

# ‘Nuggets of Rock History’

(No9)

## Mobile Defence Cylinders

By J Collett

Being proud of the place where you belong or live is a national trend, so I suppose having a theme of what's good to do with Rock Parish is a normal reaction, therefore I hope my fellow readers will be interested to know we, the parishioners of Rock, have the best set of M.D.C's (mobile defence cylinders) in the county.

And almost with one voice I hear you cry what the Brierley Hill is a MDC, and so if you are sitting comfortably I will begin. We need to go back 70 plus years (these articles are ‘nuggets of history’ after all, albeit fairly recent history), to when the government of the day were looking at the speed with which the German armed forces spread across into their neighbouring countries, capturing all before them with seemingly little resistance during the outset of World War 2. The apparent lack of any structured defence throughout much of ‘Northern Europe’ was a frightening revelation, particularly in light of the not so distant WW1, from which one would have expected a lesson or two would have been learnt. The conclusion the British war committee came to was that we needed to make it very difficult for any foreign landing force to get around and about in England, and ensure the same ease of access should no happen in the UK if or when an invasion took place.

And so during the late 1930's amongst other things, a plan was evolved to create a series of ‘barriers’ at strategic points all across Britain, using all and any kinds of structure or land feature that could be linked together to stop or at least slow down a column of armed men and vehicles. Natural features such as rivers, steep rocky out crops or boggy ground was link in continuous lines by other man made structures, mostly of concrete, to form a barrier to stop the progress of an invading army. Long level fields were also laid with obstructions, as it had also been realised that such sites had been used to land gliders full of paratroops to bring an instant fighting force to prime targets across Europe.

As the British Government was aware Landing Craft were being assembled at various ports along the French and Belgium coast, Britain was also building major defences all around our east and south coast line, assuming this would be the obvious main line of any assault, however British Intelligence were also aware that the Germans were considering a sneaky attack via the back door, i.e. by sailing round the coast to South Wales, they hoped they would find the weak spot in our defences. This would enable the invading forces the opportunity to gain access to control, or destroy the armament factories in the industrial Midlands.

Part of Britain's plan was to create barriers across any road leading to a river crossing, so as to retain the rivers as continuous lines of defence. And this is where Rock Parish got involved, for of course one of the main routes from south Wales to the West Midlands, was along the A456/A4117 roads that link up at the Finger Post, Far Forest, and from there down Cleobury Road through Bewdley and across the bridge. So as an early defence to Bewdley bridge the Rock Home Guard were supplied with a quantity of cylindrical shaped concrete blocks, which had a flat top and bottom and a hole running through its length, which allowed a steel scaffolding pole to be slid through and enable the members of the Home Guard to roll them into position, and then up-ended the MDC's by this time using the steel piping as a

lever, onto their flat surface, and with a row of these spread out across the road and adjacent verges they were able to force any vehicle to stop and be inspected.

The point chosen to erect this barrier was near the present Far Forest Society Sports/Showground entrance. On the opposite side of the road at the café (which in 1939 was part of Rock Garage, now both gone), was where the local Home Guard had their Head Quarters, and just outside the café, slightly covered by the hedge, was a machine gun post, as part of the defence in case the convey put up any resistance to being stopped.

We have an actual first hand account of this barrier being in place in a story told to me by one of the children who was evacuated from Clacton on Sea to be billeted at the Rectory at Rock with the then Reverend Mawson. In June 1940 the young lad, Ron Saltmarsh, was returning with Rev. Mawson from a trip to Kidderminster in the Reverend's car when they came upon the barrier across the Cleobury Road, Rev. Mawson had to produce his identification to the armed soldiers at the road block, and was told a German invasion was in progress, so once cleared the Reverend went straight back to the Rectory and told the Caretaker to ring the church bells at once. This was a national instruction throughout Britain that for the duration of the war church bells were no longer permitted to be rung for any occasion except, if there was an enemy invasion, and the ringing of the bells was a signal to alert everyone we were under attack.

This was the occasion that became known locally as 'the Battle of Bewdley' when it had been reported that German Paratroops had been seen landing near Ribbesford Woods and all local defence groups, including Rock Home Guard, were put on red alert, and in the mean time a platoon of regular soldiers were immediately requested to be dispatched from Norton Barrack, Worcester, to find and engage with the enemy. Fortunately, after much searching the surrounding area, as no trace was found of any invading soldiers, the search was called off, although not before many men had spent long hours searching the surrounding countryside, starting around 4pm in the afternoon and carrying on through the night until the early hours of the next day, when they were finally stood down. It was eventually agreed that the so called parachutes had been 'stooks' of hay that had been drying on a warm summers afternoon in the field, had got whisked up into the air by a localized mini whirlwind, and that as they descended, had opened out in a circular form looking from a distance like a group of falling parachutists. The whole episode was covered in much more detail by David Birt in his excellent book, 'The Battle of Bewdley' written in 1988 after a lot of local research.

For the edification of our younger readers, the Home Guard was an organisation set up by the government at the beginning of World War 2, it was originally called the LDV (Local Defence Volunteers), and was made up of men who for one reason or another had not joined up to fight abroad in the Army, Navy or Air Force, but had volunteered to act as a local armed force here at home and fight off any invaders to our country. These men would also be working at their normal jobs during the day, many of whom were in important work making armourments for the war effort, or producing some other vital produce that was needed to maintain the country through the difficult times. And thus spent much of their time when not at work, training to defend the country or actually on guard at night, protecting local points of special importance, or on fire watch duty all night to ensure fires etc from bombing raids were reported and dealt with as swiftly as possible.

However to get back to our, i.e. Rock Parish's Mobile Defence Cylinders, the ones that were issued to Rock consisted of 10 which were 21 inches in diameter and 30 inches in height (540mm x 760mm), nine 24 inches dia. by 24 inches high (610mm x 610mm), plus two 39 inches dia, and 49 inches high overall, (or at least that is the number of the ones that survived). The largest 2 two cylinders had the last 13 inches of the top part tapered off to give it a conical shape. This was to enable these 2 larger MDC to be used to form a central gateway via a gap left between them, bridged by a section that could be raised to let approved vehicle through the main road block once cleared as OK to pass.

After the war finished in 1945 the Mobile Defence Cylinders were stored against the hedge on what had just become the new site of Far Forest Horticultural Society's Show Ground and shortly after, the base for 'Rock Sports Club' which included a football pitch, a tennis court, a cricket pitch and for a short while, a Ladies Netball team also played there. Eventually the Cylinders were stored right down in the far corner at the bottom of the show ground and over the coming 60 years the grass grew higher and the hedge spread out side- ways, until the road barriers were completely covered and forgotten. Until that is, yours truly accidentally came across a couple of them and asked John Simmonds of their origin, he thought they were just something the early 'Show Committee' had acquired to build a raised stage for the band on show day, and that somewhere in the undergrowth were more.

However in 2005 on a trip to Pershore, whilst walking near the old bridge I saw a display with MDC's in a mock up of their war time use and realised these cylinders were exactly the same as those on our Show Ground. After further research and help from the County Archaeological Dept, plus some grant money, your local history group had the flat topped cylinders moved and displayed on a specially made base just inside the entrance to the pavilion car park, with a purposely designed 'Interpretation Board' giving details of their former use. (See photos below) The 2 conical topped larger cylinders remain where they have stood for the last 60 or 70 years, either side of the main gates into the show ground, there for all to see and evoke memories of the efforts made to keep our country safe from foreign invasion.