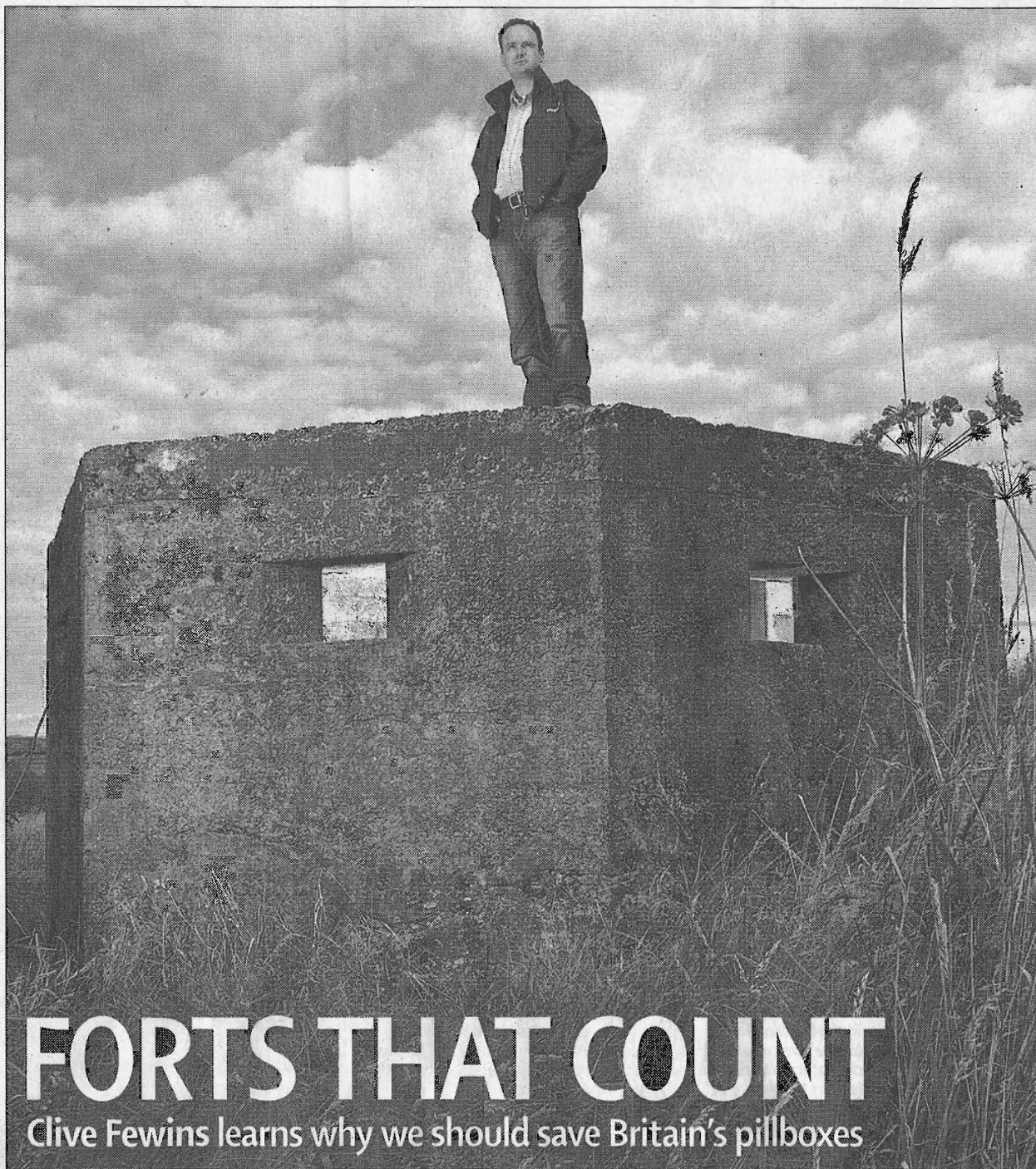
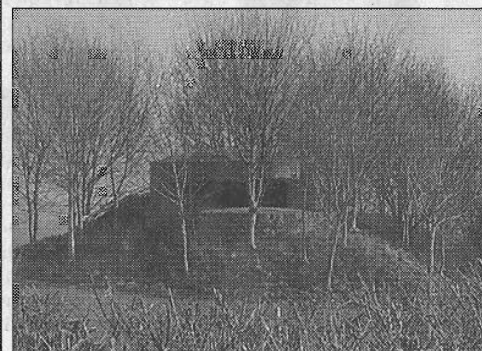
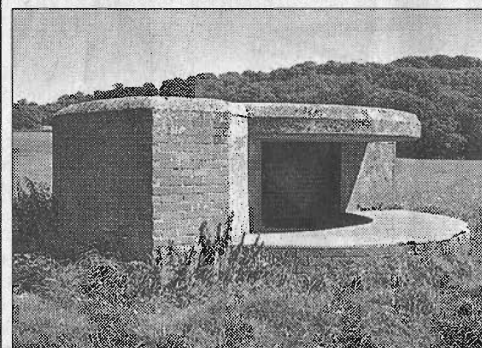
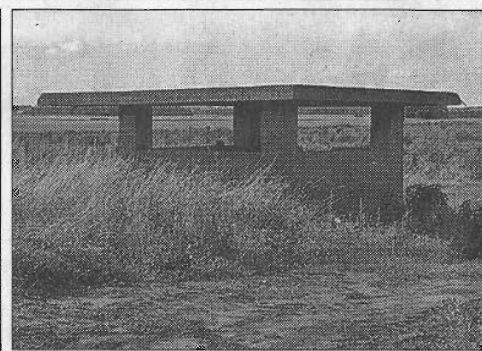


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FORTS THAT COUNT

Clive Fewins learns why we should save Britain's pillboxes



CRAG STENNETT

lan Sanders's idea of a perfect weekend is to get away with a few fellow spirits and hunt out, measure and catalogue Second World War pillboxes, the concrete mini-forts that were thrown up in their thousands following the Dunkirk evacuation of June 1940, when a German invasion of Britain was widely expected. Of the 28,000 that were built to prevent enemy columns breaking through from the coast, about 6,500 remain.

Most people think they know what a pillbox looks like but there were, in fact, seven standard designs, as well as myriad unofficial hybrids. Many of these are still to be seen and they are of great interest to enthusiasts like Sanders, 44.

But the main thrust behind Sanders's internet-led campaign is to add to the already considerable records of these buildings, and to fight for the preservation of those that remain. "Pressure for their demolition and redevelopment of the sites is growing all the time," he says. "But I have a team that's spread all over the country, and we are constantly getting new volunteers through our website and the free monthly update that I email to 800 enthusiasts.

"Every time there is a planning application near or on the site of a pillbox we encourage local authorities to preserve rather than

demolish them. There is a good example at Spalding, Lincolnshire, where a group of new buildings in a housing estate surrounds one."

In 2005 Cheshire-based Sanders published a book, *Pillboxes, Images of an Unfought Battle* (available through his website), which argues the case for preserving more of these tiny fortresses. So far, 39 have been listed as buildings of specific historic interest. "I have always been captivated by the fact that after the Dunkirk retreat, when most of our large guns had been left behind in France, people in their thousands rushed to create 'Fortress Britain'," he says. "The idea was to fool the Germans into thinking that the country was far better defended than it actually was.

"I find children and young people in particular are fascinated by graphic examples such as Pevensey Castle in East Sussex and Chester Castle. In both instances, Second World War pillboxes have been built into the ancient defences. So in a sense, the pillboxes are the successors to the great medieval fortresses.

Unholy relics: lan Sanders on the Turton Pillbox near Bolton in Lancashire (above). Although there were seven standard designs of pillbox, they exist in all shapes and sizes (right), often uncovered by coastal erosion (below)

"When people read about the rush to build the pillboxes and some of the stories of the reserve soldiers that manned them, they become convinced, like me, that it is vital to ensure that these structures remain part of our history and landscape."

Sanders's group is also charged with rediscovering long-lost examples that may have been overlooked by the giant Defence of Britain Project that ran from 1995 to 2002 and recorded nearly 20,000 20th-century military sites. They have uncovered several pillboxes that were "mothballed" in 1941 and filled with superfluous barbed wire. "Apart from the odd section of wall missing, a number of these are often in their original state," he says.

But even the best preserved rarely have any sign of their original camouflage. This is why photographs of some wartime emplacements – such as the pillbox at Woodbridge in Suffolk, which bears an advertising hoarding for the "Hotel Continental" promising "A warm reception for visiting troops" – are so valued by enthusiasts.

Sanders himself is

particularly fond of the pillbox on the first floor of the Slipway Inn at Burscough in Lancashire. The gun openings – now windows – can still be seen and a notice announcing "A warm welcome within" appears on the pub sign attached to the wall above them.

Sanders also loves the concrete beach café at Dymchurch on the Kent coast, which was given a new upper floor that formed a pillbox. It is now the flat above an amusement arcade.

All over the country, other Second World War pillboxes were disguised as garden sheds, bus shelters, haystacks, cafés, garages and even shops, waiting for the day that they would be called upon to defend their country – a day which, happily for us, never came. There was no invasion, only a handful of pillboxes fired shots in anger against minor German incursions along the east coast, and the majority of pillboxes were never used. But they remain a fascinating reminder of how different Britain's future could have been.

- ♣ The Defence of Britain project: www.britarch.ac.uk/projects
- ♣ The Pillbox Study Group: www.pillbox-study-group.org.uk
- ♣ Pillboxes: *Images of an Unfought Battle* by Ian J Sanders, costs £13.98 (including p&p). For details, see www.pillboxesuk.co.uk

