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## Chapter 1

# A regional landscape at war

This book is the result of many years of work on the landscape history of the Second World War along a narrow strip of coastline on the east of England stretching from Lowestoft to Landguard Point near Felixstowe. This area is known as the Suffolk Sandlings and it saw extensive use by the British army during the conflict, principally in the construction of anti-invasion defences and the establishment of large training grounds. This short period in the area's history has left a considerable legacy, one in many ways out of all proportion to the time actually spent at war. The physical remains of the conflict are numerous and the events that saw their construction are now part of not just the region's history and collective memory but increasingly its heritage and folklore. But the landscape of the Sandlings is, of course, far from unique in being heavily militarised during the mid-twentieth century and this, together with the fact that the Second World War is the most written-about conflict in human history, as well as the most globalised, means that the reader might with some justification ask why a book such as this is needed, especially one that focuses on this rather remote part of the coastline.

Our response is that this is a particular *kind* of study, one that approaches its subject matter from the viewpoint of the landscape historian. Landscape history can bring a slightly different view to these much-discussed events but what exactly a 'landscape approach' involves deserves a little explanation at the start. At its most basic, landscape history, or landscape archaeology as it is often known, is the study of the interplay between human affairs and the natural environment. Its chief focus is the analysis of upstanding structures and monuments and their spatial patterning on the ground – both as it exists now and in the past – and the relationship of these structures to physical geography and topography. Patterns of monuments can represent powerful categories of evidence in their own right that can variously confirm, amplify or shed completely new light on historical processes and narratives. Secondly, as a discipline landscape history is also heavily concerned with 'antecedent structures', a short-hand for saying that in any given period human activity in the present is shaped by what has been inherited from the past. This most obviously includes patterns of settlement, land use and social organisation, but also extends to more experiential aspects such as perceptions of landscape, which are often formed and maintained over centuries and usually themselves intimately connected to distinctive environments. In turn, this

concern with the natural environment and land use over long periods of time also serves to make landscape history deeply sympathetic to notions of regionalism and regional identity. Landscape studies tend to stress the almost autonomous long-term development of regional societies, which also tend to be influenced by topography, environment and land use. In such an approach national and international events are not unimportant, but their significance is usually discussed in terms of how they were mediated, directly and indirectly, by the regional context. Finally, as a subject landscape history is also slightly unusual in that its methodology is inherently inter-disciplinary and characterised by an eclectic use of source material that includes the documentary material familiar to mainstream historians, but also archaeological evidence of all kinds, cartographic material, geographical datasets and, in this case, oral history. Since the development of the subject in the 1950s the vast majority of works that have taken this 'landscape approach' to their material have been concerned with pre-modern societies and as a result our understanding of subjects as diverse as Iron Age hillforts, medieval settlements and field systems and ancient woodland have been transformed. But a new generation of scholars are increasingly attempting to apply its methods to monuments and landscapes of the more recent past, but studies taking an explicit 'landscape approach' to the conflicts of the twentieth century are, as yet, conspicuous by their absence and it is here that this book hopes to make a contribution.

In accordance with the principles explained above, the study presented here is chiefly concerned with how topography, geography and land use affected the actions of military men in one regional landscape during the Second World War. At first glance this might seem slightly odd or perhaps unnecessary; a statement to the effect that military planning is often linked to landscape is so obvious that it barely needs spelling out. Soldiers at all levels of command are taught to 'read the ground' in order to gain tactical benefit and place their opponents at a disadvantage, and the importance of terrain in 'shaping the battlefield' is one of the longest standing principles in the history of warfare.<sup>1</sup> But, in academic writing the role of environment and topography in military works is often assumed, sometimes rather glibly, rather than actually analysed, as if it is so immediately intelligible that it does not require attention. In fact, the relationship between terrain and military landscapes is often far more subtle and complex than it initially might appear and repays close attention in its own right.<sup>2</sup> At the national level, field marshals and generals may have had requirements for defence works or for training, but these schemes were actually worked out on the ground by those lower down the chain of command. It was less senior and middle-ranking officers that had to transform plans into reality and here choices were informed by military doctrine, the availability of manpower and equipment and various practical issues, such as the ranges of particular weapons. But while it might seem a banal point

1 Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, Chapter 10, in T.R. Phillips (ed.) *Roots of Strategy* (Harrisburg, 1985).

2 P. Doyle and M.R. Bennett (eds), *Fields of Battle. Terrain in Military History* (London, 2002).

to make, the schemes that resulted from military decisions did not take place in an undifferentiated environment and this, in our view, deserves greater attention. Because whatever defence scheme or training exercise was ordered, human agency was framed by, or was mediated through, the physical landscape. At its most straightforward, topography and geography provided opportunities and imposed constraints, and so often structured what could be undertaken and where. But in addition, the physical landscape of the wartime Sandlings was not a blank canvas upon which the military could undertake whatever they wished wherever they liked; rather, its management over centuries had resulted in particular patterns of land use that were, like topography, an active force in structuring military activity on the ground. Even at a time of national emergency, the military landscape was shaped by the inherited patterns of settlement, land use and farming and also by the requirements of the civilian population. As will be seen, at times the needs of the military overrode these other interests; in other cases they were structured by them; while in yet others they were, perhaps surprisingly, subordinated. The Second World War was also not the first time that the Sandlings had experienced militarisation and this longer view is crucial to understanding the perception of the wartime landscape by those who, to use the modern academic phrase, 'inhabited' it.

Crucially for this study, the exploration of many of these issues is best achieved not by the use of documents alone but alongside the study of the physical remains of the conflict. Here landscape history is well placed because, as has been mentioned above, the subject is, by its very nature, inter-disciplinary. But there is a common perception, even among some academics, that the Second World War is so well documented that its archaeology cannot add anything to our understanding. This is in fact a fallacy and the case for the value of 'conflict' archaeology of the twentieth century and the archaeological study of the more recent past generally has been well made by a number of scholars.<sup>3</sup> In this specific case, the structuring role of topography in the siting of built structures is precisely the kind of issue that does not easily find its way into the historical record, but is well illustrated by archaeological evidence. Given that so much of the study that follows uses material evidence, albeit chiefly from the point of view of what the distribution of wartime remains can tell us, and because it is by no means the first to consider the archaeological evidence for the Second World War, it is worth spending a little time exploring how the study of this aspect of the conflict has developed historiographically.