



Butterfly
Conservation

PREES HEATH COMMON RESERVE

Proposal for the Future Use of the Former Airfield Control Tower

Background

In 1942 during World War Two a bomber training airfield (RAF Tilstock) was constructed on Prees Heath Common and surrounding farmland. This was one of several airfields built at this time in Shropshire. A number of buildings were constructed, including a control tower, located near the western boundary of the Common between the long and short runways. The design used for the tower was the Standard Watch Office 12779/41, with medium front windows to design 343/43. It is believed that at least 162 towers of the design 12779/41 were constructed.

The airfield was closed in 1946 and since then the control tower has, as far as is known, had no particular use, and has been allowed to become derelict. There are still some old airfield structures remaining in Twemlows Wood across the A41, and a parachute club still uses land adjacent to the third runway.

The tower is rectangular and has two stories, and a total of 28 openings for doors and windows. The roof is flat. There is a concrete walkway surround to the building and a concrete path leading towards a path used by visitors to the Reserve.

Butterfly Conservation purchased the western half of Prees Heath Common in 2006, including the former airfield control tower. At the time of purchase the tower was without doors and windows, and had been used as a toilet. Graffiti adorned some of the external and internal walls, and there were a number of beer cans and other refuse inside and out. Butterfly Conservation immediately arranged to have the interior of the tower professionally cleaned and the windows and doors boarded up, with warning notices displayed stating that there is no safe access. The boards have been vandalised on at least one occasion and unauthorised access gained to the building. A number of small vents at approximately two metres above ground level have left open for ventilation and to allow birds and bats to have access. Elder trees growing next to the tower which had enabled people to access the roof have been cut down.

Enquiries made with North Shropshire District Council have not revealed that the building is listed in any way.

The Reserve has a number of features which need to be born in mind:

- It is registered as Common Land under the Commons Act 2006.
- It is Access Land under the Countryside and Rights Of Way Act 2000.
- Parts of the Reserve are designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), but this does not include the control tower or its immediate surrounds.
- Although there is a full-time Reserve Warden in place at present, this is not going to remain the case in the long term.

Survey

In April 2007 Butterfly Conservation arranged for the tower to be surveyed by a Chartered Building Surveyor. A copy of the surveyor's report can be seen on request. Key findings of the survey included the following:

- The roof was originally protected by 20mm thickness of asphalt, but this has now almost completely disappeared leaving exposed concrete. Some parts of this concrete slab are breaking up, and attempts made historically to carry out repairs by the application of a thin coating of cement have failed. Water is penetrating into the thickness of the concrete, with evidence of gradual seepage of water through to the soffit of the roof, where small calcium 'stalagmites' have formed over a period of time. Although there is evidence of corrosion of the steel reinforcement, the concrete slab appears to be in a sound and stable condition at this stage.
- All gutters and drainpipes have been removed, and no soakaway was identified.
- Exterior metal stairs and roof and balcony railings have all disappeared.
- The external walls appeared generally to be in a sound and stable condition. The cement render however is not in good condition, and there are places where it has come away from the walls or is loose.
- Most of the original steel window frames have been removed.
- The first floor ceiling shows evidence of the cement skin and the underside of the concrete slab failing, exposing the corroded steel reinforcement.
- The observation room floor has evidence of a different finish, which is no longer present.
- The risers of each step on interior staircase have been damaged and are hazardous. The handrail and balustrade have been removed.
- Two lintols at first floor level have been removed and the brickwork has partly collapsed.
- The ground floor concrete slab appears to be in satisfactory condition.
- There is evidence of loose and crumbling concrete on the exterior first floor walkway, but generally the surface is satisfactory.

The survey report included a copy of the original design plan for the building.

Prior to the deep ploughing that was carried out on the former arable areas of the reserve in March 2007 it was established that there are no utility services (mains water, electricity, gas, telephone or mains drainage) on the reserve.

Wildlife

The interior of the building was examined in June 2008 by a member of the Shropshire Bat Group. One bat dropping was found, as well as a number of butterfly wings, which suggests that bats had visited the building, presumably through the vents that had been left open, but there was no sign of any bats roosting. The Shropshire Bat Group is providing recommendations as to how the building could provide more suitable habitat for bats, which may include some tree planting in the immediate vicinity. The building could provide suitable habitat for over-wintering butterflies such as the Small Tortoiseshell, although the presence of bats would mitigate against this.

The remains of one bird nest have been found in the building, species unknown. The Shropshire Barn Owl Group was contacted with a view to installing a barn owl box, but advised against this owing to the proximity of the building to two busy main roads, the A49 and the A41, and the consequent risk of roadkill.

Options

A number of members of the public have already expressed views as to what should happen to the building, and these include the following:

- Demolition, as it is an eyesore or that it would be wrong to spend money repairing/restoring it.
- Allowed to collapse of its own accord.
- Conversion into a Visitor Centre, with a café and toilets.
- It should be sold as a private dwelling.
- Full restoration to its original purpose as a control tower, thereby becoming a kind of museum.
- Conversion to a memorial to all the service personnel who lost their lives not only in World War Two, with some RAF personnel being killed in and around the airfield, but also in World War One, when the Common was used as a trench warfare training camp with around 25,000 people being based there before being sent to the frontlines.
- Restored to provide suitable habitat for bats and other wildlife.

Discussion

Demolition

The control tower is an important artefact of World War Two and a reminder of the role of the local area in the conflict. If it were to be demolished or allowed to collapse it would not be replaced. Although it is not listed, buildings such as these are important components of local and national history and heritage, and once gone it would be lost forever. With its visibility from the A49 and A41 it is a local landmark feature in the landscape, as well as providing a feature in the Reserve. The tower should be preserved in some form - the question is how, and as what.

Visitor Centre

Is a visitor centre needed? At present the Reserve attracts a small number of visitors, most of whom are regular dog walkers living nearby. Many people who come to the Reserve from further afield, perhaps to view the Silver-studded Blue butterflies in the flight season, rarely seem to venture to the part of the Reserve where the tower is situated, preferring to walk around the surviving heathland fragments. The tower is a long walk from the place where most people park their cars. There are cafes available nearby anyway, and planning permission with conditions has been granted to convert the buildings immediately to the north of the Reserve, known as Warren House, to a motel.

Other factors indicate that conversion to a visitor centre would be ill-advised. Would there be the volunteer personnel on hand to run it, presumably sacrificing their time at weekends? – this appears unlikely. Utility services would have to be brought onto the Reserve and drains constructed, and as it is registered Common Land consent would have to be sought under the Commons Act 2006 from the Secretary of State for such works. The risk of vandalism and break-in is high considering the isolated location of the building, and there would undoubtedly maintenance costs. The cost of converting the tower into a visitor centre would be a significant six figure sum.

Private dwelling

A number of control towers throughout the country have been successfully converted into private dwellings. The situation on the Reserve is complex, however, given its status as Common Land and Open Access land. Any prospective inhabitant would require vehicular access onto the Reserve, car parking space and a fence around the property. This would be difficult to achieve under the Commons Act 2006 as there may well be local opposition, and special permission would need to be sought under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act as public access would need to be curtailed. There would also be the same issues regarding utility services and drains as for a visitor centre.

Restoration as a control tower museum

Whilst this may have merits, it has to be pointed out that a similar control tower in much better condition already exists at Sleaf airfield near Wem, just a few miles distant, originally built as a satellite for RAF Tilstock and still used by light aircraft.

Preservation as a memorial to service personnel

The Common has a fascinating military history dating back to the thirteenth century and the English Civil War in the seventeenth century, and more recently the two world wars in the twentieth century. The building itself would have to be preserved and kept secure. The history could be told by installing panels or murals on the outside walls of the building. Some relevant materials could also be made available inside the building, which could be opened at designated times, e.g. publicised guided walks, or by request.

Bat sanctuary

The Shropshire Bat Group advises that at least part of the tower could be made more suitable for bats by installing batons and other structures for use as roosts. Trees may need to be planted nearby. Creating appropriate habitat for bats would clearly be in keeping with the new designation of the site as a Nature Reserve.

Proposal

The following proposal is for public consultation and discussion.

To preserve the tower, but not to restore it, by carrying out works as follows:

- Repair the roof
- Consider installing drainpipes and gutters, and a soakaway as necessary
- Re-render where the render has come off or is loose
- Brick up all the windows except the large middle window in the observation room on the first floor, which can be fitted with either reinforced glass or a hinged wooden shutter
- Install a strong steel door with a secure lock
- Repair the first floor ceiling
- Repair the interior stairs and replace stair rail and balustrade
- Replace two lintols and repair brickwork as necessary
- Consider painting all the exterior walls

Panels or murals would be secured to the outside walls telling the story of Prees Heath Common, interpreting the natural history and also the military history. Members of the local community would be asked to become involved by contributing design work and other ideas to the project. The building would be open to members of the public on designated days which would be advertised in the local media. Trees and bushes would be planted near the tower, but not close enough to allow access to the roof. Bids would be made to appropriate funding bodies for the cost of the works.

All comments regarding this proposal should be directed at Stephen Lewis, Prees Heath Warden, at 193 Abbey Foregate, Shrewsbury, SY2 6AH. Tel. 01743 340721 or 07900 886809. Email slewis@butterfly-conservation.org. Comments by 19th December 2008 please.

