

WORLD WAR II STARFISH BOMBING DECOY SITES FOR SOUTHAMPTON

Decoy targets to mislead enemy bombers began to spring up across the British Isles in 1940. The aim being to divert German bombers from the intended targets and to encourage them to drop their ordnance over uninhabited countryside. Initially to replicate the layout of RAF airfields, decoys were also constructed to resemble town and cities, naval and army installations, industrial locations, and by the summer of 1944 the embarkation points for operation Overlord.^[1]



Wartime view of an unidentified Starfish installation. Tanks for the fire apparatus were the main features visible from ground level. (Plate 10 from Dobinson (2000), p.104).

At Durley, approximately 7½ miles northeast of Southampton, a 'Permanent Starfish' night-time decoy site (SU534162) was constructed to deflect enemy bombing from the City. The label Starfish being accredited to the abbreviation SF for 'Special Fire.'^[1] The Starfish system comprised a series of controlled fires lit during an air raid to replicate the urban area targeted by bombs.^[2] There was also a QL lighting decoy at Durley (part of the C-series of civil decoys to protect the railway junction at Eastleigh) which simulated marshalling yard lights and steam locomotive fire box glow to reconstruct the layout of the railway junction.^[2] The systems were operational between 1942-1943.^[2] In August 1943 an Assault QL (ASQL) system (a lighting decoy aimed at simulating troop movement assembling near Southampton) was overlaid at the site as part of Operation Starkey (a spoof British and Canadian cross-Channel landing) in September 1943.^[1] Aerial photographs taken in 1972 show the site, given over to agriculture, has no physical features of the Durley decoy system/s surviving.

'Permanent Starfish' sites to deflect enemy bombing from Southampton were also located at: Longdown (SU356084) (Denny Lodge in the New Forest), Beaulieu (SU409038) (Hilltop), Lee (SU354172), Nutburn (SU392213), Chilworth (SU395177), and Botley (SU515116).^[3] Earthwork firebreak banks and ditches (water-filled) and a raised causeway associated with the site survive at Longdown/Denny Lodge, and below surface features revealed by Lidar survive of the Starfish decoy at Hilltop Beaulieu.^[4] See <http://www.nfknowledge.org> for these images. No bomb crater damage is recorded. Thus, questioning the success of these particular decoy sites.

References

^[1] Colin Dobinson (2000) *Fields of Deception: Britain's Bombing Decoys of World War II*. London, Methuen.

^[2] Historic England. (2015) Starfish Bombing Decoy SF17F. www.pastscape.org.uk

^[3] C.S. Dobinson (1996) *Twentieth century fortification in England vol. 3. Bombing decoys of WWII: England's passive air defences*. York, CBA.

^[4] New Forest National Park. (Images dated 2013) Starfish Decoys – Denny Lodge SF17B and Hilltop Beaulieu SF17B. www.nfknowledge.org