

The Royal Observer Corps



Insignia of the Corps



The crew of the Deddington Observation Post (OP) 1943/44

Photograph courtesy Clive Sanders

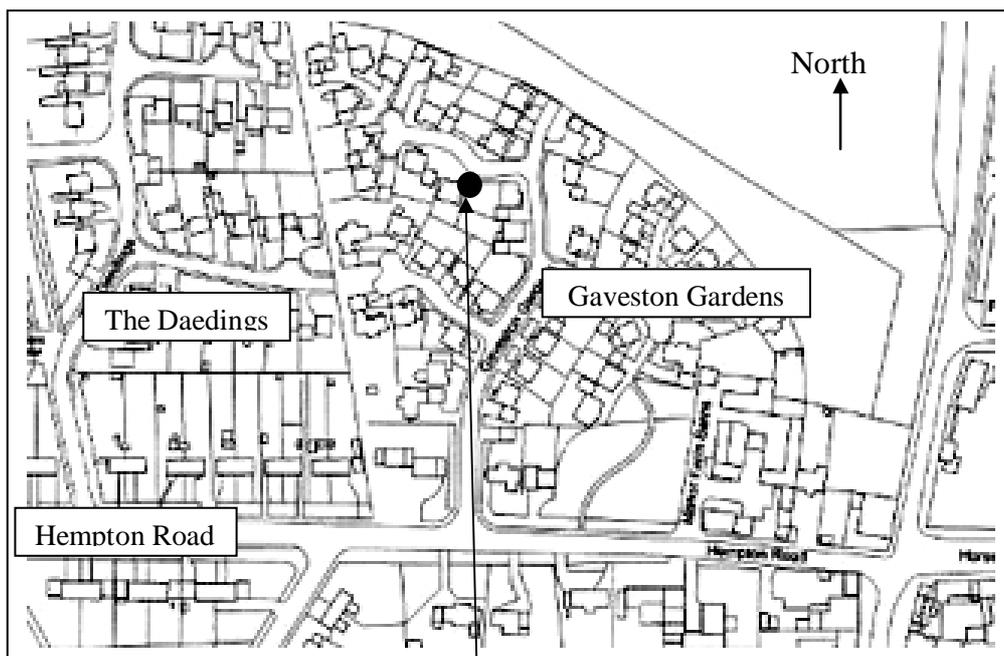
A further copy, in its original frame, has been donated to the ROC museum by Michael Powell

(Back row l to r) Jack Malcher, Charlie Fuller, Arthur Humphries, Arthur Newell, Gill, Walter Sanders, Frank Garrett, Fred Deeley, George Clark, Percy Franklin

(Front row l to r) Bill Berry, George Cottrel, Bill Holiday, George Deeley (Ldg Observer and 2 i/c), Observer Officer (later Observer Lieutenant) K W J Grigg, Chief Observer Douglas Hopcraft, Smith, Ernie Dodd, Bob Churchill.

Deddington had its own OP in the middle of the old allotments which were then up the Hempton Road in the area that is now a housing estate known as Gaveston Gardens - see map on the next page.

The original post was a very comfortable fully furnished dug-out in which Brian Fuller remembers taking tea to his father when he was on watch. The building in the photograph above - the 'tower' as it was called - replaced the dug-out and lasted into the 1950s.



Approximate location of the OP

Map courtesy of Deddington Map Group

Unusually, the new post was a two-storey brick building whereas most ROC posts were wooden huts. It had an external iron staircase to an upstairs viewing room. Tar felted panels could be rolled back for access and clear viewing. Furniture consisted of old upholstered bus seats which were convenient for sitting and leaning back to scan the sky with binoculars - and also for courting couples!

Training of the Corps in aircraft recognition was by means of some 200 3" x 2" cards containing black and white silhouettes on one side and identity on the other - an early form of 'flash card' familiar to schoolchildren today. The full set of cards belonging to Percy Franklin (back row in photograph on previous page) is still in his family.

Jack Malcher (back row in photo on previous page) recalls seeing the top secret jet aircraft, the Gloster Meteor, conducting some of its test flights from Enstone and Barford airfields in late 1942. The Deddington crew were mystified by the very high speed and lack of propeller noise from this unknown aircraft. Derrick Robbins also recalls seeing and, more particularly, hearing it: 'I came back to Deddington on a school break late 1943 and took a bike ride one afternoon. I was just north of Adderbury on the Banbury road when a twin engine plane flew east to west pretty low. Unusually it made a swishing sort of sound which was completely unlike the usual beat of a propeller driven plane. I did not know it at the time but it was the experimental Meteor jet.'

Derrick Robbins' recollections:

Derrick was evacuated to Deddington at the start of the war. His crystal-clear and extensive recollections about life in the parish then can be found on page 168. These are his recollections about the Observer Corps: 'What was the Royal Observer Corps? I hear you cry. I would hazard a guess that there is hardly anyone alive in Deddington who could really answer that question. Started way back in

1925, the ROC, then just Observer Corps, was formed to report on enemy aircraft movements in time of war. When the Second World War actually broke out, the plan was immediately put into operation and observation posts were put in all over Great Britain. These were manned by two men in shifts 24 hours a day, seven days a week, all unpaid volunteers. Mostly over 50 years of age and too old for active service (although there was one volunteer aged 15), they wore Royal Air Force blue battledress, a black beret with a silver badge and carried a military gas mask. Their task was to report on the height, direction and speed of any aircraft entering their air space. If the aircraft were German, then this information would be transferred to a fighter pilot allowing him to proceed directly to his foe and save time searching for it. Also a downed pilot could be picked up in a short space of time. What about radar detection, you might ask. In the 1940s radar was still in its infancy and could not pick up low-flying aircraft; nor could it detect height or speed, or if it was friend or foe.

There is no record of how many enemy aircraft they counted, but they would have reported on planes going to and from the devastating attack on Coventry, and on the two unexploded bombs which fell into a field near the village. Some volunteers with above average spotting ability were transferred to an elite section known as Seaborne Ops and were put aboard ships lying off the French coast two days after D-Day to help the gunners avoid friendly fire on the numerous allied aircraft in the air at the time.'

Information provided by Tony Maatz, Chairman of the ROC Museum:

'Deddington Observation Post opened at map reference P464319 (see previous page) in December 1938 as 4/Z4, ie Z4 Post in No.4 Group Oxford. In March 1939 it became 12/Q2 but was re-allocated to Oxford Group (re-designated No.3 Group) in November 1953 as 3/K2.'

Aircraft Observation Posts were manned in shifts from a Post strength of up to 25 Observers including a Head Observer and two Leading Observer Post Instructors. Posts were linked by telephone in threes and fours, called Clusters. There was an Officer in charge of each Cluster. There were no Officers in a Post Crew. It is therefore likely that the Officer in your photograph was the one in charge of the Cluster. He was known as a Group Officer. Wartime records are rare because instructions were issued in 1945 to send them for salvage so that they could be pulped to help the shortage.'

...and from Neville Cullingford (Curator):

'Observer Officer (later Lieutenant) KWJ Grigg, wearing a cap, in the centre of the photo (p.72) was not part of the Crew of the Post but was the Group Officer for a number of adjacent Posts. It was fortunate that I recognised him as an officer depicted on a named photograph of Bedford (12 Group) Officers in our collection. The gentleman sitting on his left [Douglas Hopcraft] was the Head Observer with the rank of Chief Observer. He is wearing above his left pocket the (short-lived) insignia of Head Observer. His second in command, his Leading Observer (Post Instructor) is sitting on his right [George Deeley].

This photograph probably dates from 1943-44. As the long-serving members have only four War Service Stripes it is most unlikely to be an end-of-war stand-down photograph. Third and fourth from the left, back row [Arthur Humphries and Arthur

Newell], are wearing the pre “Royal” breast badge which should have been replaced by the crowned badge by then.’

Information provided by Primrose Buckle (née Roberts):

Primrose’s step-brother Lawrence Pyman was a Spitfire pilot who died in 1941 over the Channel and is commemorated on the War Memorial (p.56). Her father, Major Roberts, and family had lived in Deddington House (now Manor) since 1932. Her mother, Freyda, helped with the care of children arriving as evacuees with health problems (p.80).

Primrose became a plotter in the Post in Oxford¹. She recalls ‘I used to hitchhike every day to Oxford; no one ever told me there was a Post in Deddington! I joined up in Oxford encouraged by our officer Miss Cooper of marmalade fame. On night duty we slept on iron beds in 2 layers - bunks - with huge square mattresses called biscuits - you had to search and search for three the same thickness as if the middle one was too high you were bent up! I once asked (as I was in the Plotting Post in the new Bodleian) what the delicious smell coming from the kitchen was. I got very short change - "that’s for the officers breakfast" - we just got doorsteps.’

¹ The ROC Museum advised that other members of the Oxford Post included:

Louise Andrews
‘Georgie’ Gray
Fred Harris
Sybil Joyce
Ronald Cuthbert Maasz (in C and D Crews),
Ray Maltby
R D T Onions