

## Chapter Ten

# RAF Northam

Category: Chain Home

National Grid Reference: SS 44763003 (approximate centre of site)



*Enlarged extract from the 1946 Ordnance Survey 1:63360 New Popular Edition Map Sheet 163.*

### Location

RAF Northam (Station 19) was situated on the edge of the town of Northam in north Devon, on low-lying ground, both on and adjacent to the Northam Burrows. The area had seen earlier RAF activity when in 1918 a small airfield, known as RAF Westward Ho!, was established on a part of the Burrows later to be occupied by the WWII radar station<sup>1</sup>.

### Station History

An exact date for the establishment of the station has not been traced, but for reasons set

out below it is likely to have been in February or March 1941. A communication from HQ No. 60 Group to a number of bodies including HQ Fighter Command in January 1941 reported that the date for Northam was delayed by seventeen days, but failed to mention the date from which the delay stemmed. In the following month the delay was at eight days with a revised date (for completion?) of on or near 23 February<sup>2</sup>.

The same file suggests that there was some debate about proposals for the site. RAF

Chivenor, a nearby airfield under Coastal Command at the time, is recorded as having sent a message to TRE at Swanage on 23 January expressing concerns that a layout plan drawing was technically poor.

An Operational Report dated 11 March 1941<sup>3</sup> makes reference to an inspection party at Northam, thus suggesting that the site was in operation, or about to be so, and there is mention in RAF Signals Volume IV that height calibration of the ACH at Northam took place during that month<sup>4</sup>. Thus a start date around late February or early March seems a reasonable assumption.

In June 1941 HQ 60 Group advised No. 78 Wing of those stations in their area that were to be constructed to final stage and that included Northam<sup>5</sup>, and an Air Ministry drawing originally prepared in February 1941, and subsequently amended in March, May and July, set out proposals for the underground cabling of the final station and this provides a guide to the site layout<sup>6</sup>.

No. 78 Wing ORB<sup>7</sup> relates progress at this station. In September 1941 there is mention of further calibration, and in December 1941 and January 1942 the final CH transmitter and receiver equipment was delivered, installed and tested. An ORB entry dated 6 March 1942 indicated that the station was in operation in its final stage.

Two photographs of RAF Northam in its final stage appear in Appendix One illustrating a west coast Chain Home station.

An extensive CH site is visible on RAF aerial photographs taken in 1946<sup>8</sup>, which indicate the position of transmitting masts on the Burrows, together with two nearby structures, annotated on Air Ministry plans<sup>9</sup> as "Q" buildings<sup>10</sup>. The photographs also show receiver towers and a number of associated buildings in adjacent fields to the south of the Burrows, and suggest that the site closely followed the original proposals in the Air Ministry drawings.

Northam was one of the stations to house a detachment of the RAF Regiment for its defence, and No. 2783 Squadron RAF Regiment

arrived on 17 May 1943 with a remit to protect both Northam and Hartland Point. The stay was brief and the Regiment was withdrawn in the following September, leaving the station personnel responsible for defence<sup>11</sup>.

A Mark III IFF is mentioned in Wing ORB<sup>12</sup> as being at Northam in September 1943.

On 27 January 1944 a hotel used by RAF Hartland Point at Hartland Quay was damaged by the explosion of a sea mine. Personnel had to be evacuated and were transferred to RAF Northam for messing and accommodation. From 3 March the commanding officer at RAF Northam was also the commanding officer of RAF Hartland Point<sup>13</sup>.

A domestic site is depicted on the two Air Ministry plans referred to above, in the aerial photographs and also on an 1960 Ordnance Survey map<sup>14</sup>, occupying the southwest corner of the site on either side of what was then Pimpley Road, now Sandymere Road<sup>15</sup>. The complex comprised dining rooms and institute, three barrack blocks, a bath and ablutions block, an orderly room, and a first aid post. On the perimeter of this domestic site there was a watch hut and it was from this area that the technical site was accessed<sup>16</sup>. There is a record that officers were accommodated in a large house near Burrows Gate<sup>17</sup> and some personnel occupied quarters at Lenwood, on the outskirts of Northam<sup>18</sup>. Wing ORB refers to this latter property in December 1945 when it is listed as one of the RAF properties not to be de-requisitioned or handed over to the Air Ministry Works Department. At the time it was still in use<sup>19</sup>.

There was reportedly a remote reserve at Abbotsham, near Abbotsham Court, some four kilometres (2.5 miles) to the southwest of the technical site<sup>20</sup>. This might possibly have been a mobile, but documentary evidence is elusive.

In August 1944 the order was given that Northam was to "cease reporting forthwith" and to be placed on C & M, with two radar mechanics to remain. Personnel accommodated at Northam were also to remain. Maintenance was later carried out by mechanics from RAF

Hartland Point<sup>21</sup>. The state of the Home Chain in March 1945 documented in RAF Signals Volume IV<sup>22</sup> shows this to have been Stage I status.

The station's run-down is not reflected in staffing statistics. Between June and August 1944 four officers and one hundred and twenty-six other ranks are listed, between September and December 1944 this roll had reduced slightly to four officers and one hundred and thirteen other ranks, whereas between January and May 1945 a increase is recorded – 134 personnel<sup>23</sup>. There were still one hundred and eighteen service personnel on site in July 1945<sup>24</sup>. This is somewhat unusual for a station no longer operating and perhaps reflects the fact that personnel from RAF Hartland Point shared Northam's domestic facilities; Hartland was still active at the time.

#### The Site Today

Much remains of this former RAF station, both on the Burrows and on private land. Northam is a relatively well-preserved site.

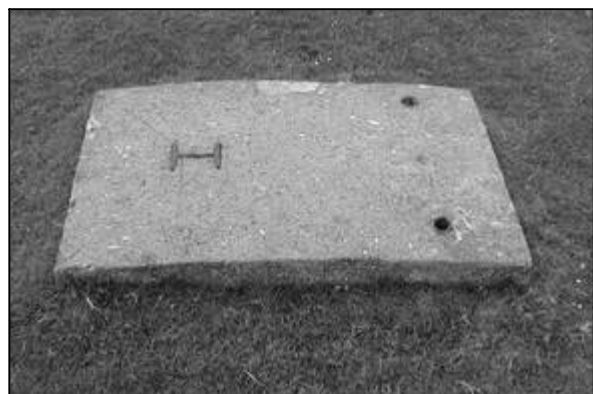


*The concrete base of a transmitter mast.*

On the Burrows the square, concrete bases of the two pairs of transmitter masts can be identified, together with sets of aerial halyard anchor blocks. Here too are aerial curtain balance weight bases and aerial halyard balance weights. By survey it was possible to define the footprint taken up by the transmitter masts and their anchors (see Appendix One).



*An aerial halyard anchor block. The illustration below (of a modern communications mast) demonstrates how halyards are anchored.*



*The base of an aerial curtain balance weight.*



*The remains of an aerial halyard balance weight.*

Most of the structures and features on private land can be viewed from the public highway. A transmitter block, still with its earth covering, stands adjacent to Burrows Lane at a point where the road enters the Burrows.



*Metal struts to which a timber receiver tower was bolted still remain embedded in the concrete bases. An aerial cable junction box is on the right.*

The boundaries of the remainder of the former site are marked by Sandymere Road, Appledore Road, Burrows Lane and the Burrows. Here concrete bases for timber receiving towers and their aerial cable junction boxes can be noted. Metal struts embedded in concrete bases, to which the timber tower "legs" were bolted, are still in place.

Two receiver blocks are *in situ*. One is still earth-covered; the other has lost its earth protection, but this provides a helpful indication of the size of such a building and its construction (reinforced concrete, encased in a waterproof membrane). An archive photograph<sup>25</sup> confirms that the second transmitter block was constructed in the location proposed on Air Ministry drawings (on present-day private property), but this could not be identified from the road, and has perhaps been removed or converted, but what the Air Ministry plans describe as a sub-station is extant, albeit without its earth covering.

The standby set has been demolished, and a private house now stands on the spot<sup>26</sup>.

There is no trace of the domestic area. A change of road layout in the late 1980s and early 1990s together with new housing have obliterated the site; bungalows have now been built where Nissen huts once stood<sup>27</sup>.



*A transmitter block, adjacent to the Burrows.*



*A receiver block.*

Two buildings have not been positively identified and are illustrated below.



*A putative ICH building with earth blast mound.*

Both structures have a central concrete base, possibly foundations for a “temporary” building, such as a hut. These are surrounded by brick retaining or revetment walls associated with earth blast mounds. One building retains some earth, but this has been removed from the second. A concrete base abuts one structure, onto which are set two concrete plinths. A photograph in a local archive<sup>28</sup> shows that the plinths were housed within a substantial structure, which was possibly a generator house.

It is proposed that the buildings belong to an early phase in the development of the station and could have been ICH structures<sup>29</sup>.



*A putative ICH building with earth blast mound removed.*



*A plinth possibly for a generator.*

Nearby are a small brick shelter and another brick hut of unknown purpose.



*A shelter.*



*A brick hut of unknown purpose.*



*The four concrete bases of a timber receiver tower, together with an aerial cable junction box in the centre.*

Notes

1. Northam Burrows is an area of grassland, dunes and saltmarsh, designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest, and now a country park – see [www.torridge.gov.uk](http://www.torridge.gov.uk).  
Reference to the WWI airfield appears in Wasley 2000, 133.
2. AVIA 7/260 Extension of RDF Chain: Site Plans and Survey 1940 - 1941.
3. AVIA 7/470 RDF Chain Northam: Operational Reports 1941.
4. RAF Signals Volume IV, 553.
5. AVIA 7/261 Extension of RDF Chain : Site Plans and Survey 1941.
6. Air Ministry drawing N<sup>o</sup> 17591/40 "Northam. Station N<sup>o</sup> 19. W/T Station (AME). Underground Cables."

7. AIR 26/129 Operations Record Book No. 78 (Signals) Wing May 1941 - December 1945.
  8. RAF vertical aerial photographs 106G / UK1420 : 15 Apr 46 : F20" / 540 SQDN, frames 3232 and 3233, held in the Historic Environment Record, County Hall, Exeter.
  9. Air Ministry drawing N<sup>o</sup> 17591/40 "Northam. Station N<sup>o</sup> 19. W/T Station (AME). Underground Cables." and Air Ministry drawing dated April 1942, reference unknown, "Northam. AMES Type 1. Siting of 105' Mast (Mk II) & Combined T & R Cubicle."
  10. "Q" is normally a term used for a decoy site, designed to draw enemy fire away from a strategic target. It is possible that the structures were constructed as dummy receiver and transmitter buildings, although they are sited very near to the transmitter masts. Such decoys are known at other radar sites.
  11. AIR 26/129.
  12. AIR 26/129.
  13. AIR 26/129.
  14. Ordnance Survey 1:2500 map (Plan SS 44 29 and SS 45 29), revised in 1959 and published in 1960.
  15. Correspondence with Northam Town Council, October 2006.
  16. Discussion with Derek Lord, Group Organiser of the South West Group of the National Service (Royal Air Force) Association.
  17. Recalled by Mrs Frances Slee on the Westward Ho! History Group website under an entry entitled "The War Years".
  18. Lenwood was a large house on the outskirts of Northam. The authors were first alerted to the RAF's wartime occupancy by Derek Lord.  
  
A conversation with Eric Blanchard of Appledore, who served briefly at RAF Northam, confirmed that Lenwood was used by the RAF.
  19. AIR 26/129.
  20. AVIA 7/261. A memorandum in April 1941 briefly refers to the siting of a remote reserve at Abbotsham.  
  
Mentioned also to the authors in correspondence from radar researcher Mark Avons.
  21. AIR 26/129.  
  
AIR 25/681 No. 60 (Signals) Group Operations Record Book Appendices October 1941 - August 1944.
  22. RAF Signals Volume IV, 636.
  23. AIR 26/130 Operations Record Book No. 78 (Signals) Wing Appendices October 1941 - August 1944.  
  
AIR 26/131 Operations Record Book No. 78 (Signals) Wing Appendices September - December 1944.  
  
AIR 26/132 Operations Record Book No. 78 (Signals) Wing Appendices January - May 1945.
  24. AIR 26/133 Operations Record Book No. 78 (Signals) Wing Appendices June - November 1945 (Organisation Circular No. 59/45).
  25. Photograph taken by Richard Sumner in 1947, now with the Westward Ho! History Group archive.
  26. Confirmed in a conversation with Eric Blanchard.
  27. Correspondence with Northam Town Council, October 2006.
  28. Photograph taken by Richard Sumner in 1947, now with the Westward Ho! History Group archive.
  29. Correspondence with Sqn Ldr Mike Dean, MBE, RAF (Ret'd) (Historical Radar Archive).
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