

The Eyes of the Few – Graham Murchie – 8 January 2025

For our first meeting of 2025 members and 24 guests were joined by Graham Murchie, from the Bawdsey Radar Trust who told us of the history of the RAF Bawdsey station and the people involved in the development of 'RADAR'.

During the first World War airships and later aircraft had become a more serious threat. In 1917 13 had been killed and 26 injured in an air raid on Felixstowe. There was considerable concern following the first World War by those responsible for the country's defence regarding the safety of the country and protecting the UK from attack was discussed at length. In 1932 the "concrete ears" had been built in an attempt to detect aircraft before they could become a threat and Henry Tizard was appointed to chair a Committee and set up an aircraft experimental station at Martlesham Heath. In 1934 in air defence exercises more than half of the bombers involved in the exercise got past the defences, despite their routes being known, which led to a competition set up by the Air Ministry with a prize of £1,000 being offered for anyone who could develop a "death ray" to disable pilots and their aircraft. However, Robert Watson-Watt with Arnold Wilkins, technical officer proved that this was not possible but established that using transmitted radio waves approaching aircraft could be detected. With the calculations in place a memo and covering letter was presented outlining his ideas and although it was met with enthusiasm, proof that the system could work was demanded so in February 1935, Watson-Watt and Wilkins successfully demonstrated their system using a BBC transmitter and managed to pick up a bomber being used as a test target. In May 1935 Watson-Watt, Wilkins and a small team of scientists moved to Orfordness to conduct a series of experiments over the sea that would lead to the world's first working 'RADAR' system. It soon became apparent that Orfordness was inadequate for further research and the Bawdsey Manor Estate was purchased for £24,000 and in February 1936 the research scientists occupied Bawdsey Manor House and the stables and outbuildings were converted into workshops. The 240ft wooden receiver towers and 360ft steel transmitter towers were built and RAF Bawdsey became the first Chain Home Radar Station which by the outbreak of the second World War in September 1939 had developed into a chain of 22 radar stations around the coast of Britain.

Graham highlighted the extremely important role played by the WAAF's at Bawdsey monitoring the radar contacts and plotting these. Radar stations such as Bawdsey and observers were directly connected to Bentley Priory, the Headquarters of Fighter Command and were to provide invaluable intelligence during the second World War and particularly during the Battle of Britain when 2,600 Luftwaffe planes were set against the RAF's 640.

Following the second World War Bawdsey was used as an RAF base through the Cold War until the 1990s when the Bloodhound Missiles were sited at the base. In May 1990 the Bloodhound force ceased operations and in June all the missiles were withdrawn. The RAF station closed on the 31 March 1991 and the last of the giant transmitter masts came down in 2000.

In 2004 Bawdsey was featured in the Restoration programme and although not the winner of the funding the Bawdsey Radar Group was set up. In 2017 the transmitter block underwent full refurbishment and reopened for the public to visit in 2018.

Graham advised that there had been no full list of those who had worked at Bawdsey over the years and many had worked under the official secrets act and had never revealed what work they had been involved in. The Trust was, therefore, undertaking the Bawdsey Radar Connections project to collect information in a database about those who served, training and worked at the site between 1936 and 1991.

Graham was thanked for attending and sharing an informative talk about a local historic landmark that had played such an important part in the country's history. It was noted that whilst the Bawdsey Museum was currently closed for the winter it would reopen at Easter when visitors would be very welcome and that further information including opening times and the online gift shop was available on the website.

Lorna Fraser

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