

“ROYAL OBSERVER CORPS HERITAGE”

MUSEUMS AND DISPLAYS, PRESERVED POSTS AND OTHER ROC MEMENTOES

By Lawrence Holmes

At this year's ADM, delegates discussed the topic of ROC Heritage at some length and 1 Group discussion paper comments have confirmed that the heritage of the ROC is becoming a more important part of ROCA life. This article goes some way in explaining just one part of our rich ROC heritage.

The word 'heritage' means 'the saving or recording of something which is handed down or passed on' and can be practices or items. The last thirty years has seen a tremendous upsurge in the preservation of all aspects of industrial and military past in the United Kingdom. Archaeology and research is flourishing and much of Britain's rich history can now be seen in the form of museums, working displays or indeed theme parks and centres.

Millions of pounds have been expended on preservation, very often as part of the regeneration for depressed areas, and all too often with a view to increasing tourism. The emphasis initially was on non-military preservation, but the Defence of Britain Project, which ran from April 1995 to March 2002, changed much thinking and the conservation of 20th century military remains and commemorations has increased dramatically. World War II, initially thought of as 'recent', is now regarded as essential history and in the last ten years, the Cold War heritage and remains, has become increasingly recognised as a valuable part of preserving Britain's military history.



The impressive bronze sundial at Horsham depicts many aspects of local history including that of the Royal Observer Corps.

The last twenty five years has also seen an increase in the building of many aviation memorials and the preservation of some aviation remains from the World War II years, such as control towers, bunkers, and a few airfields. The rebuilding of WWII aircraft to full flying condition is now a regular occurrence and these aircraft are to be seen at many air displays. Many aviation museums have sprung up, both large and small, and many have been started by aviation volunteers giving freely of their time. In 1994, the 50th anniversary of D-Day, made the Government realise that much of the twentieth century defence systems were in danger of being lost forever. The Defence of Britain Project was set up to record and document these remains and to establish priorities for preservation. Now, wisely, many ex Royal Observer Corps (ROC) structures have been surveyed and recorded within this project. Quite a number of ROC structures have now been given listing protection by English Heritage and the Corps has probably featured more in the press and TV and Radio programmes in the last eight or ten years than it ever did when it was operational. Times are thus good for military heritage and the Royal Observer Corps is an important part of that military history.

ROC Heritage has a number of important forms. With older observers passing away there is much Corps material which can, and should be, passed on to a suitable archivist and preserved. Such items are WWII logs and diaries, photographs, letters and forms, aircraft reporting or nuclear equipment. The list is almost endless but the value lies in its age or rarity. Another form of ROC heritage is the written word in books, pamphlets, poems, research articles, and in ROCA newsletters. Old ROC films recording former days, are a moving form of heritage and are particularly valuable if converted to modern playable formats such as DVD. Another modern form is the internet with its vast array of ROC related stories and video material. Let us also not forget the music of the ROC like 'Skywatch' and 'Sentinels of Britain', or the cartoons of Sessions and Thacker.

Lastly, there are the much larger static items of ROC heritage such as preserved posts, or controls, and museums or displays, recording life in the ROC. Many of these sites are important because they can be visited by members of the ROCA and the public at most times and have the best chance of remaining in being long after the ROCA, as an organisation, has stood down. Included in this category are many varied types of ROC mementoes reminding us of former days and sites. The range is vast and varied from plaques to road names to monuments and houses, and all have a role in recording the existence and passing of the Royal Observer Corps. Archival material, books on the ROC and modern forms of ROC heritage will be dealt with in a future newsletter but this article now concentrates on the 'museum, posts and memento' form of ROC Heritage.

The ROC was an active organisation with a definite role, and perhaps understandably, little attempt was made in the decades before stand down, to preserve or display ROC heritage. Since the stand down of the Corps on 30th September 1991, apart from a few notable major exceptions, little was done to protect and preserve ROC heritage for the next eight years. Indeed, it was not until 1999 that the Royal Observer Corps Association (ROCA) constitution recognised that ROC heritage was important and that such preservation should be incorporated as one of the main aims of the Association. However, until relatively recently national ROCA did very little in the ROC heritage field. Now at long last ROC heritage has been recognised as being important at national and Group level and many people are actively promoting its concepts.

Even now seldom does the national ROCA fund, or help to fund, ROC heritage projects, either local or regional, and such projects usually are a success solely due to the major efforts of a relatively few 'enthusiasts'. In 1994 national ROCA refused to help fund the preservation of Veryan Post in Cornwall on the grounds that 'it would form a precedence!'. Only rarely does the national ROCA carry out an ROC heritage project itself, but one example is the ROC Grove, plinth and seat at the National Memorial Arboretum at Alrewas in Staffordshire.

One of the most important categories of ROC heritage are museums. Unfortunately there is no national self contained ROC museum. But there are at least 62 ROC museums in other military museums, or part museums or ROC displays, in a variety of other museums scattered throughout the UK. The Winchester ROC Museum was exceptional in that it was started well before the stand down of the Corps in 1980. It was indeed the only ROC museum for several years and although it has had accommodation problems, it still remains a major depository for ROC information and artifacts.



Above is one of the displays in the new ROC museum at Longkesh Airfield in Northern Ireland. Below is the replicated WWII Ops Room plotting table at the well established Newhaven Fort Museum.



Now, of course, the Newhaven Fort Museum holds superb ROC displays and is probably the premier ROC collection in the country. There are, however, some very good, large, ROC displays in several other military or aviation style museums such as Flixton Aviation Heritage Centre, Tangmere Military Aviation Museum, Elvington, East Fortune in Scotland and Newark Aviation Museum. Two of the latest ROC museums to open are at Doncaster Aeroventure Air Museum and Longkesh Airfield Aviation Museum in Northern Ireland. Almost all these ROC museums were formed, and set up, by enthusiastic, hard working individuals, with no pay, and at times little encouragement. We owe them a great service. There are also several large ROC displays at preserved Regional Seats of Government sites such as at Hack Green in Cheshire and Kelvedon Hatch in Essex. Surprisingly, some of the large national military style museums have only small ROC sections such as at the Imperial War Museum in London and at Duxford, Hendon RAF Museum and RAF Cosford Museum, although the new and excellent Cold War Exhibition there has vastly improved the ROC content.

Posts, however, always formed the bulk of the Corps, both in structures and in manpower. Many old aircraft reporting posts dating from WWII to the early 1960s have not survived and almost half of the nuclear reporting posts were closed in 1968. All the posts were closed at general stand down in 1991. In the relatively short time since stand down, many posts have been demolished with indecent haste, and many more are now in a poor state of repair. Only a small percentage of the total have been preserved and these almost wholly by volunteers. Perhaps strangely, many of the posts have been acquired for preservation by non-ROC people and members of Subterranea Britannica are amongst the most avid ROC post owners. Almost 70 former ROC posts and Controls have been acquired by a variety of people and are being preserved to some degree or other. Most 'preserved posts' are privately owned or leased and most were those which closed in 1991 and are thus nuclear. Bearing in mind most former posts command a current price tag of £5000 to £12000, and with preservation costs on top, this is a daunting financial commitment. Some 'post preservers' lease their posts at a peppercorn (£10 per year) but public liability insurance can be a high cost at £250 to £500 per annum.

Although nearly 70 posts have been 'preserved' (or at least saved from being demolished) many are not fully equipped with all the former nuclear equipment. Very few former aircraft reporting posts are preserved but a good example is at Newhaven Fort. Even where the preserved post is fully equipped probably less than 15 are open to visitors and most of these are on a restricted basis. Probably no more than five preserved fully equipped nuclear posts, throughout the UK, are open to the public on anything like a regular basis. Examples of this type of post are at Veryan in Cornwall and Arbroath in Scotland. Two of the very early posts to be preserved are at Rushton Spencer, Staffs and Dersingham in Norfolk. Rushton Spencer is probably the best equipped preserved post in the UK. Other well preserved posts are at Skelmorlie in Scotland and Wroughton near Swindon. Recently post preserving has become quite popular and additions include posts at Cuckfield, Great Bedwin, Skipsea, Ballynahinch and Portadown in Northern Ireland.



Above is the restored aircraft plotting post at the Newhaven Fort site complete with aircraft plotting instrument. Below is the beautifully located and preserved ROC post at Skelmorlie in Ayrshire, Scotland.



Some posts are owned, and have been preserved, by Local Authorities or Trusts and examples of these are at Brixham, Broadway, Holbeach, Lizard and Muirkirk. Some posts which have been preserved like Skelmorlie and Arbroath Posts in Scotland have been fortunate in obtaining a Lottery grant to help them to carry out their work, a sure sign that the authorities are at long last recognising the importance of ROC structures. In 2004 one

privately owned preserved nuclear post on the Yorkshire Moors was offering 'Down a Bunker' breaks for a fee ! Thankfully this post has recently been sold.

English Heritage has recognised the importance of nuclear ROC posts and has scheduled a significant number over the United Kingdom. However, notable examples of above ground aircraft reporting posts and nuclear reporting posts are still to be found and it is important that these are identified and steps taken to protect them using English Heritage. WWII aircraft reporting posts have still to be considered and to date, as far as is known, not one such post has been protected.

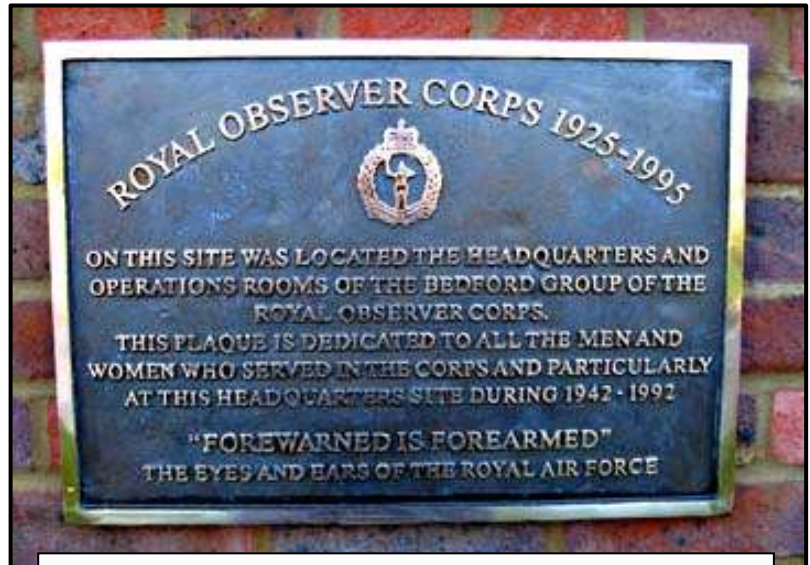
Of the twenty five ROC Controls stood down in 1991, only one Operations Room has been fully saved as an example of the Corps' Control/Centre work, and that is at No 20 Group Control at York. Thankfully English Heritage now owns the site and the buildings have been tastefully preserved and the York Control is open to the public on a systematic basis.

English Heritage has worked closely with the York ROCA to ensure the correct presentation of this major ROC heritage site. Another 'preserved' Control is that at No 1 Group Maidstone which was used as a Solicitor's Store but has recently been opened up to the public even with ROC led 'tours'. Many Controls were sited on valuable in town building land and the MOD has gradually sold off the Control sites for housing development. A very few Controls were retained and are still used for other military purposes and an example of this until recently was the Oban Control. Some controls were sold off and have been 'preserved' but are now used for other purposes. Examples of this are at Exeter where the Control is now used as a Paintball Park and at Lawford Heath (Coventry Group) which is used for radio communications. On occasions, part replicas, or models of Controls, can be now seen in a few general museums.

The ROC Memento part of ROC heritage is by far the largest and most diverse part and all mementoes commemorate the ROC in some way. Over 100 sites have been documented all over the UK. Before stand down only special events such as the Diamond Jubilee, or a 50th Anniversary of the formation of the ROC, prompted the erection of a plaque, shield or other memento to recognise the event and the work of the Corps. However, these are relatively few and far between, considering the Corps did cover the whole of the UK. Local presentations of ROC Shields or other items to organisations which had helped the Corps in some way, were much more prolific but very local and generally not well recorded. However, in recent years there has been an upsurge in the erection of commemorative ROC plaques, sometimes in quite significant positions like churches, houses and commercial buildings. Sometimes the plaques are inside, but often outside for all to see.

But commemoration of the ROC is not just the province of the plaque. The list is very varied and includes ROC shields, plaques, church Rolls of Honour, altar rails, paintings, arboretums, ROC seats, memorials, ROC Standard locations, sun dials, woods and memorial trees, replica Spitfires, heritage trails with ROC content, a relatively few stained glass windows, special gravestones, access road names, ROC house names and even a topograph with ROC content. At times commemoration of the ROC can be found on memorials for other larger organisations. An example of this is at the very impressive Portsmouth Naval Memorial where along with thousands of other naval dead can be found the names of Observers Salter and Bancroft, who were killed on active duty in the 'Seaborne Operation'. In recent years particularly where ROC Controls have been demolished, the local ROC Association has been successful in getting access roads to housing development named to reflect their former use, for example 'Observer Close' in Bedford and Truro and 'Observer Court' in Horsham. Another recent example is 'Observer Court' in Prestwick.

There are now many ROC Shields and Plaques in clubs, town halls or churches. 31 Group alone has over 10 plaque/shield sites including those at Lisburn Council Offices and Royal British Legion Branch. There is an ROC plaque in Truro City Mayor's Parlour and at nearby St Eval Church. On top of the spectacular Glastonbury Tor in Somerset is a seat commemorating the local post which was located on the Tor when operational.



The ROC plaque located on the site of the former Bedford Headquarters. This plaque is one of the few to be dedicated to ALL the men and women who served in the Corps. Below is the small plaque affixed to the seat on top of the spectacular Glastonbury Tor in Somerset. Both the aircraft reporting post and the nuclear post were sited on the Tor. Both have now been demolished. The plaque is dedicated to post M1 members who served 1939-1945.



Stained glass windows are one of the most striking examples of ROC commemoration and good examples of these are to be found at Penarth Church in South Wales and at Eglantine Church in Northern Ireland. But the most evocative is the ROC window at Bentley Priory. In Lincoln City can be found the grave of Obs P Kelway who was killed by an intruding JU88 whilst on his way to go on duty at his local post. Perhaps sadly, there is no specific national memorial dedicated to the men and women who served in the Royal Observer Corps although the one at the National Memorial Arboretum in Staffs comes near.

There are over 230 ROC heritage sites scattered throughout the UK but are more prolific in the South East and in East Anglia. Metropolitan Area accounts for almost half of the sites identified, whilst currently only fourteen sites are listed in Scotland. This difference does not reflect the numbers of sites present, it simply means that people have not provided details. In No 10 Group Exeter there are some 30 documented sites, and this figure could represent an average, which may be found in each Group. The final and total national list could well be over 700 ROC Heritage sites. Wouldn't it be good for ROC heritage if all ROCA Groups document the sites they can find in their Group area ? Now that's a challenge ! Happy Hunting.