

# Tunbridge Wells, Kent War Room

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**COLD WAR PROJECT**

**SURVEY REPORT**

**WAR ROOM**

**Tunbridge Wells  
Kent**

NBR No: 96175  
NMR No: TQ 53 NE 56  
NGR: TQ 5955 3880  
Hob UID: 1112372

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Report by Wayne Cocroft  
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## **CONTENTS**

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<b>Summary</b>	1
<b>History</b>	2
<b>Description</b>	3
<b>Exterior</b>	3
<b>Interior</b>	3
<b>Site Archive</b>	4
<b>Acknowledgement</b>	5
<b>Sources</b>	6
<b>Primary</b>	6
<b>Secondary</b>	6

## SUMMARY

The War Room is a heavily protected double-storey, surface bunker. It was constructed about 1953 for the Regional Commissioner of Home Defence Region 12, to provide protection against the effects of atomic weapons. This role was, however, relatively short-lived and in the mid to late 1950s, in the wake of the development of the H-bomb, the regional War Rooms were superseded by more heavily protected Regional Seats of Government. The Tunbridge Wells War Room was, however, reactivated in the early 1960s as a Sub-Regional Control, a role it fulfilled until 1972 when the administrative structure of the Sub-Regional Controls was reorganised. It was subsequently used as a police communications centre. At the time of the RCHME investigation, in September 1997, the War Room was being demolished.

## HISTORY

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The War Room at Tunbridge Wells was built in about 1953. Its construction was part of a national programme to equip the Regional Commissioners with protected centres to withstand the effects of atomic blast, radiation and fire. The Regional Commissioners were generally government officials or ministers, who, by royal proclamation, or an emergency powers act, would be authorised to take over the government of a home defence region in the event of a civil emergency or hostile attack. The geographic distribution of the post-war War Rooms followed the pattern of Regional Commissioners' headquarters established during the second world war, when Tunbridge Wells had performed this role for the southeast of England (Laurie 1970, 9)

Each of the 12 post-war, mainland home defence regions and Northern Ireland was provided with a War Room, the London area was sub-divided in four regions, giving in total 17 War Rooms. The cost of each was about £100,000. The War Rooms provided accommodation for the Regional Commissioner and around 50 key staff including; a scientific adviser, fire and hospital controllers, the police and military liaison staff. The network of War Rooms, however, quickly became outdated as the level of protection they could offer against the H-bomb threat was insufficient. In September 1955 a new scheme was initiated to provide more heavily protected Regional Seats of Government (RSGs). The War Room at Tunbridge Wells was not upgraded and the regional seat of Government for the region was established in caverns beneath Dover Castle. However, under another Home Office reorganisation in 1963, the Tunbridge Wells War Room was reactivated as a Sub-Regional Control, a role it met until 1972 when the administrative structure was once again reorganised. Subsequently it was used as a police communications centre (Campbell 1983, 56; 75-6; 202-11). Demolition of the War Room took place during September and October 1997.

## DESCRIPTION

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The War Room is situated about ½ km to the southeast of Tunbridge Wells town centre, in an angle of land between Forest Road and a minor road leading to Camden Park. Characteristically for this type of structure, it is sited on the periphery of an estate of government offices, large sections of which have recently been demolished. At the time of the investigation the bunker itself was being demolished, and access was restricted to the perimeter of the safety fence.

The War Room has a rectangular plan of 27m by 22.8m (88 ft 6 inches by 74 ft 9 inches), and is oriented from southwest to northeast. It lies at the eastern extremity of a large government office estate, which is at present principally occupied by the Land Registry agency. Large sections of this complex have recently been demolished except for a modern office building, Curtis House.

### Exterior

The War Room is constructed from reinforced concrete, the external walls are 1.5m (4 ft 11 inches) thick, and their external faces are of self-finish concrete. It is a stepped structure, comprising, to the north, the main double-storey section which accommodated the map room and associated offices, and to the south a single-storey annexe which housed the plant rooms and toilets. All the elevations are plain and featureless except for single doors on either side of the annexe, and double doors at the northern end of the western elevation. On the northern elevation of the War Room is a small integral room which houses the oil storage tank. This is entered through a single door in its western elevation and is ventilated by a small single light in the eastern elevation. There is no door between the oil store and the bunker. Also in the northern elevation is a small brick open ended lean-to of unknown function.

On the roof of the single-storey annexe, above the plant room, are three flat-topped rectangular air intakes and exhaust shafts, their openings sealed with metal plates. The roof of the main double storey structure, we were informed by the demolition contractors, is 2.13m (7 ft) thick. It is slightly cambered across its east to west axis to allow rainwater to drain north and southwards. The water was collected by cast-iron gutters and drainpipes attached to the north and south walls of the War Room. To prevent rain water splash down the exterior of the walls the roof has been extended with an overhanging lip about 0.46m (18 inches) in width and 0.15m (6 inches) thick.

### Interior

Although it was not possible to enter the War Room its internal arrangements may be described by reference to the contractor's plan and a plan of a similar structure at Cambridge (TL 45 NE 146) (MoW 1952). The original internal lay out of the War Room was symmetrical along its principal axis, and followed a standard pattern. The principal internal walls are of reinforced concrete upto 0.6m (23 inches) thick, slightly thinner concrete walls form the lesser dividing walls. During the demolition of the structure it was also seen that some of the partition walls were constructed of hollow bricks, which were typically used for dividing walls in bunkers of this date.

Entry into the building is at ground-floor level through two single doors on either side of the single storey annexe. The pair of double doors at the northern end of the western

elevation are probably a later addition. Entry into the building through the single doors is along staggered corridors, which also give access to the toilets which are located in the southern corners of the War Room. Between the toilets is the plant room, this housed a standby electricity generator and air conditioning plant. Typically for bunkers of this date air conditioning within the bunker was by means of rectangular section metal ducting fixed to the ceilings.

At the centre of the War Room is a square block of rooms, 10.1m by 10.1m (33 ft by 33 ft) which housed the map and control rooms. This is surrounded by a corridor on its southern and eastern sides which gives access to the rooms of the central block and the rooms ranged around the external walls of the War Room. A short length of corridor on the western side gives access to rooms along the western side of the structure. At the centre of the War Room was the map room, which was originally stood to the full height of the structure, but has subsequently been floored to create an upper room supported on concrete beams. In a further modification to the original structure the wall at its western end has been removed to form a large central room at ground level. Along the southern wall of the former map room are three control rooms which originally observed activities within this room. The former observation windows have been sealed and converted into cupboards, although in one instance a door has been inserted.

Access to the upper storey is by concrete staircases situated in the southern corners of the main section of the War Room. Over their central landings are concrete slabs which supported water tanks. During the demolition of the southwest corner of the War Room a galvanised tank was revealed. The floor plan of the upper level was almost identical to that of the ground floor. At the centre was the central block of the map room and control rooms to the south. A corridor around three sides of the central block gives access to rooms arranged against the external walls of the War Room. The circuit of the upper level could be completed by passing through a large rectangular room to the north of the map room. As described above, the open map room was floored to create an upper room. Along its southern side are two rooms, a large rectangular room, last used as the Fire Control Room, and a smaller rectangular room to its west. The cupboards in the dividing wall between the Fire Control Room and the former map room, indicate the positions of former observation windows. A door has also been inserted in the centre of the southern dividing wall between former map room and the fire control room.

Partial demolition of the floor slab confirmed it was thicker around the edges and shelved off to 2 ft 6 inches (0.76m) beneath the central part of the War Room. The floor slab was laid on a thin layer of clinker or furnace slag (pers. comm. P Edwards, Schal). It was, however, thought to be too thin to absorb ground shock caused by bombing and was probably laid to prepare the ground prior to laying the floor slab.

### **Site Archive**

No original archive material was held on site, either by Land Registry or by the demolition contractors.

Prior to the demolition of the War Room, English Heritage removed two twenty-four hour clocks and telephone booths. These are presently in store at Dover Castle in anticipation of being used in the refurbishment, for public display, of the Regional Seat

of Government beneath the castle.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

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We are acknowledge the assistance of Mr Berry of Schal and Mr Martin of Bryant Construction for allowing access to the site during the demolition of the War Room. We are also grateful to Philip Edwards of Schal for providing additional information. Nick Moore of English Heritage provided details of the artefacts removed from the War Room.

This account is based on a field investigation by Wayne Cocroft on 30th September 1997, record photography was taken by Alun Bull.



## SOURCES

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### Primary

Ministry of Works (Engineering Division) 1952 Regional Commissioners Office  
Ventilation, Gas Filtration and Hot Water Services. Job No. M52255 Drwg No. HB 1/1  
23-06-52

Modern floor plan, April 1997 drawn by K A Rylance & Associates, Woking, Surrey.

### Secondary

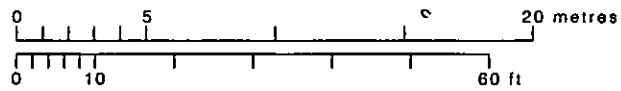
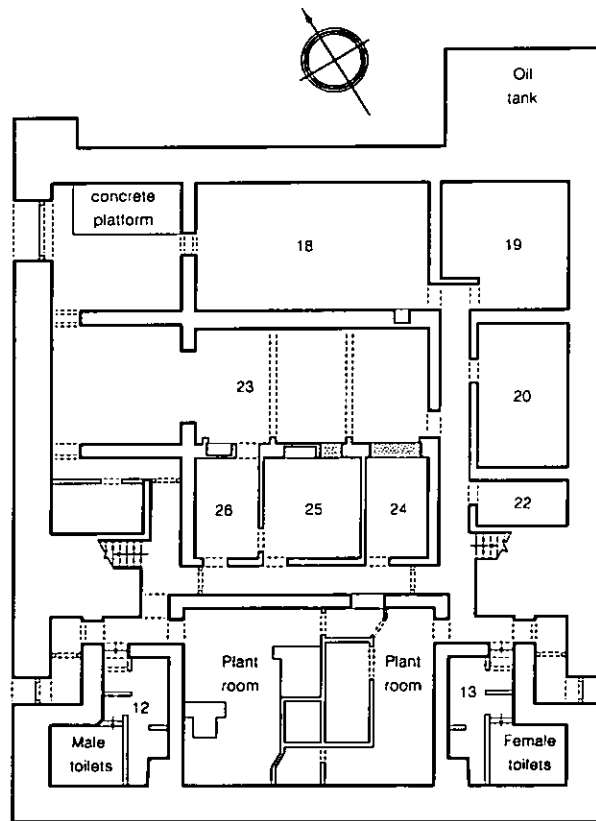
Campbell, D 1983 *War Plan UK* Paladin

Laurie, P 1970 *Beneath the city streets* Penguin

WAR ROOM,  
FOREST ROAD  
TUNBRIDGE WELLS  
KENT

NGR: TO 5955 3880  
NBR No: 96175

PLAN OF LOWER FLOOR



WAR ROOM,  
FOREST ROAD  
TUNBRIDGE WELLS  
KENT

NGR: TQ 5955 3880  
NBR No: 96175  
PLAN OF UPPER FLOOR

