

Fryent Country Park extra! – The bunker on Gotfords Hill.

One of the encouraging things about sharing the local history I know is that other people sometimes add things that I didn't know! This has happened through comments made in response to [Part 3](#) of the Fryent Country Park Story.

One comment, from Wally, which began with memories triggered by an old photo of a gipsy camp, went on to say: 'On top of "Mole Hill" in about the 60's an underground bunker was dug and buried and we saw its construction. Never found out what it was for or if it's still there.' "Mole Hill" was actually Gotfords Hill, which today looks serene in its country landscape, but I had heard rumours about something "secret" which used to be there.



1. Looking across the Country Park fields, to Gotfords Hill, Kingsbury and beyond.

An anonymous comment followed, first saying: 'I remember the bunker and what was inside,' and later adding: 'like a man hole cover in a concrete surround, a jacobs ladder leading down to a couple of rooms one with a early warning machine.' There had obviously been something on that hilltop, but what was it?

The following day another comment arrived, which provided hope that we might soon have the answer. Brian wrote: 'I have some photos of the bunker - not very good ones and I can't remember where I got them from, so I don't know who owns them.' A day later, he had sent them to Martin, and we had our first glimpse of the Gotfords Hill bunker.



2. Royal Observer Corps volunteers at Gotfords Hill, 1968.



3. ROC men around the open trap door to the bunker.

The photograph above gives a clear picture of five of the men, four of them wearing the uniform of the Royal Observer Corps (“ROC”), a volunteer organisation linked with the RAF. Do you recognise any of these men, or are you one of them, who could tell us more? Once the uniform was clear, it led me to an excellent website run by the [Royal Observer Corps Association](#), which has helped provide the following information.

The Observer Corps was set up in the 1920s, to help the RAF in keeping track of enemy aircraft that might attack this country during any future war. I had heard that Gotfords Hill was the site of an observation post during the Second World War, and that would explain its later use by the ROC.

Although the RAF had radar around the coast, to help spot approaching formations of German bombers during that war, it relied on a network of observation posts to help track their movements once they were over Britain. The post on Gotfords Hill probably reported directly to Fighter Command HQ at Bentley Priory, on the type and number of planes they could see, and the direction they were flying. Because of their vital work during the Battle of Britain and the Blitz, King George VI awarded the Observer Corps its Royal title in 1941.



4. A World War 2 Observer Corps observation post. (Still from a British Pathé newsreel film in 1941.)

After 1945, the nature of any future conflict changed, with faster jet aircraft and the development of nuclear weapons. The role of the ROC also changed, and from 1957 it was brought under the control of the new United Kingdom Warning and Monitoring Organisation (“UKWMO”). Between then and 1963, around 1500 underground ROC posts were built, in a network across the whole country. Many reused old ROC locations, such as Gotfords Hill.

Wally’s comment was right, when he said that an underground bunker was dug and buried there in the 1960s. The bunker had reinforced concrete walls, one foot thick, and could only be reached by ladder down a 14-foot concrete shaft from the surface. The Gotfords Hill bunker opened in 1961, and was named ROC Post Colindale (which has led to at least one website saying it was in the London Borough of Barnet!). It was reached via a footpath across the field from Valley Drive, and through a locked gate in the high wire fence surrounding the site.



5. ROC members around the top of the bunker, with Valley Drive in the background.

The bunker consisted of two rooms, a monitoring room and a storeroom (with a chemical toilet in it). The Cold War was at its height in the early 1960s, and in time of an emergency the job of these ROC posts would be to report where nuclear bombs had exploded, and to monitor the spread and toxicity of the radioactive fallout. Two or three observers would be expected to seal themselves into the bunker, and stay there, potentially for many weeks!



6. Inside the monitoring room in the Gotfords Hill bunker.

The radioactivity readings, from equipment linked to the surface, would have been used alongside reports from neighbouring posts (Acton, Northolt, Chorleywood, Kings Langley and Bowes Park/Haringay) and data from the Met. Office to predict where the nuclear fallout would spread to, and alert people there of danger coming their way. If you are interested, there is a public information film ["The Hole in the Ground" (1962)] on YouTube, all about these methods.

I remember those times, as my grandfather was an active member of the Civil Defence Corps then. Aged 11 to 13, I was "volunteered" to help, as a casualty, with a number of their training exercises. For one big exercise there was no gory make-up, just dozens of us delivered to a mock casualty clearing station in a local school. We each had a card listing the symptoms we had to describe to the first aiders, whose task it was to decide what to do with us. My "condition" was radiation sickness, and the symptoms were awful! Since then, I've been convinced that nuclear weapons should never be used again.

As the threat of a nuclear war with the Soviet Union diminished, half of the underground ROC bunkers were closed in 1968, and Gotfords Hill was one of them. The photographs that Brian shared with us are dated 1968, and may have been taken as the ROC members paid a last visit to their post (if whoever took them would like to get in touch, we would be happy to give a proper acknowledgement). Although the hatch and its surround have gone, the sealed-off bunker underneath must still be there!



7. Closing the hatch to the bunker in 1968, with the fields of the future Country Park beyond.

The final photo which Brian shared with us shows the metal hatch being closed; but the pictures have also "lifted the lid" on the mystery of the Gotfords Hill bunker. It is now part of the Fryent Country Park Story!

Thankfully, the bunker never had to be used for the purpose it was built to serve, but history can teach us things, if we are willing to learn. In the 1950s, the government perceived a danger which threatened the life of everyone in the country. They planned for what would be required to deal with that threat, put in the resources necessary, and trained the staff and volunteers who would be involved. Even though that threat passed, without becoming a reality, the country was prepared.

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