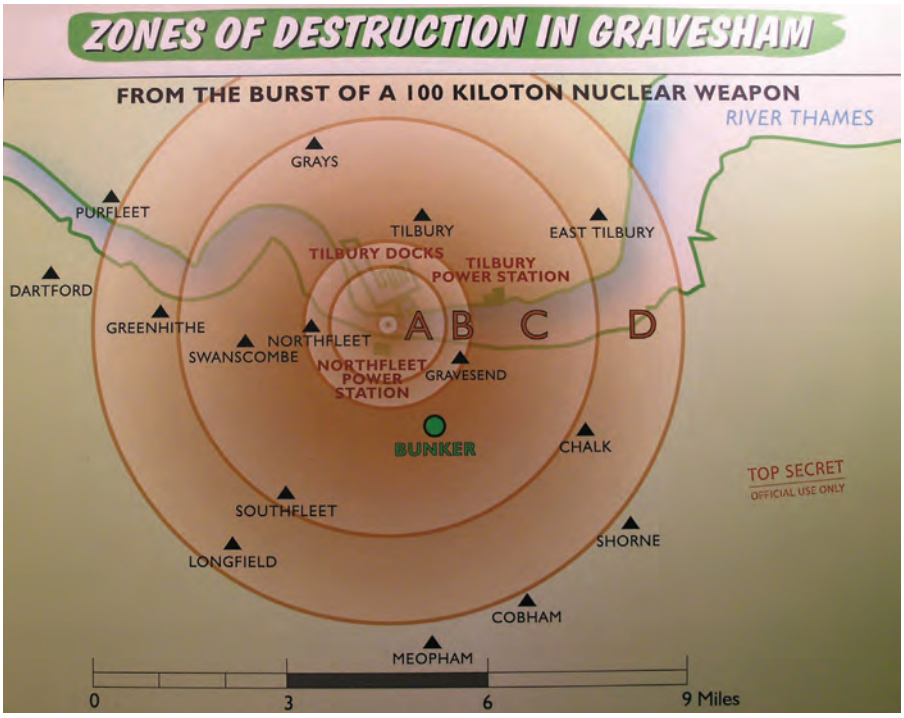
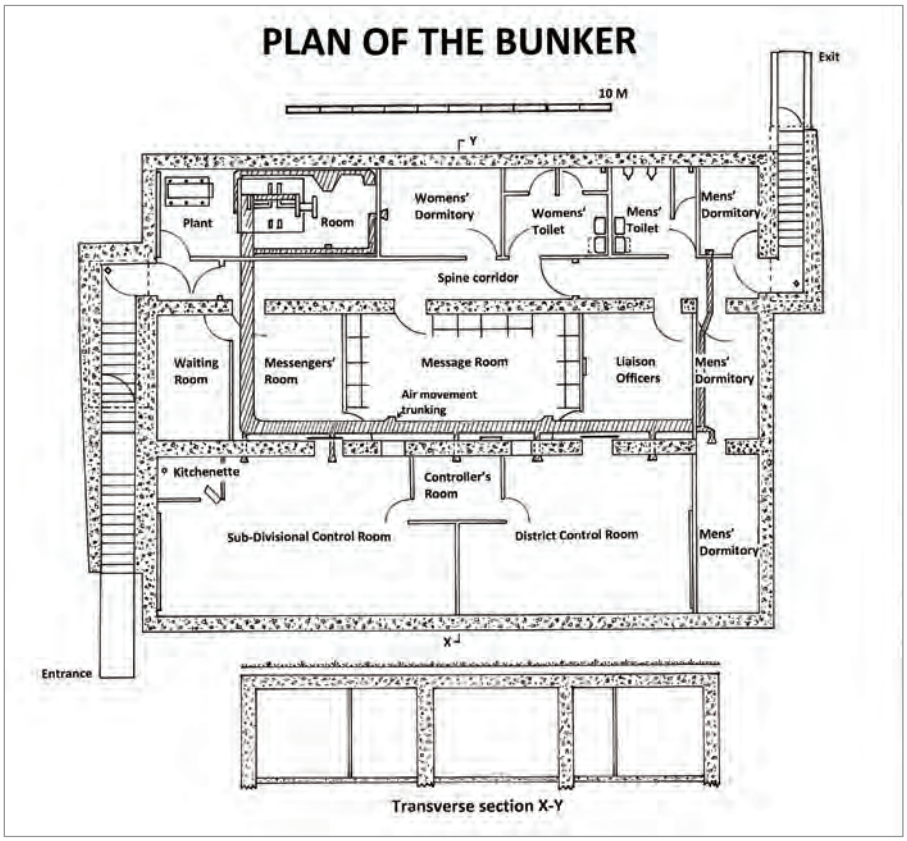
SURVIVING DOOMSDAY?
THE COLD WAR BUNKER AT GRAVESEND

By Victor Smith

Imagine that it is 1960: Gravesend and Kent Thameside are a blasted and irradiated landscape, the apocalyptic result of a nuclear explosion over Tilbury Docks and the nearby power stations: where there had been buildings, there is now a formless expanse of rubble, blocked roads and scorched ground; where there was life, there is death. Overhead, a radioactive cloud from a half-dozen detonations elsewhere rains down a lethal fallout. On the edge of the area of devastation, there are barely alive, horrifically injured victims as well as displaced and traumatized wanderers, terminally ill with radiation sickness. There are the beginnings of starvation. But in the civil defence control centre in a bunker under Woodlands Park, a mile and a half inland from ground zero, a small group of volunteer staff from the Civil Defence Corps and several officials from Gravesend's council are still alive, at least for now.

But, the entrances to the bunker are half-filled with debris blasted across from nearby buildings. Debris has also partially blocked the air intakes, and the radio mast has been knocked down by flying rubble. All telecommunications have failed, and the team inside the bunker are trapped. They desperately need to free themselves and find out what has happened to the population outside and whether there are people within their operational area to save and any surviving civil defence rescue parties with whom to contact. Just moving the debris to get out will expose those involved to deadly radiation. What they initially see of the world around them on emerging produces deep shock and, despite their training, a feeling of futility. Exacerbated by the use of biological weapons and persistent chemical agents,





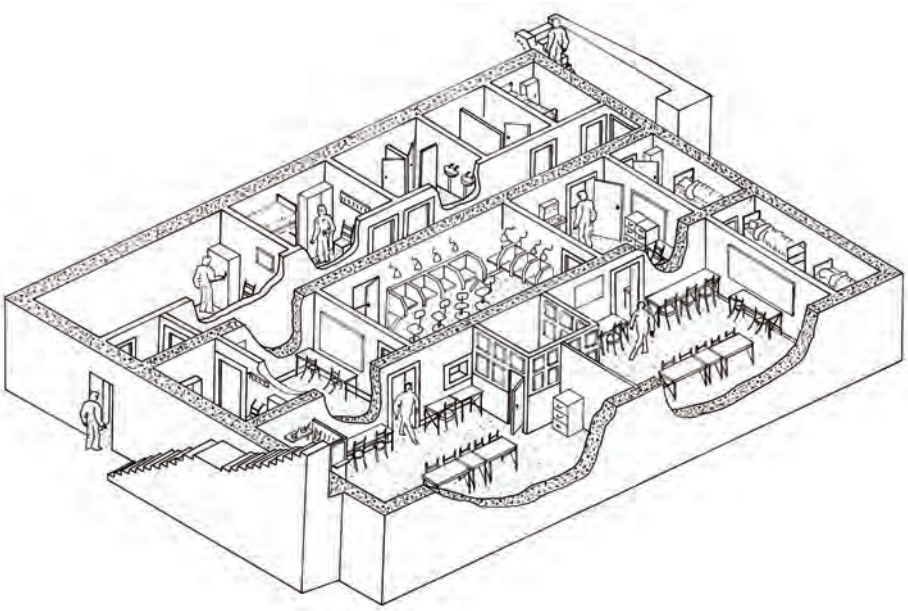
Top
Fig 1: Zones of Destruction in Gravesham
Bottom
Fig 2: Plan of Cold War Bunker at Gravesend

a devastating nuclear bombardment across the country, including the use of at least one cobalt enhanced radiation weapon, has led to widespread destruction and dislocation of the sinews of existence. There is pervading general despair and a sense of hopelessness. In their suffering, some even envy the dead. There is a belief that it is the end of the world.

This grim but not unrealistic vision of 'what might have been' is integral to an understanding of Gravesend's Cold War bunker. It is an archaeological reminder of governmental and widespread anxieties that Britain might come to be enveloped by a devastating nuclear conflict with Russia. Built in 1954, decommissioned in 1968 and mothballed until complete discontinuance in 1974, it is a well-preserved example of a command post from the early Cold War for the local coordination of civil defence, whose operations were largely reflective of the pattern of organization across the country.

After discovering its existence in 1995, The New Tavern Fort Project (renamed Thames Defence Heritage in 2000) began, in partnership with Gravesham Borough Council, to make the bunker into a setting for a Cold War heritage centre, starting with the creation of a replica Royal Observer Corps radiation monitoring post in one of the rooms. However, it soon became apparent that the rarity value of the bunker demanded display almost wholly as a Civil Defence Control Centre. It was then painstakingly restored, refurnished and re-equipped for that purpose. In doing so, the building has become an evocative time capsule of the national preparations in the 1950s and 60s against the threat of nuclear Armageddon. Indeed, once the doors are closed against the outside world, it is not hard to visualise this nightmare.

At the foot of steps from inside the park, a corridor leads into 13 rooms. These include those to which civil defence message carriers were to bring information and from which to take away orders, a communications centre with telephones, teleprinters and a wireless transmitter and a liaison room for communication



Top
Fig 3: Cutaway view of Cold War Bunker at Gravesend
Middle, left
Fig 4: Entrance to Cold War Bunker at Gravesend
Middle, right
Fig 5: The corridor in the bunker
Bottom
Fig 6: Teleprinters in the Message Room

with outside forces such as the Fire Brigade, Police and the Territorial Army. There are two control rooms in which the difficult life and death decisions would have been taken to prioritise the places for the deployment of rescue services pre-positioned outside if any remained. If the electricity should fail, an emergency generator and air filtration equipment against radioactive or chemically contaminated air were provided in a dedicated plant room. Volunteers, both men and women, were expected to be closed down inside for some time, and there was a kitchenette and small dormitory rooms, whose occupants would, at best, have had a troubled sleep. All of this would, in theory, have worked according to plan if responding to the collateral effects on the Gravesend and surrounding areas of an attack elsewhere, say on the Chatham naval base or, with a larger bomb, on London. Unfortunately, the generality of infrastructural assets, including ports and power supply, such as those of the Thames nearby, were not absent from Soviet target lists. This led to the possibility of more devastating local destruction, injury and death.

Although other Cold War bunkers had been opened to visitors, there was no example of a restored local civil defence control centre as a guiding frame of reference. Therefore, fundamental new research had to be undertaken. Other discontinued local bunkers were visited for comparison with Gravesend, personal recollections recorded and thousands of sheets of original records, civil defence manuals and what contemporary photographic evidence there was studied. It was possible to make a general plan of action and evolve a scheme for historical layouts from all this. The next step was, through continuing research, to decide in detail upon the exact nature of the furnishings and items of equipment to be obtained and how to find them.

Generous donors such as the Post Office, the Home Office, Gravesham Borough, Kent County, Medway and Reigate Councils, the Fort Amherst and Lines Trust, Dr James Fox and others, gave teleprinters, typewriters, telephonists' chairs, bunk beds, mattresses, filing cabinets, tables and more besides. Wooden chairs of a type used in most bunker rooms were obtained from second-hand shops, a telephone switchboard from an antique shop and a Baby Belling cooker for the kitchenette from another council bunker.

Top, left
Fig 7: Communications centre of Message Room
Top, right
Fig 8: In the control room
Bottom, left
Fig 9: Liaison Officers' room with switchboard
Bottom, right
Fig 10: One of the dormitories

These acquisitions sometimes involved numerous journeys of collection to various parts of the country. Obtaining uniforms and civilian undergarments for washing lines in the lavatories required additional research and travel to diverse sources. Smaller items for tabletops were acquired over time, but candlestick telephones had to be fabricated because of the cost of originals. The correctly achieved overall effect was almost that of the 1950s/60s offices and a telephone exchange, if with a doom-laden bunker ambience, reinforced by the display of civil defence resource boards, maps for plotting destruction, protective helmets, gas masks, casualty stretchers and more besides.

With the support of researched speaking notes for the guides, the bunker first opened to the public in 2000, although not all re-equipment had taken place at that date. A regime for public access was then gradually refined, including a plenary introductory briefing for each group, the use of video and division into smaller parties for a guided tour. The claustrophobic life within the bunker is explained, even how entry might have had to be defended by lethal force in the event of desperate, starving, and increasingly lawless people outside attempting to break in to seize food.

The Royal Observer Corps Post has been retained, explaining that it was not part of the civil defence control centre but a representation of one of a national network of such posts outside and across the country. This has proved to be a very popular and, given the context, germane attraction.

Top, left
Fig 11: Washing line in the ladies' toilet
Top, right
Fig 12: Ladies dormitory

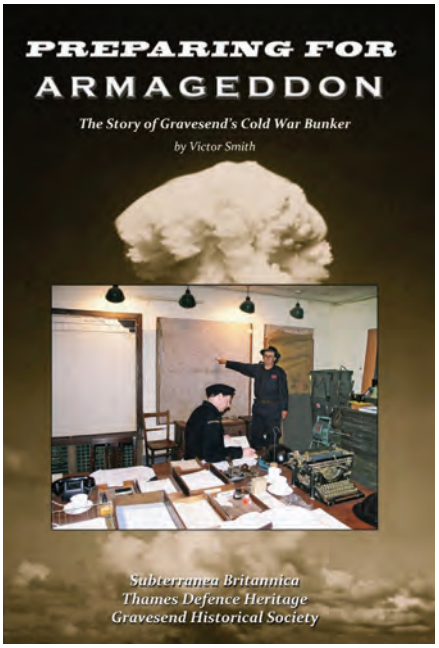
Middle
Fig 13: One of the urinals
Bottom
Fig 14: Taking radiation readings outside the bunker

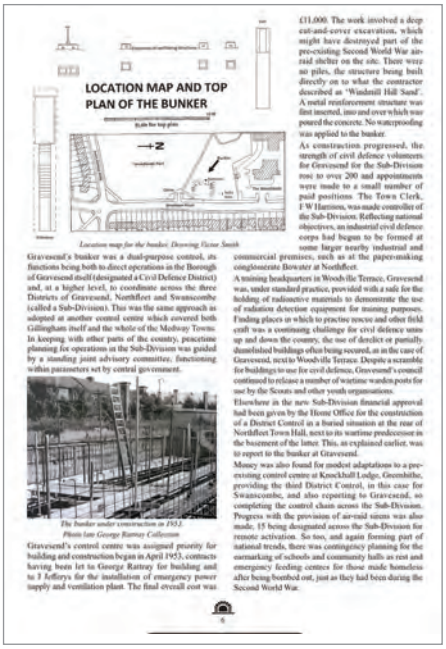
The bunker was ceremonially opened as a museum in 2004 to mark the 50th year since its construction. The event was attended by a government minister and local MP, Christopher Pond, senior council officials and other guests, including George Rattray, the bunker builder. Quite remarkably, given the history of hostility between the West and the East, the event was also attended by Pavel Andreyev, an Attache at the Russian Embassy in London. He, together with George Rattray, unveiled a commemorative plaque and gave a well-judged speech. Although curiously, BBC Television filmed the event, Pavel Andreyev's address did not feature in the broadcast.

Thanks to the assistance of local MP and a Member of the House of Commons Defence Select Committee, Adam Holloway, a nuclear bomb was donated by the Ministry of Defence and the Royal Air Force for display inside the bunker. This exhibit impresses visitors and is a reminder of the reality of the threat that existed.

The overall aim of the presentation of the bunker was to create an appearance suggestive of a civil defence control centre, prepared and ready for action, indeed as though the staff had just popped out for a moment. This has been achieved. Because the interior looks not dissimilar from a 1940s setting, it was chosen to film part of the 2011 Sean Bean film, *Age of Heroes*, regularly screened on television.

Now a Grade II Listed Building, the bunker is a flourishing heritage attraction, as shown by the number of visitors who continue to book month after month for the guided tours. It depends on the unrivalled knowledge and skill of the volunteer guides and the continuing acquisition of historical information and artefacts to enhance the displays. The bunker re-opened to the public in August for the first time since Covid-related closure. Visits may be booked via Gravesham's Tourist Information at info@visitgravesend.co.uk or by telephone on 01474 337600.





The writer has published a new booklet on the bunker by the Gravesend Historical Society and Thames Defence Heritage. This is entitled *Preparing for Armageddon: the story of Gravesend's Cold War bunker* (ISBN 978-1-9999842-1-2). There are 64 illustrations, many of them in colour. This strengthens the historical presentation of the bunker for visitors and the wider reading public and incorporates the result of extensive documentary research. The cost of printing has been generously supported by grants from the Council for Kentish Archaeology and Subterranea Britannica.

The quickest routes to purchase this booklet are in person via the Tourist Information stall in Gravesend Market at the rear of the Old Town Hall in Gravesend High Street or by application to sandrasoder@yahoo.co.uk. Alternatively, you may write to her at 58 Vicarage Lane, Chalk, Gravesend, DA12 4TE. The booklet is priced at £2.50 plus £1.80 for 2nd class postage and packing (total £4.30).

Top
Fig 15: Nuclear bomb on display
Below, left
Fig 16: Front cover of *Preparing for Armageddon*
Below, right
Fig 17: Page excerpt from *Preparing for Armageddon*