

Chapter Six

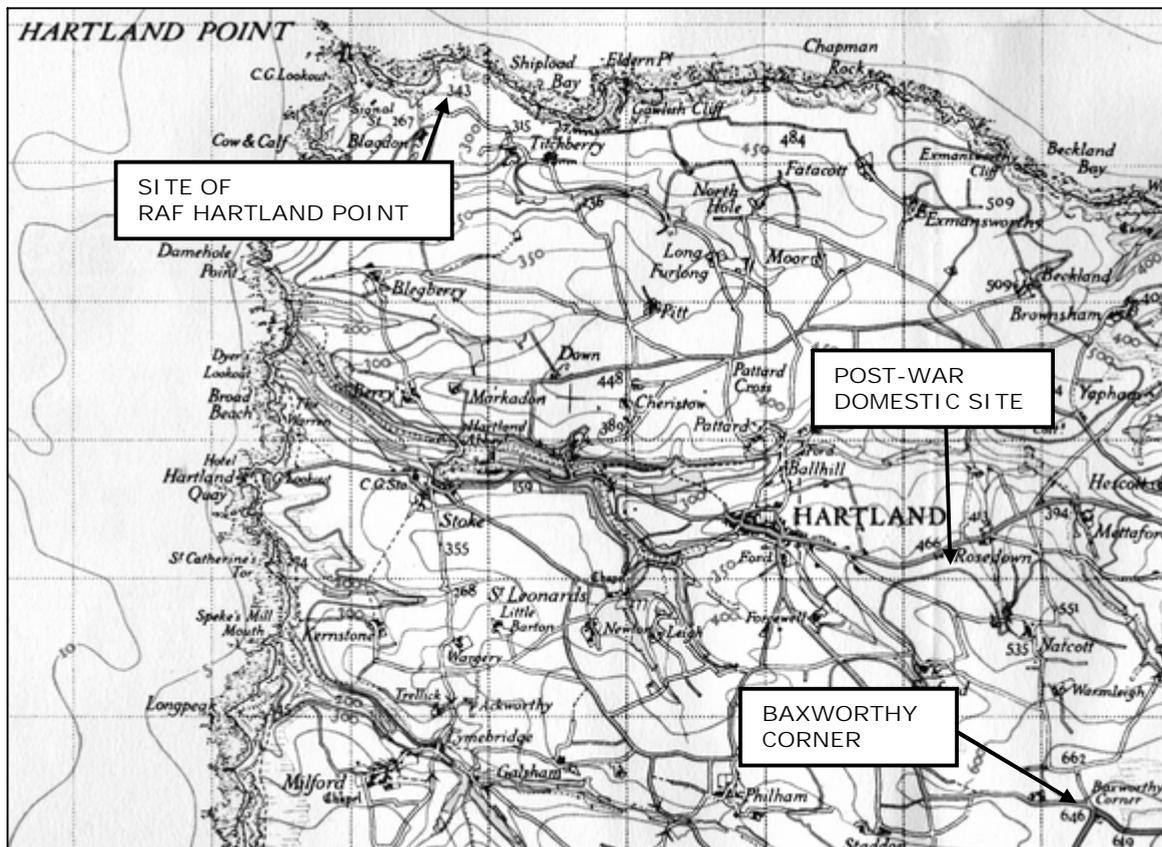
RAF Hartland Point

Category: WWII: Chain Home Low

Cold War: Ground Controlled Interception and Chain Home Extra Low

National Grid Reference: SS 23742755 (WWII Site)

SS 23882746 (Rotor Technical Block)



Enlarged extract from the 1946 Ordnance Survey 1:63360 New Popular Edition Map Sheet 174.

Location

RAF Hartland Point was situated approximately 3.8 kilometres (2.36 miles) northwest of the village of Hartland in north Devon on a cliff-top site, northeast of Blagdon Farm and to the northwest of West Titchberry, overlooking the Atlantic Ocean and the Bristol Channel.

Station History

The earliest indication of the RAF's presence in the neighbourhood is seen in an Air Ministry document that refers to personnel who formed the nucleus of the first RAF unit at Hartland Point being in the area in 1939¹. Those concerned were billeted in the district, but no

reason for their early arrival in north Devon is provided in the document, nor is a precise location mentioned. It is likely that they were the staff of a small unit known to have existed at Baxworthy Corner, southeast of Hartland village. A communications facility was set up there in 1939 and comprised two masts and accompanying structures².

The facility at Baxworthy was still in existence in the 1950s. The ORB for No. 405 SU for the period 1956 - 1960³ mentions a VHF/DF station at the site serving RAF Chivenor, at the time a Fighter Command airfield on the banks of the River Taw, some 25 kilometres (15.5 miles) to the northwest.

AHB documents state that RAF Hartland Point was formed in 1940⁴, but no record has been found to suggest that the station was actually operational during that year.

In November 1940 TRE notified the Ministry of Aircraft Production of sites surveyed for low-angle coverage of the south and west coasts, and Hartland Point (19A) was among those identified⁵. In the following month the Royal Aircraft Establishment wrote to the Ministry of Aircraft Production discussing the layout of CHL Hartland⁶ and the same document records that in January 1941 Hartland was agreed, and later mentions that the station was to be completed on or by 6 April.

The CHL (Type 2) came into operation in June 1941 and shortly afterwards, in July, the station was calibrated and the twin-gantry power-turned CHL was said to be producing "good results". In September the twin gantry was converted to a single-gantry aerial and duly calibrated⁷.

In 1942 Hartland Point adopted an additional role (CHEL) when the station was involved in both air-reporting and standby surface-watching, employing a CD1 Mark IV radar (Type 37)⁸. This equipment was housed in the CHL compound⁹. This was at first operated by the army, but in December 1942 General Headquarters Home Forces requested that Hartland's CD site be taken over from the

army¹⁰ and it was duly adopted by No. 60 Group on 7 December¹¹.

WAAF RDF operators had been posted to Hartland Point in November 1942 to manage this equipment, but in June 1943 it was to be entirely operated by members of the WRNS as and when the Admiralty advised that the latter were available¹².

On 17 May 1943 No. 2783 Squadron RAF Regiment arrived in north Devon to undertake the defence of both RAF Hartland Point and RAF Northam. The stay was short lived and the Regiment was withdrawn in the following September, leaving the station personnel responsible for defence¹³.

The CD1 Mark IV radar was replaced in June 1943 by a Mark V (Type 31) and a Type 52 CHEL was brought into operation in May 1944¹⁴.

The station suffered a domestic setback in early 1944. On 27 January the Quay Hotel, located on the coast at Hartland Quay, was damaged by the explosion of a sea mine. Personnel from RAF Hartland Point accommodated at the property had to be evacuated. They were transferred to RAF Northam (CH) for messing and accommodation and were transported for watch duties by a specially-acquired bus. From 3 March the commanding officer at RAF Northam was also the commanding officer of RAF Hartland Point¹⁵.

Searchlights were introduced to four Devon radar stations in September 1944¹⁶, and this included Hartland Point.

The site layout has been determined from an Air Ministry drawing¹⁷ and from an RAF aerial photograph¹⁸. From the plan it can be seen that the site was delineated by a barbed wire fence, and a barbed-wire compound is depicted within the main enclosure, housing "R and T huts and gantry". Among other buildings and structures shown are: a CD1 cabin, an interrogator hut, a watch hut, a power-house, an administration block, an air-raid shelter and stores.

In May 1945 it was resolved that some surface-watching stations were to close but at that

stage Hartland was retained since the Admiralty believed it to be one of those stations that could continue to cater for its needs¹⁹. Clearly this was not a long-term prospect, for the Type 31 was closed down in November 1945²⁰, and AHB papers record that in June 1946 the Type 2 and the CD1 VI** (ie the Type 52) were disbanded²¹. The station was abandoned in 1947, but that date did not mark the end of RAF activities in the area; RAF Hartland Point re-opened the mid-1950s under the Rotor programme.

As described in Chapter One, the Rotor programme involved the refurbishment and rebuilding of existing radar equipment and stations, and the construction of new stations. Some sites became operational; others were held in readiness. The new buildings were underground, semi-submerged or above ground.

RAF Hartland Point was among those stations to be provided with new buildings and in the early 1950s was planned as a satellite "readiness" GCI (codename HAT) with an above-ground R8 operations block. The station was also scheduled to have a CHEL role and this was to have an air-firing surveillance component²².

A letter in AHB archives advises that No. 405 SU was formed at RAF Hartland Point in June 1953, functionally controlled by RAF Chigwell, Essex, administratively controlled by No. 2 Ground Radio Servicing Squadron at RAF Pucklechurch in Gloucestershire, and parented by RAF Chivenor²³.

The history of the station at this time is sketchy and a little confusing since the SU failed at first to submit Forms 540 (ORB)²⁴. An official inspection report indicates that in 1954 the construction of a new complex began, designed for a GCI station, but adds that before this plan was completed it was changed to accommodate a radar surveillance unit – the No. 405 SU mentioned above. However, the report further comments that personnel did not arrive until 1955 and that in the December operational duties began²⁵. This was some two years after

the unit's formation. A re-opening date of 1955 is quoted in the SU ORB²⁶.

The GCI station was equipped with a Type 14 Mark 8, a Type 14 Mark 9, two Type 13s Mark 6, two Type 13s Mark 7 and fittings for a third array²⁷. However there was a change of policy and it was decided that the GCI role would be abandoned and that Hartland Point would be a CHEL station. Arrangements for the change began in 1955 and were completed in June of the following year. Redundant cables were disconnected, final equipment removed from the operations block, some radar heads were transferred to other stations, while others were retained for future use²⁸.

RAF Hartland Point's new-found responsibility was that of surveillance in connection with a high-altitude air-to-air gunnery range, and this role came into effect in December 1955²⁹. There is also mention in the records of involvement with RAF Chivenor's helicopter flight and tracking for the army's School of Anti-Aircraft Artillery at Manorbier in Wales³⁰.

The communications facilities at Baxworthy Corner were touched on above; in August 1957 RAF Hartland Point became the parent station for this small unit³¹.

Domestic quarters were sited at Eastdown on the eastern outskirts of Hartland village (NGR SS 27412421), with some housing for married personnel (see below).

RAF stations are subject to regular inspection, and the inspection report mentioned above – an appraisal by the Air Officer Commanding 11 Group in May 1960 – gives a useful insight into the make up of post-war RAF Hartland Point. At the technical site mention is made of a radar office, control cabin and radar heads, stores, workshop, lecture rooms, rest rooms, offices and a kitchen. There were other buildings and structures, not cited, such as a guardroom, a standby generator and fuel storage tanks.

Five officers, fifty-eight other ranks and seven civilians formed the unit at this stage and this number was to take account of duties relating to range surveillance for forty-eight hours per



The former RAF sites photographed in 2008. The WWII station occupied the hill slope between the modern air-traffic control radar tower and the highway, seen running left to right in the bottom of the photograph. The site of most of the post-war station appears in the photograph. This occupied the uncultivated land around the modern radar, the hedged field on the right of the picture and a small area beyond. The bases of the guardroom, the standby set and the R8 operations block can just be discerned within the hedged field.

week involving air firing by aircraft from RAF Chivenor³²

The inspection also covered the domestic site at Eastdown, where facilities included a guardroom, a fire section, sick quarters, police and airmen's billets, dining hall, a motor transport section, Air Ministry Works Department stores and offices, messes and recreational facilities such as a small-bore range and a skittle alley. Rugby, soccer, cricket, lectures, debates and dances are among other leisure-time activities listed. There is a reference to hirings in Hartland and Bideford, but no mention of married quarters at that time; these were a later provision, with construction underway in 1966³³.

Reference is also made to a sports field and the Station HQ where offices, an education centre and an officers' mess are mentioned.

In 1974 RAF Chivenor closed and this required a change in administrative arrangements for Hartland Point; RAF St Mawgan, in Cornwall, became the new parent station³⁴. (RAF Chivenor was later to be rebuilt and reopened in 1980³⁵.)

A small unit of the ROC was based within the RAF complex in the 1970s³⁶.

Over the years RAF Hartland Point came under the administration of a number of Groups (90, 11, 81 and 13) until, under RAF Strike Command, its closure in September 1983³⁷.

The departure of the RAF was a matter of local regret. A newspaper referred to the slow withdrawal of staff, with a handful left until the end of summer, paid tribute to the RAF personnel and commented that they would be greatly missed³⁸. A later edition of the newspaper reported on presentations to civilian staff, to the Royal British Legion and to the Parish Church by the Commanding Officer. The departure was not, however, without some controversy. Twenty-two houses at Eastdown were left empty for a considerable time and the situation was described as a scandal³⁹.

The Site Today

An unmanned air-traffic-control radar⁴⁰ now occupies a part of the area where the RAF once operated.

Little of the site can be seen from the highway, but the concrete bases that once supported the gantry of a Type 13 radar, those of a Type 14, and the plinth of a Type 13, are visible from a public footpath along the cliff top.



A modern radar now stands at a corner of the former RAF site.



The remains of a Type 13 cabin.



Supports for fuel tanks.

There are other remains, but these cannot be studied from public areas – the footprints of Type 13 brick plinths, concrete supports for fuel tanks and the bases of the standby set and guardroom. But perhaps the most impressive evidence of past activity is the flooring of the R8 block from which, despite no standing remains, the building's layout can still be distinguished. In one area of this structure floor tiles still exist in what was possibly the kitchen.

At the domestic site most of the buildings have been demolished, but the shell of a former motor transport shed still stands, as do the former houses of the married quarters, now in civilian use. One or two huts on the site originate from the RAF's one-time occupation of the area.



Floor tiles in one area of the R8 building can still be identified.



The remains of flooring of the R8 operations building.



Aerial bases adjacent to a cliff-top public footpath and the modern radar compound.



The memory lives on. Exterior wall plaque at HQ 326 (Hartland) Squadron Air Training Corps, located on RAF Hartland Point's former domestic site. (Photograph reproduced with the kind permission of the Officer Commanding.)

Notes

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| <p>1. AIR 28/1503 Operations Record Book Hartland Point Appendices May 1960.</p> <p>This document relates to an Air Officer Commanding (AOC) 11 Group Inspection in May 1960.</p> <p>AIR 29/2930 Operations Record Book No. 405 SU Hartland Point February 1958 - December 1960.</p> <p>2. Correspondence with Stephen Hobbs of the Hartland Society and originator of the Hartland Archive.</p> <p>3. AIR 29/2929 Operations Record Book No. 405 SU Hartland Point January 1956 - December 1960.</p> <p>4. Noted in a copy manuscript document provided by AHB (no reference or date), and in a typewritten letter from AHB to the Officer Commanding No. 405 SU dated 23 January 1959 (HP/4050/P1. AHB5/405 Sigs. Unit).</p> <p>A wall plaque on the Air Training Corps HQ in Hartland provides a date of 14 November 1940.</p> <p>5. AVIA 7/259 Extension of RDF Chain: Site Plans and Survey 1940.</p> | <p>6. AVIA 7/260 Extension of RDF Chain: Site Plans and Survey 1940 - 1941.</p> <p>7. AIR 26/129 Operations Record Book No. 78 (Signals) Wing May 1941 - December 1945.</p> <p>An entry dated 30 June 1941 records the station's commencement.</p> <p>8. RAF Signals Volume IV, 577 and 578.</p> <p>9. AIR 26/129.</p> <p>10. AIR 25/679 No. 60 (Signals) Group Operations Record Book March 1940 - December 1943.</p> <p>11. AIR 25/681 No. 60 (Signals) Group Operations Record Book Appendices October 1941 - August 1944.</p> <p>12. AIR 25/679.</p> <p>13. AIR 26/129.</p> <p>14. AIR 26/129.</p> <p>15. AIR 26/129.</p> <p>16. AIR 26/129.</p> <p>17. DRG No. 60G/19A/2, undated.</p> <p>18. RAF vertical aerial photograph 106G / UK1631 : 8 Jul 46 : F38" / MULTI (5) 540 SQDN, frame 4064, held in the Historic Environment Record, County Hall, Exeter.</p> |
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19. RAF Signals Volume IV, 638.
20. AIR 25/685 No. 60 (Signals) Group Operations Record Book Appendices September - November 1945 (Organisation Circular 273/45).
21. Noted in a copy manuscript document provided by AHB (no reference or date).
22. AIR 8/1630 Restoration of the UK Control and Reporting System (Operation Rotor).
AIR 20/10699 Operation Rotor: Outline Plan for the Reorganisation of Royal Observer Corps and UK Control and Reporting System 1951 - 1956.
23. Noted in a typewritten letter from AHB to the Officer Commanding No. 405 SU dated 23 January 1959 (HP/4050/P1. AHB5/405 Sigs. Unit).
24. Letter from AHB to No. 405 SU, mentioned above.
25. AIR 28/1503 Operations Record Book Hartland Point Appendices May 1960.
26. AIR 29/2930.
27. AIR 20/10699.
28. AIR 29/2285 Operations Record Book No. 405 SU July - December 1955.
AIR 29/2929 Operations Record Book No. 405 SU January 1956 - December 1960.
Discussion with radar historian Len Thomas.
29. AIR 29/2285.
30. AIR 29/2929.
31. AIR 29/2929.
32. AIR 28/1503.
33. AIR 29/3894 Operations Record Book No. 405 SU January 1966 - December 1970.
Correspondence with Stephen Hobbs. The housing included accommodation for the Commanding Officer.
34. AIR 29/4272 Operations Record Book Hartland Point 1971 - 1975.
35. Dates reported in an RAF Chivenor "Air Day" programme, 1985.
36. Noted in a transcript of a talk given by Alan Higgins and Stephen Hobbs to the Hartland Society in 1977.
37. Noted in a copy manuscript document provided by AHB (no reference or date).
38. *Hartland Times*, No. 12, March 1983 ("All Change at Hartland Point") and No. 15, September 1983 ("RAF Hartland Point Bids a Fond Farewell").
39. *Hartland Times*, No. 19, May 1984 ("Empty Houses").
40. Role confirmed by the Royal Naval Air Station Yeovilton (HMS Heron), whose aircraft use the radar.