

Cold War legacy: As Japan battles against the threat of nuclear catastrophe, Steve Snelling discovers a grim

Bonkers about bunkers from a former MAD Cold War world

It was a strange subterranean encounter in the aftermath of a prolonged phoney war that had once seen the world teetering on the brink of an apocalyptic abyss.

Scrambling below ground via the shaft of an abandoned Royal Observer Corps monitoring post in the heart of rural Norfolk, Nick Catford might have expected to find the dank, rusting remains of a ghostly Cold War relic. Instead, he found himself venturing into new and entirely uncharted territory.

Even now there is a palpable note of astonishment in his voice as he recalls the moment his 25-year odyssey resulted in one of the weirdest of all discoveries.

"The place was wide open, and I just climbed down the ladder, opened the door and was absolutely amazed to find the floor littered with batteries connected to a piece of equipment which was buzzing away and obviously still operating.

"So, I just took some photographs and got out pretty damn quick..."

Only later did he find out that the deserted bunker at South Creake, once part of the most prolific and comprehensive system of nuclear defences built in the western world, had been transformed into a seismic monitoring post, recording "earthquakes, nuclear explosions or pretty well anything".

Yet bizarre though it was, it seems oddly in keeping with a period in our recent past in which a crazy Dr Strangelove-style paranoia fed a ruinous nuclear arms race that led in turn to an unparalleled bunker-building programme, the legacy of which is the subject of Nick Catford's extraordinary subterranean exploration.

In a monumental survey of Britain's Cold War bunkers, the photo-journalist with a rare passion for the country's underground heritage has spent more than two decades charting in pictures and words the remarkable remnants of a conflict that risked global annihilation.

He has journeyed the length and breadth of the country, exploring miles of once secret subterranean structures that were designed to ensure a measure of control and organisation as well as the maintenance of vital defence systems and essential power supplies in the event of a nuclear holocaust.

His modern-day archaeological quest, chronicled in a compelling if somewhat chilling new tome, has taken him deep beneath the surface to photograph those grim places considered vital to the country's ultimate survival, from labyrinthine bunkers intended to shield our military and political leaders to the radar and air-defence installations supposed to counter the potentially catastrophic strikes.

It has been a prodigious effort that has seen him visit every last one of the more than 1,500 three-man Royal Observer Corps monitoring posts that once proliferated the British countryside like a half-hidden rash and a truly gargantuan undertaking which has its roots in an unusual fascination for all things underground that stretches back to the 1970s.

"I remember my father telling me about when he used to play in local mines as a boy back in the 1920s," he says. "I thought that sounds interesting and 50 years on he took me there and, amazingly, they were still open and we spent three or four hours exploring them, got totally lost but it gave me a flavour of things underground."

From there it was a short step to becoming a member of a group called Subterranean Britannica, an organisation of enthusiasts dedicated to researching and recording the nation's buried heritage. And, or so it seems, Nick has been bonkers about bunkers pretty well ever since.

"Back in the 1980s, when I started out, the Cold War was still cold," he says. "In fact, during the Thatcher era there was a spate of bunker building just as the Cold War was ending. Usually, they finished them because it was cheaper to do that than pay off the workers.

"The first site I visited was around 1987 and, although the Cold War was still going on and a lot of bunkers were still in use, some had long since been abandoned, having been rendered obsolete and sold off or put to other uses when the threat changed from bombs dropped by airplanes to missiles.

"As time went on, more and more of these places began to open up and to reveal their secrets and as a qualified photographer it seemed natural to marry the two interests and so I began making a photographic record of everywhere I visited."

Cold War legacy: The still operational Type 93 radar site at Trimmingham complete with its distinctive 'golf ball' Kevlar dome that now serves as a vital control and reporting centre for the RAF.

Below left to right, the unisex shower and toilet in the abandoned local authority bunker at South Wootton, near King's Lynn; the typically unwarlike guardhouse which covers the way to Norfolk's biggest bunker at Bawburgh; the nation's last surviving fixed Cold War radar at Neatishead; and early warning consoles preserved in Neatishead's operations room.



Those pictures, ranging from the Virginia creeper-smothered Bristol War Room in the west to Trimmingham's 'golf ball' radar station in the east and from the shabby remains of Wick's R8 ground control intercept (GCI) radar station in the far north of Scotland to the brutalist monstrosity that is Plymouth's Maritime Headquarters in the south, are now graphically displayed in Subterranean Britain: Cold War Bunkers and, together, they tell a shocking and sometimes farcical story of what might have been.

In one powerful image taken inside a local authority bunker originally buried beneath the grounds of the Woodlands Nursing Home in South Wootton a still-clear sign states: "Use of these toilet, water supply & sink facilities, and dumping of waste fluids in the sump, are strictly forbidden at any time preceding a real nuclear attack warning."

But turn over the page and there is the incongruous picture of a couple of racing bicycles set up in the 1988-installed Highland Council Emergency Centre to drive the ventilation fans in the event of a power failure, a case of Heath Robinson meets hi-tech.

Elsewhere, shadowy shots of tables laid out with cups and saucers in the tea bar of the massive Central Government War Headquarters, built within a vast underground factory complex at Corsham in Wiltshire, present a disarmingly domesticated scene wholly at odds with the bunker's purpose.

And yet, for all their doleful appearance and dark inspiration, there was an undeniable fascination about exploring these once most restricted of secret places.

"There is a real excitement about venturing into sites that nobody else, or at least no member of the general public, has ever entered," says Nick, who is close to completing a follow-up book on Eastern bloc Cold War bunkers. "You get a real buzz going into somewhere for the first time and it was also incredible to see the level of sophistication of the protection that was constructed at such considerable cost."

One type of shelter, however, was notable by its absence from the myriad bunkers that he visited and which now adorn his book. It was the kind of shelter most common to the second world war generation who had endured a different kind of threat from the air. The

fascination in a book that sheds light on Norfolk's subterranean heritage born out of a doomsday-laden era



Uncovered: Former Royal Observer Corps monitoring post at Cley – now a bird hide.

In Britain a lot of people thought there were nuclear fallout shelters and the public would have somewhere to go, but that was never the case. The public were always advised to build their own shelters in their own houses... and stay at home. It was only government officials, the military and essential services who had bunkers...

away all the earth in front of it and exposed one side of the bunker and you now enter it through a door rather than via the shaft and ladder."

Such a revelation is rare if not unique. But where Cley's transformation has offered a new perspective on what is usually a literal hidden past, certain of Norfolk's Cold War bunkers remain cloaked in a kind of subterfuge that isn't altogether convincing.

Trimingham's still active radar station is a case in point. Opened as a centimetric early warning (CEW) radar station in 1952, it has undergone a number of alterations and refits and is now a Type 93 radar protected by its distinctive Kevlar dome which, as well as supplying vital data to some of the country's control and reporting centres, also has the power to stop passing motorists' watches and make their mobile phones go haywire.

Not far away from it, however, is what looks on the face of it to be a normal red-brick chalet bungalow, except for the fact that this particular building boasts a garden with an array of warning beacons and a flagpole from which flutter the RAF colours.

"It's bizarre really," says Nick, "because the radar installation was always obvious, but they still decided to make the guardhouse look like a bungalow. And it was from in there that you entered the stairwell down into the bunker."

It was the same story at Neatishead where another massive radar control bunker was built, the cost of the two of them "virtually bankrupting" the country in Nick's words.

Together, these sites provided the early warning we would have needed to send up fighters to attack incoming bombers or to direct the fire of heavy anti-aircraft batteries," he adds.

Like the Cold War itself, Neatishead has now been consigned to the pages of history, although parts of the site, including the country's only surviving Cold War-vintage Type 84 radar installation, remain and have been transformed into the impressive Air Defence Radar Museum, enduring reminders of a virtual war and a deeply disturbing past in which a multiplicity of subterranean refuges and command posts were never employed in anger thanks, as Nick pointedly notes, to "the deterrence of mutual assured destruction". Or MAD for short.

Well, at least someone, somewhere close to the seat of power had a sense of humour, albeit a distinctly black one.

Subterranean Britain: Cold War Bunkers, by Nick Catford, is published by Folly Books, priced £24.99.



reason was simple enough. No large-scale public shelters to protect the population at large ever existed.

"Of course, in Britain a lot of people thought there were nuclear fallout shelters and the public would have somewhere to go, but that was never the case," says Nick. "The public were always advised to build their own shelters in their own houses and stay at home. It was only government officials, the military and essential services who had bunkers from where they could carry on."

Not that even they could have resisted the impact of a direct hit from a nuclear warhead. "The best that could be hoped was that the Russians wouldn't throw all their missiles at us at one time. The assumption was there would be a limited first strike, after which we would retaliate in the same way, and there would be something left to preserve.

"Say, for example, there was a strike on Ipswich, then Norwich would suffer from the fallout but there wouldn't be too much damage and there would be something left for the authorities and essential staff down in their bunkers to control."

So far as Norfolk was concerned, its location on the east coast and its proximity to a number of British and American nuclear airbases, ensured it had more than its fair share of 'bunkernalia'. Examples of a wide variety of structures are well represented in Nick's photographic survey, although one that's missing is the county's biggest bunker of all.

"Originally, the bunker at Bawburgh was built as a sector operations centre for the Rotor radar system in the early 1950s," says Nick, "but once the threat moved on from incoming bombers to missiles it became redundant so they later refurbished and enlarged it to establish a Regional Government headquarters. It's where that part of East Anglia would have been run from."

Unfortunately, the present private owner denied any access to the site, forcing Nick to make do with an image of the unwarlike chalet-style radar station guardhouse hemmed in by trees.

"Some of my colleagues went down into the bunker when it came up for sale in the 1990s, but I wasn't available that day, so that's one I would really love to get into. As far as I know,

not much of it is being used for anything. It's mostly empty."

Those Norfolk remnants of the Cold War that he was able to visit range from the ugliness of Norwich's now demolished Royal Observer Corps (ROC) group headquarters, which reminded Nick of an "Aztec temple", to the decidedly incongruous three-man monitoring station turned bird hide at Cley-next-the-Sea.

"The Cley post is an interesting one. It was one of the 1,563 posts which were dotted everywhere around the country, one every six or seven miles. Originally the ROC's job was aircraft-spotting, just as it was during the second world war, but once the threat changed from planes to missiles the three-man posts were relocated underground and their job was to measure the elevation of the blasts, the radiation at a particular place and the direction of any fallout so that they could then work out which areas would be no-go areas, and which areas would be safe and could remain operational.

"All absolutely vital information, but what makes Cley interesting is that when it was closed down and sold off in the 1960s it was bought by a local nature reserve who clawed