**My Recollections of the Royal Observer Post at Ashbury**

**During the 1950s & 60s**

**By Chris Sealy**

The post was part of the Oxford Group and was designated the number N4 (November Four). My earliest memories involved the recognition and tracking of aircraft as they flew across our skies. To enable a clear view of the sky there was a concrete structure which was effectively an open top box stood on top of several concrete legs accessible by steps from ground level. The centre of the box was dominated by an inclinometer and the crew stood around the device, eyes and ears straining to spot any aircraft in the vicinity. The crew were equipped with a pair of powerful naval prismatic binoculars and a radio coupled to the Oxford control centre by telephone wires, the telephone post is still there although the wires are long gone. There was keen competition among the crew to spot and identify the overflying aircraft. Each post was issued with a set of flash cards printed with the silhouette outlines of all current aircraft and each member was expected to recognise any plane which might fly over. As a special treat my father would take me up to the post when they were taking part in an exercise and my keen young eyesight combined with my knowledge of aircraft proved useful on more than one occasion. Once the aircraft was spotted and identified its height was calculated using the inclinometer and its course plotted using the horizontal protractor around the edge of the device the details were called in to the control centre in Oxford. Other posts in the area would also report their data for the same aircraft thus enabling the control centre to build up an accurate picture of all aircraft activity in the area.

**The hypothetical Hunter incident.**

Training exercises were often used to practice procedures and sharpen skills and the method was simple, crews were instructed to plot and track the position of all civilian aircraft overflying the post. On one such exercise few planes were spotted, all was unusually quiet, and so the instruction came from “control” to invent some planes and report hypothetical data to give the control room staff something to plot. Each post was supposed to listen to the data reported by the adjacent posts and continue the course direction and altitude of the hypothetical aircraft. But, on this particular occasion, the adjacent post decided that the hypothetical Hawker Hunter which had been tracking across the area would crash near their post and reported as much to the control centre in Oxford. The problem was that the control centre staff did not remember that it was a hypothetical report and scrambled the emergency services to the scene causing much hilarity around the group and very red faces in Oxford control centre.

**Recognition Magazine**

The Corps produced and distributed its own magazine called Recognition featuring the emblem of an ancient soldier on lookout duty with his left hand raised to shield the sun from his eyes and holding a flaming torch in his right and with the corps moto “forewarned is forearmed”. Inside there were articles and information relevant to the duties that that a member of the corps was expected to carry out. On the back page, there was a competition comprising small photographs of aircraft and the task was to identify them. The photographs were deliberately obscure which meant that the competition was challenging and the source of much discussion at home.

**The Cold War.**

Technology moved on apace after the Second World War and the new threat no longer came from Messerschmitts and Heinkels but from atomic bombs and so the Royal Observer Corps had to adapt to that new threat. Therefore, a small nuclear fallout shelter was installed to replace the concrete tower. There wasn’t much room down there, just a small table and two bunk beds in the main room and a chemical loo and hand pump at the foot of the access ladder. Inside the main room there was a tube to insert a radiation monitor into the outside area (fixed survey meter) so that the crew could measure the radiation levels outside. There was also a ventilation shaft with a steel shutter and of course a telephone link to the control centre. The access cover was a heavy steel counterbalanced manhole next to which there is still a four-hole flange to fit a ground zero monitor, this device recorded the direction and altitude of the nuclear explosion. I accompanied my father down the bunker many times, even during training exercises, but fortunately they were never used in defence of the country.