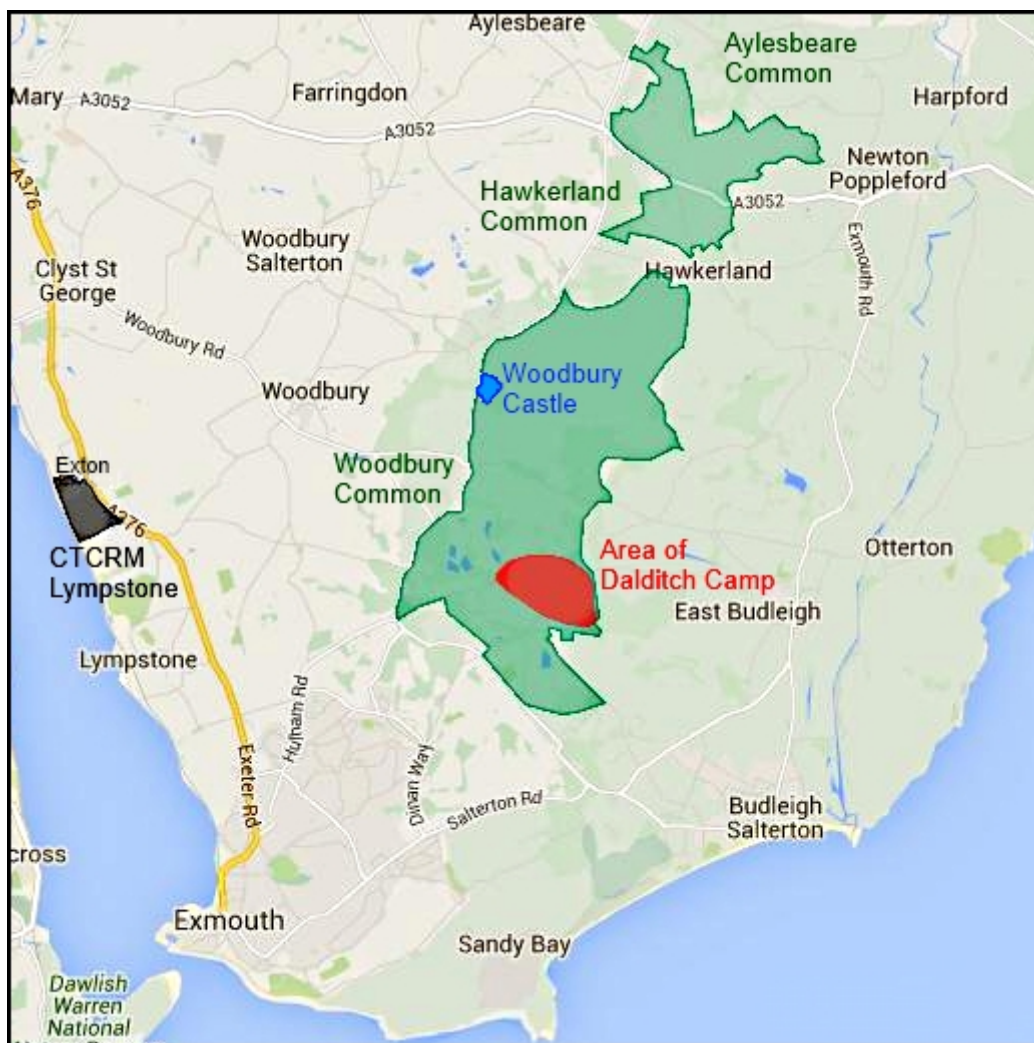


Dalditch Camp, History, And Finds on Woodbury Common.

The Second World War Training Camp of the Royal Marines. 1941 -1946.

Dalditch Training Camp – The Royal Marines History on Woodbury Common.

Abandoned Second World War military camps in the UK typically have the history of the site well documented, which provides the visitor with added poignancy if ones relative was stationed there, or those who are keen in local history. However, not all sites are quite as well documented as others, even the more larger and important World War Two sites in the country get left on the wayside. Just four miles north, of Exmouth in Devon, located on Woodbury common is one such forgotten site, which has a rich sense of military history. Today, walkers on Woodbury common will inevitably come across many remnants of bricks and concrete, with much of the foundations buried in the undergrowth, giving the impression of undertaking an archaeological survey of a long lost ancient civilisation.

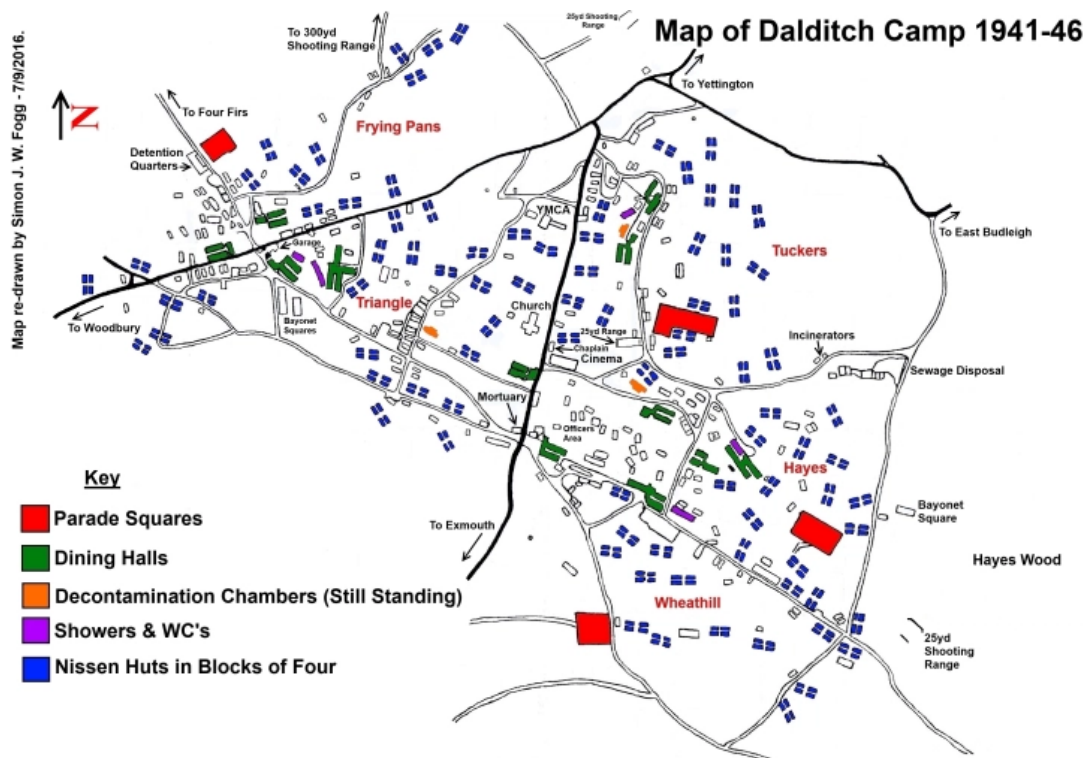


Mounds of rubble and foundations are all that is left of a training camp for the Royal Marine commandos, a camp that was known in wartime as Dalditch camp, taking its name from the nearby minute hamlet of Dalditch.

Woodbury common is a very beautiful part of East Devon, standing proud above the out-lying villages and hamlets, at 600 feet above sea-level.

Its composition is made up of pebble-beds, heath-land, valley bogs and small copses of mixed trees, thus supporting all kinds of wildlife, insects and flora. The common has been host to the development of mankind – from Neolithic man, Iron-age, Romans, and Saxons. Civil War ‘Royalists’ and ‘Parliamentarian’ campaigners have also used the common for military purposes in the seventeenth century.

In the early 19th century, it has been the turn of the modern British army, to inhabit the common. Many regiments, both British and from overseas have done their training there since the first recorded ‘regular’ training camp on the common since 1797. Preceding and including the First World War, a living ‘city’ of white-canvas tepee -like tents had been erected as well as collapsible shelters put up for cavalry horses.



As the war in Europe was under-way in 1939, there was no time to lose in building a military camp for the training of young recruits, ready to take part in the 'Theatre of War'. To begin with, the camp was very basic, but soon developed into an 'operational machine'. The building of Dalditch camp began in the summer of 1941 and was completed by the November, with numerous Nissen huts erected for accommodation, mainly in blocks of four, housing twelve men in each hut. They were constructed of a wood-surround, with a corrugated roof and interchangeable windows – depending on their 'life purpose'. Each hut had a coke-stove installed, as the main source of heating. Initially, oil lamps were used in the Nissen huts, preceding the installation of electric lights. The main failing of the huts were, that they became damp and suffered from condensation from the volatile weather conditions that Woodbury Common could produce.

When the building of Dalditch Camp was complete, a total of 378 Nissen huts were erected, with a further 107 huts for offices, workshops, drying rooms and medical use. Dalditch camp was split into six site areas being, Wheathill, Frying Pans, Triangle, Tuckers and Hayes. Much of the camps infrastructure was built using reclaimed bricks and materials from nearby 'blitzed' Exeter and the surrounding area. The Wheathill site was the first to be completed, replacing 648 men living in canvas tents, to the newly-built facilities. By the end of November 1941, there were over 2,100 ranks, housed on the site. Each of the sites had two or three mess halls and galleys, each serving 250 men, with a Senior Non-commissioned Officer's Mess, attached to one galley. The Wheathill site was double in size than the others and was where the officers' area was located. The camp also boasted of a cinema, which was at the Wheathill area. It opened on the 3rd August 1942, showing the film (made the year before), 'The 49th Parallel'. The cinema also doubled as a church. On the site, were also a post office, telephone exchange, and an electric power transformer (powered from the East Budleigh grid). The Frying Pans area had a gymnasium, which also doubled as a church. Triangle site had a YMCA, a solidly-built garage and was also fortunate to have a N.A.A.F.I. building, as-well-as at the Hayes area of the camp. It was built like a small town – even having its own mortuary, parade squares and detention quarters. Fresh food supplies came from the local villages. Bread from Exmouth, meat from Exeter and dry foodstuffs came from the stores based at Plymouth. The initial water supplies came by tanker, from nearby Exton camp (Now called CTCRM Lympstone), until it could be 'piped' from Squabmoor reservoir just south of the camp. 20,000 gallons of water was contained in two tanks and a 28-day 'emergency' ration of supplies was 'stocked' on the common, at all times. The initial 'plumbing' for Dalditch Camp, was a major problem for the Ministry of Health for Exmouth and East

Budleigh, as they were not consulted when plans for the camp were first drawn up, into the functioning of the sanitary system. Just by the sheer number of personnel stationed at Dalditch Camp, latrines and galleys were connected to just four, 9000 gallon tanks, situated in the Lower-Hayes section of the camp. The system was over worked and it wasn't long before the system couldn't cope. This subsequently caused the 'effluence' to over flow, into the Hayes Barton stream (via the drains), and then into the water supply, of nearby Budleigh Salterton. The Ministry of Health soon intervened to solve the problem.

Entertainment at the camp became quite popular, as the serving soldiers 'had-a-go' at discovering their own talent for amusement. Forces from the near-by American base, came to be part of the audience on a regular basis. Football and cricket teams were formed between the soldiers, and a public sports day was held at Exmouth – complete with 'fair-ground' like attractions. It was so popular, that the event was repeated the following year, on the August bank holiday. In the later stages of World War Two, prisoners-of-war were exchanged, on the 'understanding' they would not re-serve in the Theatres of War. Eighty-eight Royal Marine commandos were captured on the island of Crete, and imprisoned in the Stalag VIIIB camp in Lamsdorf, Germany. They were repatriated and held in Dalditch camp – only being released a month after VE day in 1945.



Luftwaffe reconnaissance photo. Mock airstrip top right, next to Woodbury castle, Dalditch camp centre. Taken 24th April 1942.

Dalditch camp didn't escape enemy interest. Many measures were taken to divert German bombers away from Exeter airport (Then called RAF Exeter). A 'mock airstrip' was built on the common in 1941, with electric lighting along its 'runway'. It proved successful, as it is recorded that the Luftwaffe

bombed this site on the night of the 26th April 1942, when German bombers unloaded their remaining bombs when returning back from a raid at Bath. An aerial photograph was taken of the camp on the 24th April 1942 by the Germans – just two days before. Another method of bombing decoy was a mock fire decoy. Small fires were ignited in specific areas on the common, about 1 mile north of the mock airstrip. The fire was contained inside a big basket-like structure, and was used to simulate bombed buildings. This was to divert the Germans into bombing the decoy and the nearby mock airstrip, instead of RAF Exeter and the surrounding area. The camp itself also suffered bombing, with a large 20 foot wide, 6 foot deep crater just less than 100 yards from a block of Nissen huts. It is still visible on the landscape today.

In the run up to operation Overlord in June 1944, Dalditch camp served a vital role in preparation for the upcoming invasion. The camp had the facilities for a very varied and specialised weapons training, which included the many rifle ranges, PIAT (Projector Infantry Anti-Tank) range, a tank range, Lifebouy flame throwers, mortars, hand grenades, as well as training of hand to hand combat and Close Quarters Battle. These combat skills proved indispensable for an elite regiment as the Royal Marine Commandos. At its height, Dalditch camp had around 8,000 troops stationed on site at any one time. By October 1945 barbed wire entanglements that surrounded the camp had been removed, and the running down of the camp began. Various troops had been dispersed to other parts of the country, including Bickleigh, Crewe and Plymouth. Workmen quickly began to dismantle the camp as it emptied with personnel. Dalditch 'service- troop' documents were taken to Plymouth and equipment was taken to the newly-named, 'Infantry Training Centre Royal Marines Lympstone' (from the previously named 'Exton Camp'). In November 1946 the camp was closed down by the War Department and the land was returned to Clinton Devon Estates (Owned by the Rolle family). It was eventually demolished by 1954.

THE DISGRACE OF DALDITCH CAMP

A special correspondent of the "Daily Telegraph," writing from Exmouth on Wednesday, says:

"The residents of this resort, many of whom are living in overcrowded conditions, are grateful to Mr. W. Bardens, a local magistrate, for his remarks on what has become known as 'the disgrace of Dalditch Camp.'

"At Dalditch Camp, about three and a half miles away, which up to last winter was occupied by the Royal Marines, are hundreds of huts and administrative buildings rapidly falling into dilapidation. Mr. Bardens, presiding at Exmouth magistrates' court, spoke of the failure of the Government to make available to builders the materials lying idle.

" 'Here is property running into many thousands of pounds deteriorating from day to day. It is a disgrace to the authorities responsible and becoming a temptation to people,' he declared.

"When I visited the camp doors gaped open, linoleum lay rotting on the floors and many windows had been smashed. In the open I saw a stack of window frames, the glass still intact, though builders have for months been complaining of the difficulty of obtaining glass.