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Contrails

Newsletter of the Christchurch Aviation Society

CAvSoc

The Royal Observer Corps

For our November talk we were given a history of the Royal Observer Corps (ROC) from Neville Cullingford who is the curator of the ROC's Museum. The motto 'Forewarned is Forearmed' is depicted in the ROC crest which shows an Elizabethan soldier in 1588 bearing a flaming torch in one hand with the other hand shading his eyes as if searching the horizon – the role of watching for the Spanish Armada and ready to light the warning beacon.

The roots of the ROC go back to the First World War when the Zeppelins soared above London and England unhindered. In September 1915 the first London Air Defence Area was set up. Fixed wing raids needed further development and the Metropolitan Observation Service was set up in 1917 by Maj Gen Ashmore which covered London and surrounding areas. The system was continually developed but the war had ended as it was becoming perfected. In 1924 further work was carried out and in 1925 the Observer Corps was formed using a sound methodology of reporting. Within a year Kent, Sussex, Hampshire and Essex were operating with assistance from the police for shipping observation. Being based on telephone communications the GPO was central to the system and personnel were drafted as special constables with neither uniform nor pay. Observation Posts (OPs) were often no more than a garden shed with a telephone pole, observation being made with binoculars and information was



Meetings Schedule

Wednesday **2nd January 2019**

History of Aviation by Ernie Ball

Wednesday **6th March 2019**

Battle of the Atlantic by Dr Henry Goodall

Wednesday **1st May 2019—AGM**

passed to local centres, equipped with plotting tables.

A simple device to estimate height was designed by an engineer Cpt Ball with a later improvement called Mick-lethwait Height Corrector which used information coordinated by two posts to improve accuracy of aircraft altitude. A countrywide exercise was carried out in 1938 and by 1939 there were 1,430 posts staffed by 32,000 volunteers. Tin helmets were issued with the letters OC stencilled on them, as often as not from the word pOliCe with the relevant letters scraped off. As the war progressed uniforms became available and purpose built posts, rather than sheds were used. OPs were often set up on the roof of buildings especially Post offices but it was realised that the OPs themselves were becoming targets as well as the Post Office communication centres.

During the Battle of Britain the Chain Home radar system provided early warning of the approach of enemy aircraft. However, once past the coast enemy aircraft could only be detected and tracked by the Observer Corps and consequently they provided an invaluable service integrating with the air defence system. Additionally they provided information for Air Raid warnings thus saving many lives. As a 24 by 7 operation, staff had to endure all manner of hardships from the weather whilst maintaining their vigil, especially for hit and run raids by FW190s. As a result of their proven performance and contribution the Observer Corps was granted Royal status in 1941. At this time women were being enlisted due to the shortage of men and they also served with distinction. Recognition was developed as a key skill by the ROC club with awards for proficiency. This led to the ROC being used aboard the ships of the D Day fleet to prevent friendly aircraft being shot down as much as to identify enemy aircraft. After the war a new role in the nuclear age was required to monitor explosions and to plot fall out and Neville explained the design and reporting technologies used. Purpose built shallow underground OPs were designed and built to monitor key parameters. Following the 1990 defence review the ROC was stood down in 1991. Throughout, Neville provided illustrations of each aspect as his story unfolded, a story which received enthusiastic applause for his little known topic.

Folding wings were once the preserve of fixed wing naval aircraft but now the composite wing of the new Boeing 777X has folding wing tips to enable it to use existing airport infrastructure. The maiden flight of the 777X is expected in early 2019 and with orders for 320 it will start to provide competition for the Airbus A350 with its 900 orders