

Formby
during
World War 2 (WW2)

World War 2 (WW2)
1939 - 1945

Formby during World War 2 (WW2)

General introduction

The west coast of Britain was seen to have been vulnerable to an invasion during the opening period of World War 2 for various reasons.

Military experts feared that Formby could provide Nazi Germany with a perfect landing spot, in that it was near the mouth of the Mersey Estuary and it also had long flat beaches that were deemed a good invasion threat for both sea (amphibious craft) and air (air craft or glider) invasion.

In addition to this, at this time, the neutrality of Ireland was a great concern to the British government. Some feared that there was a possibility that Germany could make some sort of deal with Britain's nearest neighbours and, so it was, that the west coast of Britain received all sorts of anti-invasion structures.



Formby

Formby's War with Hitler and the Nazis

These lesson slides will help you to understand to what extent Formby was involved in World War 2 and what effect the conflict had on the area (and the people living in it) at the time.

Although some lives were lost in Formby during the bombing, the town escaped the relentless raids that were experienced in Bootle and Liverpool.

Harington Barracks

When the former Depot of the King's (Liverpool) Regiment at Seaforth became inadequate (as recruits began to flow in after the outbreak of war in 1939), it was moved eight miles north to a "hatted camp" sited on requisitioned farmland in Formby, between Wicks Lane and Victoria Road. This later became Harington Barracks, the King's (Liverpool) Regiment Infantry Training Centre, and continued in the early part of the war to receive 200 recruits every fortnight.



The War Office originally planned to take over Formby Golf Club, which was in fact used as officer accommodation for a period but, in the end, the new purpose-built barracks was constructed with vehicular access from Victoria Road and pedestrian access via Blundell Path.

Harrington Barracks

Blundell Path, which still survives today, was the shortest route to the nearest station. Training took place in large gyms and on a large parade ground as well as on the surrounding open fields. Rifle Training began to take place (using .22 rifles) in a covered range, situated near where St Jerome's Church in Wicks Lane is today. Following this, further practice took place on the (still surviving) open range (see next slide for photographs) at the seaward end of Albert Road and finally, at Altcar Rifle Range.

Soldiers at Harrington Barracks during WW2.



The barracks was named after General Sir Charles Harrington, who died in 1940. From 1941 to 1945, the Commanding Officer, was Lieutenant Colonel Burke Gaffney, who established a good relationship with local residents. He subsequently became Colonel of the Regiment.

Open Firing Range

Here you can see some pictures of the open firing range which dates back to WW2. According to the Formby Civic Society, it is fascinating that this structure has survived.

It is in a natural bowl in the dunes and was used as a training facility throughout WW2. Soldiers would use this open range to hone their skills before being sent out to battle. The large curved wall shows a great deal of bullet holes, but surprisingly the large buttresses are on the firing side.

Unfortunately, this structure has suffered a lot of vandalism and is now slowly being engulfed by nature.



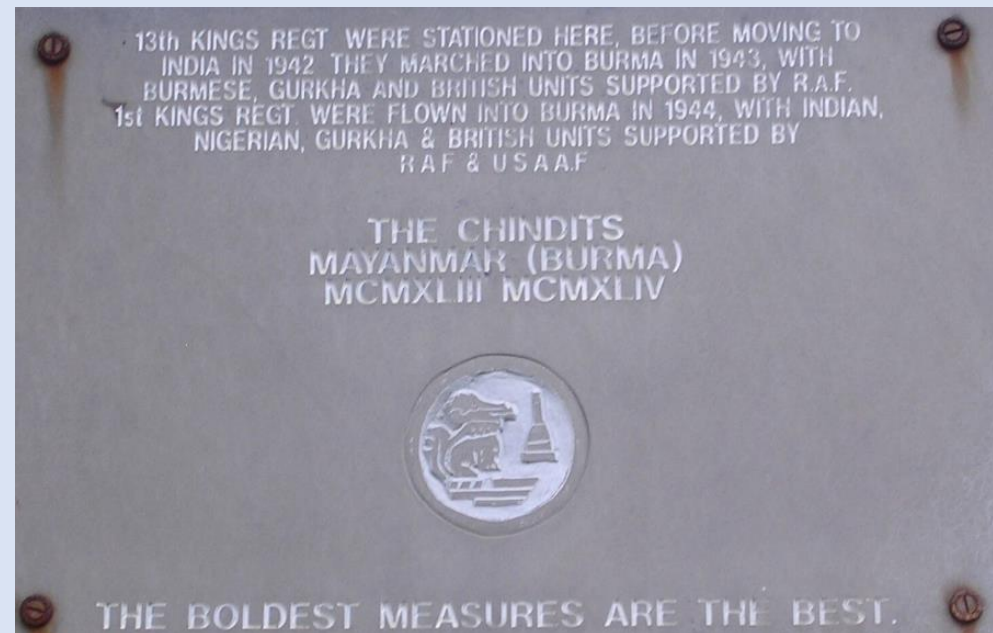
Harrington Barracks

The only other remaining physical evidence of the existence of Harrington Barracks is on the Sub Station in Proctor Road, Formby. It is called the Chindit Plaque Memorial and it marks the site of the World War Two Kings Regiment Harrington Barracks, Guard Room.

Some of the 'Kingsmen' who were trained at the Barracks were involved in battle in the Far East in the Chindit expeditions and fought behind enemy lines, contributing greatly to the defeat of the Japanese Army who had otherwise seemed invincible - hence the name the Chindit Plaque.

In 2020, Formby British Legion honoured these servicemen on the 75th anniversary of the end of WW2 by holding a memorial service at the Chindit Plaque.

The plaque on the Sub Station at Proctor Road, Formby.



Starfish Sites

Commissioned in 1940, a Second World War bombing decoy site was created at Formby. Its purpose was to deflect enemy bombing from the city of Liverpool and from Bootle Docks. It was known as a permanent 'Starfish' site. The name 'Starfish' came from the initials 'SF' which stands for 'Special Fire' sites.

The 'Starfish' decoy operated by lighting a series of controlled fires during an air raid to replicate an urban area targeted by bombs.

There was also an additional decoy at the same site, known as a 'QL' decoy, which displayed lighting to simulate the railway marshalling yards, and tram flashes associated with the docks.

Formby was one of fourteen civil bombing decoy sites for Liverpool, and one of fourteen 'Starfish' sites.



Starfish Sites

It is fascinating to think that during WW2, Formby was used as one of these decoy sites.

The sites ...

- were designed to look like burning cities - this saved thousands of lives and diverted hundreds of air raids
- helped to dupe Nazi aircraft during the Blitz
- were built to lure enemy bombers away from more populated areas.

The idea of building these decoys and setting them alight, completely confused the German air force bombers (the Luftwaffe) into believing they had hit their targets.

The Starfish decoys were sited miles away from the communities and cities that were likely to come under attack. As soon as the first wave of German bombers lit up or attacked a real target, emergency teams raced to extinguish the flames - then lit the decoy fires. The aim was to convince the second wave of bombers that this was the target and to fool them into dropping bombs harmlessly on the decoy site.

Starfish Sites

This is how the decoy worked ...

- tanks containing paraffin or diesel were placed on top of 20ft towers, arranged to resemble rows of buildings or industrial complexes
- a valve, that operated like a toilet flush, was opened to release the fuel on to burning coal, creating an instant blaze and engulfing the area in black smoke
- the fire was flushed with water to send a column of steam into the night sky
- Result: This would cause a virtual explosion of fire and steam and created a rather convincing mock-up of a bombing raid that had hit its target and caused a burning.

By the end of the war, there were 237 Starfish sites protecting factories, railways and other potential targets as well as 81 cities across the country. Official figures reveal that 730 bombing raids were diverted to these dummy targets.

RAF Woodvale

RAF Woodvale (a small Royal Air Force station to the north of the town of Formby) was opened in 1941, with 308 Squadron being the first flying unit.

The airfield opened and served as a Second World War fighter station with three active runways - the main runway being a mile in length.

It was designated to provide fighter cover to protect Merseyside and it housed fighter squadrons for general protection against the Luftwaffe.

It was also used as a Sector Control Station with responsibility for North West England.



RAF Woodvale

The RAF station was home to the operational service of WW2 fighter planes, the Supermarine Spitfires. Spitfires would roar over the town during the summer of 1941. Many of the Spitfires based at Woodvale were flown by Polish airmen who had been deployed there.

Several accidents unfortunately marred the squadron's stay, and six Polish airmen are buried in war graves at Our Lady of Compassion Church, in Formby.

Today, RAF Woodvale is used by the Royal Air Force for light aircraft and fighter training, as well as a few civilian aircraft. The station was (until 2011) also home to Merseyside Police's helicopter, known as 'Mike One'.

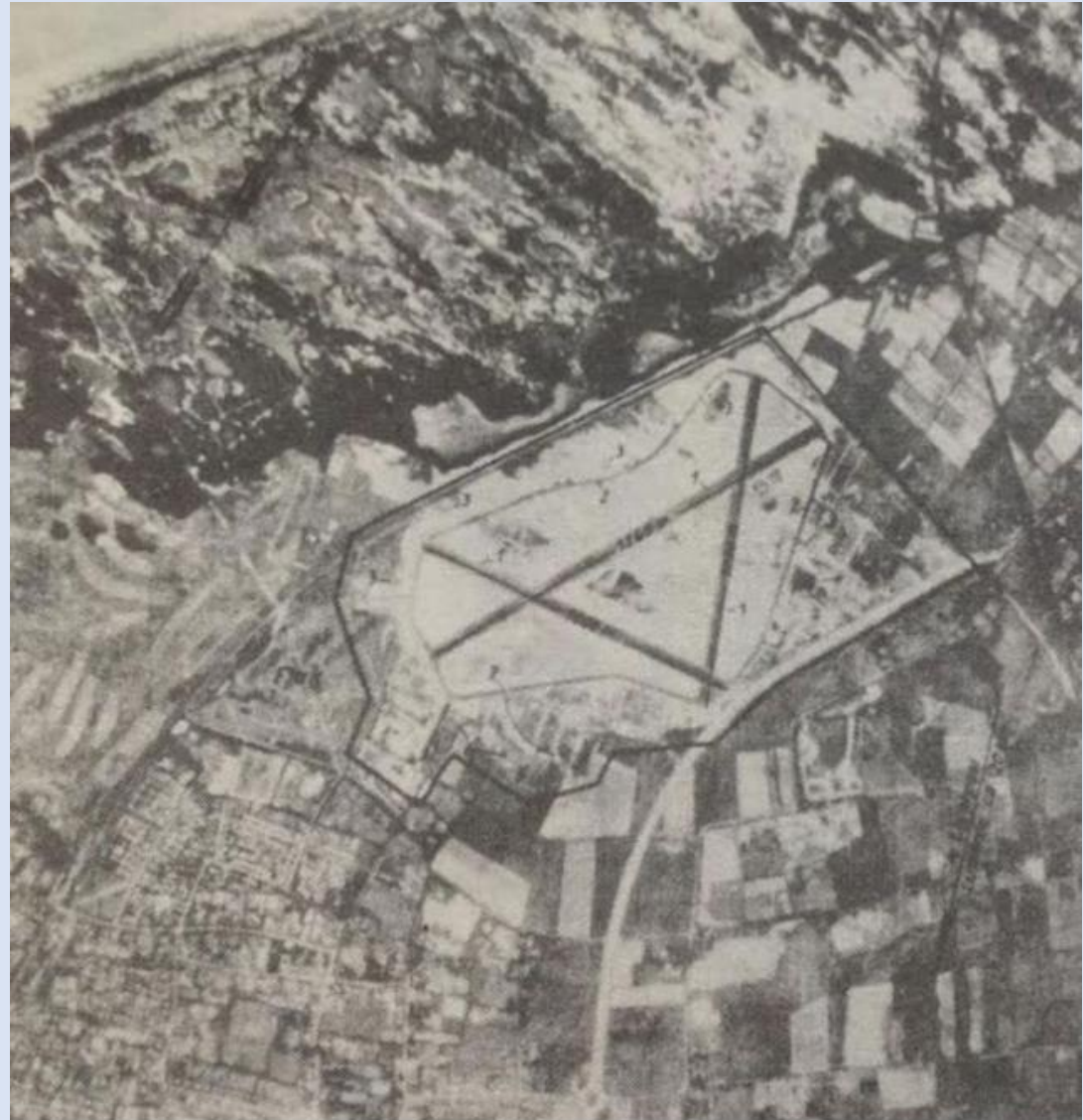


RAF Woodvale

Here, you can see a Nazi bomb aimer's aerial photograph of RAF Woodvale (from Oct 1942). You can clearly see the three runways.

The air base sent out squadrons of Spitfires to fight off Nazi bombers which had caused such huge devastation to areas including Liverpool and Bootle during the Blitz the year before. Britain faced a grim struggle for survival during the Second World War, most notably during The Battle Of Britain in 1940, when the Luftwaffe laid siege in overwhelming numbers. Bombs also fell on Southport, so RAF Woodvale was needed to defend Southport too.

Seventeen people were killed in Southport and 76 others were injured during enemy raids between September 1940 and July 1941.



A Nazi bomb aimer's aerial photo of RAF Woodvale near Southport, issued in October 1942 during the Second World War

Stella Maris Hotel

One structure that unfortunately no longer survives, is the Stella Maris Hotel, Formby. Like other buildings built in Formby at the turn of the 20th century, it was built in an attempt to create a new sea-side resort called 'Formby-By-The-Sea', but it was demolished after the resort failed to take off.

However, information from the Formby Civic Society tells us that this hotel was adapted for war-use during WW2. It was adapted to become a Chain Home High Radar Station. The black and white picture below shows the hotel with the radar set up (built on its roof). Unfortunately, nothing remains of the building today, but the Formby Civic Society says that the concrete (seen here, top right) is what remains of the base for the generators.



Formby's Heavy Anti-Aircraft Site

During WW2, a large anti-aircraft gun was mounted on the roof of the town's police station, on the corner of Church Road.

Although some lives were lost in Formby during the bombing, the town escaped the relentless raids that were experienced in Bootle and Liverpool.

Merseyside
Gunsite "I"
H1 Formby



Mersey Gunsite "I" H1 Formby	Mersey Gunsite "T" H18 Sutton
Mersey Gunsite "C" H2 Fort Crosby	Mersey Gunsite "S" H19 Red Brow
Mersey Gunsite "M" H3 Seaforth	Mersey Gunsite "R" H20 Moore
Mersey Gunsite "A" H4 Litherland	Mersey Gunsite "YY" H21 Puddington
Mersey Gunsite "B" H5 Walton Hall Park	Hawarden Gunsite "VC" H22
Mersey Gunsite "C" Lower Breck Park	Hawarden Gunsite "VA" H23
Mersey Gunsite "D" Fiveways	Mersey Gunsite "WW" H24 Whitby
Mersey Gunsite "E" H6 Tramway Rd	Mersey Gunsite "LL" H25 Upton Heath
Mersey Gunsite "F" H7 Deysbrook	Mersey Gunsite "W" H26 Ince
Mersey Gunsite "N" H8 Kirkby	Mersey Gunsite "V" H27 Alvanley
Mersey Gunsite "D" H9 Childwall	Mersey Gunsite "GG" H28 Thurston
Mersey Gunsite "NN" H10 Rainford	Mersey Gunsite "G" H29 Hoylake
Mersey Gunsite "L" H11 Speke	Mersey Gunsite "Z" H30 Leasowe
Mersey Gunsite "FF" H12 Prescott	Mersey Gunsite "J" H31 Bidston
Mersey Gunsite "O" H13 Hale Bank	Mersey Gunsite "H" H32 Oxtan
Mersey Gunsite "PP" H14 Yew Tree Farm	Mersey Gunsite "Y" H34 Storeton
Mersey Gunsite "P" H15 Ditton	Mersey Gunsite "XX" H35 Raby
Mersey Gunsite "U" H16 Overton	Mersey Gunsite "G" H36 New Ferry/Shore Fields
Mersey Gunsite "Q" H17 Barrows Green	Mersey Gunsite "X" H37 Eastham

Royal Navy activity

There was also a heavy Royal Navy presence on Formby's coast acting as defenders of the Mersey itself but, more importantly, ready to fend off any enemy activity headed towards nearby Liverpool and its docks.

German U-boats were spotted at the mouth of the Mersey Estuary and archives tell us that the authorities sank mesh type gates at the mouth of the Mersey, to keep them out.

Devil's Hole

Hidden behind a high dune ridge, Devil's Hole is Formby's biggest dune blow-out. No-one knows exactly what made 'Devil's Hole' form in the 1940s, but German bombs are the likeliest culprits.

Raiding Luftwaffe warplanes often saw the fires of 'Starfish' decoy sites between Altcar and Formby. Some released their deadly loads over Ravenmeols, believing that they had reached Liverpool.



Today, Devil's Hole still resembles a crater but, over the years, it has hollowed out and now provides an important refuge for plants and animals that require open sandy conditions.

Home Guard and ARP (Air Raid Precaution) wardens

In the same way as happened across the whole country, Formby's civilians answered the call of duty and joined the Home Guard or became ARP wardens.

They played a vital part in the war effort by their vigilant patrols of Formby village. It was crucial that no lights were seen through any windows, and it was the duty of the ARP wardens to ensure that blackout regulations were enforced.

Incendiary bombs dropped all over Formby, and it fell to the ARP to extinguish them with their stirrup pumps.

The Home Guard also played an essential role by making regular patrols of the village keeping watch for any threatened invasion. Formby archives tell us that, due to a shortage of weapons, some Home Guard men were issued with broom handles as rifle substitutes for their practice sessions.



WVS (Women's Voluntary Service) and the Red Cross Society

Many local Formby people gave what they could in feeding the wives and families of soldiers when they came to visit Harington Barracks.

The WVS and the Red Cross Society were kept very busy too. Evacuee children were brought out from Bootle and Litherland and housed in Formby.

During the worst of the bombing, people from the city flocked to Formby, where they spent the nights sleeping in church halls, private houses and any place where a floor was available, until they returned to work in the devastated city the next morning.



Formby War Memorial

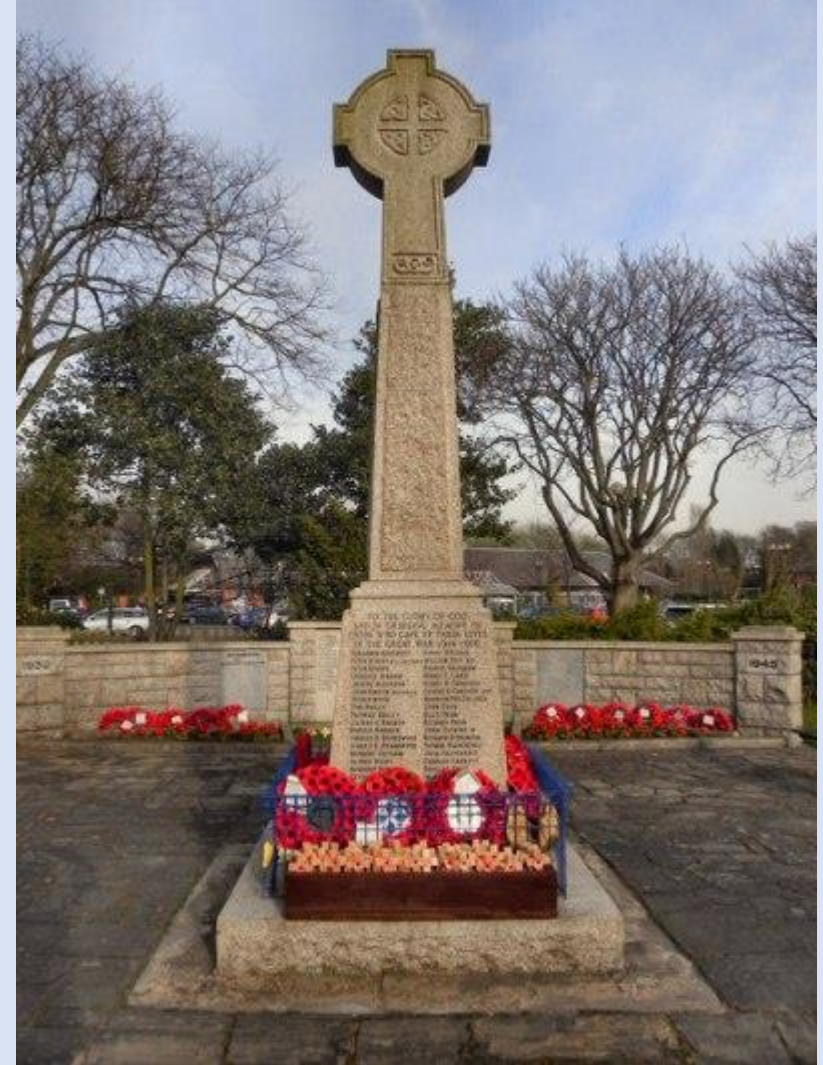
Formby's fallen service men of World War Two are remembered and honoured by the War Memorial.

Formby's War Memorial is located by the roundabout at the corner of Three Tuns Lane (at the end of the village) and was built on land given by Mr Charles Weld Blundell.

At the end of WW1, the people of Formby opted for the simple stone cross.

Behind the cross is the second part of the memorial. A semi-circular stone wall - this is where the names of the men killed in WW2 are inscribed.

The memorial, as a whole, commemorates the residents of Formby who were killed or missing in World War I (115 names) and World War 2 (69 names) and the war in Afghanistan (1 name).



The final word ...

Escaping, as it did, the worst of Hitler's attack, made Formby an enviable place to live after the war.

The people who lived here definitely played their part, but they were spared the horrifying dangers which were experienced by other parts of the country.

When victory came in 1945, the service men who had survived, returned home and Harington Barracks became a national service camp until its eventual closure.

Task Time



Formby Learning in Partnership

Formby Schools Local History Project	
Event	Formby During WW2
5 Key Points	
1	
2	
3	
4	
5	

Cause	Effect
Significance	