



PLACE IN HISTORY:
Priory classrooms today

V2 rocket hunters based at school

Way We Were



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IN 1995, to mark the 50th anniversary of the end of the Second World War, those who had fought in the war were invited to write accounts of their units' experiences – not the glorious winning of battles but the truth of how it felt to be hungry, sometimes lost, often in mud, running out of supplies, losing comrades, missing home life and so on.

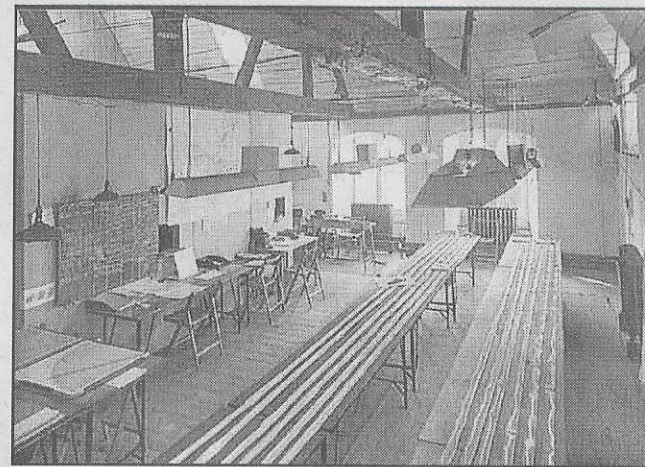
My father's contribution was a booklet 'long traverse from Juno', recollections of members of the 7th Survey Regiment of the Royal Artillery.

These were men trained in calculating the precise location of the enemy's large guns. Earlier this year I walked (OK drove) in his footsteps starting on the Normandy landing beaches, using his account as my guide book.

His version certainly strays into areas not normally covered by the official war histories. When George VI inspected the Regiment at Hawkhurst in 1943 he asked about the general principles upon which the use of sound devices to locate enemy guns was based.

The battery commander explained in some detail how a Major Tucker in the Second World War had noted, when sitting in the officers' latrines, a sharp upward draft of wind every time a German gun fired. In terms of inspiration, this upward draft to Major Tucker proved no less potent than the falling apple had been to Newton.

One sentence in my father's account, dated to late 1943,



V2 BOFFINS: The operations room in 1944, with strips of recorded soundings laid out

caught my eye. It refers to a top secret project involving microphones spread over the Kent countryside, hoping to pinpoint the launch sites of the newest threat from Hitler – the V2 rocket.

The V2 rocket was 46 feet long, weighed 13 tons, and flew at supersonic speeds at an altitude of over 50 miles. Once fired, the allies had no means of stopping it. Around 3,000 were launched between September 1944 and the following March, mostly aimed at London and Antwerp.

So what's all this to do with Canterbury?

The chosen location for work on pinpointing V2 launch sites was classrooms in King's School.

The school buildings were available for army requisition as the school itself had been evacuated in May 1940 to Carlyon Bay in Cornwall.

The boys did not return until 1945. Needless to say, given the top secret nature of the work, it is not easy to piece together who was here and exactly what they did.

It seems that the V2 work took place between June 1944 and May 1945. Memoirs of those involved mention an operations room, recorder room and drawing office. Long strips of recorded soundings from all over Kent were laid out on trestle tables for analysis. Surviving image of the operations room and written accounts give hints as to where this took place.

One record mentions a site "close to a passage" and 'next to the Deanery'. Detective work by Peter Henderson, King's School archivist, and others, has managed to identify the building concerned.

It forms part of what is now known as the Priory classrooms.

As members of XII Corp, those serving in Royal Artillery survey regiments wore a shoulder flash of three trees, representing the three trees of Kent – oak, ash and thorn. My father used this in naming his first house "Three Trees", where I was raised.

He failed to mention that the shoulder flash was widely known in the army as "dog's delight".