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## Ipswich Icons: When the Cold War was played out right on our doorsteps in Suffolk

**PUBLISHED:** 13:00 26 March 2017 | **UPDATED:** 16:58 30 June 2017



The Foxhall site: once a key installation in military communication. The majestic towers simply arouse curiosity. Picture: CONTRIBUTED

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A military site just outside Ipswich has always had an air of mystery about it, writes John Norman, of The Ipswich Society.

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*The towers at the site of Suffolk Aviation Heritage Museum in Kesgrave. Picture: CONTRIBUTED*

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I write today's article under false pretences. I knew nothing of the history of the United States military establishment on the junction of Bell Lane and Foxhall Road, other than it was clearly a key site during the Cold War – and like most installations at that time, the more important in the military hierarchy, the more secret it became.

We are not even sure when the Foxhall Transmission station was built. Was it in the 1930s (the oldest building on the site has Art Deco features typical of pre-war RAF buildings) or was it the 1960s (it doesn't appear on earlier maps but, then, lots of secret installations were omitted).

Furthermore, we don't know its original purpose, which branch of the military was first to use the facility, or to which other establishments it was connected. However, we do know the Americans were there in the '70s and '80s.

What we know for sure is that the facility originally consisted of eight aerials, each with a satellite dish standing high above an array of unmarked military buildings. Three of the towers remain, standing tall in the middle of a field, a tantalising distance from the highway but providing no invitation to visit.

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*Listening and speaking... in secret. Picture: CONTRIBUTED*

The classified military establishment propaganda of the Cold War prevails. We know we are not allowed in, so we don't even try. The site is surrounded by high chain-link fencing and sinister notices threatening prosecution under the Official Secrets Act if we step over the line. Inside, typical mid-century temporary buildings that are generally well past their best: some vandalised and repaired, others robust enough to withstand the ravages of time.

The building that housed the generators and fuel store (a facility of this importance was expected to go on working irrespective of what else was happening beyond the wire) has recently been adopted by the Suffolk Aviation Heritage Group. They are preparing the museum for their Easter opening. Perversely, the exhibition does not tell the story of the site but has a wealth of information, models and drawings of military aircraft each with a Suffolk connection.

The Foxhall transmission station was self-contained. There were dormitories, a dining hall with kitchen and club room. The personnel stationed here were single enlisted men, carefully screened and selected for their known discretion and ability to "keep the secret". Their main source of R&R appears to have been the baseball diamond in one corner of the compound.

The newest building at Foxhall was the main ops' room, the radio room: the room where the switching and interception of telephone calls took place, and the room from which coded messages were sent to the States.

Since it was constructed in 1984 this building has been known as The Dead Building. Although it looks like a bungalow (from the air) it is in fact a very robust concrete box: a hardened shelter with shutters on the windows, lined with sheet steel so no radio signals (or mobile phone signals) can penetrate or escape, other than those scrambled and transmitted.

My research has established, after following a number of false but speculative trails, that Foxhall was, most recently, part of the United States Defence Communications System, or DCS, under the direction of the US Airforce Communications Command (AFCC), a detachment of the parent AFCC at Bentwaters/Woodbridge. When the US 81st Tactical Fighter Wing left Bentwaters in 1992, the Foxhall facility also ceased operations.

Getting a coded signal back to the States, both during the Second World War and the Cold War, proved incredibly difficult. Originally analogue, the signal was transmitted through the same cables as used by the public service. Experiments with medium wave radio and microwaves confirmed their limited range. The solution was Operation Tea Bag: a scheme to connect telephone switching stations from across Europe, as far south as Italy, to Foxhall for forward transmission across the Atlantic.

The station was known as an Autovon Exchange or Troposphere Forward Scatter radio station, and housed transmitters for three TFS radio systems and two terrestrial microwave radio links.

Today. communication is via satellite and distance is no handicap. We've come a long way in 50 years.

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## Breaking News: Ed Sheeran to perform two headline gigs in Ipswich's Chantry Park in summer 2019

06:11 | Katy Sandalls



Suffolk's global superstar Ed Sheeran will be returning to his home county next summer for two huge concerts.

### Ed's 'perfect' return to Suffolk shows Sheeran's strong links to the area

06:35 | Katy Sandalls



Suffolk has always played an important part in the life of Ed Sheeran.

## 'I am over the moon' – Ipswich family welcomes fifth generation

41 minutes ago | Megan Aldous



An Ipswich family are celebrating the arrival of a baby who is the fifth generation of their family – and the first boy.

### **'Weapon' found hidden near Ipswich park**

57 minutes ago | Amy Gibbons



Police uncovered a metal bar during a weapons sweep near Alexandra Park in Ipswich.

**Video: WATCH: How two diehard Ipswich Town fans plan to make more noise at Portman Road**

59 minutes ago | Andrew Papworth



They may only be, for the moment at least, a two-man army.

**Video: Look inside Suffolk's first ever cannabis lounge – but is it legal?**

08:42 | Adam Howlett



Suffolk's first cannabis lounge has opened in Ipswich – but owner Darryl Noe says it's all legal and above board.

## Tribute given to World War Two fighter pilot who died at Seckford Hall

08:39 | Dominic Moffitt



A memorial has been placed in the grounds of a Suffolk stately home in honour of a pilot whose fighter plane crashed there more than 75 years ago.

## **New site raises questions over Ipswich Bury Road warehouse development**

08:32 | Jason Noble Local democracy reporter

 The site off Harris Way, Ipswich, which Headlam Group is planning to develop for its distribution centre Picture: GOOGLE MAPS

One of Europe's largest flooring distributors given the green light to build a warehouse behind Anglia Retail Park is eyeing plans for another site elsewhere in town.

## Video: Hero policeman describes dramatic moment he saved drowning woman at Ipswich Waterfront

07:30 | Jake Foxford

 PC Jon Harvey awarded for rescuing woman from the water in Ipswich's waterfront. Picture: Rachel Edge

A heroic off-duty policeman who saved a woman from drowning in Ipswich has spoken out about the incident as he scooped an award for his life-saving actions.

## East braces for high winds as yellow weather warning issued

06:43 | Amy Gibbons

 A yellow weather warning for wind is in place across East Anglia Picture: MIKE STEVENSON/NEWZULU.COM

The Met Office is warning of a potential “danger to life” as momentum builds for strong winds across Suffolk and north Essex.

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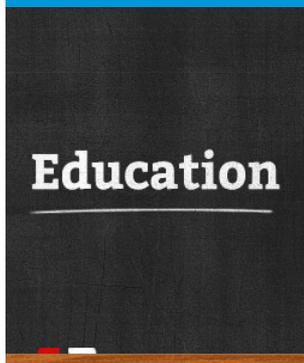
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