

West Lothian's Cold War preparations remembered

As the bleak BBC Nuclear drama *Threads* marks its 40th anniversary, the Local Democracy Reporting Service looks at details of West Lothian's response to the terrors of the Cold War and the possibility of a nuclear war – including a secret nuclear panic room under the then county council offices, and a terrifying recruitment drive at the local cinema.

It is a television drama that has gone down in history as perhaps the most terrifying programme ever created by the BBC. Made at a time when the Cold War between the USA and Russia was escalating, *Threads* shocked British audiences with its stark portrayal of a nuclear attack on 1980s Britain, and the aftermath.

While the drama, recently re-screened for its 40th anniversary, has become the stuff of legend however, the very real, often alarming preparations for a nuclear attack have often been lost.

There's very little left now of what was the former West Lothian County Council emergency bunker, built in 1935 at the County Buildings in Linlithgow.

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PROBE



• X - RAY

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PHONES



TEST 2

TEST 1

ON

OFF

X10

X1

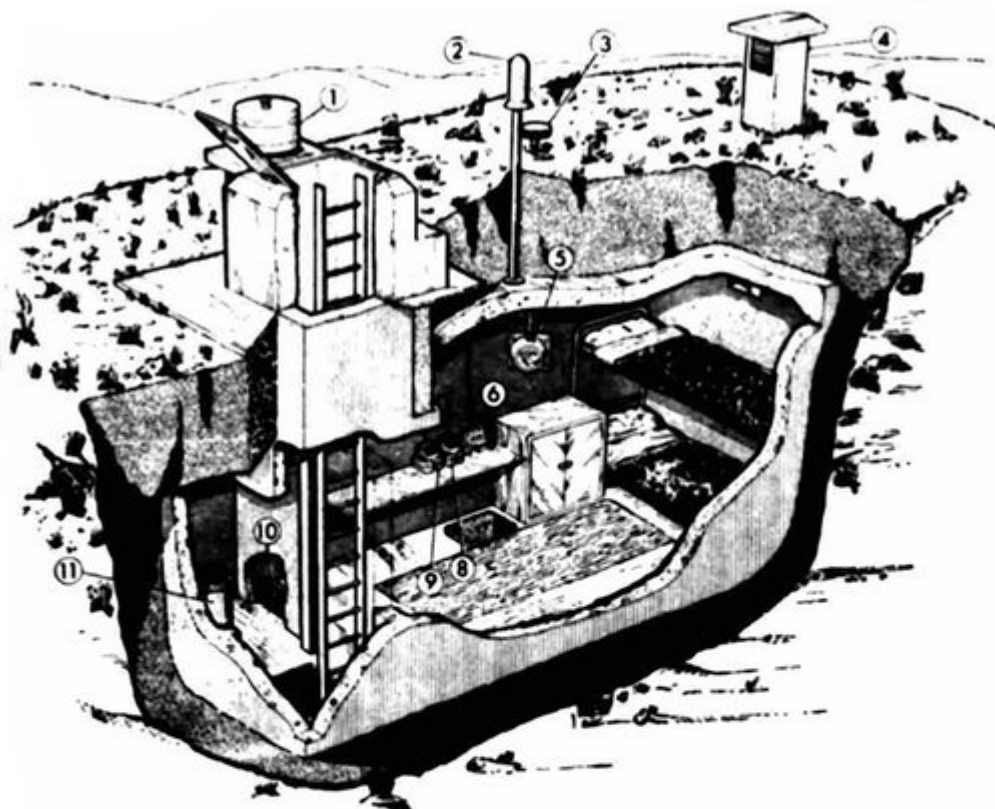
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NUCLEAR WEAPONS BURST BOARD

CODE	GRID REF.	POWER	TYPE	D. T. G.
1	10	100	100	100
2	20	200	200	200
3	30	300	300	300
4	40	400	400	400
5	50	500	500	500
6	60	600	600	600
7	70	700	700	700
8	80	800	800	800
9	90	900	900	900
10	100	1000	1000	1000



R.O.C. UNDERGROUND POST — Key to Illustration.

- 1—Ground Zero Indicator.
- 2—Survey Meter Sensing Head.
- 3—Bomb Power Indicator Sensing Head.
- 4—Air Vent.
- 5—Bomb Power Indicator.
- 6—Fixed Survey Meter.
- 8—Tele-talk Set.
- 9—Carrier Receiver.
- 10—12 Volt Battery.
- 11—Chemical Closet.





The bomb-proof basement was the designated Area Control Room for civil defence. It had a separate air filtration system, so that in the event of a nuclear explosion, the county administration could continue.

In an emergency they would have housed wireless operators and telephonists to take and pass on messages, and been a base for the Scientific Sub-section which would monitor radiation and fall-out. There was also a training centre in Linlithgow.

The bunker itself has long been dismantled, lost to time – but remnants do remain, and were still kept in the County Buildings until the Tam Dalyell partnership opened in 2018.

These include a table of information on radiation doses. The Civil Defence map was also still on display in what was once the information room. This would have allowed damage and emergency services to be plotted.

The symbols to be used; severe fire, roadblocks – acute hospitals, emergency feeding centre, public or communal shelters (underground), nuclear burst fallout.

There was also the Nuclear Weapons Burst Board, a blackboard where information on bursts – the term used to describe nuclear blasts- were to be scribbled.

Now these pieces are all part of the council's vast archive, most of which is never put on public display.

Managing the response was the job of the Civic Defence Corps, and they had a very interesting approach to recruitment at the start of the cold war.

Cinema audiences turning out on a Spring night in 1953 to see War of the Worlds, with Gene Barry and Ann Robinson at the Bathgate Regal would have been a little alarmed to be met by volunteers of the local Civil Defence Corps.

The volunteers were "armed" with Geiger counters – a noisy device with a high-pitched squeal which warns of lethal radiation.

The Technicolor film version of HG Wells' story shows the world almost destroyed by a Martian invasion force. At a time which had seen the Americans and Russians explode nuclear bombs launching an arms race which threatened the end of the world, it was a blunt recruiting stunt.

How successful it was is unknown, but public belief that a nuclear attack could be survived waned quickly and volunteers dried up within a decade.

They were only a part of West Lothian's involvement in preparing Scotland for a nuclear attack, however.

Of the 1,563 underground bunkers built throughout the UK, three were in West Lothian, including West Calder.

These monitoring posts were built to a standard design with a 14-foot access shaft leading to a concrete room with a chemical toilet and store, and a monitoring room. They were designed to hold 3-4 people and survive nuclear fallout.

Almost half of the monitoring posts were closed down during a restructuring of the Royal Observer Corps (ROC) in 1968 – including a post in Bathgate. Posts in Bo'ness and West Calder

operated until the ROC was stood down in 1991.

You can still see the concrete "box" that was West Calder's ROC post lying on its side in a field beside the remnants of the Hermand shale bing it had been buried in, in 1959.

The Hermand post was part of the ROC No.24 group, whose headquarters were in a bunker beneath RAF Turnhouse. Each monitoring post consisted of a small room within a reinforced concrete box, covered by at least three feet of soil and accessed through a manhole and a 19ft long vertical steel ladder.

This was to provide some protection against a nuclear blast and reduce exposure to radiation. Little showed above the surface other than filter equipment to cleanse incoming air and monitoring equipment. At times of threat, the posts were manned by part-time volunteers of the ROC.

Each post was equipped with bunk beds, a chemical toilet and had ration packs containing biscuits, steak and kidney pudding, tea, sugar, milk, etc, which would sustain three men without contact with the outside world for three days.

In the event of a nuclear attack, the monitoring post would report levels of radiation, other measurements, and readings from the Ground Zero Indicator (GZI).

This was a metal drum lined with photographic paper which sat atop the bunker. The developed photograph showed the intensity and direction of the blast.

The West Calder post was abandoned in 1991, and up until 2005 it was still possible to climb down into the bunker and survey a scatter of papers and furniture. A portrait of the Queen still hung on the wall.

Further along the A71, RAF Kirknewton also played an important role in the Cold War. In 1949 the Civil Defence Joint Planning

Staff recommended the creation of “protected control rooms with signal communications at local authority, zone, region and central government level”.

One of these regional headquarters (Scottish Eastern Zone) was located in Kirknewton.

During the 1950s and Sixties the RAF station was also home to the US Air Force and, by extension, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), as a communications tracking station focused on Russia and the Eastern bloc.

Kirknewton’s nuclear command centre was built in 1953, decommissioned in 1993, and after various other uses the building was demolished in 2003.

Today West Lothian Council may not have a nuclear panic room – but it still has an emergency planning officer.

Caroline Burton told the LDRS: “The preparation and response to emergencies is underpinned by The Civil Contingencies Act 2004 and the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 (Contingency Planning) (Scotland) Regulations 2005.

“The legislation seeks to minimise disruption in the event of an emergency and to ensure that the UK is better prepared to deal with a range of emergencies and their consequences.

“Resilience in Scotland takes an ‘all-risks’ approach and is based on the doctrine of Integrated Emergency Management (IEM). Whilst emergencies can be caused by a wide range of factors, the effects will often share similar consequences.

“The aim of IEM is to develop flexible and adaptable arrangements for dealing with emergencies, whether foreseen or unforeseen and regardless of cause.

“The council works with a wide range of agencies, including emergency services, utilities, the voluntary sector in preparing for emergencies and the multi-agency response to

them.”

Don't have nightmares.

By Stuart Sommerville Local Democracy Reporter