



The area around Reigate Hill has long played a significant role in defending London and south east England. Forming part of the North Downs, with exceptional views to the South Downs and north to London, the hill is an obvious strategic stronghold.

During the Napoleonic Wars (1803–1815), Britain was one of France’s key opponents. Following a brief alliance between the two nations during the Crimean War (1853–1856), France once again became Britain’s main adversary. As the range and power of munitions increased, so did the threat of invasion by France. Reigate Fort was built in 1898 as a ‘mobilisation centre’, to house weaponry and ammunitions as part of the London Defence Scheme, a 72 mile long chain of forts built to protect London. By 1907 however, the threat of invasion no longer existed and the fort was sold to a private owner.

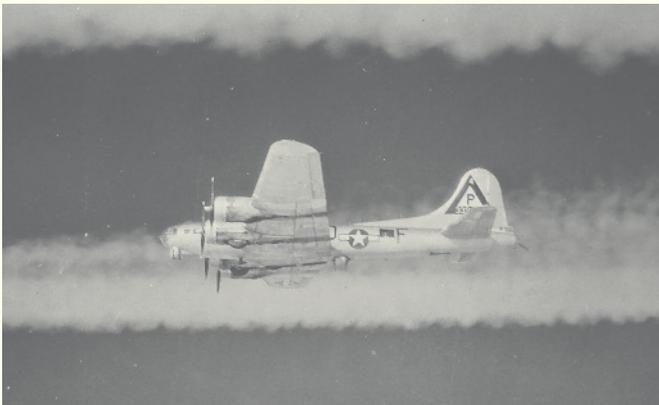
During the Second World War, Reigate once again played its part when South Eastern Command, the British Army’s regional headquarters, came into existence in February 1941. Most famously headed by Lt. Gen. Montgomery, it was based in tunnels below Reigate Hill and in houses in Beech Road and Underhill Park Road.

The Second World War artist, Stella Schmolle, portrays Reigate Hill as a hive of activity, covered in camouflage netting and boasting its own light railway. Locals were barred from walking on the hill, which they nicknamed ‘Radio City’ due to the great number of radio masts in the area.

Tragedy touched the hill in March 1945 when an American B-17G (Flying Fortress) crashed onto the hill; all nine crew died.

Below:

The Reigate Hill B-17G in flight.



This stretch of the North Downs is good walking country with flower-sprinkled grasslands and quiet shady woods. It’s a lovely spot to bird watch, fly kites and enjoy a picnic.

The chalk downland is home to many rare wild flowers and insects, including the vibrant Adonis blue butterfly.

To the east Gatton Park nestles serenely into the landscape. The lush pastures, mighty trees and sparkling lakes were designed by Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown.

Reigate Hill and Gatton Park are designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

GETTING HERE



Car parking:

Wray Lane car park (not National Trust) RH2 0HX

Find out more

nationaltrust.org.uk/reigate-hill-and-gatton-park



National Trust



Surrey Hills Board



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REIGATE HILL

Military History Walk

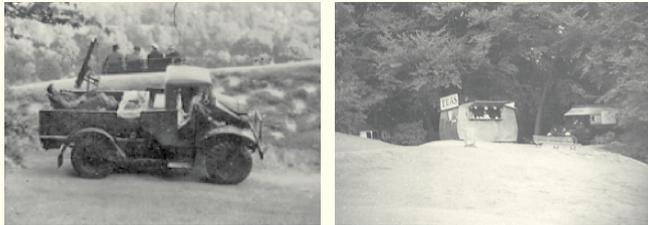


REIGATE HILL – FIFTY YEARS OF MILITARY HISTORY

1

Reigate Hill has played a significant part in the military history of Great Britain. Start this mile long walk, on level ground at the footbridge towards Reigate Hill.

This bridge, built in 1910, played a key role in communications on the hill during the Second World War, with both British and Canadian soldiers being on duty nearby.



Top left and right:

Anti Aircraft crew at Wray Lane car park, and the Wray Lane tea hut in 1940.

Above:

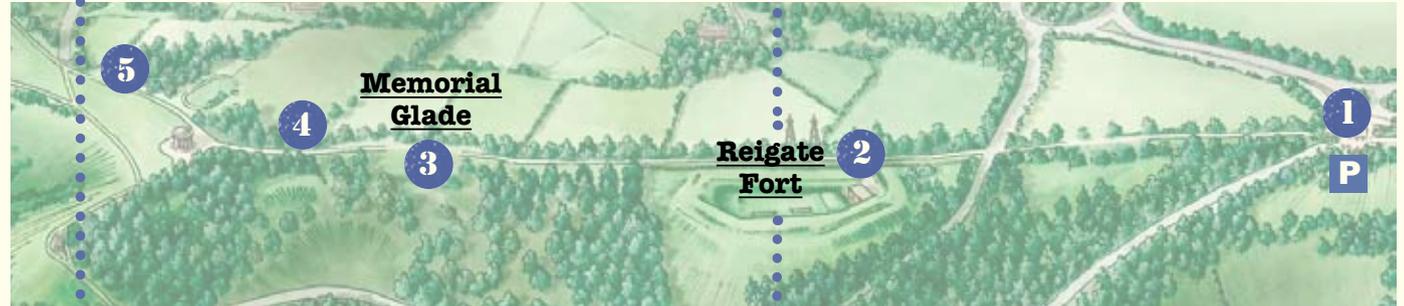
The crew of the B-17G who lost their lives at Reigate Hill in March 1945: in the top row, left to right are co-pilot Second Lieutenant Herbert Geller; the pilot 24 year old Second Lieutenant Robert Griffin; Second Lieutenant Royal Runyon, navigator; Sergeant William Irons, ball turret gunner; and bottom row, Sergeant Donald Jeffrey, gunner/toggler; Sergeant Robert Marshall, engineer; Sergeant Thomas Hickey, gunner; Sergeant Philip Philipps, radio operator and Sergeant Robert Manbeck, tail gunner.

2

Once over the bridge, walk west towards Reigate Fort which was built in 1898 when Britain feared an attack likely by the French. The fort, one of thirteen built along the North Downs was constructed as a 'mobilisation centre' and would have stored ammunition and weapons. Take a look over the earthworks and parade ground; the buildings are open by special arrangement.

4

Beyond the B-17G crash site, to the left of the path, is a rather unusual structure. Long believed to have had associations with the South Eastern Command's Head Quarters, which were based in tunnels and requisitioned houses below Reigate Hill from 1941-1944, it's still unclear as to the structure's real use. With large domestic-style windows facing south and small, low entrances to the north and south, the purpose of the structure has baffled experts for a long time. Although we aren't certain, it's likely that the structure had a communications role; a ceramic-clad hole in the centre of the structure may be a socket for an aerial. The structure has been closed to visitors, but please feel free to look through the entrances and walk around it. Similar smaller structures are known locally on private land.



3

Head back onto the path towards Colley Hill. Soon you'll reach a clearing in the trees on the left hand side of the path. On this site on 19 March 1945, a B-17G (Flying Fortress), of the United States Army Air Force crashed, killing all nine crew on board. Returning from a bombing raid at Plauen in Germany, the aircraft wasn't far from its base at Grafton Underwood in Northamptonshire. Crashing at 5.40pm on their scheduled route home, the tragedy was witnessed by many people who recalled a terrible crash and a series of explosions. The aircraft destroyed a thick bank of beech trees as it came down - the clearing you see today was created by the crash and is the same width as the wingspan of the aircraft. The morning after the tragedy, a B17-G flew low over the crash site several times and dipped its wings in salute.

5

As you come onto Colley Hill, look for large indentations in the ground; Colley Hill and other areas of the North Downs were used as training areas during the Second World War and it's possible that some of the smaller features are in fact the result of ammunition explosion damage to the soft chalk soil.

Take your time to enjoy the views over the Weald to the South Downs. On your way back to Wray Lane, look to your left, there are some wonderful glimpses towards London through the trees; a stark reminder of why this area was 'Front Line Surrey Hills'.

