

The Battle of Britain Bunker Exhibition and Visitor Centre

Recollections from my visits

Introduction



As mentioned in my introduction on the Wheels, Wings and Water webpage, I discovered the Battle of Britain Bunker Exhibition and Visitor Centre during a visit to Uxbridge in September 2019.

Walking around a recreational space, known as Dowding Park, I came

across the striking visitor centre. Entering the building brought me to a whole new world, and took me on to enjoy a guided tour of the bunker itself, which is located to the left of the new building, between the memorial and a model of a Spitfire, which you can see in the photograph below. I hope that my article will tempt you to visit the area to learn more and enjoy the experience, when time and circumstances permit.

The place

RAF Uxbridge was associated with RAF Fighter Command, being the location of Hillingdon House, the headquarters of RAF Fighter Command No 11 Group, which covered London and the southeast of England. The Group's operations room was located in a nearby bunker.

Although a top-secret project, the bunker was constructed by a commercial company, Sir Robert McAlpine, over about 8 months in early 1939. It is 60 feet underground and accessible by stairs and corridors which carry all the utilities such as water and electricity. The concrete construction and ground cover were designed to make it bomb proof and it had its own air ventilation and filtration system, to protect against gas attacks. (During my visit between lockdowns in late 2020 I was informed that the efficient ventilation system still worked, and enabled the bunker to meet COVID-19 safety requirements, in spite of being underground!)

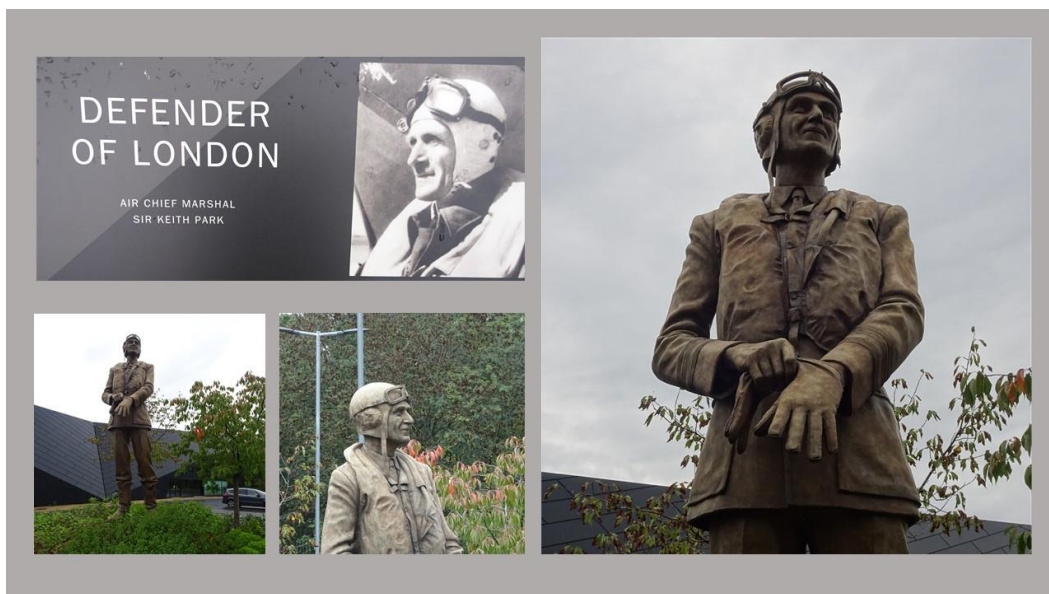


The purpose

Fighter aircraft activities were controlled from the bunker throughout World War II, but most famously during the Battle of Britain. The bunker and its occupants played a major role in the operation of the Dowding System, the world's first integrated air-defense system. This brought together information from multiple sources such as anti-aircraft systems, The Royal Observer Corps and RADAR, to enable the fast and efficient deployment of the RAF against the attacking German air force. Coordinated improvements in aircraft activity via the Dowding System is believed to have doubled the effective operational size of the RAF.

The people

Numerous historical figures are associated with the Battle of Britain bunker. Air Chief Marshall Sir Hugh Dowding is clearly linked with the site through the air defense system named after him, and I assume that the name of the new recreational park on the site reflects his achievements and association with the area. Similarly, Air Chief Marshall Sir Keith Park seemed to have a towering presence over operations within the bunker, especially during the Battle of Britain. Park has been referred to as "the defender of London" and recognition of his status inspired the large statue adjacent to the visitor centre.



The bunkers also had famous visitors, such as King George VI and Winston Churchill. There are tales of Keith Park having to remind Winston Churchill that smoking was not allowed, so he could only chew on his cigar! It was after one of his visits in August 1940 that Churchill made his now famous comment "Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few".

Perhaps less well known, but equally deserving of recognition are the roles played by members of the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF). These women worked 10-hour shifts, wearing headsets and using croupier's rakes on plotting tables to monitor movements of friendly and hostile aircraft. (Current visitors to the bunker will see a model of a member of the WAAF, known as Doris.) The WAAF's contribution was

recognised by Hugh Dowding, who praised their courage, particularly in radar stations subjected to bombing.

Post-war development

In April 1958 High Dowding unveiled a granite memorial close to the entrance of the bunker, highlighting its role during the Battle of Britain. During the 1970s the operations room was restored to reflect its wartime format; then in the 1980s Warrant Officer Robert "Chris" Wren used 6 rooms within the bunker to build a museum, open to the public.



In 2001, members of a society called Subterranea Britannica noted that although it was a museum, it was on the RAF Uxbridge site, which was at that time still operational, hence visits had to be arranged in advance. On their visit they were able to see the museum, plant rooms within the bunker and associated buildings above ground.

RAF Uxbridge closed in 2010, and the London Borough of Hillingdon took responsibility for the bunker and its surrounding area. In 2015 the Council and the Government committed a total of £5.5 million pounds to restoration of the site and development of a visitor centre, which opened in March 2018.

The Bunker Exhibition

Visitors able to negotiate the 76 steps down into the bunker are able to enjoy a guided tour and listen to a talk about activities within the bunker during the Battle of Britain.



They will see the operation room, with its plotting table and Doris from the WAAF, the viewing gallery built for King George VI, and various control rooms, which are home to more traditional museum exhibits.

Since my last visit, one of these rooms, where Keith Park worked with Senior Controllers to oversee and manage the defense of London, has been restored as the "Controllers soundscape". Visitors can hear the sounds, voices and decisions made on the 15th of September 1940, now known as the "Battle of Britain Day". (Quite by chance my first visit to the bunker was on the 15th September, in 2019, and it was quite eerie to know that I was in the place where Churchill and Park witnessed the battle 79 years earlier. For this reason, I felt that the bunker is more of a heritage site to be experienced, than a traditional museum to be visited.)

Those not able to manage the steps into the bunker should not despair, as some aspects are replicated in the visitor centre, and at the time of my last visit, between

COVID-19 lockdowns one and two, a virtual tour was available by watching a film in the auditorium.

The Visitor Centre

The complex that makes up the visitor centre is a large, bright, open and airy environment, which is fully accessible. You can see exhibitions about topics like the Dowding System, together with actual pieces of equipment and aircraft remains such as a Merlin engine from a Hurricane flown during the battle of France. Many of the exhibits are interactive, but sadly due to COVID-19 restrictions these may not be fully functional.

A visit to the site will also highlight the important contribution of the Polish Air Force to the operation of No 11 Group, and the Battle of Britain.



Visiting

Although the Bunker is theoretically easy to reach by road from Newmarket, the journey time can be variable, especially via the M11, M25 and M40. (My journeys there have taken between one and a half, and four hours.) If, however you are in London and want an alternative to the usual visitor attractions, a journey along the Metropolitan line will take you to Uxbridge.

In practice, current travel and other lockdown restrictions due to COVID-19 make the possibility of a visit something to be considered for the future. You can however get a very good taste of what lies in store from their website. This has details for visitors, but also numerous videos, on subjects such as Hurricanes, Spitfires and the Dowding System, and even the option to download instructions for building your own bunker! (I had thought of giving these to the model making section of the 2nd Tuesday Group, but I suspect that the exercise is really aimed at a younger audience.)

Acknowledgements and Sources of information

I am grateful to the helpful and well-informed volunteers who taught me so much during my visits. Their information inspired me to learn more about the subject during the COVID-19 pandemic, using websites and books. A list of relevant sources is given below, but there are probably many more. All photographs are from my own collection. I apologise in advance for any errors or omissions.

Stephen F. Garner

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Websites:

Battle of Britain Bunker and Visitor Centre

<http://battleofbritainbunker.co.uk/>

Hillingdon Borough

<https://hillingdon.gov.uk/bunker>

Friends of No 11 Group

<http://friendsof11group.co.uk/>

Polish Airforce Heritage Trail

<https://archive.hillingdon.gov.uk/article/34246/The-Battle-of-Britain-Bunker>

Subterranea Britannica

<https://www.subbrit.org.uk/>

<https://www.subbrit.org.uk/sites/uxbridge-battle-of-britain-ops-room/>

Wikipedia

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Britain_Bunker

Books

The Most Dangerous Enemy – A History the Battle of Britain, by Stephen Bungay

Park – The Biography of Air Chief Marshall Sir Keith Park GCB, KBE, MC, DFC, DCL,
by Vincent Orange