Elstree & Borehamwood Museum

Friends Newsletter

September 2025: Issue Number 33

PREPARATIONS UNDERWAY FOR EASTENDERS 40TH ANNIVERSARY EXHBIBITION

Preparations for a new exhibition commemorating the 40th anniversary of the long running BBC soap-opera ***EastEnders*** are currently underway at the museum. The BBC will be donating original props from the show towards the exhibits. Since its inception in February 1985, it has been filmed locally at the BBC Elstree Centre, which the BBC have owned since 1984.

The studio has been in near-continuous operation since 1914, when the Neptune Film Company established the first film studio in the area; subsequently it has gone through a successive number of owners over the years. ***EastEnders*** is among a number of well-known BBC shows shot at the facility, which have also included ***Grange Hill***, ***You Rang M'Lord?***, ***Top of the Pops*** and ***Holby City***, etc. The exhibition will include replica sets of the fruit & veg market and the Queen Vic pub, where visitors can get their photo taken behind the bar. The new exhibition will be launching to the public on 4th September.

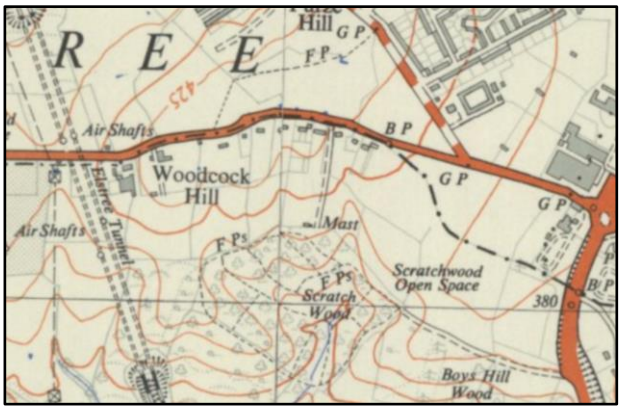
TRIP TO BLETCHLEY PARK

On 10th September we will be organising a trip to Bletchley Park, renowned for its pivotal role as the principal bastion of Allied code breaking during World War Two. We'll be departing by coach from 96 Shenley Road at 10:30am, arriving by around 12-noon, where we'll have four hours to explore this extensive site at our leisure before leaving via coach at 4pm, returning to 96 Shenley Road by around 5:30pm. Travel is free of charge for all members, though there is subsidised fee of £15. If you would like to join us, bookings can be made payable by post, telephone or electronic bank transfer directly to the museum.

NEW OCCASIONAL PAPERS

Two new occasional papers both written by Anthony Frewin will soon be available to buy at the museum shop, these include **AN ENQUIRY INTO THE TOWER BY SCRATCH WOODS** and **THE EARLIEST ROADS IN ELSTREE**, respectively.

THE MYSTERY OF THE SCRATCH WOODS TOWER



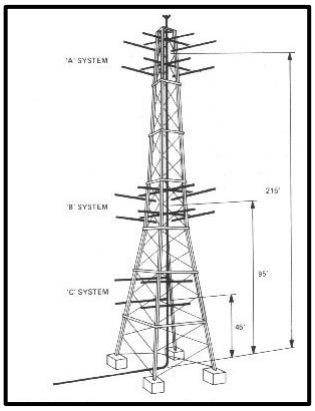
If you were a kid in the 1950's and lived on the Cranes Way/ Manor Way estate in Borehamwood, there was an exciting place to explore, Scratch Woods. Although it's shown on maps as Scratchwood, we referred to it as Scratch Woods. The main entrance was by the A1/ Barnet Bypass, little over ½ mile from the estate. But there was a shorter and quicker way, via an unofficial back entrance through fields that separated Furzehill Road from Barnet Lane. The path we followed kept close to the west-side of Little Manor, the narrow field led to a large open field, and there ahead was Scratch Woods. However, on the south-east corner of the field, there was a tower that rose high above the trees. This tower was four sided as best as I could remember and solidly built of angled iron. The foundations appeared to be buried deep in the earth and whole thing was enclosed in a quadrangle that may have been fenced off at one time. There also appeared to be the outline of a small building, now long gone. This is what I remember from the late 1950's. What was the purpose of this tower?

Barnet Lane runs along a ridge with the ground falling away between the north and south, and did the tower facilitate transmissions over this 'escarpment'? Was the tower marked on any OS maps, it was noted on various editions I had at home, but then I discovered the OS 1:25,000 map of the area run online by the National Library of Scotland. The date wasn't stated but from topographical evidence it was dated from the late 1950's. Shown here was a footpath running down the west side of Little Manor leading to a tiny, marked building or structure that is noted as a mast next to Scratch Woods. A mast is defined in the dictionary as 'a tall metal pole used to support an aerial for radio, television and telephones etc.' There are many other definitions but this one seems to fit for now.

The only way forward was to find out who owned the land in the 1940's, the presumed date of erection. It didn't matter how top secret the tower was (or wasn't), there would have been a paper trail covering the legal side of arrangements with the landowner/owners, such as wayleaves, easements and leases etc. After innumerable emails, my enquiries were directed to the Property Administrator at the London Borough of Barnet, she advised that "we are unable to answer your queries from our electronic records but we have requested the original title deeds from our archive." The documents were slow in emerging as Barnet was in the process of digitising their deed packs. In February 2024, I heard from the Head of Property Services at Barnet informing me that they

received electronic copies of all the files in the Scratch Woods deed packets, but due to the large file sizes they requested the files to be copied onto a USB drive for posting or collection. The USB drive appeared in the middle of April and contained some 76 documents. I spent the best part of the day going through the documents. I eventually found five items of interest; these included two maps dated 26.9.50 labelled HENDON from the Air Ministry. The first map covers the area west of Woodcock Hill Farm to the east of Little Manor, from north of Barnet Lane to Scratch Woods beyond the mast. A track is shown running down by Little Manor to the site of the mast that is described as a VHF RECEIVING STATION and described as 'one 125ft wood lattice tower'. A compound here is shown as measuring 60x100ft and containing a 'Standby set house' and is a 'Secco type building.' A red line goes west from the tower skirting at the edge of Scratch Woods then abruptly turns north following a field boundary, then westwards following property boundaries before coming to a halt at a 90ft wood lattice tower noted as a VHF TRANSMISSION STATION. The 2nd map merely duplicates the area around this second tower. Both maps date from 1950 and the towers certainly don't date to World War Two.

The second document contains a letter (dated 12.07.55) from R.H. Williams, town clerk at the borough of Hendon to the Supt. Engineer, Air Ministry Doctorate of Works, Valance House; informing that the council has granted permission for the Air Ministry to install an additional electric cable connection to the site of the receiving station at Scratch Woods. What follows is a formal lease (dated 19.06.53) between the Mayor, Aldermen, and the Burgesses of Hendon with the Secretary of State for Air giving approval to erect a radio station from the 29.08.1950, for the term of 21 years. So, is 1950 when the towers were put up? The third document is a supplement of the lease (dated 1.6.1956), between the Mayor &c and the Secretary State for Air granting authorisation to run a telephone line down the west side of Little Manor to the receiving station. The fourth document is a letter (dated 17.2.1960) from R.W. Williams (town clerk at Hendon) to Supt. Engineer, Air Directorate of Works, Valence House; that agrees with the proposal that the lease for the two towers now be transferred from the Secretary of State for Air to the Minister of Aviation. The fifth document, a letter (dated 12.12.61) sent by the Air Ministry, informing the town clerk at Hendon that the two leases will be terminated on 24.06.1962. We can conclude from this that both towers and related infrastructure were demolished in 1962.



A receiving tower not unlike the one at Scratch Woods.

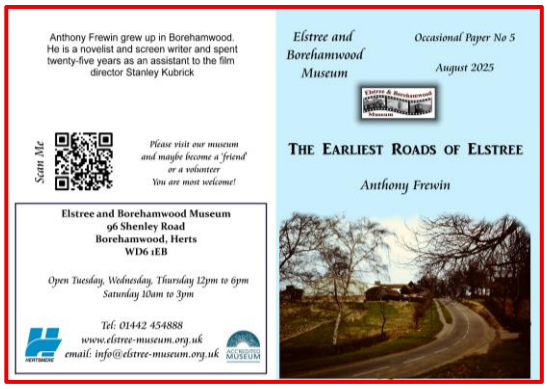
I needed to find out the RAF's involvement with VHF, there were countless sites dealing with the subject, but nothing of use. I trawled through several hundred books, again finding nothing. Then I went to the National Archives, and found 18 items from the Royal Aircraft Establishment, the first was headed 'New VHF system for RAF' dated 1945. Alas the card didn't reveal much, though the files were open but necessitated a visit to the Archives at Kew. The second item was a map showing another VHF station at Sutton Bridge, similar to the one in Scratch Woods. The rest of the items were dated from the 1940's and tangential to my quest. I subsequently emailed the Air Historical

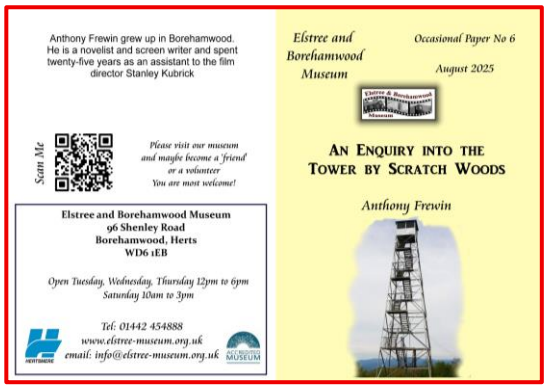
Branch at RAF Northolt, I mentioned about RAF Hendon and they directed me to the operational archives for RAF Hendon at the National Archives, where I found a record that mentioned that the masts were erected between 1951-55. I later paid an online visit to the Imperial War Museum, going through photos of VHF equipment. What looked promising was a reference to Centre for the History of Defence Electronics (now Defence Electronic History Society). There is an RAF Museum still at Bentley Priory, so I wrote to them asking suggestions for contacting RAF personnel. I received an immediate reply from operations manager James Ponton-Hewitt, who suggested I contact the Royal Observer Corp, and the Association of RAF Fighter Control Officers. I later received a response from Janette Cobb, Honorary Secretary of the RAF Fighter Control Officers, stating about the use of VHF transmissions in aircraft control; and that the wooden masts (used in Scratch Woods) were likely to be associated with the airfield at Elstree (now Elstree Aerodrome). It never occurred to me that there could be a connection with the airfield. Could this necessitate two VHF towers being put up by the RAF?

Late one Saturday night, I came across the Professional Pilots Rumour Network on the web, with a thread titled 'RAF Fighter Command Fixer Net Early 1950's'. According to the findings by Warmtoast, in 1955 there were 67 VHF/DF fixer stations in the UK established by the RAF, these were built c.1951 as part of the Rotor Program to modernise the UK's air defences during the Cold War, enabling fighter crews to receive positioning data. By 1958, only 14 fixers remained as modern automatic directional finding was introduced and two years later, all were closed down. So were the two masts at Elstree 'fixer stations', it seems likely.

by Anthony Frewin

Read more in his recent occasional paper 'An Enquiry into the Tower by Scratch Woods'





Elstree & Borehamwood Museum

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