

## Case Study for Heritage Counts 2015

### The Control Tower, Walsingham, Norfolk

The Control Tower near Walsingham, Norfolk, was one of around 300 residential properties whose doors opened as part of Heritage Open Days 2014. For the owners, Claire Nugent and Nigel Morter, it was the second time that they shared their home with hundreds of curious strangers attracted by the chance of seeing something that is normally private.

Inspired by a friend who had opened his house in Lewes for Heritage Open Days the year before, they decided to give it a go in 2012. As Nigel put it: "We'd always felt that the history of the control tower was just too fascinating to keep to ourselves and this seemed a great way to share it."

As its name suggests, the Control Tower did not start out as a private abode. It once formed part of Royal Air Force (RAF) North Creake, a bomber airfield with three intersecting runways, technical and administration sites and quarters for more than 3,000 servicemen and women. Built in 1943, The Control Tower's first operation was on the night and morning of the 5th/6th June 1944 in support of D-Day, making it one of the last wartime bases to become operational. Although its operational life was brief (just under a year) its strategic importance was immeasurable as it supported and protected the bomber stream through the use of secret 'Radio Counter Measures'.

Since the war, the building underwent several transformations from flats to a mess room for a local carrot packing business, and finally a lovingly converted home and Bed & Breakfast. When Nigel Morter and Claire Nugent bought the Control Tower in 2011, many alterations had been made to its appearance and internal layout. Externally, the first floor had been clad in cedar shingles, the middle windows on the front elevation had been removed, and later in the 1990s a shallow pitched roof added. Internally though, despite the numerous changes that had been made over the years, some of the original features had miraculously survived, such as the doors fitted with Bakelite handles and the wonderful oak strip flooring in the control room, which had been imported from the USA in 1943.

However, to turn the structure into the 1940s time capsule and living memory of a piece of British aviation history that it is now, Nigel and Claire had to start all over again with most things – such as plumbing, heating, electrics, wall finishes and floors. Having both left behind their university careers, they decided to project-manage their conversion themselves, with work progressing as finances allowed. Nigel remembers: "Once we embraced the idea of mess we got underway. The order of things was the hardest to fathom; this coupled by the inability to afford some of the bigger jobs made planning difficult. Fitting new windows after we'd had plastering done springs to mind as a very bad idea, but there was no way of us affording the £45,000 for replacement windows when we started out. There is the inevitability of escalating costs. As with all projects the building threw things at us that we weren't expecting, but these were usually reasonably straightforward to get around with thought. However, it was the sheer strength of the building that really surprised us – the plumbers named it 'the tool-eater' as they'd never known anything so hard; it destroyed drill bits and, on some occasions, the drills themselves, with such alarming regularity."

But Nigel and Claire were lucky in having trades people in their family and proved remarkably creative in sourcing period features and furniture and raising funds. For example, the conversion of

an outside building to provide further B&B accommodation, which is due to be completed in the spring of 2016, was funded by a crowd-funding project (<http://www.crowdfunder.co.uk/the-control-tower-needs-you>) with nearly 150 backers pledging for deferred holiday breaks. The couple hopes the overall project will reach the 'maintenance' stage by the end of 2016.



The owners, Nigel Morter and Claire Nugent, outside the Control Tower (Photo: Paul Macro).

For Nigel and Claire, sharing their house with interested members of the public during Heritage Open Days proved a rewarding experience. While some visitor comments spurred on further research, others contributed nuggets of information that would close yet another gap in the jigsaw of the place's history. Highlights included time witnesses visiting the place and sharing their memories of wartime life at the tower and its surroundings.

Being part of the event also boosted the profile of wartime aviation heritage locally and nationally. When Nigel and Claire first moved to North Norfolk, they were disappointed in the Local Authority's lack of interest in the airfield's history - in fact, the Control Tower is not listed. Attitudes now seem to be changing though and the couple are proud to have played and continue to play a part in shining a light on this important aspect of the nation's past.



Images of the Control Tower during Heritage Open Days 2014 (photos: Paul Macro).

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