow the A39 and then take the A386 to Northam. Brown signs then appear to Northam Burrows. There is a seasonal toll charge to bring vehicles on to the site.

For further information visit:  
[www.torridge.gov.uk/northamburrows](http://www.torridge.gov.uk/northamburrows)

For a free download of the North Devon D-Day Heritage Trail, visit:

[www.northdevon-aonb.org.uk/coastalheritage/world-war-2/d-day](http://www.northdevon-aonb.org.uk/coastalheritage/world-war-2/d-day)



Cover photos: Major General Percy Hobart and the transmitter towers of RAF Northam. (c) Westward Ho! History Group.

## Northam Burrows' Hidden Wartime History



## 2. ANTI-GLIDER AND ANTI-TANK DEFENCES

World War II was a new kind of conflict that had abandoned static trench warfare for a highly mechanised war using tanks and aeroplanes.

Being of a reasonable size and flat, the inner area of the Burrows was considered good "tank country" that might allow the enemy to mobilise its forces. The land also lent itself to airborne attack, especially the landing of gliders.

The faint depressions in the ground were used as anti-glider trenches and were dug in a criss-cross pattern. The trenches also included a number of upright posts. These acted as a deterrent, as they would cause damage to any glider that attempted to land.

**Head out towards the Skern, in the direction of Appledore, which you can see in the distance. When you reach the road, look closely into the mudflats. At low tide, you may notice the remains of several concrete pyramid-shaped structures.**



German gliders. (c) Bundesarchive, Bild 1011-587-1523-35A

## 3. INVASION PRACTICE

The structures in front of you were known as Dragon's Teeth. They were placed in rows along the foreshore; and were once numerous, but only a few remain now.

Dragon's Teeth were a formidable obstacle for military vehicles, especially tanks and landing craft. It is likely that they initially served a defensive function at Northam Burrows, but were later re-purposed for practising assault, in preparation for D-Day.

The remains of a group of poles also appear from out of the mud. It is thought that these are the remains of scaffolding used for D-Day practice. These may have been used as a training aid by troops to practise transfer from large ships into smaller landing craft.

**Follow the road in the direction of the entrance/exit to the Country Park. Before you reach the bridge there's a sharp bend and an information panel.**



(c) IWM

## 4. RAF NORTHAM

It is difficult to believe, but at this point you are standing in front of one of the most significant wartime landscape features on the North Devon Coast. This was the site of a radar station which was built by the Royal Air Force in 1941, when the danger to Britain was at its height.

RAF Northam formed part of the 'Chain Home' network of radar stations which were constructed to detect and warn of incoming enemy aircraft up to 100 miles away.



The eyes and ears of the Royal Air Force (c) IWM

The radar station comprised a number of buildings and structures. There were four metal lattice transmitter towers, around 100m high, and two slightly shorter wooden receiver towers located on the edge of Northam Burrows.

The radar station was a 'West Coast' type which relied on dispersal and camouflage for protection. The features were also duplicated, so that, if one structure was destroyed, a back up was available. There were two transmitter blocks, two receiver blocks and a double set of aerial masts. Look closely and you will see the scattered remains.

**Among the concrete remains of RAF Northam are two small earthen mounds. They are difficult to spot, but they played a very important role.**



A concrete counter-weight was used to secure aerial wires between the transmitter masts.

## 5. DECOY SITE REMAINS

What makes this radar station important is that two decoy buildings were built to resemble RAF buildings when viewed from the air. They were intended to draw enemy fire away from the actual targets.

From the decoy remains you can observe some of the other buildings linked to RAF Northam. Two radar receiver blocks are located just outside the Northam Burrows boundary, in the adjacent field.

Over the field boundary, you may be able to see the concrete bases on which the two wooden receiver towers once stood. These were a duplicate pair of wooden towers nearly 80m high.

The radar station was decommissioned in 1944, when the threat of German invasion had passed. However, RAF Northam remained a prominent landmark in the landscape until it was dismantled in the mid 1950s.

**Follow the line of The Pill. On reaching the long straight road, head towards the pebble ridge. Take care of traffic entering and exiting the Country Park.**

## 6. HOBART'S FUNNIES

The beach beyond the pebble ridge proved to be an ideal testing ground for various inventions designed to overcome German coastal defences during D-Day.

In the summer of 1942 COXE (The Combined Operations Experimental Establishment) was installed in Torrridge House in Westward Ho! as well as in nearby Appledore. This led to an increase in amphibious trials on the beach.

**The eccentric Major General Percy Hobart (pictured on the front cover) was tasked with the job of equipping and training a secret armoured division. The tanks that were tested here became known as "Hobart's Funnies".**

The tank designs included the 'Bobbin', which rolled out a canvas mat, and the 'Crab', which had a flail on the front to clear minefields. A later development was the Duplex Drive tank which had a canvas skirt so that it could be launched in water. These tanks were the first to land on the Normandy beaches and cleared the way for the infantry.



The Bobbin (c) IWM



(c) IWM

## THE GREAT PANJANDRUM

A number of other experimental projects were tested here, including the trials of The Great Panjandrum in 1943.

The Panjandrum was a massive, rocket-propelled, explosive-laden cart that resembled a huge cotton reel. It was designed to penetrate enemy coastal defences. A prototype constructed in East London was transported by night to Westward Ho!, but plenty of holidaymakers witnessed the test, so the weapon was hardly a secret!

The trials were unsuccessful. It was claimed that the entire project might even have been a hoax, devised to misguide the Germans about Allied invasion plans.