

WW2 Military Sites In Caithness



Andrew Guttridge

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Introduction

Today, due to its geographical location at the extreme north of the British mainland, Caithness is perceived as being remote from and uninvolved to any significant degree in the experience of the second world war, which most people consider happened on the south east coast of England and London. This view is wrong.

Even before the outbreak of war the possibility that Caithness could be attacked and invaded was taken very seriously by the military authorities. In 1938 the Admiralty asked the then Commander in Chief of Britain's Home Fleet, Admiral, Sir Charles Forbes, to decide where he would like to base his ships in the advent of a war with Germany. He chose Scapa Flow in the Orkneys. Being only 20 miles away from the mainland, this decision put Caithness right into the front line.

From its base here the British fleet could effectively prevent the German Navy access to the Atlantic Ocean and beyond, keeping its surface ships bottled up in their home ports. Also, British naval vessels sailing from Scapa Flow provided protection for the Atlantic convoys bringing vital supplies of food, fuel, munitions and raw materials to the UK. This made Scapa Flow an important strategic target for Germany and for the first 8 months of the war, the period of the so called 'phoney war', Scotland and particularly Scapa Flow was on the receiving end of some of the earliest raids on Britain.

This situation changed in the spring of 1940. With the growing inevitability of defeat in Europe the military's attention focused more and more toward the defence of the homeland. The first week of June saw the end of the evacuation of the BEF from the beaches at Dunkirk and the occupation of Norway. With France, Holland, Denmark and Norway in enemy hands, and the German navy now having free access to the Atlantic from France's seaboard ports, Britain found itself alone and surrounded. Many in authority believed it would only be a matter of weeks or even days before the German military continued its advance and brought the war directly onto British soil.

With the German air force now able to launch bombing raids on Britain from airfields only a few miles across the channel in France it was feared that an invasion of Caithness would provide the enemy with an ideal base from which to mount air raids on the south of Scotland and north of England. A situation that could have been disastrous for Britain.

The existing construction programme of defences was accelerated and it was at this time that the beaches and shorelines around Caithness became off limits to civilians. Anti-tank obstacles, gun posts (pillboxes), miles of barbed wire fences and mine fields were placed along beaches and around harbours and military stations. A coastal gun battery of two 6 inch (152mm) naval guns was built to protect Wick harbour.

Four airfields were constructed to service the RAF's need for bases here and six Heavy Anti-Aircraft gun batteries sprang up around Wick, Skitten and Castletown airfields to protect them. Many Light Anti-Aircraft gun batteries also provided increased protection for these and other stations. Two decoy airfields were built to lure enemy bombers away from the real airfields.

Three Radar stations were located around the coast of Caithness to provide not only early warning of enemy aircraft and also to detect submarines in the Pentland Firth. A radio-navigation station was also sited here, providing accurate long range navigation for allied aircraft operating in the North Sea and North Atlantic and guiding aircraft on bombing raids over Germany to their targets.

Many large country houses and castles were requisitioned for use as HQs and billeting for the numerous military units stationed in the county. Several large military camps were built to house

the thousands of servicemen that flooded into the county. Towards the end of the war one of these camps was converted into a Prisoner Of War camp for German prisoners. Another special training camp existed in the hills behind Reay.

The Royal Artillery had three batteries of 25 pounder field guns sited to defend Reiss, Wick and Castletown against invasion.

A number of secret wireless stations also operated around the county, tuning in to enemy wireless broadcasts in order to locate where they were transmitting from, their reports finding their way to Bletchley Park where they provided valuable information that helped in breaking the German Enigma codes.

Caithness also had twelve Auxiliary Units, small highly secret groups of specially trained men whose duty, if Caithness was actually invaded, would be to carry out acts of sabotage and destruction on the enemy from carefully hidden bases around the countryside.

These activities have all left their traces, some are still very obvious but others not so. Caithness has a rich and varied collection of 20th century military remains, investigation of which shows that Caithness' role in the second world war was far more significant than is appreciated today.

This booklet is written as a brief guide, giving details of the wartime remains around the county as they may be found today. It is intended to give the reader a greater understanding of the role Caithness played in the war and be useful to anyone with an interest in the subject, or just curious to know what all those derelict old buildings were and why they were put here.

Invasion Defences

Obstacles

The most common invasion defences still to be seen are the anti-tank obstacles set along beaches and low lying coast. These obstacles are of two types, cubes and pimples, commonly known as Dragons Teeth. Cubes are large blocks of concrete either 4 ft. square by 5 ft. high or the larger 5 ft. square by 5 ft. high. A common feature of those in Caithness is having beach boulders or pieces of Caithness flagstone set into the top. Pimples are truncated square pyramids about 3 ft. square at the base and 3 ft. high. Typically these two types were used together, a double offset row of pimples in front of a row of cubes set edge-on towards the invader, although in some cases either one or the other is used by itself. The most impressive stretch of anti-tank obstacles is undoubtedly that at the north end of **Reiss** beach where an uninterrupted line of blocks and pimples stretches almost half a mile southwards from **Keiss** village. The north end of **Freswick** bay also has a short but well-preserved line where the layout described above can clearly be seen.

Murkle bay also has a well-preserved stretch of pimples which curve around the headland in a triple row set into the slope at the top of the beach. **Dunnet** beach had many obstacles blocking



Figure 1 Anti-tank obstacles on Freswick Bay

the low ground at the east and west ends but most have now been removed, a few clusters near the east end survive. There are also anti-tank obstacles at **Burnside**, and **Thurso** beach also had some blocking the ramp exit from the beach but these are now gone.

At places where access onto the beach was necessary removable barriers were placed across the access tracks. The barriers consisted of pairs of larger concrete cubes set facing each other either side of the track. Into each facing side was cut a stepped recess. In the event that the tracks were to be blocked heavy steel girders or sections of railway track, which were stored

nearby, would be lifted into these recesses and secured. The road to **Holborn Head** lighthouse at **Scrabster** is protected with such a barrier which is still in situ.



Figure 2 Road barrier at Freswick bay.

In addition to these measures **Reiss** beach was also equipped with an extensive minefield as well as a flame barrage around the mouth of the **Burn of Wester**. The flame barrage was designed to flood an area of beach with a flammable mixture of oil and petrol which would be ignited as an invading force approached the beach. The flammable mixture was held in large tanks situated behind the dunes to the north side of the burn. It could be pumped from here through a pump room along a network of pipes laid under the sand to emerge from nozzles spread along the beach just above the high water mark. The tanks are now gone and there is little to show where they were located. It is worth noting that only 6 flame barrages were ever built and this one in Sinclair's Bay is the only one to have been built in Scotland.

The minefield, reputedly the largest in the UK at the time (1940) with over 2000 mines, stretched the length of the dunes south from **Keiss** village to the **golf club** car park. It was made up of mostly of Type C Beach mines, a particularly nasty mine filled with 25 lb of high explosive designed to tear the track off a tank or the bows off a landing craft, although it could also be triggered by a man standing on it, anyone doing so would have no chance of survival. A small area at the mouth of the **Burn of Wester** was laid with anti-tank mines as this was considered the most likely place for tanks to be landed. After the war these mines were all cleared and destroyed by Royal Engineers, with a little help from German prisoners from the POW camp at Watten.

Caithness being quite flat makes the county quite suitable for aircraft landing, particularly troop carrying gliders. To deter this activity many areas of flat ground, such as beaches and fields, were liberally sprinkled with anti-aircraft poles and anti-aircraft ditches.

Anti-aircraft poles were like short 8 - 10 ft. wooden telegraph poles set into a concrete block. Used mainly on beaches, such as **Dunnet** and **Reiss**, they were distributed over the beach just below high water mark. The poles were all cut off after the war but many can still be seen as short wooden stumps protruding above the sand or from the large lumps of concrete into which

they were fixed. The beaches also had miles of barbed wire fencing and tubular scaffolding obstacles stretched along them.



Figure 3 Row of 3 anti-landing poles on Reiss beach

Anti-landing ditches were shallow trenches about 2 - 3 ft. deep, the spoil being mounded up at intervals along the edges, intended to catch an aircraft's undercarriage and tip it over. They were dug across most of the fields and flat areas of farmland particularly around the airfields at **Castletown**, **Skitten** and **Wick** and on **Noss Head**.

All of these defences were hurriedly built when materials were scarce and often of poor quality using local labour, often men with little or no experience of construction work. The obvious results of this can be seen in many of these structures.



Figure 4 This anti-tank cube (left) shows the use of beach pebbles to eke out the cement. The foundation of the cube (right) is almost non-existent, this could have been easily pushed aside.



Figure 5 Graffiti on this cube shows that these defences were constructed around Sept 1940.

Note also the small iron ring in the centre for attaching barbed wire.

Pillboxes

Probably the most well-known defensive building is the pillbox, or Gun Post to give it its correct military term. Although dozens of these structures were built in Caithness most have now disappeared. The popular assumption that they were built haphazardly to a single design is entirely misplaced. Pillboxes were carefully sited to defend vulnerable areas or specific sites such as beaches, airfields, gun batteries, radar stations, harbours etc., and were used always in conjunction with other defences. WW2 pillboxes generally conform to drawings prepared by department FW3 of the War Office Directorate of Fortifications and Works and are usually identified by a type number e.g. FW3/22, FW3/23 etc. Types found in Caithness are:

Type 22 - Regular hexagon with interior walls approximately 6 ft. Designed for infantry with rifles and light machine guns.

Type 24 - Flattened hexagon with a rear wall 14 ft. long; designed for infantry light or medium machine guns. A large concrete slab table around the inside for supporting machine guns. Those found in Caithness all have unusually large rectangular embrasures (loopholes).

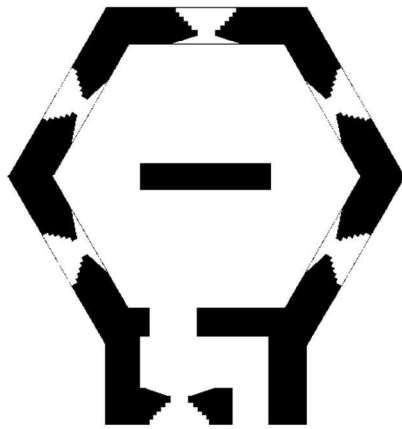
Type 27 - Large hexagon with an internally accessed open area in the centre for a light AA weapon, designed for infantry with rifles and light machine guns.

Pillboxes are usually constructed of reinforced concrete, shuttered with whatever material was conveniently to hand. Wood was most commonly used but corrugated iron and asbestos are often seen, and sheet asbestos sometimes for the underside of the roof. Many pillboxes used brick shuttering which was left in place giving the misleading appearance of a brick built structure, however evidence at Reiss indicates that at least some of the pillboxes there were built entirely of brick with no reinforcing.

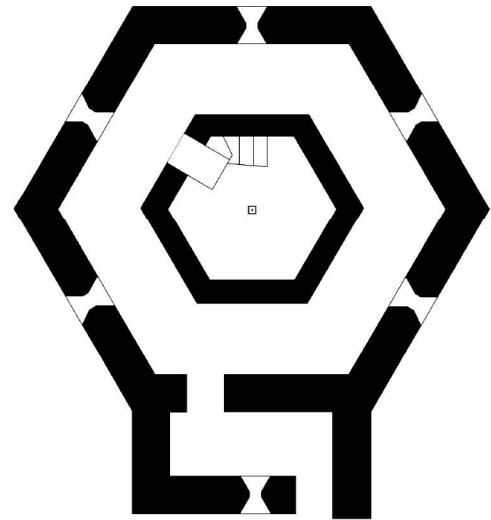


Figure 6 A typical Type 24, set atop the ruins of the Bishops Palace at Burnside, Thurso. A row of anti-tank cubes can be seen to the left in the distance.

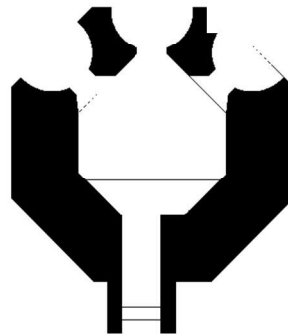
Types of pillbox found in Caithness



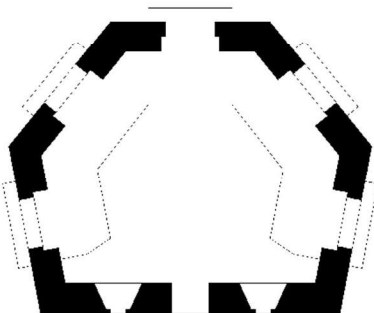
Type 22 - Castletown



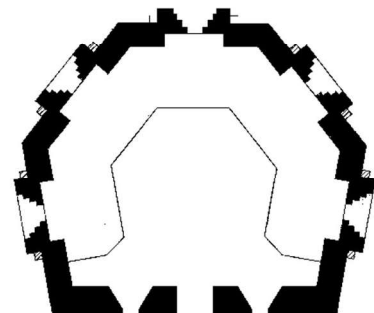
Type 27 Strongpost - Wick



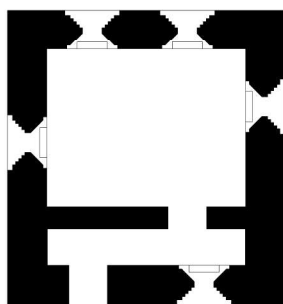
Wick airfield



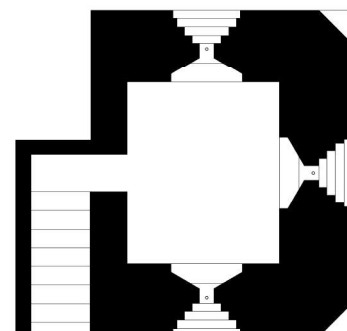
Type 24 – Sinclair's Bay



Type 24 - Thurso



Type 26 – Wick airfield



Vickers gun pillbox – Wick harbour

RAF Castletown was originally defended by some nine pillboxes, a number of type 27 Strongposts and type 22 hexagonal. The only survivors being a type 22 in front of the old grain tower at **Thurdistoft farm** and the half-dismantled shell of a Type 27 which lies beside the **Greenland road**.



Figure 7 A type 22 pillbox at Castletown airfield

Reiss beach had a number of Type 24s placed every 400 yards along the beach, running from **Keiss** to **Ackergill**. Most of these have long since been demolished or become buried but four still survive, two on the foreshore to the north of **Keiss** harbour one to the south at **Ackergillshore** harbour, in use as a store shed, and a short way further north towards **Noss Head** another rather impressive looking example sits perched atop the cliffs looking out across the sweep of **Sinclair's Bay**. One which overlooked **Keiss** harbour has had its roof and walls removed, the base and rear wall survive as a view point with bench.

RAF Wick was also ringed with pillboxes, one of these still survives in good condition and can be seen on the airfields western boundary behind the houses at **Ackergill**. Further along the road beside **Upper Ackergill** can be seen a good example of a Type 27 Strongpost. On the airfield landing ground itself are two pillboxes of non-standard design with semi-circular embrasures, facing inwards and covering the runways and landing ground.

Wick itself also had a ring of defences thrown up around the towns perimeter, barbed wire entanglements and machine gun positions strengthened every so often with pillboxes, some nine in total. None of these have survived. **Wick** harbour had its own defences in the form of four pillboxes and a Coast Battery. The one extant pillbox, with red brick shuttering, can be seen built into the bank of the north shore. This is a thick walled pillbox which would probably have been armed with Bren light machine guns. The Coast Battery, situated on **North Head** below **Broadhaven**, mounted two 6 inch naval guns. The last of the battery buildings disappeared in 2002 under a new housing development, the only relic is a Coast Artillery Search Light (CASL)



Figure 8 CASL emplacement for the 6" Coast Battery at Wick harbour

emplacement built of red brick, below the battery site. This would have housed one of the search lights used to guide the guns onto their target.

RAF Castletown also had its own 'big gun', although this was completely unofficial. The then commanding officer of **RAF Castletown**, Wing Commander David Atcherley, an enthusiastic if somewhat unconventional character always keen to exploit any opportunity to improve his defences, learned of a naval sloop armed with a 4.7" naval deck gun that had run aground in bad weather. The ground crew of 504 Squadron were quickly dispatched to recover the gun while a platform was built at the western end of **Dunnet** beach. The gun was mounted so as to give enfilading fire across the beach and shore line. Unfortunately when the gun was acquired the salvage party neglected to take the gun's mounting so it was fixed and unable to traverse, they could only raise and lower the barrel.

Despite this drawback, practice shots were fired at the cliffs of Head of Man near Dwarwick with some accuracy. Naval authorities eventually reclaimed the gun when Atcherley overstepped the mark by trying to requisition a fresh supply of ammunition from the admiralty. The concrete apron with the holdfast mounting bolts still exists, the letters **RAF** neatly picked out with pebbles in one corner.



Figure 9 Concrete apron (left) with ring of mounting bolts in the centre, for the 4.7" gun installed at Castletown. The letters **RAF (right) are set at the foot of the tree to the left.**

There were other unusual types of pillbox, with specialised functions, which are worth mentioning here as examples can be found in Caithness.

The 'Norcon' pillbox was simply a length of 6 ft. diameter concrete drainage pipe with embrasures cut around one end. These fitted onto standard pipes, mounted upright, to form a one-man pillbox. One such can be seen at the main gate of **RAF Skitten**.

The Alan-Williams turret was a domed steel cupola, with openings in the side and top, which rotated through 360 degrees on a steel base. This could mount almost any type of light or medium machine gun of the day in either a land or anti-aircraft role. These were installed at **Castletown** and **Skitten**.



Figure 10 Pickett-Hamilton retractable fort at RAF Castletown, in raised position.

The Pickett-Hamilton retractable fort was intended for airfield protection. They spent most of their life underground, the roof being level with the runway surface and able to support the weight of a medium sized aircraft taxiing over it. They were usually sited at the intersections of the runways and when required could be raised hydraulically to give covering crossfire across the runways. They held a garrison of five men equipped with rifles and light machine guns. These contraptions were installed at **Castletown**, **Skitten** and **Wick**.

Another important defence related structure is the RAF Battle Headquarters. This was an underground command post intended to be manned only during an attack on the airfield and was usually positioned overlooking the airfield for good visibility. Built of reinforced concrete with a complex of five rooms they were the control centre the entire local defence around the airfield, with contact by telephone, radio and motorcycle messengers to all local defence areas. At one end a square observation cupola protrudes 3 ft. from the ground giving a 360° field of view. The best surviving example is that at **Castletown**. **Skitten's** was demolished many years ago and **Wick's**, unusual in that it was built above ground, has been almost completely demolished as it is sited close to the runway and poses a hazard to aircraft using the airport.



Figure 11 RAF Castletown's Battle Headquarters, the Observation cupola and escape hatch.

Mobile Defences

In addition to the fixed defences there were mobile defences, artillery and troops. Three Royal Artillery field batteries of 25 pdrs were allocated for Caithness defence and, although mobile, were primarily sited at:

Olrig, covering **Castletown**, **Dunnet bay** and **Dunnet head**.

Bilbster, covering **Keiss** to **Thrumster**, including **Wick** and **Skitten**.

Lyth, covering **Keiss** to **Wick** and also **Castletown**.

These guns at Lyth were sited on open platforms very near to cottages and steadings so little or nothing remains to be seen of them.

To defend Caithness in the event of a land battle there were three to four battalions of infantry garrisoned around the county. Accommodation and training camps were needed for the troops so big military camps were built at **Watten** and **Halkirk**. The **Watten** camp was situated at the north end of the village where a football field and new housing estate now stand. A single concrete generator building at the back of the houses is all that remains of this camp. **Halkirk** had camps at **Braal** and **Gerston** and another special training camp existed in the hills behind **Reay**.

Many large country houses and castles were requisitioned for use as HQs. **Thurso Castle** camp, **Braal castle** and camp, **Gerston Mains** camp, **Barrogill Castle** and camp, **Keiss castle** and camp, **Olrig House** and camp, **Banniskirk House** and camp, **Strathmore Lodge**, **Dale House** and **Barrock House**, to name a few, were all pressed into use by the army.

Auxiliary Units

Not quite an anti-invasion measure but rather a post-invasion force was the Auxiliary Units (AU), or the British Resistance Movement as it is sometimes called. Their purpose, should Britain

actually be invaded, was to go to ground in their specially constructed, underground 'Operational Bases' (OBs), wait until the enemy had advanced past them, then carry out acts of sabotage at the enemy's rear to hinder and disrupt his communications and supply lines. This organisation was set up under conditions of extreme secrecy, its members recruited individually from local people who had a good working knowledge of the area and could move about the countryside without attracting unnecessary attention. They were given standard battle-dress uniforms but wore no badges or insignia. Many of these people were already members of the Home Guard and this was used as a cover for their AU activities, a deception that was actively encouraged and has led to the mistaken belief that AU was part of the Home Guard, they were not. People such as farmers, gamekeepers and even poachers were commonly recruited. They were given special training in all manner of clandestine techniques including demolition, special weapons and silent killing. Their OBs were built in unobtrusive places and heavily camouflaged against detection.

AU was organised into Areas, Groups and Patrols. There were 12 Patrols operating in Caithness, No. 1 Group having five Patrols between **Reay** and **Dunnet** and No. 2 Group having seven Patrols between **John O'Groats** and **Berriedale**. OBs at **Reay** and **Thurso** survive in tangible form, others remain only as vestigial traces.

AIR DEFENCES

The threat of aerial attack on Caithness was very real, although its actual experience was trivial in comparison with that of other British cities later in the war. Nevertheless, during the first few months, the period of the 'phoney war' in the south, Scotland found itself on the receiving end of the first German bombing raids of the war and can claim a number of the major 'firsts' of the war. First German aircraft shot down over Britain, first civilian killed, first bombs to land on Britain and mainland UK. Scapa Flow was the main target and some of the first attacks Caithness suffered were as a result of German aircraft jettisoning their bomb loads after being driven off from their main target. However, as Caithness became more extensively used as a base for Orkney defence so the Luftwaffe's attention turned here and raids were mounted specifically against the county. **RAF Wick** was bombed on more than one occasion and the town of **Wick** itself was bombed and strafed by machine gun fire. **RAF Wick's** decoy site at **Sarclet** was also bombed on a number of occasions by Luftwaffe pilots, mistaking it for **Wick**. Ships in **Thurso Bay** were attacked and a Minesweeper, HMS Beech, was sunk whilst at anchor just off Scrabster. A bomb also fell on Thurso's municipal refuse dump igniting fires that remained smouldering deep inside the mounds of refuse for many years afterwards. To protect the county's inhabitants and military bases a number of air defence measures were taken to deter aerial attacks: airfields and airfield decoys; anti-aircraft batteries and radar stations.



Figure 12 Crater near Watten made on 10th April 1940 by the first German bomb to land on Caithness in WW2.

Airfields

The role of airfields was twofold, both defence and offence. From these air bases not only could aircraft be scrambled to defend against enemy attacks but raids could be mounted against occupied countries and also shipping. At the end of WW2 Caithness had 5 airfields, including one emergency landing ground, and two decoy airfields.

RAF Wick

The first of the airfields was at **Wick** where land adjoining the existing civil aerodrome at **Hillhead farm** was requisitioned for the purpose. **Wick** became operational at the end of September 1939, the station HQ being hastily formed in **Wick** on 15th September and by the end of the month 803 Squadron's Skuas were flying fighter patrols along the north coast. The landing ground at this time was grass, which rapidly became a quagmire in the winter rains, and priority was given to constructing tarmac runways.

Wick became a Sector Station in December 1939 with responsibility for aircraft movements from the borders to Shetland and the Western Isles. Initially the station was shared between Fighter Command and Coastal Command, with fighter squadrons based here for the protection of Scapa Flow, but in October 1940 Fighter Sector HQ moved to Kirkwall leaving Wick solely to Coastal Command. The station remained thus until the end of the war, flying patrols over the North Sea and Atlantic Ocean and long range meteorological and reconnaissance flights. Perhaps the most interesting unit to be based here was the Wick Strike Wing, this was formed in October 1943 with 144 (RAF) Squadron and 404 (RCAF) Squadron, flying torpedo-carrying Beaufighters (Torbeaus) on anti-shipping operations over the North Sea and Norwegian coast. The Wing racked up a creditable tonnage of shipping sunk before it was moved south in May 1944. During 404 Squadron's stay in Wick it was equipped with rocket projectiles and 404 aircrew were responsible for developing tactics in using this new weapon. The last squadron to leave Wick was No. 316 on March 15th 1946. After this the airfield reverted to civil operation in which role it remains to this day. The terminal building contains a small but interesting display of wartime artefacts and memorabilia.

The station buildings have been arranged in the pre-war expansion period layout with all the station buildings being clustered together in a single area, the domestic site also being very close by. This presented an ideal target for a bomber which could do immense damage to this compact group of buildings with only a few bombs. Later stations, such as **Castletown** and **Skitten**, had their buildings widely dispersed and thus presented less of a target.



Figure 13 Bomb stores at RAF Wick, now a scheduled monument.

Very few original wartime buildings survive at **Wick**, although two of the original four huge 'C' type hangars are still standing, along with the original watch office or control tower. Most of the technical and administrative buildings were prefabricated wooden hutting which survived until recent years as industrial units. A big clean-up in the late 1980's saw the whole area re-developed and all these buildings were demolished to make way for new modern industrial units. An interesting survival is the bomb and ammunition stores compound on the northern boundary. Still with their huge steel doors and protective blast walls, built as much to protect those outside from the effects of an explosion inside the store as to protect the stores from attack from outside, they are a stark reminder of **Wick** airport's more aggressive past.

RAF Castletown

Soon after **Wick** opened the need for a separate fighter base in the north as part of the defences for Scapa Flow and northern Scotland was realised and a site just outside the village of **Castletown** was selected. **RAF Castletown** opened as a satellite of **Wick** in June 1940 and seven days later it became a fully independent fighter station of No. 13 Group Fighter Command. Its main tasks were flying coastal patrols and convoy escort, providing fighter cover for ships sailing to and from Scapa Flow and the arctic convoys. Although its career was relatively uneventful it did have its moments of excitement such as on 18th May 1944 when two Junkers 188's flew in from the north west at zero ft. and disappeared inland. The last squadron, No. 504, left **Castletown** in April 1944 and the station closed in mid 1944.

Today there is little to see of the airfield, the three runways and perimeter track are still there and at the northern end, near **Thurdistoft farm**, the gas decontamination centre, small arms range, bomb stores and parachute packing shed make up the most significant remains, although all are now in poor condition. Behind **Tansfield** house is the VHF transmitter site and in the grounds of **Castlehill House**, beside the high wall, can be found the station squash court. At the southern end are the aircraft gun testing butts, some dilapidated dispersal huts and aircraft pens, which are gradually becoming just mounds of mud, and on the hillside above is the Battle HQ.



Figure 14 Gas decontamination centre at RAF Castletown

Castletown had an Emergency Landing Ground (ELG) situated at **Brims** near **Crosskirk**. This provided a place where aircraft could land if **Castletown** became unsuitable for flying for whatever

reasons or overspill accommodation for aircraft if there was not enough room at the parent station. The landing ground itself was simply a number of grass fields joined together by removing boundary walls and fences and filling in ditches. A compliment of men from **Castletown** was billeted in nearby farmhouses and did a weekly shift, guarding the fuel dump and whatever aircraft may be using the ELG.

RAF Skitten

Situated five miles north of **Wick**, **RAF Skitten** opened in early December 1940 as a satellite of **Castletown**. Initially it was intended to accommodate a single fighter squadron but by April 1941 **Wick** had become interested in using **Skitten** as a satellite for Coastal Command operations and in early 1942 the runways were extended to allow use by medium sized aircraft. This also meant that it could now be used as an emergency landing ground for Bomber Command's aircraft engaged in operations against Norway and in early 1943 it was officially designated a reserve base for Bomber Command. This meant that Coastal Command's aircraft would have to move elsewhere at short notice. In 1944, with the end of the European war in sight, Bomber Command's interest in **Skitten** ended and the station was returned to Coastal Command control. **Skitten** went on to a care & maintenance basis shortly after the end of the war and was sold off soon afterwards.

There are a number of surviving buildings at **Skitten**, including the original watch office and fire tender shed. The other remaining buildings are all standardised brick and concrete hutting whose function is impossible to deduce without recourse to the site plan. The runways are now gone, either by excavation or buried under building waste.

Skitten is associated with two notable WW2 exploits. Perhaps the better known is Operation Freshman, the ill-fated attempt to destroy the Norsk Hydro plant near Vermork in Norway. This plant was producing deuterium (heavy water) for use in Germany's atomic weapons research programme and it was considered paramount to stop this research, by whatever means, and prevent Hitler from obtaining atom bomb technology. In late 1942 a party of specially trained Royal Engineers arrived at **Skitten** under the code name 'Washington Competition' with the object of mounting a raid, with the help of the Norwegian resistance, on the plant and destroying it and its deuterium producing capability. At 17:45 on the night of 19th November, two Halifax bombers flew out from **Skitten** each towing a Horsa glider, on board were the Royal Engineers eager to put their training into practice. However the raid went tragically wrong. The aircraft became lost in bad weather hundreds of miles off course when their navigation beacon malfunctioned. One of the Halifaxes, with its glider still attached, flew into a mountain killing all those in both aircraft. The other Halifax lost its glider prematurely when the towrope froze and snapped. This Halifax managed to limp back to **Skitten** on its last drops of fuel, while the glider crash-landed many miles off course. Most of the crew were killed in the crash and the survivors were all quickly captured and delivered to the Gestapo. They were interrogated and eventually either shot or killed by lethal injection. The supply of deuterium was later destroyed in transit as it left the town by the courageous efforts of the Norwegian resistance. The story has been more or less accurately recounted in the 1965 film 'The Heroes Of Telemark' starring Kirk Douglas, and the full story can be found in the book 'Operation Freshman' by Richard Wiggan.

A memorial to the men of the 'Washington Competition' and the crew of the Halifax was dedicated at **Skitten** on 5th Sept 1992. In attendance were two members of the original Norwegian resistance team that attacked the plant and eventually destroyed the heavy water cargo.

In April 1943 **Skitten** became the base for training with the 'Highball' bomb. Highball was an offshoot of the Grand Slam bomb used against the Ruhr dams by 617 'Dambusters' Squadron. It

was designed for use against shipping, primarily the *Tirpitz*, and although it was never used in anger, specially modified Mosquitoes of 618 Squadron (617's sister squadron) flew from **Skitten** to lochs on the Scottish west coast specially selected for their resemblance to the Norwegian Fjord where the *Tirpitz* was anchored. The raid was timed for the day before the Dams raid but problems with the weapon and delays in training the crews resulted in the project being abandoned.

Dounreay

Lastly came **Dounreay** airfield. This, unlike Castletown and Skitten which were hastily constructed to meet immediate needs, was well planned and organised from the start. Originally intended for use by Coastal Command it was inspected in December 1942 by Bomber Command as an advance base for operations against Norway. In January 1943 Coastal Command stated it did not intend to occupy **Dounreay** and offered its sole use to Bomber Command who decided to decline the offer as the site was unsuitable for heavy bombers, there was little scope for extension and the nearby hills were a serious flying hazard. The station was finally completed in April 1944 and immediately put on a Care & Maintenance standing. The Navy showed a brief interest and it was transferred to the admiralty in May 1945. Intended to become HMS Tern II it was never commissioned and remained on a Care & Maintenance basis until October 1954 when it was transferred to the Air Ministry, ownership being almost immediately taken over by the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority.

Very few of the original station buildings survive. On the south side of the main road is a brick and concrete building that housed the 'Link Trainers'. These were early flight simulators used to teach the skills of aircraft pilotage to newly qualified pilots. Further along beside the road is the gas clothing store, which later became the first home of the Dounreay Apprentice School, and in the fields behind can be seen a few crumbling buildings of the domestic sites. Towards the western end to the south of the road stands one of the large Stand By Set Houses which housed the large diesel electric generators which supplied the site with electricity. On the hill top behind there are the remains of the radio navigation beacon, a blind flying aid to guide aircraft in to land at night and in conditions of poor visibility.

Bombing Decoys

As a means of trying to divert the attention of enemy bombers away from their targets, many airfields were provided with a 'decoy', that is, a dummy airfield. They were constructed at some distance from the real airfield and made to appear more obvious, but not too obvious, in the hope that enemy bomber crews would mistake them for the real thing and waste their bombs harmlessly on the decoy instead of the real airfield. **Castletown** and **Wick** both had their own decoys.

Castletown had a night only decoy or 'Q' Site. This consisted of an elaborate light show laid out on the ground to look like a fully functional airfield when seen from above. Lamps representing runway lights, vehicles and even taxiing aircraft were all simulated to give this false appearance. The whole system was controlled from a small two room control bunker nearby. The control room held the switch panels from where two airmen could turn the lights on and off as required and the other housed a small electricity generator to supply the power for the lights. **Castletown's** Q-Site control bunker can be seen beside the Greenland road at **Inkstack**, a small red brick building with two large earthenware pipes protruding from the wall. The building would originally

have been banked up with earth for protection and the two pipes acted as ducts through this earth bank to supply air to, and vent the exhaust from, the generator.



Figure 15 RAF Castletown's Q site control building

Wick had a combined day and night decoy or 'K/Q' Site. These were more elaborate schemes as they had to appear realistic during daylight as well as night time and had to simulate runways, perimeter tracks, buildings, aircraft, vehicles, people and every other appearance of an operational airfield. **Wick's** K-Site was situated at Sarclet just below **Ulbster Hill**. It was equipped with dummy Blenheim bombers, buildings were simulated with wood and canvas and even special inflatable vehicles were used. There are still some small control bunkers and personnel shelters dotted around the site and if viewed from the vantage point of **Ulbster Hill** the faint outlines of runways and perimeter tracks can still be made out in the grass. This site was actually bombed on a number of occasions. These decoys were more or less abandoned after the Battle of Britain when the Luftwaffe switched to night raiding in the south and had already identified many decoy sites as such.



Figure 16 Wick's Q Site control bunker at Sarclet K/Q decoy site

Anti-Aircraft Defences

Airfields were seen as prime targets for an invasion force and consequently priority was given to their protection, at all costs. **RAF Wick**, being the largest, had no less than three Heavy Anti-Aircraft (HAA) batteries surrounding it, **Noss Head** and **South Head** each with two 3 in. guns, and one at **Reiss**, although this was never used. **Castletown** had two HAA batteries, each of two 3 in., sited at **Lochside Farm** and **Gillock**. **Skitten** was covered by **Wick** but also had a battery sited to the south of the airfield. Little evidence of any of these batteries remain today, behind Noss Farm can be found a few collapsed Nissen huts and concrete bases which made up the HAA camp site there, all trace of the gun pits in the adjacent field have gone. On the Hill of Man on South Head a few concrete bases and mounds of earth are the only trace of the battery there.

A number of Light Anti-aircraft (LAA) batteries of 40 mm Bofors guns were also allocated to each airfield. These battery sites were probably constructed mostly of earth and sandbags and consequently there is no visible evidence of any of these sites left today. Conversely, to the south of **Wick** at **Tannach**, the remains of two LAA batteries do still exist. These were constructed to protect the CH radar station there. A circular concrete apron with ring bolts surrounded by ready-use ammunition lockers and a range-finder housing are all that remain of the gun pits, the earth or sand bag revetment that would have protected the gun and crew having been removed. Nearby are two semi-submerged ammunition lockers and some concrete bases for Nissen huts for the crew.



Figure 16 LAA emplacement at Tannach CH radar station.

Note the two ready use ammunition lockers below brick structure.

On **Burifa Hill** on **Dunnet Head** can be found four octagonal stepped plinths with a ring of bolts at the bottom. These were mounts for Oerlikon 20mm cannons which provided anti-aircraft protection for the Gee station there.

Radar

Radar was developed from 1935 onwards and by the outbreak of war a 'chain' of 20 stations had been established around the south and east coast of Britain, stretching from Ventnor on the Isle of Wight to School Hill near Aberdeen, with an additional station at **Netherbutton** on Orkney for the protection of Scapa Flow. These early stations were known as Chain Home stations and were located on high ground at roughly 20 to 40 mile intervals, with an approximate range of 100 miles.

The CH stations provided a basic early warning capability but they had two major drawbacks. They were unable to provide cover at altitudes below about 5000 ft. and had poor directional ability. Rapid technological developments soon produced a much smaller directional type radar that had a similar range to the CH equipment but was sensitive at lower altitudes, down to a few hundred feet. The transmitter and receiver aerials were incorporated into a single antenna array which could be rotated to send out a directional beam of radio energy and could be considered the true forerunner of modern radars. These were called Chain Home Low (CHL) radars and stations were constructed to extend and supplement the existing CH stations. CHL stations were built at **Navidale**, **Ulbster Hill** (originally located at **Tannach**) and **Dunnet Head**.

During the early part of the war it was decided to extend the 'Chain' in the north and west of Britain and in October 1939 a transportable CH station was erected on the eastern edge of **Thrumster** village. Its operation was not exceptional and in November 1940 it was moved a few miles west to **Tannach** beside the CHL station which had been established there in July. Later a permanent CH station was built at **Tannach** to replace the mobile equipment and this became operational in April 1942. The CHL station was dismantled to be replaced by a more modern 1941 Type CHL station at **Ulbster Hill**. **Tannach** ceased operating in November 1945. Other CH and CHL stations were built to the south at **Navidale** and **Loth** and to the west at **Durness** as well as Orkney and Shetland.

RAF Tannach

Tannach's control buildings are still relatively complete and are of the original early war design, known as Type B, these massive structures were intended to withstand a direct hit from a 1000



Figure 17 The massive bomb proof receiver block at Tannach.

lb. bomb, they can be seen to the west of the **Thrumster - Haster road** comprising the transmitter block to the west, the receiver block to the east and between them the stand-by set house, which supplied electrical power to the site.

The transmitter block housed the electronic equipment that generated the radar signal that was beamed out over the **Moray Firth** from curtain aerials suspended from steel cables slung between two 325 ft. guyed steel masts situated just behind the transmitter block. The masts were of a similar height and construction as the modern day mast at Thrumster. These masts were each supported by four pairs of steel guy wires anchored to massive concrete blocks set into the ground around each mast. The masts themselves balanced on a ball socket to allow them to sway in the wind. A huge concrete counterweight weighing over three tons pulled the masts back to the vertical after any swaying, this is still extant in situ, now engulfed in gorse, beside a nearby boundary wall. A complicated arrangement of pulleys and balance weights situated between the masts and beneath the aerial curtain kept the aerial wires and feeder cables at the correct tension during such movements of the masts.

The receiver block was the heart of the whole site, it housed the radar receiver equipment and the operations room. From the 240 ft. wooden receiver masts close by, the returning radar signals were picked up and fed to the receiving equipment in the control room where WAAF operators spent hours staring at their screens monitoring the movements of aircraft as they flew in and out of **Tannach's** area of influence, reporting all to the operations room at **Kirkwall** and sometimes causing the fighters from **Castletown** airfield to be scrambled when an unidentified 'contact' appeared on their screens. Here also was housed the calculator, a mechanical computer for determining the height and bearing of contacts, and various offices.



Figure 18 The aerial mast base.



The massive aerial halyard counterweight.

On 28th May 1942 a Beaufort aircraft of 86 Squadron based at Wick was returning in bad weather from a patrol over Norway when it collided with one of the unlit receiver masts, killing the four crew members and destroying the mast. The mast was never repaired.

The stand-by-set house contained a large diesel-electric generator needed to provide power for the site. It also contained the large tanks to store diesel fuel to feed the generator.

Further along the road behind **Grudgehouse** is the reserve site, this could do the same job as the main site but was intended only as a backup in case the main site was out of action for any reason. It is a much more compact arrangement, the bunkers being of a later design, much smaller and closer together.

Also to be seen are the remains of a small compound of red-brick buildings immediately beside the road, this was the technical and administrative site. These buildings housed technical and

maintenance workshops as well as offices for the general administration and running of the station. A typical CH station such as **Tannach** would have required some 142 personnel to run : 20 RAF & 19 WAAF on operational duties and 64 RAF & 39 WAAF on admin and ground defence duties. Personnel were accommodated at the domestic camp two miles to south at Raggra. Two LAA gun batteries, as mentioned earlier, protected the site from aerial attack.

RAF Ulbster

Ulbster is a good example of a typical 1941 Type CHL station. It is still remarkably complete, retaining all its original technical buildings. These CHL stations had their Tx and Rx equipment housed together in a single building, the Tx equipment being housed at one end and separated from the slightly larger Rx/operations room at the other by a small office. The 20 ft. radar gantry was situated immediately to one end of the building and the concrete feet for this are still visible. The stand-by set house sits close by and a smaller backup generator building stands at the other end of the site. There was also another type of radar installed here, designed to operate at surface level for monitoring shipping, designated as Coast Defence (CD) radar. This was even more compact and operated from a single Nissen hut with the small aerial mast mounted nearby. The base for this hut and mast stand on a hummock just south of the stand-by set house.

A typical CHL station such as **Ulbster** would have required some 74 personnel to run : 6 RAF & 19 WAAF on operational duties and 33 RAF & 16 WAAF on admin and ground defence duties, but **Ulbster** would have had some extra to operate the CD equipment as well.



Figure 19 Combined transmitter / receiver building at Ulbster CHL radar station

RN/RAF Dunnet Head

The station on **Dunnet Head** started life as an Admiralty Coast Defence U-Boat (CDU) station. The southernmost of six such stations constructed in a chain from Shetland, Faroes, Orkney and to the mainland. Operated by naval personnel they were built in the early part of the war to watch for German vessels, and particularly U-boats, trying to pass from the North Sea out into the Atlantic. The **Dunnet Head** station monitored shipping coming through the **Pentland Firth** and entering and leaving **Scapa Flow**, it also monitored aircraft movements in the area for the RAF. By 1943 the equipment had become obsolete so the station was updated by the construction of a

1941 Type CHL station adjacent to the original naval buildings. The new station was run by the RAF but they continued the reciprocal arrangement by plotting vessels for the navy.

Almost nothing remains of the naval buildings on **Dunnet Head** but the CHL buildings are still in very good condition, complete with standby set house, guard room/telephone exchange, backup generator building, IFF hut with mast foundation and the combined transmitter/receiver building with the aerial gantry footings beside.



Figure 20 The identical building at Dunnet Head CHL radar station

RAF Burifa Hill, Gee Radio Navigation Station.

Gee was a grid based electronic radio navigation system, ('Gee' for **G**rid) that enabled aircraft and ships to accurately plot their position. The Gee system consisted of groups of three or four stations situated approximately 100 miles apart in the area where navigational cover was required. Each group of stations was called a 'Chain' and there were five such Chains covering the UK. The **Burifa Hill** station acted as the master and monitor stations of the Northern Gee Chain.

Each chain consisted of a master station and 2 or three slave stations. One of these stations would also act as the monitor for the chain. The job of the monitor station was to monitor the transmissions from the other stations in the chain to ensure their signals were all exactly synchronised. The master station transmitted a pulsed signal which was picked up by the slaves and re-transmitted with a short time delay added. These transmissions were picked up on a special receiver in the aircraft which provided the navigator with information about the time the signals from each station had taken to reach him. This then allowed him to work out the aircraft's distance from each station which he could then plot on a map, overlaid with a special grid for that area, and hence obtain the exact position of the aircraft.

The Northern Gee chain actually had four stations, the master and monitor stations at **Burifa Hill** and slave stations at Sango near Durness, Windyhead Hill near Fraserburgh and Scousburgh on Shetland. The extra slave on Shetland gave the chain a greater range of accuracy, which was normally about 300 miles, over the North Sea to Norway and the Atlantic.

The Northern Gee chain became operational in March 1943 and provided invaluable navigation assistance for the rest of the war. When Gee was superseded by the American Loran system, **RAF Burifa Hill** was adapted to become a Loran station. The station operated until June 1946 when it was put on care and maintenance until the 1950's when it was finally dismantled.

Burifa Hill consists of 7 sub-sites. As with radar, protection of vital equipment and services was through duplication so there were two transmitter blocks for the Master Station site and two receiver blocks for the Monitor Station site, also a domestic site, an army guard site and an anti-aircraft crew site. The buildings were almost entirely made up of Nissen hutting and similar type buildings, of which very little now remains except concrete bases. However, the red brick blast wall enclosures that protected the transmitter and receiver blocks and one of the two stand-by set houses are still very much standing. Beside each of these enclosures are the four great concrete footings for the 240 ft. wooden masts and nearby a small octagonal plinth for anti-aircraft guns as described earlier.



Figure 21 Blast walls protecting one of the transmitter huts at Burifa Hill. The four concrete footings for the 240 ft. wooden transmitter mast can be seen to the right.

The extensive domestic site was on the south side of the road, just below the station, and provided accommodation, ablutions, canteen and recreational facilities for the personnel as well as administration offices, garages and workshops. The only evidence of this site now is the septic tank at the bottom of the hill beside the road.

Other Sites

Beside the defence sites in the county there were other activities, some not directly related to defence but part of the overall war effort, and others which supported the military presence.

Wireless and the Y Service

A number of wireless stations were built around the county mainly providing communications for aircraft operating from the three Caithness airfields. A HF/VHF Transmitter station at **Hill of Harland** near **Wick**, and a HF/VHR Receiver station on Noss Head for **Wick** and **Skitten** based aircraft, and a HF/VHF combined transmitter/receiver station at **Tansfield** for **Castletown** based fighters. Small wireless stations were also built to provide D/F navigation and homing facilities for aircraft operating from Caithness and Orkney airfields. There were other wireless stations, those of the Y Services, which were very secretive.

Y Service Stations

The Y Service stations are probably most clandestine of the county's wartime and post-war military sites. The Y Services were set up to monitor and intercept enemy wireless communications and to locate where they were being sent from (direction finding or D/F). D/F information can be extremely important, for example locating the position of U-boats at sea or analysis of the movements of army units may show them to be massing in a certain area which could indicate preparation for a major offensive in that area.

Each of the armed services and the Home Office operated their own Y Service stations, all doing the same job but focusing on different signals. The RAF were interested in Luftwaffe (airforce) wireless traffic, the navy monitored Kriegsmarine (navy) signals particularly U-Boats, the army's War Office Y Group (WOYG) tracked Heer (Army) transmissions and lastly, the highly secret RSS (Radio Security Service) for the Home Office, MI6, listened in to Abwehr, Gestapo and Sicherheitsdienst (military intelligence, secret police and SS & Nazi Party intelligence) communications.

Caithness hosted Y stations for all of these services. The RAF operated intercept and D/F stations on **Noss Head**, co-located with the RAF Transmitting station there. The navy had two D/F stations at Keiss and Lybster, they later built another station at **Bower** with 5 D/F stations as part of an unsuccessful experiment to improve D/F accuracy. The WOYG ran three stations near **Thurso**, two D/F stations at **Geiss** and another at **Claredon**. The RSS had an intercept station in **Thurso** and a D/F station at **Harpsdale** near **Halkirk**.

The intercept stations were wooden huts, about the size of a small village hall, in which banks of radio receivers were laid out in pairs on tables. Ideally each receiver had its own aerial in a nearby 'aerial farm', but wartime exigencies meant that usually one aerial was shared between several receivers, the resulting degradation of the signal had to be accepted. The operators spent their watch listening for enemy transmissions, when an enemy station started broadcasting the operator had to rapidly write down the Morse code letters they heard onto a special pad. The messages were encrypted by Enigma encoding machines so the operator had no idea what the message contained, even if he knew German, just a long series of letters sent in blocks of 5.

The D/F stations were quite small, just a small wooden shed surrounded by four wireless aerials. The aerials were set up near to the cardinal compass points and connected together through a

goniometer, a device which electronically created a single all-round aerial array. The operator was able to scan the signal coming from the array using the 'gonio' which was calibrated to the position of the aerials, thus the part of the array nearest to the direction from which the transmission was coming gave the greatest signal strength. With this the operator would be able to gauge with good accuracy the compass bearing of the signal's origin. This information was relayed to a central HQ which, when combined with similar readings from other Y stations located in the south of England and borders areas, enabled them to triangulate the bearings onto a map and reveal the exact location of the transmission.

All this information was filtered and sent to the respective services Intelligence HQs for immediate use, and also to Bletchley Park in Bedfordshire where it was combined with other intelligence to become part of the now famous Ultra intelligence reports which made such a significant contribution to hastening the end of the war.

Unfortunately, most of these sites were ephemeral in nature, just small wooden structures, and have left no trace, only where the site persisted into the Cold War era has anything survived.

The Y Service Post-War

Most of these stations were closed down at the end of hostilities but two, the RAF station on **Noss Head** and the naval station at **Bower**, were retained and upgraded and continued in service. In 1967 the newly formed Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) took over the running of all such stations around Britain, and as all these stations were carrying out basically the same functions there was much duplication of effort and so many were closed down. **Noss Head** was closed down at this time but GCHQ kept its operations in Caithness and Sutherland going at its **Bower** and **Brora** stations throughout the cold war, these stations becoming part of GCHQ's Composite Signals Organisation. **CSOS Bower** continued to expand its operations to keep pace with the developing technologies and housing was built alongside the compound to accommodate staff. The station finally closed in 1977, largely as a result of the increasing transfer of communications technology away from radio to satellite.



Figure 23 Original gate sign from C.S.O.S. Bower.
(Composite Signals Organisation Station)

Little information is available about Bower's role within GCHQ as its operations are still covered by the Official Secrets Act and former employees are very reluctant to talk about their

involvement. However, evidence suggests that it continued in its direction finding role tracking Soviet naval activity. The main compound at **Bower** has been cleared and is now used as business premises. The small D/F out-stations have largely disappeared and the main receiver site at **Reaster** has been de-requisitioned and sold off. The post war GCHQ era operations building at Reaster is still intact.

The large aerial array near the operations building has nothing to do with the station. It was built by Leicester University in 1982 as the British part of a collaborative project called SABRE (Scandinavian And British Radar Experiment) set up to investigate the nature of radar auroras and the study of solar-terrestrial relationships, or 'space weather'.

Post-War ROTOR Plan Radar

In the late 1940's it was decided to re-asses Britain's early warning air defence scheme and from this the 'ROTOR' plan was developed. A network of stations around Britain, equipped with the new Type 80 radars, was developed, the old HF/VHF Transmitter station site at **Hill of Harland** was chosen as one such site. The station was built in 1954 but the equipment was never installed, technology had moved on so fast that the station had become obsolete before it was even commissioned. Apart from the radar antenna related buildings and generator building the site also boasted a large modern operations room, the last remnants of this prefabricated structure blew down in gales early in 2000.



Figure 24 Hill of Harland ROTOR Plan operations block, workshops and admin buildings 1995

Hoy Aviation Fuel Distribution Depot

To keep Caithness's three airfields supplied with the thousands of gallons of aviation petrol they required an Aviation Fuel Distribution Depot (AFDD) was built beside the railway station at **Hoy** near **Halkirk**. Two compounds to the north and south of the track beside the road at Hoy station were built. The north compound contained four large underground storage tanks, in the south compound were a semi-underground pump room, an office building and a protected building which is believed to be a gas decontamination facility. Petrol tankers would be shunted into the



Figure 25 Hoy AFDD, with gas decontamination in foreground and pump room in distance

compound to have their contents pumped up into the storage tanks through pipes running over the rail track. Beside the pump room was a fuelling gantry where fuel bowlers from the airfields could fill up from the storage tanks to take back to the airfields where they would fill their own underground tanks. The storage tanks were demolished many years ago but the pump room and protected building still stand inside the southern compound.

Thurso Transit Camp

Passage of all service personnel (Navy, Army and RAF) to and from Orkney, except those arriving directly aboard their ships, was through **Scrabster**. Movement was organised by No. 27 Embarkation Office with HQ at now demolished **Mina Villa** house in **Thurso**. Between the dates Feb 1941 - Feb 1946 this office records dealing with the movement of nearly 125,000 personnel. To accommodate these men and women, as they awaited their designated passage on one of the many transport ships operating from **Scrabster**, a large transit camp was built on the western edge of **Thurso**. Nothing remains of this except the main entrance gate, opposite **Pennyland Farm**, with a length of tarmac roadway and a small concrete hut beside the gate, which was probably a utilities cubicle.



Figure 26 Entrance to Thurso Transit Camp.

Watten POW Camp 165

In 1945 the camp at **Watten**, originally opened in 1943 as a military training camp, was converted into a POW camp to house German prisoners of war, the first prisoners arriving in May of that year. Over the next three years thousands of German servicemen were processed through this camp, some of them the most hardened of Nazis but most just ordinary men caught up in the cataclysm of total war, weary of it all and longing to return to their homes. Some stayed on in the county after their release and a few married local girls and made Scotland their home. The camp finally closed its gates in May 1948, the last prisoner having been shipped out in February.

The area occupied by the camp has been completely cleared and built over so there is little to see now, except for some concrete hut foundations near the garden centre. A nearby information panel gives a brief outline of the camp.

DTN Switching Station

This building, constructed c1941, was a switching station for the DTN (Defence Teleprinter Network), which provided teleprinter communication to military bases around Caithness,

principally the RAF airfields and Radar stations, and was itself part of the DCN (Defence Communications Network), a nation-wide military communications network constructed from 1938 by the GPO (General Post Office) in preparation for an anticipated war, to allow all Britain's military and government establishments to communicate with each other. The DTN was connected to the GPO telephone exchange in Wick.



Figure 27 DTN building, with garage annex at left and blast wall protected entrance to right

The building itself is 'hardened', that is, it is designed to protect the equipment within from a nearby explosion. It has no windows through which a blast wave could enter and only a single door which is protected by a blast wall. The interior equipment rooms housed the teleprinter switching apparatus, a generator to supply power to the equipment, a workshop/office and a store room. The east side has a separate annex with a vehicle bay, storeroom and small office. It is not known when the building was decommissioned but it may have continued in use for some time after the war ended. The two large holes in the walls (not visible in the photograph), were made to remove the equipment after the war. During construction of such buildings major equipment was installed before the walls were erected, the walls being then built up around the equipment. This was done to avoid having to have large doors or other apertures which would weaken the protective capability of the building.