

Aims of the Digging Dad's Army Project

The term 'people's war' is often used of 20th century wars (as on the BBC website of the same name), but is seldom defined and hardly ever explored archaeologically. The East and South-East London People's War Project (ESELPWP) aims to create a multi-disciplinary but essentially field-based project that will explore all aspects of the experience of modern conflict in a densely populated urban landscape.

The ESELPWP will use research into official and community archives, oral history, and archaeological reconnaissance, survey, excavation, and recording to explore the militarised landscapes and popular experience of modern conflict between 1914 and 1945.

The study area will extend from the Eltham/Shooters Hill area in SE London, through the Woolwich Arsenal/Creekmouth area, to the Wanstead Flats area of E London.

The choice of this study area (the precise limits to be left open) reflects the following:

1. An established project at Shooters Hill
2. A planned project at Wanstead Flats
3. Provisional interest in First World War air defences at Creekmouth
4. The size and importance of the Woolwich Arsenal arms research, production, and distribution complex during the first half of the 20th century, including both world wars and the start of the Cold War.
5. That the area corresponds to the Second World War anti-invasion Stop Line B.
6. That the area corresponds to a First World War air-defence line (with two known balloon-aprons, one at Creekmouth, one at Wanstead Flats), and AAA positions at Woolwich Garrison, Shooters Hill, One Tree Hill, and elsewhere.
7. That an area of this size is manageable yet large enough to encompass the geographical spread of interrelated air-defence installations.
8. That, in relation to the 20th century air-defence of London, the River Thames was a giant navigational aid rather than a barrier, necessitating north-south, rather than east-west, axes of defence.

Current research interests

This project arises out of previous work by leading participants, and constitutes a logical development of their evolving research interests as field-based modern conflict archaeologists. Of particular relevance are the following current research interests (though this does not in any way preclude the development of new ones):

1. The development of British air-defences in 1915-1918, both in response to Zeppelin raids (1915-1918), and later to Gotha and Giant raids (1917-1918).
2. The development of British 'stop-line' anti-invasion defences in a heavily urbanised environment in 1939-1945.
3. The development of British air-defences from the mid 1930s to 1945.
4. Popular experience of, and participation in, the militarisation of East London during the Second World War, particularly in the context of working class politics and popular fascism and anti-fascism; specifically, alternative conceptions of the war rooted in political differences, e.g. in relation to the Home Guard.
5. The culture of commemoration and remembrance, from the personal (e.g. 'trench art' and family photos), through the collective (e.g. war memorials), to the official (e.g. the listing and preservation of wartime buildings) as well as the interpretation of the subject to contemporary audiences in Museums, through the Arts and at public events such as Living History/Costumed Interpretation events.

Planned Fieldwork in 2009

A field reconnaissance of the Creekmouth area to explore a) the site of a former airship shed where Zeppelin crash-debris was stored during the First World War; and b) the site of a balloon bed from the First World War.

A field project with training school to be based at Shooters Hill (but with the possibility of some work at other places) from 13 to 21 June 2009. This to comprise:

1. A 2-day Introduction to Modern Conflict Archaeology course (13-14 June)
2. A 5-day Basic Excavation and Recording Techniques course (15-19 June)
3. A 2-day Standing-buildings Recording course (20-21 June)

The field project will be directed and taught by Andy Brockman and Neil Faulkner, with other specialist tutors. Features for investigation and recording will include: a barrage-balloon bed; the debris of a balloon site; a zigzag trench; a possible World War One AAA gun-site and public and private air-raid shelters.

Looking ahead

ESELPWP is keen to ensure that this project leaves a practical legacy and lays the ground for further research. In order to achieve this the project will:

1. Actively develop means of archiving and disseminating ESELPWP data to ensure its preservation and accessibility to other researchers as soon as possible after collection.
2. Conduct a training workshop aimed at developing a core team of skilled community-based team members who will work in such areas as oral history and local archive research.

Other fieldwork may take place as opportunities are identified.

This document has been compiled after preliminary discussions involving Dr Neil Faulkner, Dr Nicholas Saunders, Martin Kender and Andy Brockman.

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