The Spigot Mortar Base at Shincliffe Bridge

A Spigot Mortar base (also referred to as a mount or pedestal) is a World War II relic found predominantly in coastal regions and at strategic sites such as road junctions, bridges, radio transmitters and airfields. A mount (a steel base plate and pivot set in concrete, see Fig. 1) survives on the North-Eastern side of Shincliffe Bridge.

Fig. 1: The Spigot Mortar mount near Shincliffe Bridge

Otherwise known as the 29mm Blacker Bombard, named after its designer Lt. Col. Stewart Blacker, the spigot mortar was introduced in 1941. At this time, the threat of invasion was extremely high and in coastal regions the spigot mortar was considered a more flexible alternative to static lines of pillboxes. In addition, the spigot mortar was cheap and straightforward to manufacture at a time when the country had not recovered from the loss of equipment left behind on the beaches of Dunkirk.

The design of a spigot mortar is the reverse of a conventional one. A spigot mortar has a peg (the spigot) instead of a barrel and each mortar bomb has a short tube or barrel attached to its rear end. The bomb is fitted onto the spigot instead of being loaded into the barrel. A spigot casing extending beyond the end of the spigot protects the crew from the blast.

The primary purpose of the 29mm Blacker Bombard was as an anti-tank weapon but it was issued with two types of ammunition: 20lb anti-tank bombs and 14lb anti-personnel bombs.

Being a muzzle-loaded weapon, the rate of fire would be relatively slow; a well-trained crew could be expected to fire up to a maximum of twelve rounds per minute for anti-tank bombs and up to fifteen rounds per minute for anti-personnel bombs.

Fig. 2: Home Guard training with 29mm Blacker Bombard (Spigot Mortar) 30th July 1941.
Photograph H12299 from the collection of The Imperial War Museums,
Puttnam (Lt) War Office official photographer, Public Domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

There was a portable version of the Blacker Bombard, each with its own base plate and 360° pivot and supported by four legs, (Fig. 2 above), but these were heavy and required an additional crew of two to move position. Later versions had static mounts (the base plate and 360° pivot were encased in concrete), as in the Shincliffe example. The mount would have been housed in a circular trench or pit, providing cover for both weapon and the crew of 3, (Fig. 3 below).

Fig. 3: Home Guard training with the Blacker Bombard with concrete base and dug-out 20th May 1943.
Picture H 30181 from the collection of The Imperial War Museums,
War Office official photographer, Taylor (Lt), Public Domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

Each mortar was supplied with the kit for constructing four mountings and pits, which allowed four alternative firing positions for each weapon. The loss of mobility in having only four firing positions was compensated for by the greatly reduced carrying weight of the mortar.

The spigot mortar was little used by the regular army but was widely issued to the Home Guard. The spigot mortar emplacement at Shincliffe Bridge was probably intended to defend the approach to Durham City from the south.

Fig. 4: The Spigot Mortar base near Shincliffe Bridge - showing the steel baseplate and pivot. Also visible are re-enforcing rods partly embedded in the now crumbling concrete.

The Shincliffe Spigot Mortar base is not in the best condition; here are pictures of other, similar emplacements:
https://www.northmymmshistory.uk/2018/01/brookmans-parks-spigot-mortar.html

And here: https://dunkirk1940.org/index.php?&p=1_343

Here is a photograph with a clear view of the spigot within its casing:
https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cqee3pdn3lvo

~~~~~~~

Sources, and where to find out more:

http://www.pillbox-study-group.org.uk/other-wwii-defensive-structures/spigot-mortar/

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blacker_Bombard
~~~~~~~

The Book of the Blacker Bombard:
http://www.staffshomeguard.co.uk/J16-98Blacker2.htm

The 1942 edition (49 page) 29mm Spigot Mortar training manual:
26 Pubs 790, 29mm Spigot Mortar (bulletpicker.com)

~~~~~~~

Addendum

In 2025, the University of Durham erected an information board close to the Shincliffe Bridge Spigot Mortar site, see Fig. 5 below.

Fig. 5: Information Board for the Shincliffe Bridge Spigot Mortar

~~~~~~~

Afterthought:
If there were up to four static mounts for each mortar, and we have one mount at Shincliffe bridge, were any others constructed and do they survive?