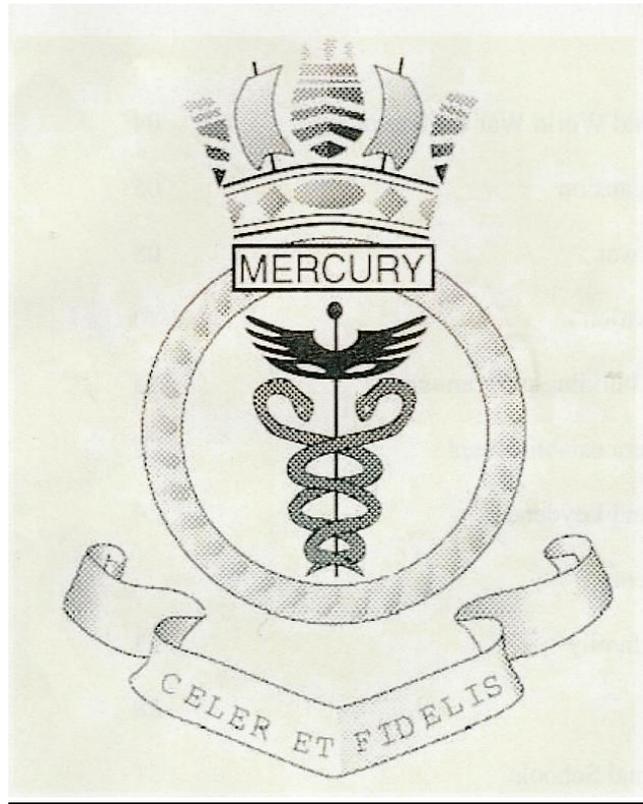


# H.M.S. MERCURY



Swift and Faithful

1941 - 1993

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## **Introduction.**

This is a short history of the Royal Naval establishment H.M.S. Mercury. The difference between writing a history of a person or a ship, as opposed to an establishment, is the establishment does not move. It does not interact with other objects or people as a ship or person would. Therefore, this history concentrates on the structural aspects of the establishment and the reasons for their existence.

The 'blood' of the establishment is the people who populate it. These people changeover the years, arriving and leaving and sometimes coming back. They provide some aspects of the character of the establishment and in return the establishment imposes its character on the people.

Mercury was a very popular establishment. Its isolation from the main command area of Portsmouth was a bane to some and a blessing to others. It made the Communicators feel different, unique and gave them a certain pride in their branch and their work. They knew, while serving on a distant station or ship, if they had a problem, Mercury would help them out.

The following document traces the development of the Leydene site, through the first commissioning of HMS Mercury to the final closure of SCU Leydene. The history has been supported by illustrations and the development of the Communications Branch during its existence.

Chris Rickard  
March 2006

## HMS Mercury

### The Second World War. the beginning.

Pre 1941 the Signal School was situated in HM Dockyard Portsmouth, near H.M.S. Victory. In 1938, there had been plans to move the Signal School out of Portsmouth to Stamshaw, its new name would have been HMS Swiftsure. These plans were shelved due to the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939.

Heavy bombing and damage of dockyard buildings and the surrounding areas, during 1940 and 1941, imposed severe restrictions on communications training. The staff and students of the school were required during the nights to provide fire parties and sentries on the dockyard walls. On the 10<sup>th</sup> March, a very heavy raid caused almost total destruction of the Dockyard and H.M.S. Vernon.

The decision was then made to move training, research and accommodation facilities away from the Portsmouth area.

The experimental section had already moved to Lythe Hill House, at Haslemere and King Edward School at Witley. The radio and headquarters sections went to Lythe Hill and radar to Witley. The reason for this was twofold. First the rapid development of technology such as radio, radar and HF/DF had expanded the section and the bombing had damaged the workshops. This split of the experimental sections from the training section, lost one of the great advantages of the school, that of enabling the trainers to keep up to date on latest developments and of the researchers to know what the 'users' wanted.

Leydene House and estate, had been earmarked for requisitioning since the 4th of November 1940, initially by the Ministry of Health, but later as an accommodation site for the Signal School.

On the 19th of April 1941, approval was given by the Admiralty to requisition Leydene house and estate and on the 20th, the Chief Surveyor of Lands made a signal stating possession could be taken forthwith.

On the 22nd of April, Captain G.H. Warner, who had assumed command of the Signal School the previous day, visited Leydene House, to establish what needed to be done to accommodate the school.

Lady Peel reluctantly agreed to the arrangement and remained in her estate in Scotland, letting her agent deal with all the necessary details.

While arrangements were being made for the transfer of the Signal School, a land mine was dropped on the site. However, this was the last hostile act of the Germans against Leydene. Prior to the move to Leydene, working parties arrived to prepare the site for occupation. Tents for accommodation had to be erected and the interior of the house had to be rearranged into classrooms, offices and various messes. The garage complex was converted into five classrooms by bricking up the entrances and providing access between them.

One of the first working parties of junior rates used the large kitchen as a mess and slung their hammocks between the legs of the big upturned kitchen tables. Arrangements were made for the storage of Lady Peel's furniture and possible employment of her estate staff. Contracts were also awarded for the erection of Nissen huts. Also duplicate classroom equipment and instructional equipment needed to be found and put in place to reduce lost training time to a minimum.

On August the 16m the Leydene site was commissioned as HMS Mercury and the Signal School moved lock stock and barrel to its new environment. Only one 'training' day had been lost.

### **Rapid expansion.**

Not all the courses previously run at the dockyard school could be transferred to Leydene. Fleet Air Arm observers went to Eastleigh, where Morse classrooms were set up and RDF operators to Valkyrie on the Isle of Man.

The first contingent of ratings numbered 300 and were accommodated in bell tents and messed in Leydene House. Until alternative buildings could be constructed, the Main House was used for all purposes, messes, classrooms and domestic usage. During the autumn and winter of 1941, Nissan huts were erected, along the area south of the Droxford Road and became known as West and East Camps, Separated by the garages. These two areas stretched

from where Mountbatten block was eventually sited to the Cinema. Initially the placement of these huts was random, due to the rapid need for them; later a more organised plan was executed.

Some of these huts, probably to save time and expense and due to their temporary nature, had their 'end's closed with timber as opposed to brick and the floors concreted. Eventually, over the years, some of the more used Nissan had their ends 'bricked'.

For the protection of the huts (and their contents) 3ft 6inch earth mounds surrounded them and sandbag traverses built, along with a trench system. The labour for this was provided by the ships company. A guard house was also erected on the road leading to Hyden Cross, opposite the site where the cinema would be built. It contained a small office, accommodation for six ratings and a small number of cells.

Later the numbers of ship's company and trainees fluctuated, often up to 1,200. The Nissan huts, designed for 14, were required, at times, to accommodate 24. Eventually, about 100 Nissan huts and 50 Ministry of War buildings were erected and were used for a variety of purposes, some even lasting until the closure of Mercury.

However, due to the shortage of officer accommodation during the early years, some of those on short courses lived in Excellent and were transported to and from Mercury, each day, by bus.

The WRNS contingent, initially were accommodated in the bungalow, next to the garage and stable complex and the top floor of the Main House. As their numbers grew, three houses in Hambledon were requisitioned and a third officer was billeted there to 'supervise'. White Lodge, previously the Butler's cottage, at the Clanfield

entrance to the camp, was also used as accommodation for ten WRNS ratings. Later two more houses were requisitioned in Hambledon. A bungalow complex was later built to the west of the garages for the WRNS' and contained recreation facilities, their admin and welfare needs and more sleeping quarters.

A galley complex with dining halls was erected between the garages and West Camp area, early in 1942. This consisted of a galley to feed 1,000 ratings and five Nissan huts one for the senior rates and four for the junior rates.

Later, semi permanent huts were erected to the south of the Clock Tower and contained the Signal School Mess and NAAFI canteen.

To the east of these, a brick bungalow housed the NAAFI 'wet' canteen serving beer and scrumpy. Over the years, after Mountbatten block was completed, this versatile bungalow was to house, in turn, the Regulating Office, New Entry Admin office, MACCO, Exped Store and finally the Buffer's Store. Prior to the construction of these buildings, the Signal School mess used a large marquee.

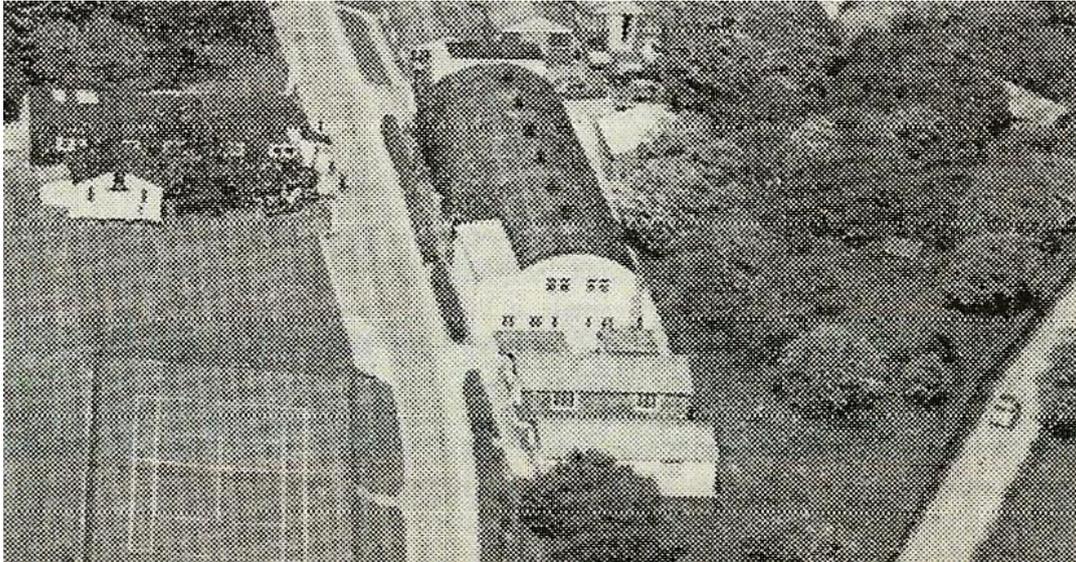
In the same building programme, more Nissan huts appeared south of East Camp. These were for accommodation, two for the senior rates and seven for junior rates.

Once the messes of the senior and junior rates had moved out of the Main House, there was a requirement for the Officer of the Watch organisation to move and make the building for the use of officers and administration only. Up until this point, it was situated in the entrance to the house, which served as the ships 'gangway' for liberty men and ratings joining and leaving. The OOW moved into the W/T and V/S stores huts to the north of the Main House with the MAA and regulating staff. The OOW's position remained there until the administration block was completed in 1973.

Due to the rapid expansion of the communications branch during the war, other communications training establishments were set up all over the country. Some dealing with the specialist communicators required for certain tasks, such as combined operations, convoy, landing craft signalmen and electronic warfare operators. Also new trades were appearing, such as teleprinter operators and coders. The Signal Training Centres at Plymouth and Chatham also expanded and had their own satellite establishments.

A Wardroom annex was constructed to the south of the Main House and completed on the 12th of February 1943 at a cost of £861 and became known as Siberia Block. This block was capable of accommodating 19 junior officers in cramped single cabins.

The first amenity building, a large Nissen style structure, was completed along the road from the main gate, in July 1943 and was used as a cinema, theatre and assembly hall. The interior was completely refurbished in the August of 1961, using a generous grant of £2,000 from the Nuffield Trust.



**Cinema**

King George VI visited Mercury in the summer of 1943, had lunch in the establishment and then took the salute during a march past. He also visited the research establishments on the same day.

The first semi permanent buildings to be constructed commenced in April 1944 and were the classrooms of North Camp. However the land was not actually requisitioned until January 1945. These were Ministry of War building (MOWB) style huts and the area was eventually completed in 1947. It comprised of two areas, separated by the ancient Cross Dykes, which was 'crossed' by two footpaths at the north and south ends of the camp. Initially these buildings were used for the training of RNVR officers in W/T and Radio Mechanics. Later, the north eastern part of the camp became home to the 'S' branch and EW sections.

Prior to the war, the Telegraphists were responsible for the maintenance of their own equipment. However, as the war progressed, a new branch of Radio Mechanic was created and not only dealt with radios, but also the rapidly developing RDF or Radar equipment. Radio Mechanics were trained in the North Camp workshops and classrooms as they were erected. Telegraphists also did their training in the equipment rooms. After the war, the Radio Mechanic branch was absorbed into the new Radio Electricians branch.

Radio maintenance training continued in North Camp, for a while and Radar maintenance and workshop principles were completed in another new establishment, Collingwood, at Fareham.

With the birth of the Radio Electricians branch, after the war, they took over responsibility for the maintenance of all electrical equipment, thus the Telegraphist lost his 'user/maintainer' status. Many skilled Tel's were absorbed into the new branch to provide a foundation of experience.

On the 19th of August 1945, approval was given for Mercury to carry out the functions of a shore W/T station. This would enable the Signal School, not only to receive its own signal traffic, if required, but also to conduct W/T training exercises with other W/T stations and ships at sea and in the dockyard.

To achieve this, more equipment was ordered and three 60ft wireless masts were erected in the camp. Also there was a need for an 80ft lattice mast, and further land was requisitioned next to North Camp to accommodate it.

### **After the War.**

After the war, an area in the north east corner of North Camp became the home of the 'S' branch. They included classrooms, administrative offices, a watch room and workshops. The branch was fairly small at this point as during the war its main population had been hostilities only. There were still a number of National Servicemen serving as coders and linguists.

In 1946 consideration was given to moving the Signal School back to the dockyard at Portsmouth and return the estate to Lady Peel. However there was insufficient room in the barracks and the proposal was shelved. An alternative proposal at the time was to move it to Fort Southwick, but this was impractical due to its vulnerability to nuclear attack. At this time the first WRNS W/T course started in Mercury. The decision was made that all communicators should be able to touch type, this started with the training of new entries early 1946 and later, all communicators were required to have the skill.

An area to the West of the camp was cleared as a sports field in November. The cost of hiring the bulldozer was £350.

By 1947, it was established that the cost of moving the school was far greater than purchasing the land and developing it. The Admiralty bought the house and estate of 120 acres by compulsory purchase for £60,000 from Lady Peel.

Conditions at Mercury during this period were still very primitive. For example, apart from the Main House, there were only three flushable toilets in the camp and these were 'owned' by the senior rates. All other conveniences were rows of Elsan type buckets in whitewashed 'grottoes'. These had to be emptied regularly by a very dedicated working party and it was not unknown for a rating to fall into the pit. Compensation for this mishap was a series of injections and 14 days leave.

In the summer of 1947 the Glenholt signal school, in Plymouth, closed and the training of Leading Telegraphists was transferred to Mercury. A new Signal Training Centre was established in Vicarage Road in the Dockyard. Also the Naval Air Signal School closed in Arbroath and was transferred to Seaford Park, Lee-on-the-Solent, so as to be in close proximity to Mercury. H.M.S. Scotia closed in Ayr and reopened in Warrington for the training of all National Service and Short Service Communications Ratings.

In 1947, liaison was established with the BBC and a course was started in Leydene for instructors and officers in voice production as opposed to voice procedure. Automatic teletype or teleprinter communications was expanding and now available via radio to ships. An A/T mock up was established at Leydene to find the best layout of equipment for ships.

Also in 1947, a Leydene Amateur Radio Club was formed and a license obtained, callsign G3BZU. It established itself in a hut on the Broadwalk, initially with just two service sets.

Due to the decision to keep Mercury at Leydene, a new construction programme was initiated. Phase one programme included better accommodation for the senior and junior rates, a new boiler house and a purpose built recreation building to include a galley and messes.

On the 20th March 1948, Mercury's recreational yacht, Meon Maid was launched. Also this year the titles Signal Bosun and Warrant Telegraphist were changed to Warrant Communications Officer.

More land to the north of the Droxford Road, to the west of North Camp, was purchased in June 1948. This was to provide more habitable accommodation and work was authorised to commence on the 30th of June that year.

At first the requirement for this land was recreational. Full sized football and rugby pitches were planned, as well as a cricket ground.

However, accommodation was a more pressing priority. The sports pitches were eventually laid out in the Hyden Wood area and the small football pitch, previously established at High Trees was enlarged.

Also in the High Trees area was a small bungalow. At first it was used as a classroom complex, then as part of the WITEX organisation. WITEX was a series of classrooms distributed around Mercury to train operators in the use of radio equipment on board ships. Each classroom represented a ship or shore station and drill traffic was passed between them and some emergency drills carried out. The bungalow was occupied by X Section in the late sixties, PSA in the late seventies and finally became accommodation for NAAFI staff.

In the summer of 1949, Lord Fraser of North Cape cut the turf of a new accommodation block. This was A Block, later to be renamed Anson, and was to home 120 senior rates with self contained bathrooms and utilities. It was the first building to be built north of the Droxford Road (apart from North Camp) and was sited opposite the 6 senior rates Nissan huts. Rear Admiral Crumbier opened the block in November 1949 and the Chiefs and PO's moved in.



**Junior Rates dining hall - A Block**

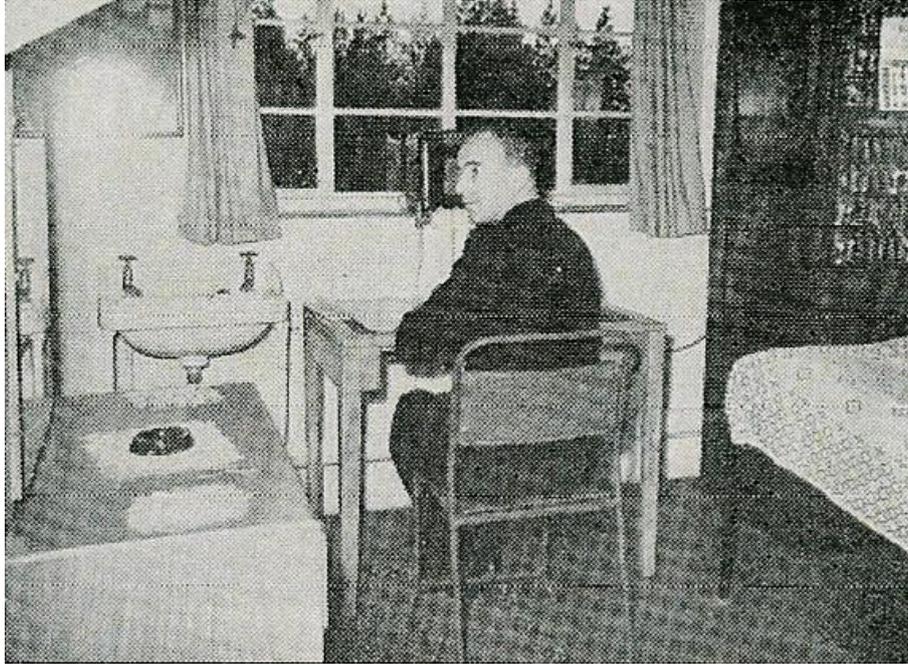
In the Easter of 1950 a small arms range was opened on the Broadwalk, opposite the Main House. This facility not only gave the Communicators military training, but also fostered enthusiasm for a shooting club, which over the years won many cups at Bisley. Later a purpose built, indoor .22 rifle range was constructed next to the old squash courts.

1st June 1950, a decision was made to abandon the small Poultry Farm and invest in a Pig Farm. This enterprise was situated in the area north of the Cinema and originally consisted of ten sties and a small boiler room. The 'Piggery' expanded over the years and became a lucrative business with profits of £2,000 per annum in the fifties. This money subsidised the maintenance of the playing fields, squash courts and rifle range. The farm was eventually closed down in the early seventies.

Summer 1950 communications New Entry training transferred to Mercury. In future, trainees joining at Raleigh and St Vincent would complete six weeks basic training then join Mercury for their communications package. Ratings joining at a younger age at Ganges would complete half of the communications package there, before joining Mercury. The purpose of this move was to standardise training.

### **Modernisation.**

In the September 1950 construction began of the new accommodation by Messrs John Hunt, builders from Gosport. The land north of the Droxford road, previously purchased in 1948, for the purpose of accommodation, became the site of much activity. A bowed road, to be named the Crescent Road, was laid and the foundations for the new Junior Rates accommodation blocks were started. These blocks contained eight mess-decks, four on the ground floor and four on the first floor. Each mess could accommodate ten ratings. Toilets, washing and laundry facilities with drying rooms were provided in a two-storey annex at the rear of each building. Also, as part of this project, permanent accommodation for the Chief Petty Officers was started. This block, containing single berth cabins and utilities, was constructed south of the Droxford Road and the extreme western end of the camp.



**Chief Petty Officer's single berth cabin.**

Seven accommodation blocks were built on the Crescent road. At the western end, Jackson and Inglefield were to be occupied by the Petty Officers. From the eastern end, Kempenfelt, Blake, Knowles, Popham (later Howe) and Pascoe were built for the Junior Rates. There was a gap left between Pascoe and Inglefield, to give the senior rates some privacy.

A boiler house was also constructed to the west of North Camp, behind Kempenfelt block. This was in addition to the one built a few years earlier by the garages.

In the winter of 1950 an area in Hyden Wood was cleared as a secondary sports field. However, this site had very poor drainage and would provide problems for a number of years.

In July 1951, a fire destroyed the dining hall and servery in the galley complex, also causing damage to the Chief's mess. Also this year, Hambledon Lodge, which used to be an estate workers cottage, was converted for use as accommodation for six officers. However, electricity and other amenities had to be supplied to the building. This shortfall did not hinder the occupation of the lodge and five mantel paraffin lamps were provided for illumination. White Lodge was also 'refitted' for officer accommodation and also housed six officers.

The first block was occupied on the 11th of August, 1951; two more were ready in September and November of that year. By the summer of 1952, the only people living in Nissen huts were ratings on short courses or temporary drafts. The Chief's and PO's blocks were ready in the August of 1952.



**Crescent Road accommodation.**

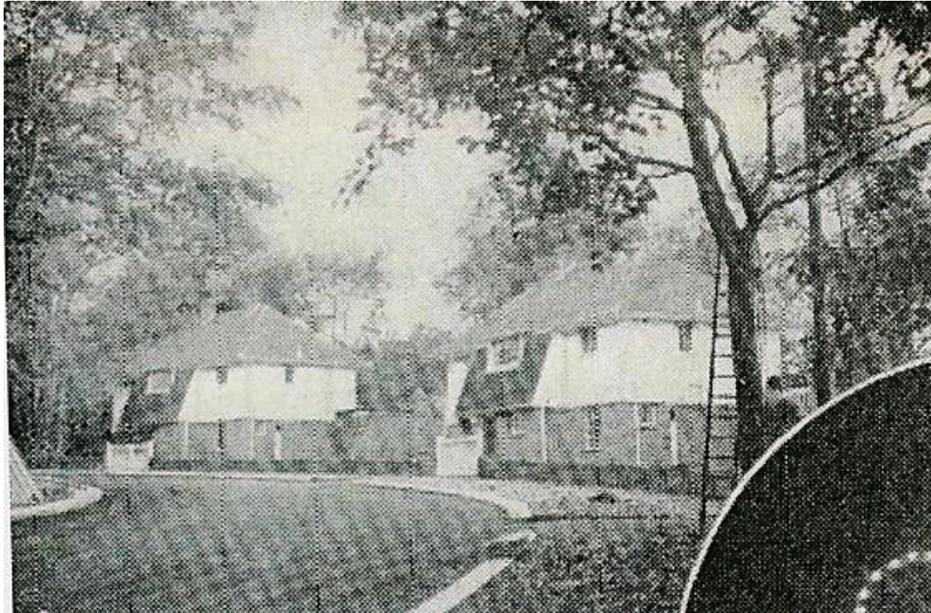
'A' Block was earmarked for conversion to a New Entry block and was named as such in the winter of '52. In the Easter of 1953 a brick 'front' was built on to the two Nissen huts making up the church and church hall.

One of the main features of Mercury was the Wardroom pond. It was not part of the estate when it was taken over by the Navy. It must have been built sometime between 1950 and 1952, when the road passing the east of the house was widened to allow for ships company divisions to march past. The pond was sited opposite the rose garden where the tennis courts were originally. The courts were then relocated further south along the road. Official funding for this ornament is doubtful, unless it was disguised as a static water tank for fire fighting purposes. Another, more functional, static water tank, for the same reason, was built behind the house during the war.

As part of this phase of the construction programme, work started on a 'marriage patch' in the village of Lovedean, to the south of Mercury. The first two were ready in early 1954, the rent being 17 shillings a week (85 pence).

When completed, forty six quarters for senior and junior ratings were available. A further sixteen were built in the village during the early sixties.

Five senior officer's married quarters were built in Hyden Wood, opposite the area to be known as Joe's Meadow sports field and a further fifteen were available in Petersfield.



### **Married quarters Hyden Wood**

The second part of the building project was to build a permanent block for Petty Officers, two more accommodation blocks on the Crescent Road and a messdeck and galley block. Further construction would include a canteen, administration block, an instructional block and accommodation for WRNS, who at the time were living in Soberton Towers. The sites for the new buildings had not been decided upon at this time.

Soberton Towers, built by Colonel Sir Charles Brome Bashford in 1905 and locally regarded as a folly, was requisitioned during the war. It had been one of the training establishments for the predecessors of the 'S' branch, the Telegraphist (SO), male and female, including the writers and coders linked to that branch.

During and since the war it was used as an accommodation site for WRNS working, or on course in Mercury, The WRNS would be taken by bus and sometimes lorry, to and from the site.

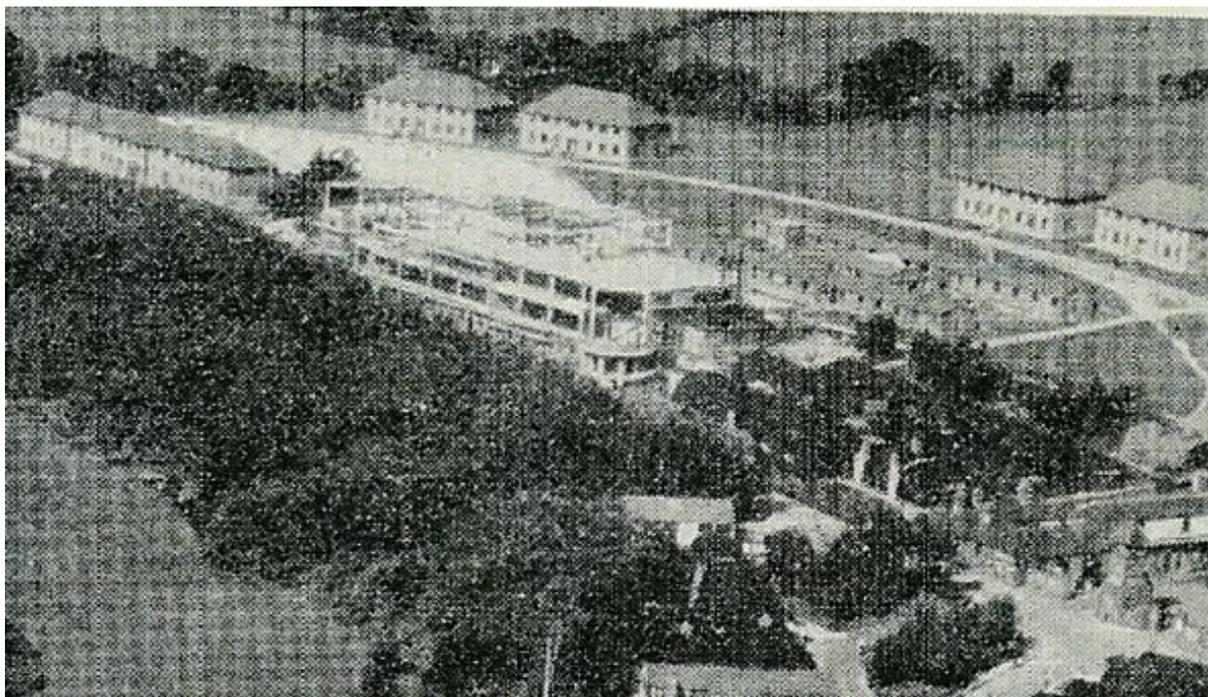


### **Soberton Towers**

During the winter of 1953/54, the redundant accommodation Nissen huts in West Camp began to disappear to make room for new construction.

In 1954, approval was given to fund the building of the new Mess and Recreation Block. The building contractors, Braziers of Southampton, started work by clearing the land and laying the foundations in the summer of 1955. The new building was across the Droxford Road from 'A' Block where the Nissen huts were being dismantled.

The First Sea Lord, Admiral the Earl Mountbatten of Burma, laid the ceremonial foundation stone for the new block on the 25th May 1956. On the 20th June, 1958, the First Sea Lord was back with Lady Mountbatten, to open Mountbatten Block. This large new block contained dining halls, galley, recreational messes for senior rates and other amenities.



### **Mountbatten Block under construction.**

In November of 1956, British and French forces invaded the Suez Canal area in support of Israel's response to Arab invasion. Operation Musketeer. Mercury was emptied of all spare communicators to support and augment the staff's of ships in the operational area and to man ships coming out of reserve. It was said that Mercury became a ghost town and the Chief's who remained were able to have the pick of comfortable chairs in the mess.

On the 26th of June 1957, Hyden Wood sports fields were used for the first time. But the problem with drainage remained, an attempt to rectify this was undertaken in June 1959 and again in 1963 before it was finally resolved.

During the latter part of 1958, construction commenced, to the east of Mountbatten Block, on a new purpose built instructional block. This was 'commissioned' as Eagle Block in May 1962 and contained classrooms for formal instruction and morse trainers as well as a more suitable home for the Classified Books Office.

In 1958 the structure and titles of the communications branch changed. Telegraphists became Radio Operators and Signalmen became Tactical Operators.

At the senior rate level, the CPOTel and POTel became Chief Radio Supervisor and Radio Supervisor, while the CYS and YS became Chief Communications Yeoman and Communications Yeoman.

A/T (automatic teletype) procedures were to be taught to both buntings and sparkers, giving them a common skill.

In 1959, certain elements of the 'S' branch moved from North Camp to RAF Tangmere, where the RAF had a special communications unit. The remaining 'S' members in North Camp continued with the Electronic Warfare aspect of the job.

In 1961 the User Requirements and Trials Section was formed. More commonly known as X Section, it was first located opposite the Guard room near the main gate. Its purpose was to plan future communications systems and organisations, office layouts and ship fits, communications and EW requirements and statistics and traffic analysis. Feedback from ships staffs was most welcome and encouraged by this section. The link between user and research/producer had been re-established, lost after the experimental section moved to Haslemere and Witley, Later, toward the end of the decade, the section moved to a bungalow to the east of High Trees playing field.

To make room for a second instructional block, the old Nissen huts north of Eagle block were demolished in 1961.

Towards the end of 1961, over a dozen garages were built to the north west of the pig farm. These were for the use of junior rates, the project was executed by the Buffer's Party at a cost of £200. A further amenity for the junior rates, was the installation of a laundry in the ground floor of Mountbatten Block, this enterprise was run and managed by two junior ratings. A changing room for the RA's was also provided in the same area.

Also in 1962, an open air swimming pool was built in the area to the south of Mountbatten block. It was accompanied by two changing huts and a filter pump house.

On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of May 1962, the new Mercury Club officially opened in Mountbatten block.

It was open to all rates (except new entries) and included a restaurant, espresso bar, a cocktail lounge called the Dutch Bar, and a social area for functions and dances etc. The doors were open for business on the 30<sup>th</sup> April. It had the dubious distinction of being the highest club above sea level in Hampshire.

The winter of 62/63 was very severe, with snow nearly isolating Mercury from the rest of the world. The road from Leydene to Clanfield was cleared of snow by the ships company, to allow one-way traffic. In order to co-ordinate the traffic flow, portable radio communications were set up between the Officer of the Watch and a communications team in the Rising Sun!!!!

On the 1<sup>st</sup> of January, 1963, the structure of the communications branch changed yet again. All communicators would now be Radio Operators. The previous Radio Operator became an RO(G), general, and the Tactical Operator became an RO(T), tactical. A new section was formed, the RO(W), electronic warfare. All three sections would have common communications training in A/T and message processing, as well as their specialisation. Ratings would enter the branch as an R03 or JRO and specialise prior to being rated R02 (AB). The RO(W) ratings were drawn from the electronic warfare portion of the 'S' branch. Ships would now have permanent EW staff that could also be utilised in the communications office when not required to man the Golly Shack.

All communications ratings would now wear the same branch badge, that of the previous Radio Operator, the winged lightning bolt. In Malta on the 29<sup>th</sup> December 1962 at the Grenada Bar, Gzira, a wake was held to mourn the passing of the old TO's badge of crossed flags. The occasion included a ceremonial 'burning' of the badge, accompanied by the words of 'The Lay of the Last Signalman'.

All was not lost however, CCY's and CY's were allowed to keep their original branch badges. During the mid '70's, the crossed flags returned to the right arm of all 'signalmen'.

## **The final building programme.**

All further plans for construction, the WRNS accommodation and administration blocks etc were curtailed in 1961 as a restriction was imposed on building. This was due to consideration being given to amalgamating Mercury with Dryad. The decision was finally made that the amalgamation was impractical in 1963 and in 1964 work began on a revised development plan.

Initially, plans were drawn up to ' build the two remaining Junior Rates accommodation blocks on the Crescent Road and a second instructional block.

June 1963, saw the opening of a new Fleetwork Trainer. This was situated on the ground floor of the eastern end of Eagle block. It contained nine cubicles and was capable of giving practical instruction to students in fleetwork, the co-ordination of the movements of ships at sea during various operations. It used an electromechanical system to project lights on a large screen to represent the movement of ships. Students could use the communications system to simulate external voice radio and internal control of outstations such as the flag deck or communications office.

The two new Crescent Road accommodation blocks were named Sommerville and Cunningham and were completed in 1964. Cunningham was to be used by Petty Officers and the other to be populated by the ships company, not those on courses. Cunningham block was finally vacated by the Petty Officers in the summer of 1971, when they moved into the new senior rates accommodation.

The second instructional block was named Dreadnought and completed in 1966. An extension was later added to accommodate an equipment wing by 1968, to allow the remaining Nissan huts used as classrooms to be demolished.

Longer term plans included more accommodation for Junior Rates, the aim to reduce overcrowding from 14 to 8 in each of the messes. A WRNS accommodation block to house all rates, those from Soberton Towers as well as the Senior Rates in the bungalow. An extension built on to the Chiefs block, to provide more suitable accommodation for the Petty Officers.

Further plans included an administration block on the present garage area. This block will include officer accommodation on the top floor, which will allow Siberia Block to be demolished.

A medical block and supply block were also required as well as a proper gymnasium. A new church was to be built and the cinema was to be demolished.

A budget of 1.4 million pounds was allocated to the redevelopment and involved four phases.

#### Phase 1

Sewage farm enlargement. Drill Shed. Petty Officers Block. Five new Junior ratings blocks. Alterations to existing Ratings blocks. WRNs Block. Victualing Block

#### Phase 2

Sick Quarters. Administrative Block. Instructional Block.

#### Phase 3

Alteration to Leydene House. P and RT Centre. Church. Naval Stores and Estate Block. Alterations to Garage complex. New Tennis Courts and improvements to playing fields. Captains Residence. Hobbies Centre.

#### Phase 4

Replacement of North Camp classrooms. Replacement of X Section and Publication section offices. New Assembly Hall.

By the summer of 1967, phase one had started and contracts to builders issued. The modifications and enlargement of the sewage farm was complete. The construction of the Drill Shed, to the East of the Crescent Road commenced in September. This building was used more for musters and PT than drill over the years, but served Mercury well. A small car park/bus turning area was laid in front of it.

Work started on the new accommodation buildings in April 1968, the first two, Sommerville and Cunningham, to fill the gap on the Crescent Road, had already been completed in 1963. These two had improved bathrooms, with baths, as well as showers and washing facilities. The remaining Crescent Road accommodation blocks were gradually upgraded to match the two new blocks. Included in the upgrade were television/quiet rooms to be built above the block entrances and improved bathroom facilities\* This was completed early '72.



**Mountbatten block dining hall**



**Mountbatten block gallery**



Early 1969, saw the foundations of five new accommodation blocks laid. Soberton block was to be to the south and east of the Chiefs block. It would contain sleeping and recreation spaces for all Mercury's WRNS, senior and junior. Leading rates and above would have single berth cabins, the remainder would mess six to a room.

The extension to the west of the CPO's block commenced of the Petty Officers accommodation. To the north, over the Droxford Road, three new ship's company blocks were erected. These were Anson, Rodney and Hawke, with accommodation on three stories containing messes for 6 to 8 ratings and single cabins for leading hands. A television room and recreation/rest room occupied the top floor, with magnificent views across the Downs and towards Portsmouth.

Alterations were also made to Mountbatten block, a WRNS dining hall, a New Entry lounge, plus a NAAFI and barbers shop. At the western end of the block more space was found for the senior rates servery.

Life could not have been easy for the poor Chiefs during this period, surrounded on all sides by construction work.

1969 also saw changes to the training structure of communicators. Ratings would now sub-specialise to G, T or W during their initial training. There would still be a course and examination to advance to the able rate, R02, and these would be done at Mercury, STC Devonport and STC Kranji. New courses for advancement to LRO G, T and W started in January 1970 at Mercury. Included in the Leading rates course would be the new subject of management, candidates were also required to complete a leadership course, albeit in another establishment.

Closer links were now being established with Dryad, as T and W ratings courses took advantage of the operations room training facilities. During this period, there were feasibility studies into the amalgamation of the T and W rates and the combination of T, W and RP (radar plotter) to create a warfare specialist. These ideas did not come bear fruit.

Changes were also afoot with the 'S' branch. The RAF had decided to move out of Tangmere to North Luffenham, leaving the RN unit the sole occupier of the site. Also, technical advances in the 'job' meant that students were doing courses at a multitude of sites, such as GCHQ Cheltenham, Bletchley and Earls Court.

The unit, however, was still administered from Mercury and in the early seventies was renamed Special Communications Unit Mercury.

1970 saw A block demolished, to clear space for the new Victual ling/Supply block and land prepared for a purpose built NAAFI shop, which was completed in 1971.

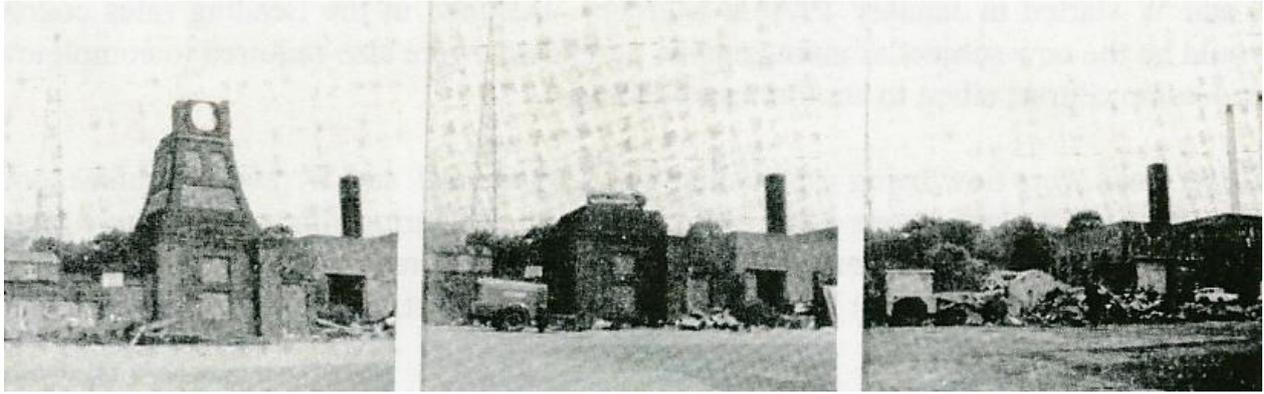
Also a new Captain's house was built on the southern end of the Broadwalk. The house was first occupied by Captain Barrie Kent and his wife, Peggy, on December the 18<sup>th</sup> 1970. There were initial problems with the house, but some of these, such as the roof leaking were soon resolved. Prior to occupying the house, Captain and Mrs Kent lived in one of the quarters in Hyden Wood.

The three new ships company blocks, Anson, Hawke and Rodney were ready for occupation during the same period and the Petty Officers finally moved into their new accommodation to the west of the present CPO's block. In later years, when the CPO's and PO's messes amalgamated, there was no distinction between the allotment of cabins. A duty part accommodation block was completed behind the Crescent Road accommodation blocks and was named St Vincent Block. Later this building was used as a New Entry/Kelly club.

In September 1971, a new Fleetwork Trainer was opened in Eagle block. This one was at the western end of the ground floor and contained many improvements taken from experience with the older one. They were now referred to as FWT east and FWT west.

A new M/T section and civilian, CISCO, canteen was started, close to the new Boiler House, also completed in 1971. A mall NAAFI shop was completed immediately to the east of the new Rodney block, superbly situated within the main accommodation area. June the 30<sup>th</sup> 1971 saw the closure of the cinema due to increased costs and lack of revenue. However, after a few years, funds were found and the cinema was recommissioned for Christmas pantomimes etc.

Early 1971 saw one of the main landmarks of Mercury knocked down. The clock tower at the entrance to the bungalow and garage complex had first been built in the twenties as part of the original Leydene estate.



**Demolition of the Clock Tower**

In 1971 the New Entry division was renamed Kelly Squadron in honour of Lord Mountbatten's famous destroyer, lost during the battle of Crete in 1941. On June the 10<sup>th</sup> 1972 Lord Louis and members of the Kelly Association attended divisions at Mercury to present a print of the destroyer to the newly named squadron during their families' day.

In 1972, the third instructional block was opened. This was Nelson block and would house officer training, A/T classrooms, typing trainers, a frequency laboratory and a presentation room. Later, in January 1974, the Exercise Wireless Office was transferred from the woods to the purpose built area in the ground floor.

The new Administration block was also completed this year and contained the Pay Office, MACC, Course Planning Centre and the WRNS administration offices. The OOW now moved to a new suite of offices on the north side of the building, on the Droxford Road, which was a more practical location. The new block also contained the Captain's and Senior Officer's office complex.

All of the construction completed in 1971 and 1972 was carried out by Messrs F.J. Privett of Portsmouth.

The remaining Nissan huts to the east of the boiler house began to be demolished in the summer of 1973, to make room for the new YSM/DOE buildings and Squash Courts. The Cinema, Church and Church hall were to remain as historic testament to the wartime Mercury.

1975 saw the introduction of the RO(SM), a dedicated submarine communicator. His job now not only included communications, but also T, EW and RP duties. Conversion courses were held for EW and RP ratings and the first direct entry RO(SM) completed training in October 1975.

This combination was not a success and was reduced in 1979. This reorganisation was part a new system, whereby the communications branch now became included in the operations branch along with radar, sonar and gunnery branches. Mercury was now under the umbrella of the School of Maritime Operations, SMOPS, at Dryad. Another innovation of 1975, was the 'S' branch getting technician status and the higher pay band associated with it. They now became Communications Technicians.

In 1975, the new recreation centre was completed. It included a large gymnasium, activity areas, PTRO and PTI's offices, changing rooms and stores. The swimming pool was enclosed and became part of the new building. A hobbies room and a new home for the Royal Naval Amateur Radio Society were included in this building. The funds for covering and heating the swimming pool were covered by a grant from the 'Tot Fund' of £24,000.

Just to the west, a new sick bay/medical centre was completed the same year. Containing wards, treatment and consulting rooms and a fully equipped dental surgery. Also completed in 1975, were buildings for estate stores and the MPBW and YSM compounds. A new building containing squash courts was constructed and in the area of the old field gun track, an all weather pitch and more tennis courts appeared.

A magazine and armoury was built in the space under the northern part of the administration block in 1975. This replaced the previous one underneath the north east wing of the main house, which was notorious for the concrete ramp, cursed by many a ceremonial guard trying to navigate either up or down it in steel shod boots.

Started in September 1972 and completed in February 1975, the new supply block was commissioned. Containing both naval and victual ling stores, stores offices and cash clothing store, it also included on the south side of the ground floor, Jack Blair's naval tailor, Lloyd's bank and baggage store. The Droxford Road was widened throughout Mercury to facilitate the movement of large vehicles.

In 1975 work was finally started in modernising the main house, which had received very little attention since it had been completed in 1925. The suspended stairs were given a supporting pillar as they were very fragile. From 1946, only the Captain had been allowed to use them, from 1975, the privilege was extended to Lt Cdr's and above.



## **Mercury - the modern establishment**

Demolition of North Camp west starts in August to make room for new buildings to accommodate the RN unit from Tangmere.

In 1975, the EW specialists now became Seamen EW and transferred to a new instructional block in Dryad. The vacated classrooms in North Camp were soon occupied by the specialist navigational training section, which moved in from Dryad.

Also late in 1977, Ashmore block was completed in the western side of North Camp. It would house the Communications Technician branch when it moved from Tangmere the following year. The building, containing offices, classrooms and workshops, was for the training and administration of the CT's and was enclosed within a high security compound. Early in 1978 the CT's moved into their new buildings" and became Special Communications Unit Leydene.

On the 19<sup>th</sup> of February 1979, the first WRNS officer to become the First Lieutenant of a shore establishment was appointed to Mercury.

In 1981, an assault course was completed in the trees along the southern edge of the Broadwalk opposite the sickbay and Nelson block. However, restrictions were imposed on its use as it was deemed unsafe in wet weather.

An annex was built in 1982 south of Ashmore block and just north of the drill shed, within the secure compound.

1982 also saw the occurrence of the Falklands conflict. Mercury was drained of communicators to provide extra manning onboard ships proceeding south and naval parties on board the host of merchant ships taken up from trade. Such was the demand, that several courses including career courses were cancelled.

An announcement in the August of 1983, as part of Slimtrain, Vernon and Excellent were to close. Mercury was to remain where it was for the time being. Slimtrain was governmental project to make the Armed Forces more efficient, in other words a defence cut. However, the axe did not stay from Mercury long; a Parliamentary announcement In the June of 1985 stated that the school was to close as soon as possible.

In July 1984 the Bungalow complex was finally demolished, which originally housed Senior Rate WRNS, Junior Rate WRNS recreation spaces, Education Centre, Sports Store, Buffer's Store, Domestic maintenance group. The stables, which became the MT section with garages and workshops. The area was then covered with tarmac and used as a car park and sometimes as a parade ground by the ceremonial training staff.

October 1987 saw the biggest storm to hit the south of England for many years. Trees came down on all roads leading out of Mercury, virtually isolating the camp. But some of the ship's company who lived out managed to get in by climbing over the obstacles. Electricity supplies failed along with the heating and ancient hurricane and tilley lamps seemed to appear from nowhere along with stocks of candles. However, by the afternoon, working parties had cleared the road to Clanfield and within a couple of days, large Army generators were brought into the camp to restore some sort of normality. Luckily the damage to the camp was superficial, compared with other areas. However, damage to the Drill Shed was severe enough to put it out of commission for a while.

On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of September 1989, the IRA exploded a bomb at the Royal Marine School of Music at Deal, killing ten bandsmen and one civilian. Up till this point Mercury had been an 'open' camp. Now security fencing was erected around all areas. Effectively the camp was now divided into two parts by fencing along each side of the Droxford road. Access was by two gates on the north side and three on the south side. Later a bridge made of scaffolding and wood spanned the road from outside Hawke block to the car park to the east of the old senior rates accommodation. Later a small guard house was built by the road to the east of this car park to control the new main entrance to Mercury.

During October 1990, the first WRNS communicators went to sea, following an earlier decision to allow female ratings the same drafting opportunities as males. The only exceptions were service in submarines and the Royal Marines. Conversion courses at Mercury were attended by WRO's to learn both general and tactical skills. These courses were very successful; however some candidates did not turn up or left after a couple of days. Those who completed the course did very well. All female ratings now joining the Royal Navy were eligible for sea service and were soon integrated into the previously established training routines. Blake block on the Crescent Road was converted for use by female trainees, to enable all new entry students to be treated equally.

A decision was also made during this period that RO(G)'s were to be trained in visual signalling. This was the first step to creating a single specialist, more commonly known as the cross trained RO. A couple of years later, this finally came about and all new entries were instructed in both tactical and general skills. Existing RO(G)'s and (T)'s were to become 'cross trained' through onboard training or special short courses.

### **Closure and Leydene.**

In the summer of 1991, Her Majesty the Queen, with Prince Phillip, visited Mercury on the occasion of the establishments fiftieth birthday. Royal divisions were held on a damp drive in front of the Main House. This was followed by a garden party on the lawns at the back. The opportunity was taken to combine this event with a family's day, which, despite the weather, was thoroughly enjoyed.

Following the announcement to close Mercury, it was decided to keep the SCU, for the time being, in its present location. As part of the build up to the closure of the main camp and the SCU becoming independent, the stores block was cleared during the summer of 1992, for SCU use. This block would now contain dining halls for all ranks, a galley, a wardroom mess, some offices and naval stores. This programme was completed by the time Mercury closed.

In the August of 1992, the old boiler house, north of Crescent Road was demolished and work started on new boiler house and bonded oil tank. The new boiler house was completed in the March of the following year.

The first part of the migration from Mercury took place in the Easter of 1993, when the navigational training section moved out of North Camp back to Dryad. The eastern part of North Camp was then demolished and levelled to provide car parking facilities for the SCU.

The SCU ships company and trainees suffered a certain amount of nomadic activity as accommodation was upgraded or converted. Initially Hawke block was used for both male and female junior rates and some senior rates. Other senior rates were accommodated in Howe block, while Rodney block was converted to a senior rate complex, containing a mess as well as cabins and quiet areas, this was completed in early September. In June of 1993, work started on the upgrading of Crescent Road blocks to house the junior rates, this was completed in the November.

St Vincent block, or the Kelly Club, became the new junior rates club, run by the NAAFI. A sports hall was later added on the land to the west of St Vincent block. The NAAFI staffs were to be accommodated in the old PSA bungalow at High Trees, after it had been suitably refitted. This building was the only one outside the secure perimeter.

6<sup>th</sup> August 1993 all training ceased in HMS Mercury and recommenced in Collingwood. A new building had been built in the large training establishment south of Fareham. The new building was christened Mercury and contained all the administrative offices and some of the classrooms. An equipment wing was situated on the north side of the building and included two new fleetwork trainers. Further classrooms and a classified book office were in a block over the road.

By September 1993 a Guard House had been built at the eastern end of the Crescent Road, with sentry post and gun pits, to control the only access to the secure area. Perimeter fencing around the entire area north of the Droxford Road was upgraded and more security cameras installed.

From the beginning of 1993, SCU Leydene was referred to as SASCU, Stand Alone Special Communications Unit. This was in view of its semi-independent command status prior to the closure of the main camp. Later the title reverted back to SCU Leydene.

The buildings along the Crescent Road were now put to a variety of uses. Jackson block was used by CRTPS (they had been there since the late seventies) and Inglefield was used as an Exped store. Sommerville became the home of FEWSG and Cunningham was used as accommodation. Pascoe was the main administrative block, containing regulating office, pay office, sick bay and dental surgery. It also housed the First Lieutenant and the Buffer. Both Howe and Knowles were used as accommodation for the SCU, as was Blake block for female ratings. Finally, Kempenfelt block was utilised as the language school.

Support was to be provided by Dryad, only a few miles away. An LMA would attend the site three times a week to provide medical cover. Also, Dryad resources would meet any large transportation requirements.

In the December of 1993, the lands to the south of the Droxford Road, previously known as HMS Mercury, were handed over to the Defence Land Agency. All that remained was the area north of the road containing SCU Leydene and CRTPS

(Communications Requirements, Trials and Publications Section. Ex X Section)  
The RN Language School and FEWSG.

Anson and Hawke block were demolished once they had been vacated and there was no further use for them.

Demolition started on the now deserted 'southern' camp. The only building left standing were the Medical Block, which became the Sustainability Centre and the old senior rates accommodation block. The Sustainability Centre had been sub let to an environmental publishing company.

The guard house opposite the SC was used as a site manager's office while demolishing and rebuilding took place. A woodlands burial site was also created at the south western end of the Broadwalk.

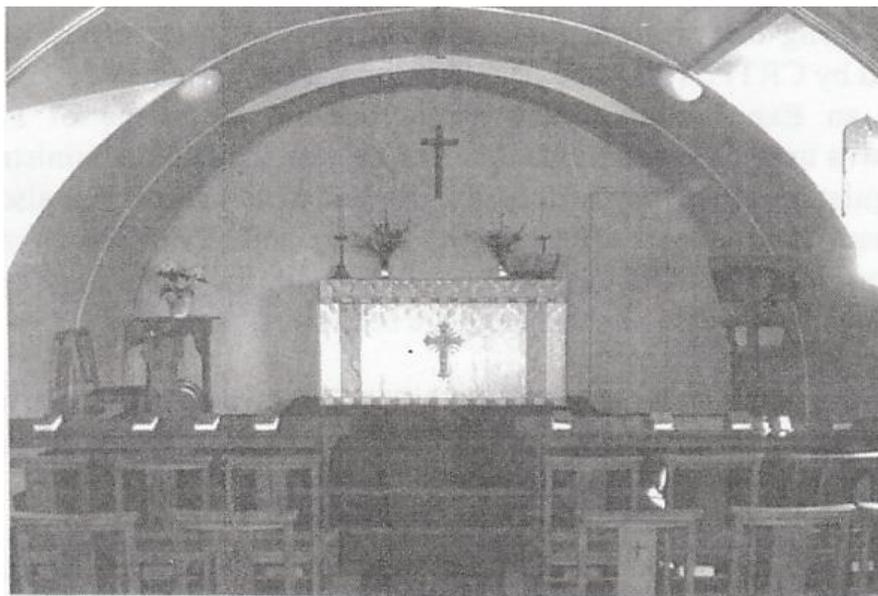
The Main house was converted into flats. Nelson, Mountbatten, Dreadnought, Eagle, Rec Centre, Admin, Boiler house and garage complex, were all demolished and luxury homes built.

However, it was soon decided that it was too expensive to have a small camp on such a remote site, however important and valuable. So the decision was made to close SCU Leydene, which would move to Collingwood.

The language school moved to the Joint Service Language School in Beaconsfield. CRTPS moved to Collingwood during the summer of 2001 and the SCU with FEWSG followed them there in the November of the same year. A new high security building called Ashmore block had been purpose built for the SCU at Collingwood.

The buildings north of the Droxford Road are still there awaiting their fate. The Cross Dykes, centuries old, remain.

One question arises, what happened to the 'Ghost' of Eagle block?



**Inside Mercury Chapel.**

## **Peel Family**

### **Lord Peel 1867 -1937**

Lord Peel was the grandson of Sir Robert Peel (1788-1850), famous in the nineteenth century as an eminent politician (founder of the Conservative Party and Prime Minister twice) and as Home Secretary, formed the Metropolitan Police in 1829. Sir Roberts youngest son, William Wellesley, born 1829, was elected Speaker of the House of Commons in 1884 till 1894 when he retired. He was then elevated to the peerage as a Viscount in recognition of his work. He died in October 1912. He had one son William Robert Wellesley Peel who inherited his father's viscountcy in 1912.

William Robert Wellesley Peel was born in 1867 and entered politics, following his grandfather and father. He was secretary of state for India twice (1922 and 1928) and Lord Privy Seal in 1931. He was created an Earl in 1929.

### **Lady Peel 1871 - (9<sup>th</sup> November)1949.**

Lady Peel's grandfather was James Williamson, a Lancashire textile magnate. He made his fortune exporting fabrics and from the invention of linoleum. This floor covering was first produced by covering a sackcloth, or cork, base with oil paint. On his death in 1879, his son, also James Williamson, inherited his vast wealth. The second James was a Justice of the Peace, town councillor, High Sheriff of Lancaster and Liberal MP for Lancaster. He was elevated to the peerage in 1895, assuming the name Baron Ashton.

Baron Ashton married three times and had two daughters by his first wife, Eleanor (Ella) born in 1871 and Maud, who died at the age of 30 in 1906. The Baron in his later years became a recluse in his Skerton estate, dying, in testate, in 1930. He left a fortune of some 10 million pounds, of which almost half went to his daughter, the rest to his third wife.

Lord Peel married Eleanor Williamson at All Saints Knightsbridge, London, in April 1899. Eleanor's father gave the couple a wedding gift of £800.000 to start them off. They had one son who later became the Earl of Clanfield.

After their estate at East Meon had been completed, Lord Peel rarely spent time there, residing mainly in London, where he could keep in close touch with the political scene. However, it was Lady Peel who spent the most time there and created the legends.

Lady Peel was very careful with her money. She was not averse to accepting rides from coal lorries, when walking from one of the villages back to the estate. One story has her suing Petersfield council for their delay in clearing the roads of snow. Her six guests had to stay an extra four days and she wished to recover the seven pounds and seventeen shillings for their extra board.

Eccentricity was a part of the Williamson family and Lady Peel was no exception. It was her habit to perform her morning exercises, on the balcony of her bedroom, in the nude.

Any grounds man or gardener who was seen looking at her was sacked on the spot. She would then dress and proceed down the stairs to breakfast, inspecting the potted plants on the way. Any piece of foliage with marks or dust, resulted in the chastisement of the Head Gardener and Butler. After breakfast, she would return to the bedroom balcony for the morning, with a telescope, to ensure all the staff were working at full capacity.

After Lord Peel's death in 1937, she took to the habit of wearing black all the time, in the fashion of Queen Victoria. As these garments aged, they began to become tinged with green.

After her husband's demise, she purchased an estate on the river Tweed, near Kelso in Scotland for the salmon fishing. Here, she had a main house built in the style of Leydene. While the house was being build, she resided in a boatman's cottage by the river so as not to miss the fishing.

### **Leydene.**

Lord and Lady Peel journeyed through the south and west of England, looking for a suitable site for their new estate during 1913. They both decided upon an area of 10,400 acres stretching north-west and west from Hambledon to Hyden Wood. The name Leydene came from the hollow to the south of Hyden Hill, Leydene Bottom.

The site was chosen for its solitude. It was quiet, and from the area where the main house would be, no other buildings could be seen. Also it was close to a large town with rail access to London.

This plot of land was astride an ancient road, in almost a straight line, from Butser Hill to Winchester Hill. The track, or travel way, pre dates the Roman occupation of Britain. This road is now part of the Southdown's Way and from Hyden Cross it becomes the Droxford Road to the west. Traversing the road was some earthworks called Cross Dykes. The purpose of these dykes remains a mystery and they could be Bronze Age, 900 to 600 years BC. However, various suggestions have been mooted, the most feasible being defensive. They may have been a boundary between tribal settlements. One of the more doubtful theories suggests that they were part of a covered 'walkway', to enable livestock and people to cross the ridge without being seen.

Cross Dykes consist of a ditch with embankments either side. Sometimes they may have two ditches and rarely three. There are only two known examples of a triple cross dyke. There is one at Tichthorn Down in Dorset and the other is at Leydene. Probably the only remaining portion left is in the area stretching north from the Droxford Road, through the North Camp area, to the spur south east of Wither Down. The portion south of the road, has now been built over. Cross dykes are protected as ancient monuments. There are also Bowl Barrows to the west of the dykes, probably dating from the same period.

Negotiations were started with Lord Hotham, who owned the land and the estate was purchased. Work started on the Main House, designed by Mr Jupp FRIBA of London, in the Spring of 1914 and an area North of Leydene Bottom was levelled for the foundations.

The stone came from Belgium, shipped across the channel, then by rail to Havant and finally by lorry to the site. The bricks were specially made by Rowland's Brick Works.

The Peel's moved into the farm house at Coombe Cross to keep an eye on construction. They stayed at the farm house for ten years. However, the First World War brought a halt to construction, as the labourers, who were all local, were needed for war work and to expand the armed forces.

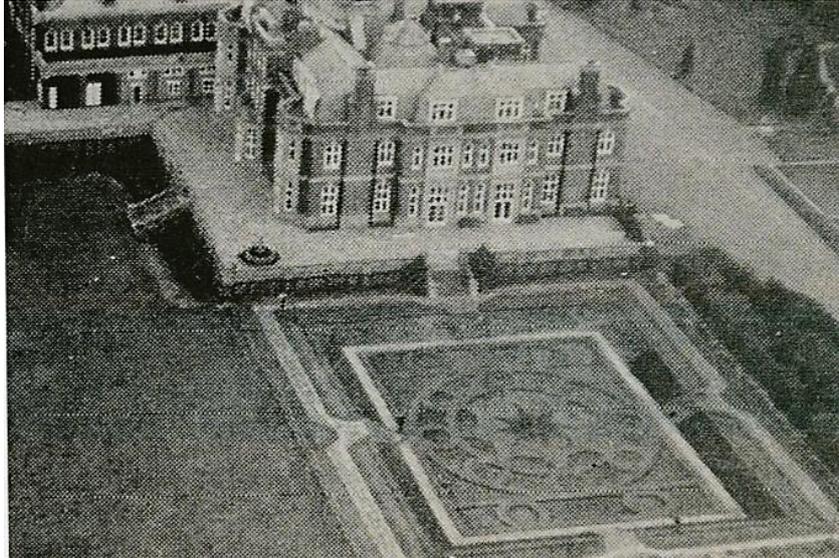
Work re-commenced in 1919 and the main house was completed in 1925, although some rooms were occupied in 1924. However, the original plans had to be curtailed slightly, as a result of the War devaluing the Pound. Some of the 'comers' were cut during the construction, such as a lack of damp course and some external walls only being one brick thick. This caused a lot of problems in later years. Two of the special features of the house are the glass dome in the roof and the self supporting staircase, copied from the only other in Belgium. The garages and cottages were also completed in 1925. The last building to be completed was the clock tower. The clock itself was hand made by Smith's of Clerkenwell, of London.



**The staircase at Leydene House.**

The original Droxford Road, which ran a couple of yards past the north east corner of the house and south of the clock tower, was moved to its present location, to afford the house some privacy. This road was pre Roman and ran in a straight line from Butser to Winchester Hill.

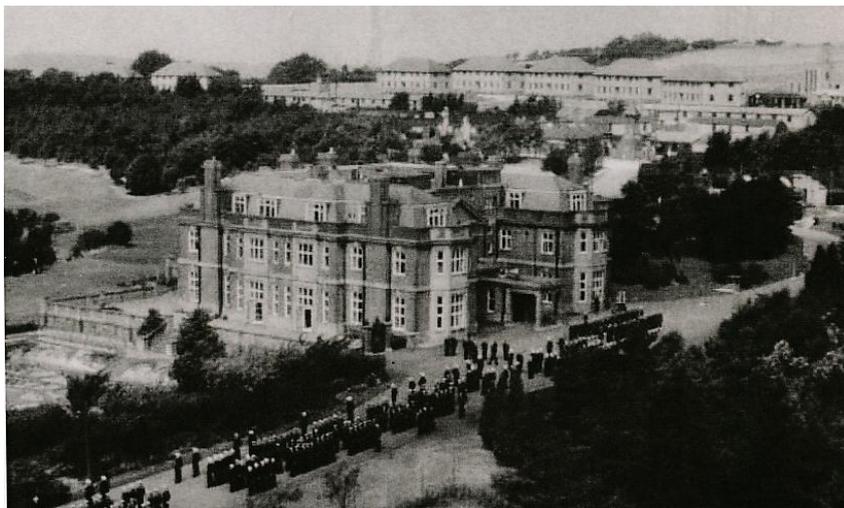
A rose garden was planted to the south of the house in the pattern of the most popular linoleum design. A croquet lawn was also laid to the west of the house.



**Main House with rose garden.**

From 1927 onwards, the house was in full operation, weekend parties in the summer and hunting and shooting parties in the winter. The kitchen garden occupied seven acres, this and the grounds needed fourteen gardeners. The house itself had twelve servants.

At the start of the Second World War the Germans bombed the Leydene area with three high explosive bombs and an empty oil can. The only casualty was a pheasant with a broken wing. Later incendiaries were dropped and in 1941 a land mine, but no structural damage was done.



**Leydene House in the fifties**

## Early Signal Schools.

Prior to 1888 there were no Signal Schools, all training for signalmen was undertaken onboard the ships in which they served by senior signal staff. The major drawback of this system was lack of standardisation in continuity of training.

Already, the Signalman's branch had developed to the extent whereby it had a proper structure, from boy signalman to the rank of Yeoman of Signals and Chief Yeoman. Also the 'job' had increased in complexity since the days when Pascoe advised Lord Nelson on signals during the battle of Trafalgar.

Not only did the signalman need to be proficient in flag signalling, but also semaphore and the newly introduced system of sending messages by morse code signals using a 'flashing' light as well as the heliograph. There were also plenty of ceremonial aspects to learn, as well as different shapes to indicate helm and speed orders.

In 1889 the first Signal School was established in the training hulk, HMS Victory, moored in Portsmouth harbour. The first Commanding Officer of signal training was a Torpedo Boatswain from Vernon, but early in the following year he was replaced by one of the newly promoted Signal Boatswains. Two more schools were created in short succession, Vivid in Devonport and at Pembroke barracks in Chatham, each with a Signal Boatswain in command. To ensure continuity between the three establishments, a Superintendent of Signal Schools was appointed in 1995, based in Victory.

Toward the end of the century, wireless began to make an appearance. The development of this equipment was undertaken at Vernon in Portsmouth. During this period the Torpedo Branch were responsible for all things electric. Therefore the subject of telegraphy began to be taught to the signalmen at the Signal Schools. Equipment was installed to facilitate instruction. At this time the telegraphic signal was received via an inker system, whereby the signal was reproduced by ink on a paper tape and the operator would read the morse code from the ribbon. Later, it was found that atmospheric interference or another station transmitting at the same time, made the tapes difficult to read. In order to alleviate this problem, it was found that the signals could be audibly read and transcribed, by a signalman, just as easily.

However by 1906, as the complexity of wireless and telegraphy increased, it became evident that a separate 'communications' branch was required. In 1907 the Telegraphist branch was formed, initially from ratings drawn from the Signals branch and later from volunteers from other branches. However, due to the rapid expansion of the fleet and the requirement for wireless in all classes of ship, some signalmen were 'cross' trained to assist in the wireless office, to alleviate the shortage of telegraphists.

In 1904, it was decided to move the Signal School at Portsmouth ashore to the dockyard. While this was being arranged, the school moved to HMS Hercules, lying alongside the wall. The move was eventually completed in 1907. The school remained in the dockyard until forced to move in 1941.

The outbreak of the First World War, brought many changes. The first was the formation of the Signal Section, part of the Operations Division at the Admiralty in London.

During the early part of the war, Admiral Jellicoe felt the need to have a signal school further north, nearer the main base of the Grand Fleet. He therefore ordered the conversion of a small merchant ship to be fitted out with classrooms and had it moored in Scapa Flow. This school was part of the Grand Fleet organisation and independent from the other three main ones. Its purpose was to provide continuation training for Telegraphists and Signalmen within the fleet. This school was the forebear of the numerous Signal Training Centres or STC's and was decommissioned after the war.

In 1917, it was decided that the different aspects of naval communications were too fragmented. The first was to move the wireless section from Vernon to the Signal School in the dockyard. This then became the experimental department. The second was to transfer all communications training, visual, wireless and sonic telegraphy to the signal schools. During this year the Signal School in Portsmouth adopted an unofficial crest as their badge. Its main design was the signal Equal Speed Charlie London, depicted in flags, used by Jellicoe to deploy the fleet during the Battle of Jutland, surrounded by lightning bolts.

After the war, in 1922, the King, during a visit to the school in Portsmouth, bestowed upon it the honour of the prefix His Majesties Signal School.



**Signal School Badge**

## Signals relating to the commissioning of HMS Mercury.

From Captain Signal School To Commander in Chief Portsmouth Info  
Commodore Royal Naval Barracks

//

Ref A.L.M. 08815/41 of the 20<sup>th</sup> July.

Propose that administrative, instructional and personnel Departments of Signal School be transferred to LEYDENE HOUSE on Saturday 16<sup>th</sup> August and that H.M. Signal School become an independent command from that date, the nominal Depot ship being commissioned as H.M.S. MERCURY accordingly.

//

1920B/6

From Commander in Chief Portsmouth  
To Captain Signal School  
Info Commodore Royal Naval Barracks

//

Your 1920B/6 Approved

//

0942B/8

From Captain Signal School Portsmouth  
To Royal Arthur, Highnam Court, Impregnable, P.S.O.D. Collingwood, Valkyrie,  
Ganges, Cabbala, Commodore Devonport, Chatham Info Commodore  
Portsmouth, D.P.S.

//

On August 16<sup>th</sup> H.M. Signal School will become an independent command as H.M.S. MERCURY with accounts in VICTORY. Request that from that date V/S and W/T ratings including coders be drafted to Mercury instead of to R.N. Barracks, Portsmouth. Railway Station is Petersfield and transport will be provided there on receipt of E.T.A.

Ratings for R.D.F. should be drafted to H.M. Barracks, Portsmouth as formerly. Signals for Captain Signal School should be made by T/P to T/P Call Sign PTM PAT.

Telegraphic address "SIGNALS EAST MEON". Telephone via Admiralty Trunks, Portsmouth Dockyard Exchange or G.P.O. lines Petersfield 760 and 761.

//

1840B/8

From Captain Signal School  
To Admiralty, Commander in Chief Portsmouth.  
Info Commodore R.N.B. Portsmouth.

//

H.M.S. MERCURY commissioned today 16<sup>th</sup> August under the command of Captain G.H. Warner D.S.C.

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1539B/8

From Commander in Chief Portsmouth To Admiral  
Superintendent Portsmouth Info Captain of Dockyard, Captain  
Signal School.

//

In Portsmouth number 381/10/90 of 9<sup>th</sup> August. The Admiral Superintendent  
was requested to report the name of a vessel to bear the name of H.M.S.  
Mercury.

A reply was asked for in my 1356A/3/11 but none has been received

//

Ref CinC's 1345A/16 there are no boats available in this department. It is  
suggested that Signal School Motor Boat be named Mercury.

From Commander in Chief Portsmouth To Captain Signal School  
Info Admiral Superintendent Portsmouth, Captain of Dockyard.

//

Portsmouth No. 381/10/90 of 9<sup>th</sup> August. Is there any objection to Signal  
School motor boat being re-named "Mercury" as A.S. reports that he has no  
vessel suitable for re-naming

//

1615A/17/12/41

**Memorandum relating to transfer of Signal School to Leydene HMS Mercury  
and provision of 'Depot Ship'.**

Subject Commissioning of H.M. Signal School as H.M.S. Mercury.

From Commander in Chief Portsmouth 9<sup>th</sup> August 1941 381/10/30

To Admiral Superintendent, Portsmouth.

Copy Captain of the Dockyard Portsmouth, Captain H.M. Signal School.  
Portsmouth.

Approval has been received for H.M. Signal School to be commissioned  
as an independent command under the name of H.M. S. Mercury.

2. The Admiral Superintendent is requested to select a small sea-going  
vessel to bear the name Mercury, and report the name of the vessel selected  
as soon as possible.

3. Possibly the trawler Strathcore might be considered suitable for the  
time being.

From Admiralty

17<sup>th</sup> August, 1941 M.012667/41.

To Commander in Chief Portsmouth.

Copy The Captain H.M. Signal School Portsmouth.

I am to acquaint you that the Experimental Department of the Signal School will remain at Haslemere. The Establishment has been named Mercury II and will be an independent command. The accounts will be carried out as heretofore.

2. A harbour launch or other small vessel should be renamed and commissioned accordingly, the date being reported.

By command of their Lordships.  
(signed) H.N. Morrison.

Subject H.M.S. Mercury II - Experimental Dept, of H.M. Signal School.

From Commander in Chief Portsmouth.

31<sup>st</sup> August 1941 381/86.

To Captain H.M. Signal School

Copy Admiral Superintendent Portsmouth

With reference to Admiralty Letter M.012667/41 (copy attached for Admiral Superintendent, Portsmouth), the harbour launch or small vessel is to be selected in conjunction with the Admiral Superintendent, Portsmouth.

2. The Captain H.M. Signal School is requested to forward to Commander-in- Chief, Portsmouth, a proposed draft amendment to P.G.0.2893.

Subject H.M.S. Mercury I and H.M.S. Mercury II

From The Commander in Chief Portsmouth.

22<sup>nd</sup> December 1941 6786/381/10

To The Secretary of the Admiralty

Copy Admiral Superintendent Portsmouth, Captain Signal School, Captain Superintendent Admiralty Signal Establishment.

With reference to Admiralty Letter M.08815/41 of 30<sup>th</sup> July, 1941, and Admiralty Letter M.012667/41 of 27<sup>th</sup> August, vessels have been selected as follows to be renamed H.M.S. MERCURY and H.M.S. MERCURY II:-

Motor Boat No 3520 to be renamed H.M.S. MERCURY and to be considered as commissioned to date 16<sup>th</sup> August, 1941  
Motor Boat No 3521 to be renamed H.M.S. MERCURY II and to be considered as commissioned to date 27<sup>th</sup> August, 1941

Signed W.M. James Admiral.

From Commander in Chief Portsmouth 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1941

381/10

To Admiral Superintendent Portsmouth, Captain H.M. Signal School.

For Information

As I first requested Admiral Superintendent and Captain H.M. Signal School to take action on Portsmouth No. 381/10/90 of 9<sup>th</sup> August and again in No. 381/86 of 31<sup>st</sup> August and neither of these letters produced any reply, I think someone, in both cases, must have put these letters of mine out of sight so as to be out of mind. It would be an advantage to future celerity in business if the culprits are admonished.

Signed William James Admiral.

## Communications Training Establishments.

### Pre War establishments

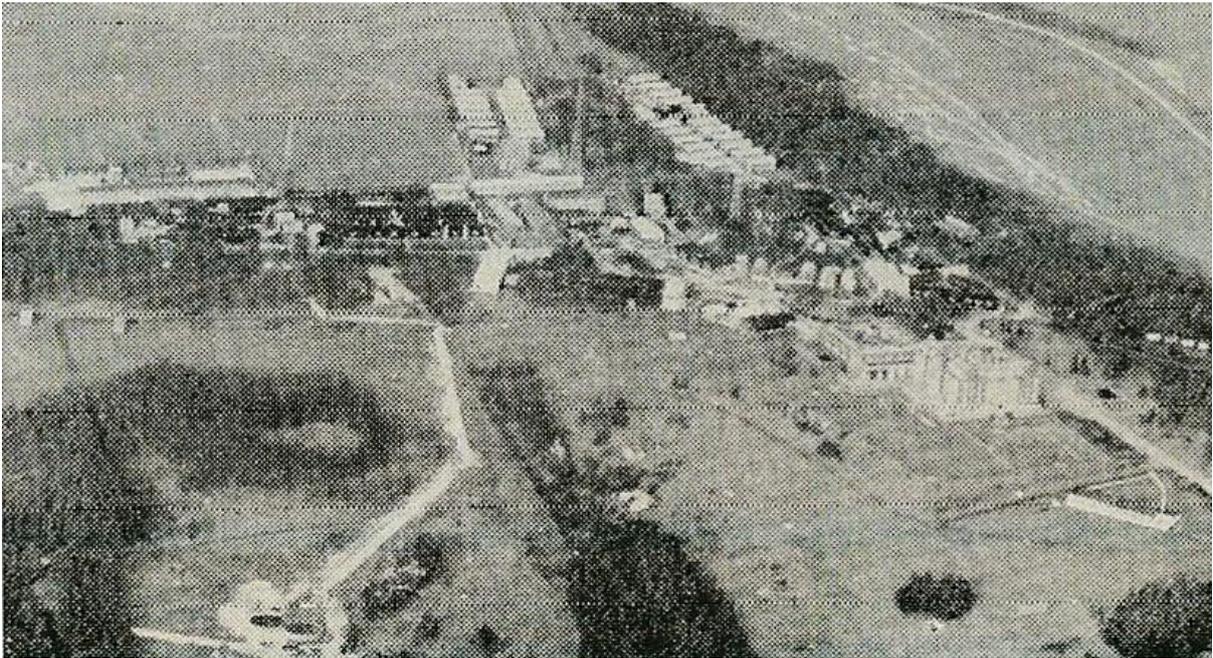
H.M. Signal School	R.N. Barracks	All courses except boys
Signal School	R.N. Barracks Chatham	Entries and No3 non-sub
Signal School	R.N. Barracks Devonport Glenholt	Entries and No3 non-sub rates
H.M.S. St Vincent	Gosport	Boys
H.M.S. Ganges	Shotley	Boys
H.M.S. Caledonia	Rosyth	Boys
Signal Training	Malta	Non-sub rates
R.A.N. Signal School	Flinders Naval Depot	
R.I.N. Signal School	Bombay	
R.C.N. Communications ratings were trained in the U.K.		

### War Establishments.

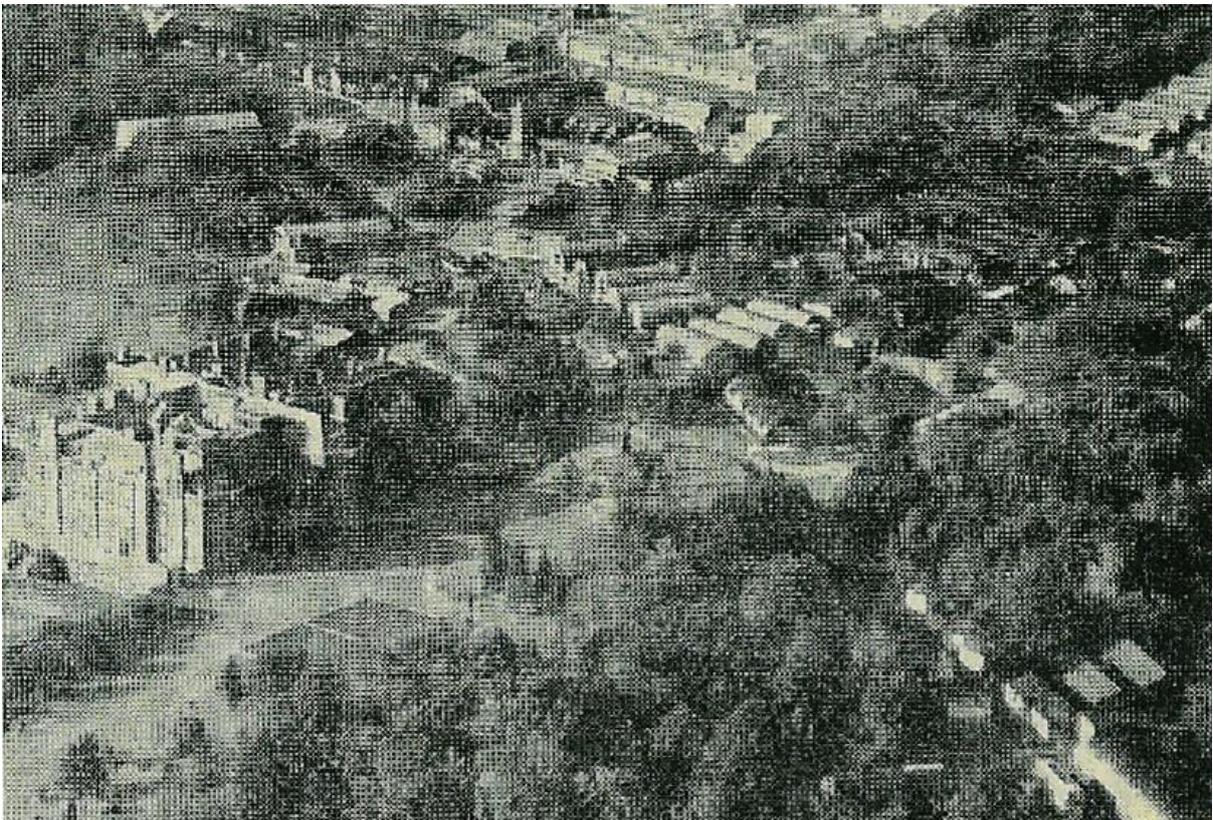
H.M. Signal School	Leydene	Officers, Non-sub rates, Special courses.
	Soberton 11/43-	WRNS Comms. trng?
Signal School	R.N. Barracks Chatham	No3 non-sub rates, miscellaneous.
Signal School	R.N. Barracks Devonport At Glenholt, then moved to Vicarage road in dockyard in 47.	No3 non-sub rates, miscellaneous.
Signal Training	Londonderry	Signal Training Centre
Signal Training		Signal Training Centre
H.M.S. St George	Isle of Man	Boys.
H.M.S. Impregnable	Devonport	H.O. ratings.
H.M.S. Scotia	Ayr Comm Jan 42. Paid off 12/46	H.O. ratings
HMS Scotia	Warrington	National Service V/S, W/T, WRNS teleprinter and switchboard. 2 camps, v/s and teleprinter north and w/t
H.M.S. Royal Arthur	Skegness	H.O. ratings
H.M.S. Valkyrie II	Isle of Man Paid off 26/3/45	H.O. ratings Trng transferred to Scotia.
H.M.S. Ganges	Shotley	H.O. ratings (first part of war only)
H.M.S. Collingwood	Fareham	H.O. ratings (first part of war only)
H.M.S. Wildfire	Sheerness	H.O. ratings (first part of war only)

		only)
Wireless College	Glasgow	Initial training of H.O. Telegraphists.
Scottish Signal School	Glasgow	Initial training of H.O. Telegraphists.
Caledonian Wireless College	Glasgow	Initial training of H.O. Telegraphists.
Wireless College	Aberdeen	
British W/T School	Middlesex	Initial training of H.O. Telegraphists.
Wireless School	Holloway	Initial training of H.O. Telegraphists.
Telegraphy Training College	London	Initial training of H.O. Telegraphists.
Wireless college	Dundee	Initial training of WRNS (W/T) at first, initial training of H.O.
H.M.S Cabbala	Warrington 09/42-11/46	WRNS W/T V/S and coders. Trng transferred to A/M ratings.
Various G.P.O. training schools		
Soberton Towers.	Nr Portsmouth	S.O. etc ratings incl WRNS.
St Bede's	Eastbourne	S.O. ratings incl WRNS
Training School	Brighton	S.O. ratings incl WRNS
R.N. W/T Station	Scarborough	S.O. ratings incl WRNS
R.N. W/T Station	Flowerdown	S.O. ratings incl WRNS
Southmead's	Wimbledon	S.O. ratings incl WRNS, Writers (Sp).
H.M.S. Condor	Arbroath	Naval Air Signal School
H.M.S. Dundonald II	Troon	Combined Ops Signal School
R.A.N Signal School	Sydney	
R.C.N. Signal School	Halifax	
R.I.N. Signal School	Bombay	
H.M.S. Assegai	Durban	Signal School for Eastern Fleet (planned on a big scale, but never fully developed owing to Fleet's return to Ceylon).
Signal Training	Alexandra	Courses for ratings from
Signal Training	Ceylon	Courses for ratings from
Signal Training	Simonstown	Courses for ratings from
Signal Training	Halifax	Courses for ratings from
Combined Ops Signal School	Canal Area	Combined Operations Signals
Combined Ops Signal School	Bombay	Combined Operations Signals

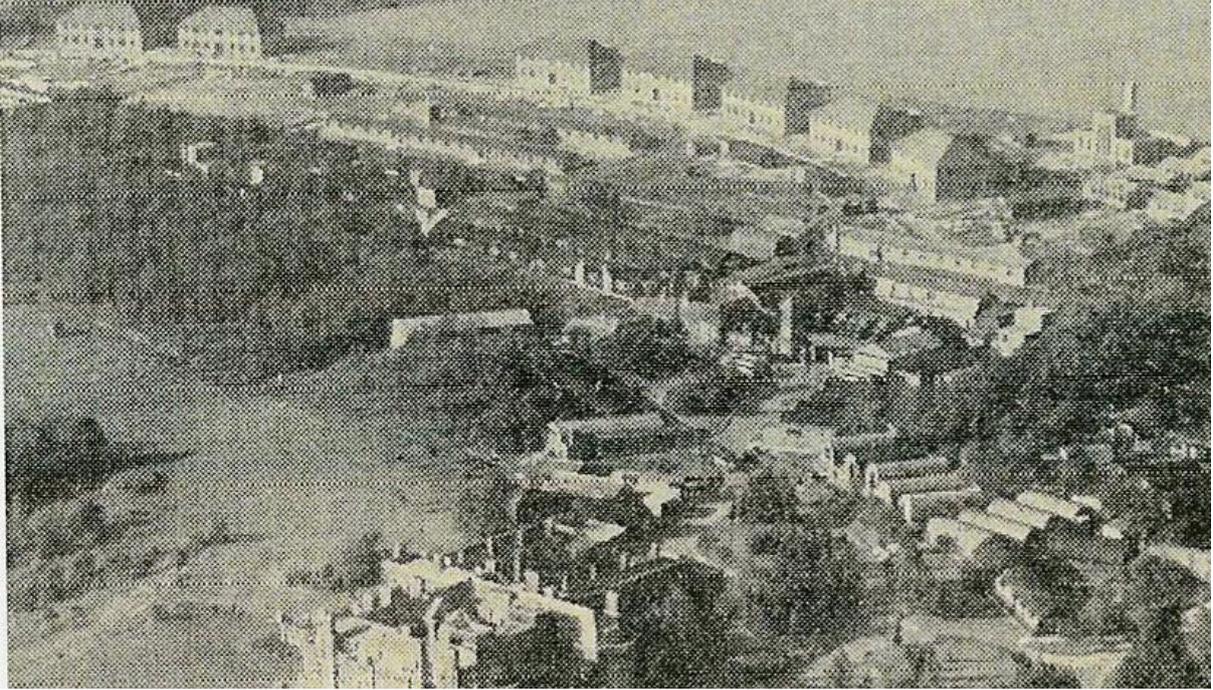
## The changing face of Mercury



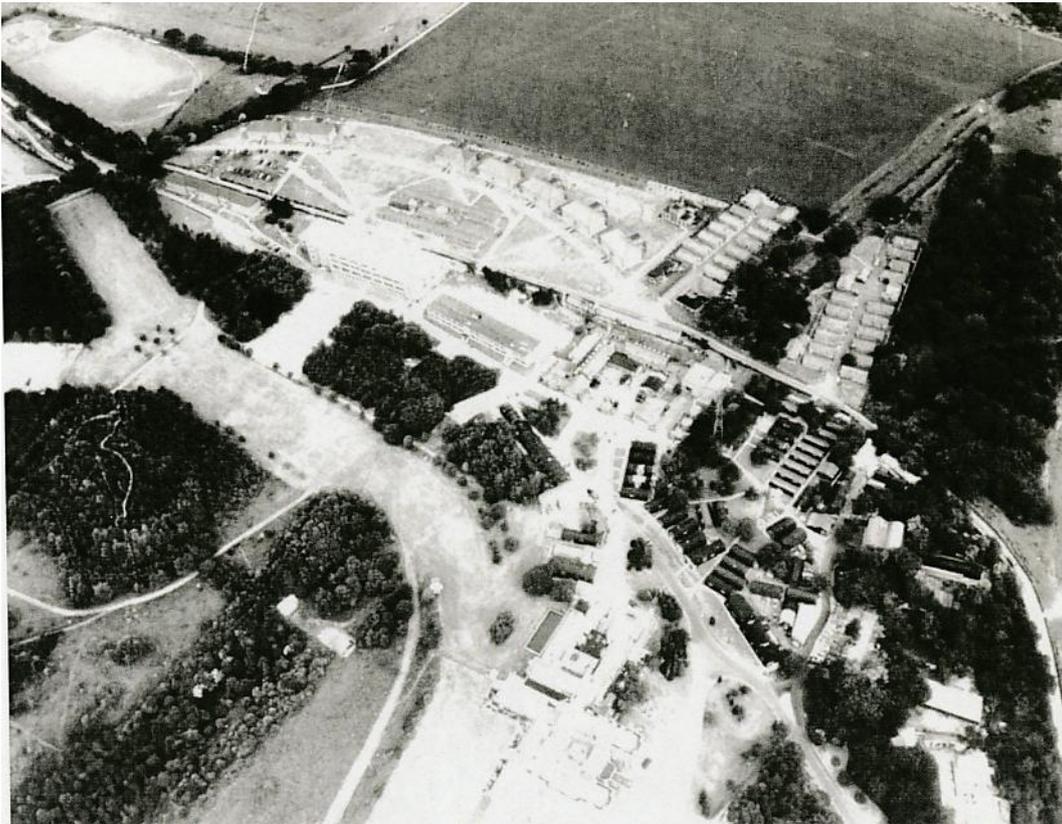
**Mercury c1949/50 - Note: no Wardroom pond.**



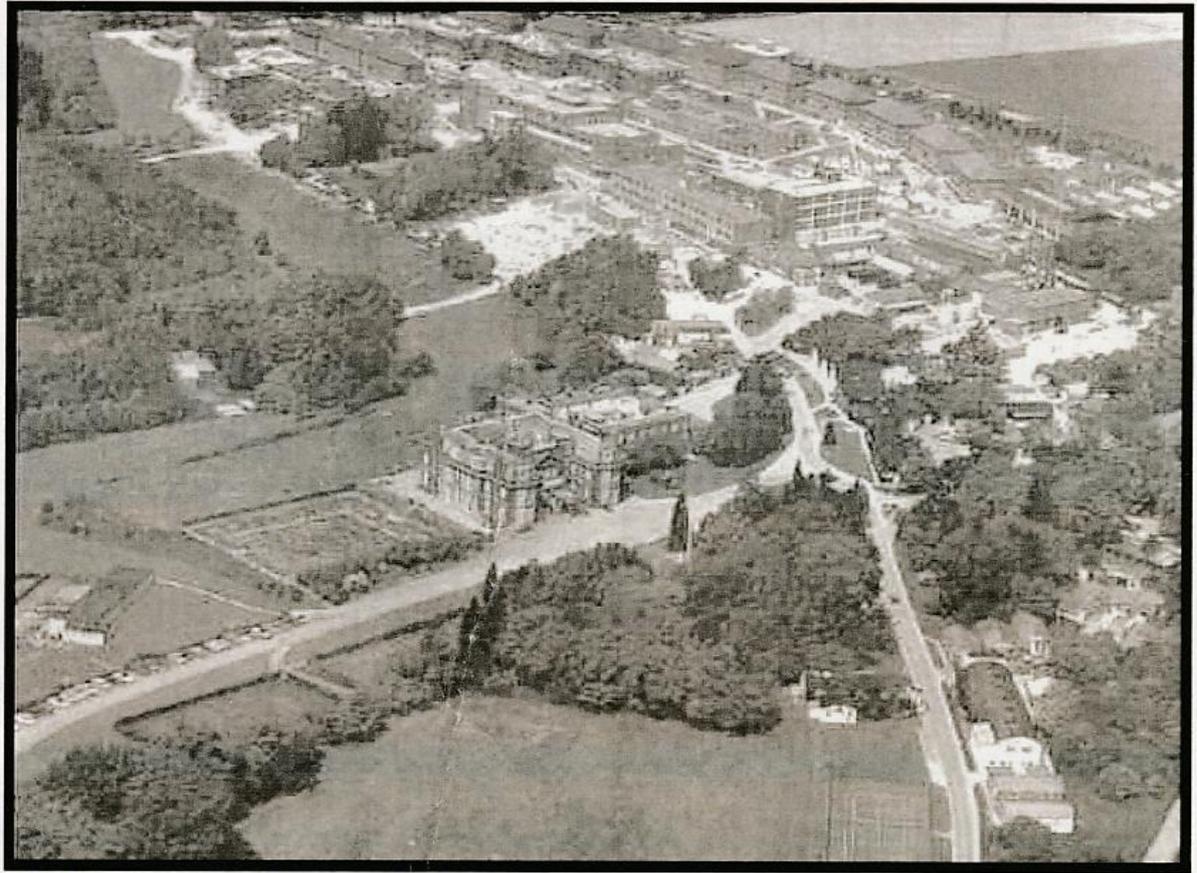
**Main House, West and East Camps c1949.**



**Mercury c1952**



**Mercury 1962 - The Cross Dykes can be seen in the top right.**

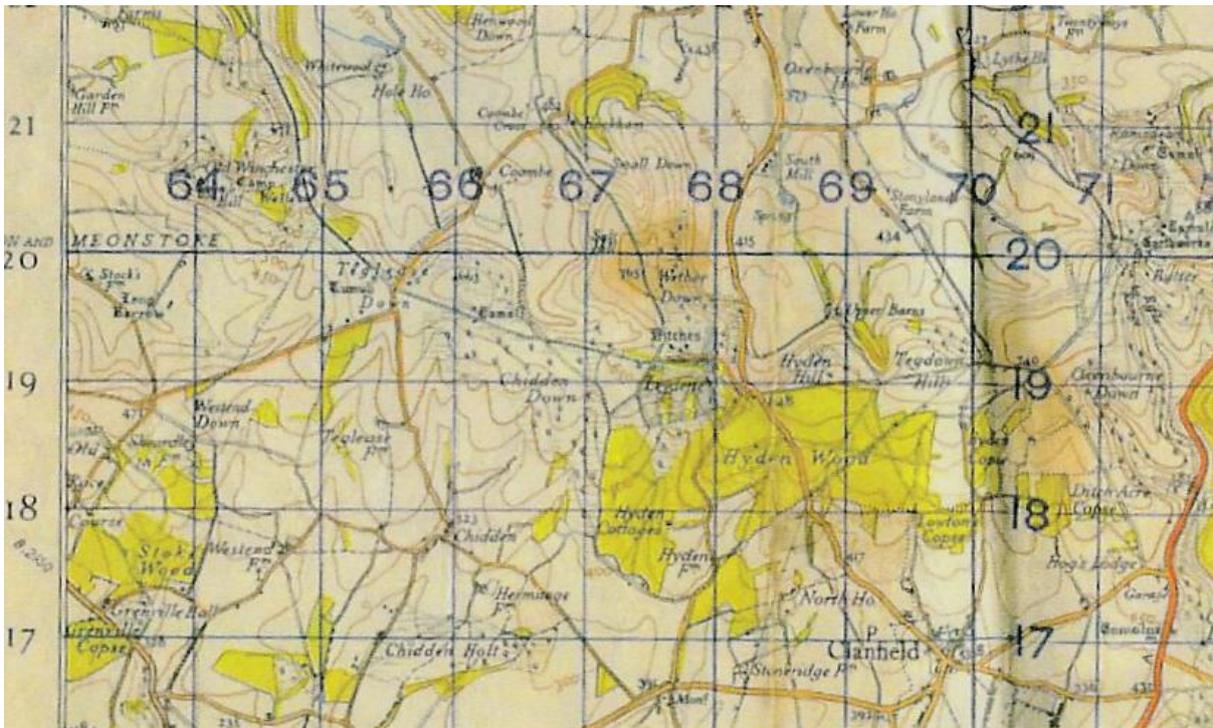


**Mercury 1970**

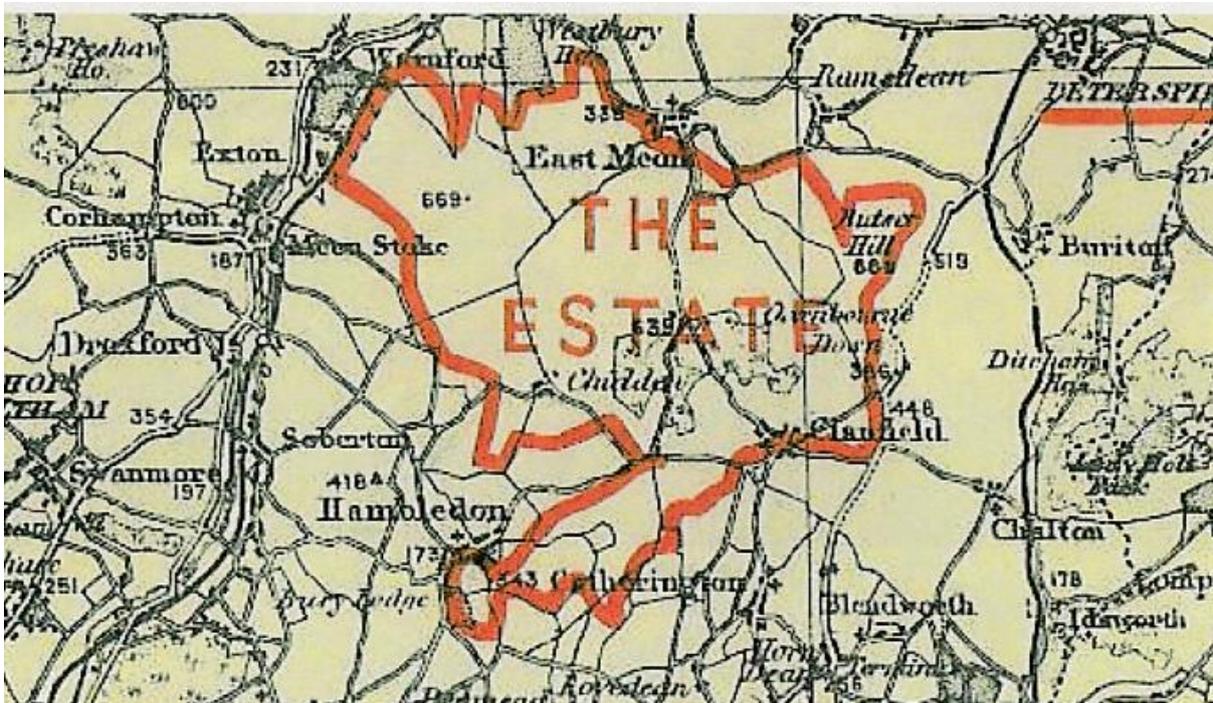


**Mercury mid 1980's**

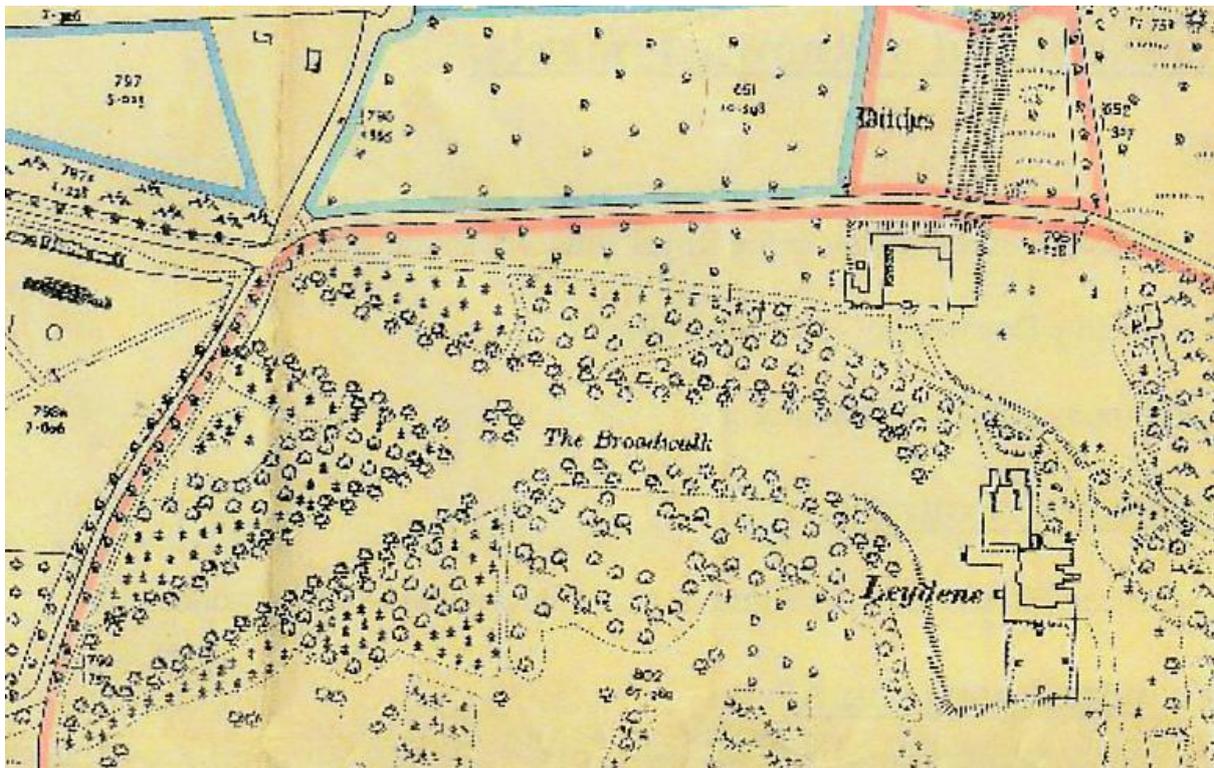
## Maps



Ordnance Survey map of Leydene area prior to World War II

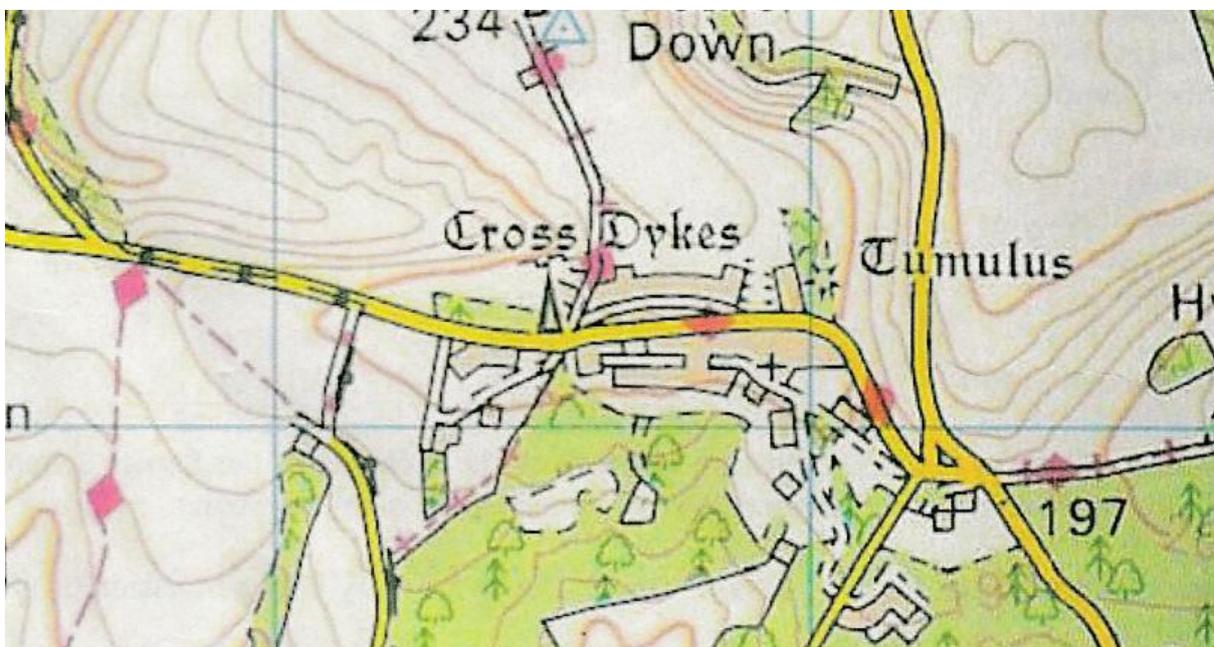


Estate Boundaries



**Estate map of Leyden prior to Mercury**

The boundary in red is the area used by Mercury during the war. The blue boundary is the additional land requested to be purchased with that already in use.



**Ordnance Survey - Modern**

This map shows Leydene prior to Mercury decommissioning

## **References and acknowledgments.**

### **Books**

Signal! A history of Signalling in the Royal Navy - Captain Barrie Kent.

The Royal Navy Day by Day - A.B. Sainsbuiy.

Various editions of the Communicator.

### **Unpublished sources.**

Documents and Files held in the Signal School Library HMS Collingwood.

### **Correspondence (email)**

Grateful thanks to the following

Captain Barrie Kent

Russell Searle

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Ken Sutton

Dave Field

Eddie Clamp

Dave Peters

Norman Langley

Richard Cooksley

Rob Potter

Len Foot

### **Illustrations.**

All illustrations and photographs are taken from the archives in the Signal School Library and Communicator magazine, with the exception of the following.

Page 1 Illustration of Mercury crest - Signal, Barrie Kent, by kind permission of the author.

Page 29 Photograph of Main House stairs - RNCA website.

Page 43 Ordnance Survey Landranger No 185.