

THE COLD WAR IN BARBY

by Rob and Christine Close
Greys Orchard 1990-2014



When we bought Greys Orchard in Kilsby Road in May 1990 we did not know we were inheriting responsibility to advise all the inhabitants of Barby of an impending nuclear threat. We had bought Barby's Nuclear Alert Warning Centre.¹

Across the UK some 18,000 houses in rural communities were charged with this responsibility.²

Attached to the phone in our bedroom was a special device. In the event of a national emergency normal telephone lines would be deactivated and only this special device would receive messages.³ (NB In 1990, few persons had mobile phones and the internet was not in general use.)

It was our responsibility to receive any messages. In the event of a 'four minute warning' of nuclear attack, we had a klaxon in a crate in the barn. We had to open the crate, assemble the klaxon and then wind the handle to create a piercing noise. Hopefully all within the allowed four minutes.

We were invited once to a practice drill for those monitoring incoming missiles. This was somewhere in the Warwickshire countryside, well underground. The action room was reminiscent of RAF command centres from World War II films, with messages coming in and people moving markers across a gigantic map of the area.

It is a moot point how well the local alert system would have worked in practice. The good news is that in 1992/1993, a few years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the National scheme was abandoned. Our special phone was deactivated and the klaxon taken off. The Authorities gave us a thank you letter...and left us with the crate.⁴

¹ The United Kingdom Warning and Monitoring Organisation (UKWMO) conveyed warnings of air attack and fallout from nuclear weapons to the public via a system known as HANDEL from 1962 until 1992. [The information contained in this (and subsequent) footnotes has been taken from a website owned by Steve Scanlon.]

² The UK was divided into small areas of approximately 100 square miles with 250 Control Points located in major police stations organised to pass on warnings. In rural areas, where there were no power-operated sirens, hand sirens, whistles, maroons and gongs were allocated to 'responsible' people such as police officers, council officials and magistrates, and also placed in pubs, post offices, shops and vicarages. The previous owners of Greys Orchard were Robert and Meriel Godber, and before them, until the mid-1960s, the owners were John and Mary Walker.

³ HANDEL used telephone lines associated with the Speaking Clock, which was distributed on a duplicated circle of lines between major telephone exchanges designed to raise an alarm if the ring failed. It was thus a ready-made and secure (against breakdown) system of distributing warning messages around the country. The device in Greys Orchard was a WB1400 speech receiver, which dated from the 1980s.

⁴ Both the Northamptonshire and Warwickshire Police Authorities sent thank-you letters 'for your support and dedication over the years in providing such a vital contribution to our National War Plans', and explaining that because of 'the diminishing international threat' UKWMO would be discontinued. The Home Office also wrote and said that future warning systems would rely on television and radio.