



Viewpoint

Whispering wall



Time: 15 mins

Region: South East England

Landscape: rural



Location:

Abbott's Cliff, near West Hougham, Kent, CT18 7HZ

Grid reference:

TR 2708 3867

Getting there:

The concrete object is on the on North Downs Way coast path between Folkestone and Dover

Keep an eye out for:

Samphire Hoe Country Park - an entirely new piece of land, created from the earth dug out for Eurotunnel.

This large, square piece of concrete with a circular hole scooped out of it looks like a modern sculpture. Yet there's nothing nearby to tell us the artist or any information panel to read. Without a clue to what it's for, it towers over us mysteriously, rather like the monolith in Stanley Kubrick's film 2001: A Space Odyssey.

Here on the North Downs Way between Folkestone and Dover we are just 20 miles from the French coast. This might offer a clue as to its function...

How did this ugly concrete lump on Kent's coast help to defend the capital?



This concrete dish was once part of Britain's national defence strategy. Known as 'sound mirrors' or 'listening ears', objects like this were used during the First World War and beyond to detect enemy aircraft.

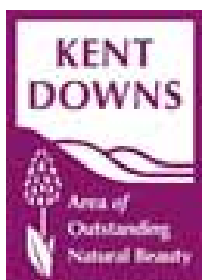
Notice the bowl-shaped hole scooped out of the centre. This concave shape was deliberately designed to 'catch' sound waves coming from approaching planes. The sound waves were then relayed back through microphones to an operator, who could raise the alarm. This gave the military a fifteen-minute warning and time to organise their anti-aircraft defences.

There were several sound mirrors built along England's east coast - in Kent, Yorkshire and Durham - to detect airborne threats from across the Channel and North Sea. The one here at Abbot's Cliff, built in 1928, is one of seven in Kent alone, strategically positioned to detect aircraft aiming to attack London.

The system was never really successful however. Weather conditions affected how the sound waves were detected. Developments in aircraft design meant faster planes would already be too close for the 'ears' to hear them. In 1939, the invention of radar effectively drowned out the listening ears.

Now abandoned, they still stand sentinel along our coast. These days they attract the attention of psychogeographers and military historians. Fashion photographers use them as the backdrop for their shoots and bands including Turin Brakes, have featured them on their album covers.

The wartime artist Eric Ravilious featured this Folkestone acoustic mirror in his 1941 watercolour *Bombing the Channel Ports*.



This viewpoint is one of 12 created in partnership with **Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)** to celebrate their 50 year anniversary in 2018.

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