

“SOUTH MOLTON REMEMBERS THE ROC”

By Lawrence Holmes

South Molton is a small North Devon market town set in what future estate developers would call ‘unspoilt rolling countryside close to Exmoor and the rugged North Devon coast’. The WW2 aircraft reporting post of the Observer Corps at South Molton opened in July, in the heady days of 1940. There were fears of invasion, the Battle of Britain had begun and Prime Minister Churchill was giving his rousing speeches. In the West Country the Observer Corps was expanding rapidly to face the increased wartime threat. The geographic county of Devon came into the Observer Corps area of 21 Group Exeter.

The new observation post was located just under one mile north west of the town centre in open farmland off North Road, on an elevated portion of land (148mtrs above sea level) to give a good all round view of the skies. The role, 24 hours a day, was to track and report all aircraft seen or heard in a radius of 10 miles round the post and report to the parent Ops Room in 21 Group HQ Exeter. There was ultimately a crew of up to 16 full time and spare time observers with two on duty at any one time.

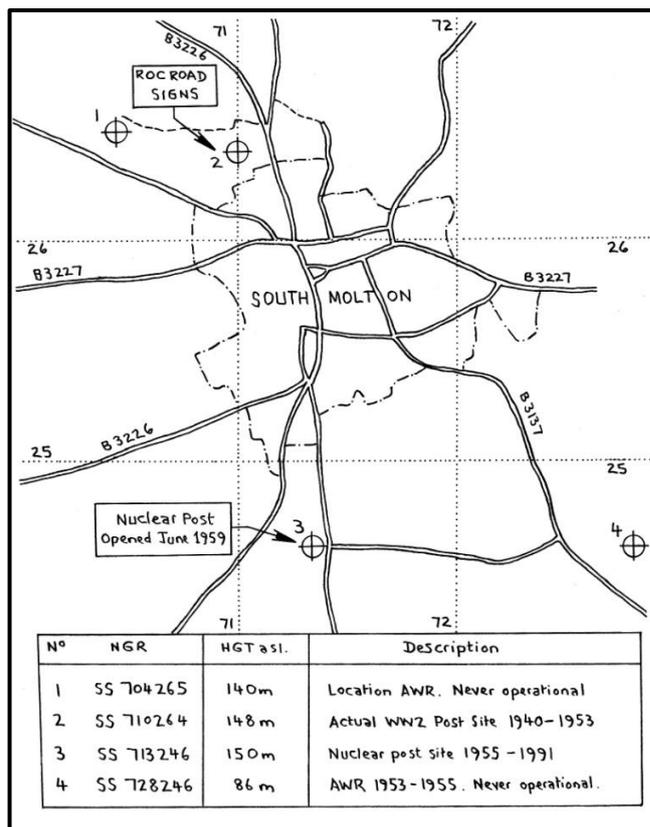
They were often referred to as ‘aircraft spotters’. Some posts which were near high ground (such as Exmoor) were issued with flares to warn aircraft of the proximity of high ground. There was a procedure for firing the flares which both the OC and the RAF pilots knew, it was called – Granite. South Molton post was issued with granite flares in 1943.

After operating for 24hrs a day throughout WW2 the post was stood down on 12 May 1945. On 1 January 1947 the post was reopened with a low level aircraft intruder tracking role. The wartime post was re-equipped and again manned but now only on a spare time basis. In November 1953 the post was re-sited to a location south of town. In 1955 the role of the Corps gradually changed from aircraft tracking to the reporting of nuclear bursts and monitoring of radioactive fallout. To enable the post to carry out this new role an underground nuclear post was built. This post opened in June 1959. The full history of the South Molton ROC Post will appear in 10 Group News later this year.

Stuart Jameson Chislett was born on 9 March 1926 and by the start of WW2 was living in Epsom, Surrey. In his eventful early life he was Fire Watcher, Home Guard, Bevan Boy and Sapper. He was demobbed in 1948, became a builder/decorator and moved to South Molton in 1973 and joined the Royal Observer Corps on 14 February 1975. He served as Obs and Ch/Obs on B2 South Molton nuclear post then part of 10 Group Exeter. On 1 September 1982 the post was transferred to 9 Group Yeovil. Stuart served from 1975 to 1991 and was awarded his ROC Medal on 13 February 1987.

After his ROC service he joined ROCA and for many years has been a faithful member in both 9 and 10 Group ROCAs. In January 2010, 9 Group ROCA published the full ‘Chislett Story’ and in September 2013, 9 Group ROCA published ‘Life at South Molton’ by Stuart Chislett. In this article Stuart related his attempts to persuade the North Devon District Council to name a road in the local development after the ROC. Also at this time Stuart spoke with Irving Roberts who was working on a project to get a road at Seaton named after the ROC. Of the South Molton road naming project Stuart said ‘Progress difficult’. By September 2013 Irving was successful and a road at Seaton called ‘Royal Observer Way’ was unveiled. However, for Stuart at South Molton, progress on getting a road named after the ROC was very slow until 2017.

In 2012 a housing developer named Baker Estates obtained outline planning permission to erect houses at South Molton. This was repeated in 2017 and a detailed planning application followed. By September 2017 detailed planning approval was obtained for 56 houses.



The initial request for road names was made by the developer (Baker Estates) in December 2017 to North Devon District Council Planning Department. In 2018 planning permission for a further 65 houses was obtained. Initial road names were then confirmed in early 2018.

At the beginning of 2018 Stuart saw a newspaper article giving details of a new housing development to the north west of South Molton town centre in an area to be called 'Bee Meadow'. This was exactly where the ROC Post 1940 to 1953 had been located.

Stuart, who knew the planning procedures, had written to North Devon District Council (NDDC) suggesting a road in the new development be called 'Observer Close' or similar.

NDDC planning department street naming policy was to promote names with a local or historical significance where possible. The developer did not submit any name suggestions for the site and they had one suggestion from Stuart Chislett suggesting 'Observer Way or the like?'. The planning staff did some internet research into the site history in general but found nothing of significance. They then decided to study the suitability of ROC names and this found favour. The Council selected several names themed around the ROC and checked that they would be acceptable to the Council's other naming criteria. These names were then passed over to the South Molton Town Council as part of the consultation process. Road names were then confirmed in February 2018.



Stuart Chislett in his home at South Molton proudly holding his 'Heritage Certificate of Appreciation' on 18 February 2021.

Stuart's original suggestion to NDDC thus produced a very positive and favourable reply. The reply explained that requests involving 'military type sites' would be referred to the County Archaeologist for comments but he took no part in the road naming process. At some stage it was realised that in the northern part of the development at Bee Meadow there were four small 'Closes' coming off the main access road (Deerhill Road). It was agreed that the four 'Closes' should all bear names related to the ROC. The local Town Council never did inform Stuart of the decision although they had approved the use of the ROC names.

Building operations commenced by the Spring of 2018 and towards the end of 2018 the 'Observer Close' road sign had been erected on site. As building work progressed other signs followed. 'Spotter Close' was erected in March 2019 and 'Monitor Close' went up in June 2019. At this time the new ROC road signs were seen by Stuart Chislett as he and his wife attended the latest election at the polling station. The last road sign 'Granite Close' was erected in late August 2020. On 27 August 2020 Stuart Chislett wrote to National Heritage Officer Edwina Holden informing her that 'South Molton now has three names in the new housing development. These are Observer, Spotter and Monitor Closes'. The magnitude of Stuart's achievements thus became known. Photos were obtained, exact locations determined and preliminary announcements made in News Sheets.

It was decided that Stuart should be recognised in some way and in early February 2021 Edwina Holden obtained permission from the National Chairman to produce a Heritage 'Certificate of Appreciation' (and a Citation) to be presented to Stuart. Due to Covid restrictions the Certificate was posted to Chislett family friend Steve Johnson who lives in South Molton. On 18 February 2021 Steve duly presented the Certificate, on behalf of the ROCA, to Stuart Chislett with thanks. His fame spread and Stuart with his Certificate were on the front page of the South Molton and District News March 2021 edition.

Now as one leaves South Molton on the B3226 heading north west, one mile from the town centre, the Bee Meadow access road named Deerhill Road is on the left. On the north side of Deerhill Road are four 'Closes'. From east to west are Granite Close, Observer Close, Spotter Close and lastly Monitor Close. Apart from Observer Close the other three names were chosen by the NDDC Planning Department staff. They did well.

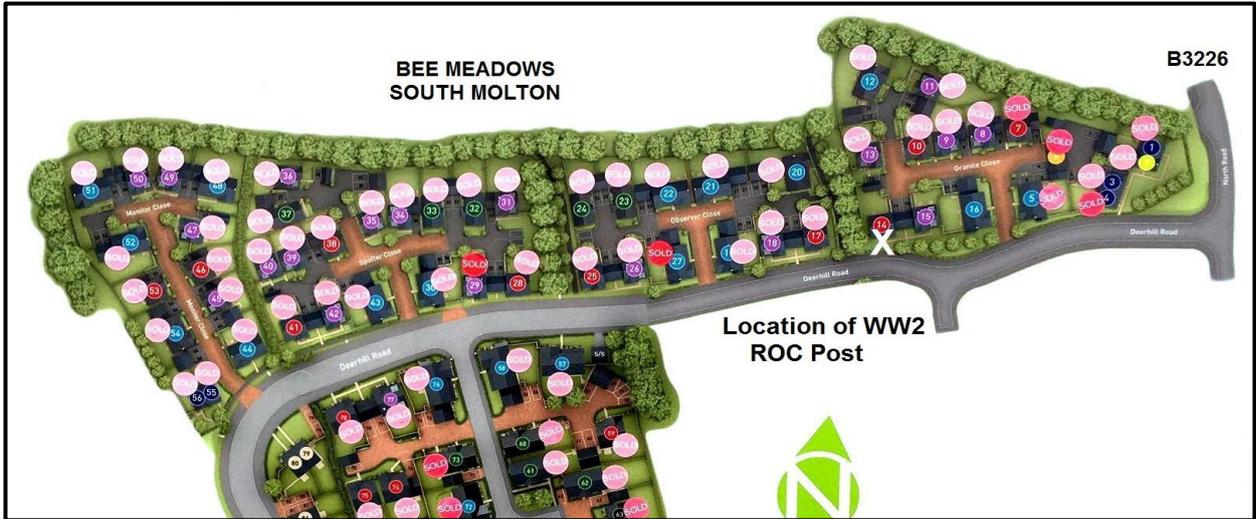
What does Stuart feel about the ROC road names ?

".....as for the names, I feel that while Observer Close and Spotter Close are OK, Monitor Close may owe more to a 'Cold War language'. Granite Close seems slightly out of context to those uninformed about WW2 Post procedures. But by the time I knew, the names had been approved and people were moving into the new homes.

End Note

On a UK basis, Lawrence Holmes keeps a record of all locations which commemorate the ROC, such as house names, memorials, plaques, and road names etc. To date there are listed only six road name signs, normally bearing some variant of 'Observer'. e.g. Observer Way or Observer Drive etc. All those listed are single locations. The South Molton road signs would be fairly rare if there was just one ! But to have FOUR all in one location is UNIQUE ! This is a wonderful achievement for Stuart Chislett and for North Devon District Council Planning Department.

(Thanks go to Stuart Chislett, Baker Estates, North Devon Planning and others for providing information for this article. Thanks also to Steve Johnson for making the presentation and for providing the road sign photos).



Top photo shows estate layout in Bee Meadow, South Molton. The 'Close' roads west to east are Monitor, Spotter, Observer and Granite. They all access off Deerhill Road. The aircraft reporting post plots near No 14 Granite Close. To have four ROC named roads in one location is unique in Great Britain.