

# John Moss - National Service at Bawdsey 1951

When I passed out of my course as a Radar Operator (PPI) and also rose from AC2 to AC1 I was given leave and my posting to Bawdsey, and that resulted in a very wonderful part of my life. When given my posting I asked “where the devil is Bawdsey?” “Oh. Somewhere in Suffolk I think – you’ll find it”. I did. After a short leave I caught the train down through Grantham, Peterborough and Ipswich (changing at all those stations) and came to Felixstowe. I met up with Jim Small from Hull who was also being posted in, and we remained good friends for all the time I spent there.

Outside the station we caught a rather old, ramshackle single-decker bus, driven by Albert. Through town, past the Golf Links to Felixstowe Ferry, to cross the River Deben. We then had to walk across the shingle (no jetty in those days) to a motor boat ferry, commanded by Maurice. On the other side there was a jetty. We climbed ashore and walked up to the main gate of RAF Bawdsey. No-one in sight so we carried on walking up the road, over a bridge crossing what was called the ‘River Jordan’, to find the guardroom right in the middle of the station. Strange or what? We were allocated beds in Room 29 of Accommodation Block. This was formerly a Radar Experimental Workshop and still had lino-topped benches down one side of the room. They were eventually removed when more space was needed, for more beds.

We had a walk around the station and found that the headquarters, plus officers and WRAF quarters were in a beautiful Manor House. This was built by Sir Cuthbert Quilter and started in 1888 as a weekend cottage! Being headquarters we ‘erks’ tended to stay away from here as much as possible. Pay day was held here so that was acceptable, welcome and very, very necessary.

The Airman’s Mess was a converted stables, also previously used as workshops, where they served surprisingly good food, in pleasant surroundings, and generally in a very civilised manner. I was, and still am, extremely fond of sausages and one breakfast, when they were on the menu, nobody else on the table fancied them very much and kept piling any spares onto my plate. I think I managed about ten sausages in that one sitting. A slight case of overkill perhaps.

Our working hours were more than civilised. Due to an excess of National Servicemen we worked either 9.00 am to 1.00 pm or 1.00 pm to 5.00 pm. If the Russians had planned an attack and they chose 5.00 pm to 9.00 am they would have found it very easy going! We did also have night exercises, with each ‘watch’ doing one a week. This was mostly cancelled but, just sometimes, we were issued with sheets giving various ‘plots’ which, with a stopwatch, we read out to the plotting tables on another station, to give them a bit of practice.

The workplace comprised wooden huts underneath four magnificent steel towers, 360 feet high, holding the aerials for the various types of radar. Radar was developed at Bawdsey, involving a team of scientists under the leadership of Robert Watson-Watt. Bawdsey became the first permanent radar station in the world, hence the station motto of ‘First in the Field’. There were various other towers, of the 240 feet wooden variety, so it seemed rather like a garden with plants growing up all over the place.

Since the ‘sites’ were reached by a walk through the woods, Bawdsey was a truly idyllic place to live and work and I doubt whether there was another military site anywhere quite like it.

We also saw the sunken garden which used to be a very large formal fishpond but was now a rose garden. I assume that the fish took too much looking after! In the corner stood the White Lady. A statue, seeming to be of marble, at this time her head was lying on the ground at her feet but I picked it up and balanced it on one of her arms so that it looked like 'with her head tucked underneath her arm' and it provided a wonderful photo opportunity. There the head remained until I was demobbed, but it has since disappeared completely.

In our workhut, and during a break, we used to remove the electric heater from the wall and, as it had an enamelled surface, cooked food on it of a quite revolting nature. Obvious things like baked beans were more civilised but some of the concoctions defy description. All the makings were purchased from the NAAFI shop which was nearby. The shop was provided for married people on the station but they didn't seem to mind selling to us. Condensed milk on bread was absolutely wonderful.

Once when I was on duty and sitting at 'the tube' I saw on the screen, at extreme range of about 200 miles, an echo, and worked it out as moving at about 700 miles an hour. It was only on the screen for a short time since, on a circular screen it was seen for only seconds. I reported this to Stanmore and received the comment that I must be wrong, since nothing could travel at that speed. How times have changed!

From the site, and from various other points, we had access to our very own private beach. All shingle, but very pleasant for us to sit and, for the more adventurous, bathe in the sea. At the back of the beach were cliffs, made of concrete and sea shells, built there by the Quilter family. Beautiful walks on a fine day and, I'm told (I wouldn't know about these things) very good for romantic possibilities!

One other time we seemed to go mad and we all bought water pistols and chased each other through the woods. Good exercise I suppose, and it filled in time when we couldn't afford to go into Felixstowe.

In the NAAFI building, next to the Accommodation Block, we all seemed to gather for a 'tea and a wad' or in my case, tea and a meringue, to which I was addicted.

Terry Short was an excellent pianist, surely of near concert hall standards, and he used to sit at the piano in the NAAFI and tinkle the ivories for long periods. One of my favourites at that time was 'The Dream of Olwyn' and I often asked him to play this. Beautifully done, and it quite brought a tear to the eye.

Once sitting round one of the tables with a group of friends, I was looking around the NAAFI seeing what was what and the lads reminded me that I hadn't drunk my tea. I grabbed hold to have a long swallow, and found that my cup had been filled from all the dregs in the cups on the table. With friends like these ....!

Back in the billet, tucked up in bed, Ernie Ring often came out with one of his favourites – "I will now give you my impression of Bette Davis. Give me a cigarette". It always worked and someone would throw him a cigarette. Ernie, whenever anyone asked his name, would reply "I'm Ernie Ring from Rochdale, a woodcutting machinist by trade". Be it an Officer or an NCO, he always got away with it very well. It was that kind of Station.

I was a keen photographer then and till quite recently, and I used to take my films for processing to a chemist in Felixstowe (who used to give me credit when necessary). One time, on a visit there, I noticed a new camera in his window, at a price of £11/0/0, which was well beyond my means. I looked at it, liked it, and asked if I could buy it and pay him later. He agreed to this – I must have had an honest face – and as I walked out of his door I asked if he ought to have my name and where I was stationed. What a trusting soul he was. And so I obtained my very first 35mm camera. How proud I was.

One very cold winter, the roads of Bawdsey were very icy and they called for volunteers to travel on the back of a lorry to scatter grit to improve all the roads. Strangely, they had to turn down several as so many volunteered. It was a very good laugh and we even enjoyed the hard work!

When we had reservists stationed with us – for two weeks at a time – I fixed a lot of my photos to a large piece of card and hung this in the entrance to the Mess. Many of the reservists bought several photos and, at my price of 11d (just under 5p) I made a reasonable profit. The trouble was I heard that the Security Officer was looking for me since some of my photos were taken from the Towers (forbidden) and showed the station as it would be from the air, therefore making a good aiming point! I removed my photographs very quickly and stayed out of sight for a while.

I have said that the Mess served good food, and for most of the time the person in charge was a WRAF Sergeant. She was good at her job, always anxious to please, and hated to hear any complaint about her cooking. As a matter of interest, we always had to carry our 'irons' (knife, fork and spoon) when visiting the Mess, and then wash them afterwards. No restaurant service in those days!

We had many and varied activities and one of these was shooting. As I had a Marksman Badge I was invited to join the Station team, which was led by the CO. Shooting took place, first with .22 rifles at the rear of the Accommodation Block. We then started to go to RAF Felixstowe and use their range. After being there I used to drop off the lorry returning to the Ferry to visit a girlfriend. Saved on bus fare you know!

At one shooting session it was pointed out to me by Flight Lieutenant 'Q' Cumber that I had obtained a better score than the CO (Squadron Leader Alec Gilding) and that I could expect a posting at any time!

We did have one session at a proper outside range, where you had to shoot at maximum distance while lying down, run to the next point and fire while kneeling, run to the next point and fire from the standing position. Great fun – I think!

It was promised that we would go to Bisley to compete against other RAF teams, but this was not meant to be since it was cancelled 'due to operational requirements'.

Climbing the aerial towers was good sport. The 360ft steel towers did have ladders going up the inside, with hoops around for safety. A long, long climb but oh what a view. And oh! What photographs. The 240ft wooden towers had no ladders but plenty of spars for hands and feet, but perhaps a little more dangerous. Both activities were, of course, strictly forbidden.

I also joined the Theatre Club, which was a lot of fun, and we had shows for all the station personnel. Two I starred in were 'Ways and Means' in which I played the butler and (I think) 'An Inspector Calls', with me as Inspector Slack. Our producer/director was Jim Hunwicke who was a civilian in charge of the stores on the Station. During my time as the butler I had white greasepaint on my hair and couldn't see the point of washing it off between two shows. In the NAAFI Jeannie White said to me "Oh John you are going grey aren't you?". It seemed such a shame to put her right, but I did. After all, the next day my hair was back to normal.

Funny, but years later Jeannie White and I met, of all places, in London Piccadilly Underground Station. It is said that if you wait in this station long enough you will meet someone you know, but what are the odds? Jeannie and I yarned for a little while and then went our separate ways, never to meet again.

All plays were held at Bawdsey in the Theatre in the Woods, which was exactly that. A wooden building with a proper stage at one end, real curtains (!) and plenty of seating for the (non-paying) customers. After the second performance we were usually invited back to the Officers' Mess for something of a party. Since it was the Mess we were not allowed to pay for any drinks, so the Mess bills must have been pretty high!

We did also have one of our plays entered into the Felixstowe Drama Festival. Alas, we were not destined to win, but it was good experience and a good time was had by all.

Social affairs included the Children's Christmas party, with the CO and Mrs Gilding making a visit, and the Adjutant playing the part of Father Christmas. I, of course, played the part of official photographer. Most of the Christmas decorations were made by one of the chaps, who was very artistic, and they were very well done.

Other happenings included, on a fairly regular basis, Station dances, for which various young ladies were invited (imported?) from the surrounding villages and from RAF Felixstowe.

At one Station dance I went as a 'spiv' with a painted-on moustache and specially padded shoulders on my jacket. To the uninitiated, a 'spiv', mostly from the days of the war, was a character slightly outside the law, a black marketeer, who could get you, at a price, anything from a pair of nylon stockings to a joint of meat. Altogether a most disreputable feller. At another dance I went, with Jim Smail, as a pair of Red Indians, covered in Vaseline, cocoa, food dyes and a shell necklace. I wonder why nobody wanted to dance with me!

One other dance I remember well. I was drinking cider since I wasn't too fond of beer and I was rather the worse for wear. I met at the dance a WRAF from RAF Felixstowe (known as the blonde bombshell) and made a date to meet her the next day in Felixstowe. When she turned up, as arranged, she brought a friend with her as she thought I had been too drunk to remember anything about it.

One day a young airman ran at top speed to the guardroom and reported an unexploded bomb or mine on the beach. Very careful inspection proved it to be an old, upturned saucepan.

One other item, which did remain from the war, was on the cliff top and this was a gun of about 2 inches calibre. So affected by the weather it was rusted solid. This was to hold the entire German Army at bay. Fat chance!

In May 1951 I was promoted to SAC (Senior Aircraftsman) with a three-bladed propeller on my arm, and I therefore went up to my maximum pay of £3/18/9d per week (£3.80 approximately). To celebrate I went into Felixstowe and bought, at Burton's Tailors, a new suit, which cost me all of £5/17/6d. The promotion was not automatic and I had to take exams for it. I did wonder if I would ever achieve SAC since I failed my first exam because of lack of study and had to persuade my officer, Mrs Trolley, to let me try again.

Also in May we had the annual inspection by the AOC (Air Officer Commanding). He arrived at Bawdsey in the time-honoured fashion, by ferry. No fancy cars for this man! The Guard of Honour was drawn up on the quayside. I managed to avoid all parades by being the official photographer for the day and I covered the inspection of the Guard of Honour and the following parade in front of the Manor.

At about this time a mobile test radar was set up in the marshes to carry out calibrations for a new radar aerial set-up. A Lancaster had to fly around while plots were taken. A group of three or four of us from Bawdsey were appointed as the crew and we had to (very carefully) find our way across the marshes. Bearing in mind that this was a tidal river, the ditches became very, very deep. It was obviously a good idea to avoid falling in. The mud was at least as deep as the water, even at low tide.

In July 1951, my friend Bill came home on leave from Egypt and, being anxious to see him I managed – with great difficulty – to obtain a 48 hour pass. I wrote to Bill but could not remember the number of his house so I addressed the letter to him at 'two or three houses down from the Savoy Cinema' and 'thank you Postman, from one RAF 'bod' to another'. The letter arrived the next day!

I had to catch a very early train and had to leave far too early for the first ferry sailing and it was suggested that I contact a local fisherman. I met him on the beach at about 6.00 am and he gave me a piggyback to the rowing boat. We crossed this tidal river in this little rowing boat, operated by this old man who used the hook (!) on his right arm on the single oar over the stern. A little disconcerting but it was, at least, the great Charlie Brinkley, a fisherman (smuggler?) of some note, who lost his hand in a shooting accident. Cost 2/6d (12½p).

A taxi awaited me on the other side for my journey to Felixstowe Station, and thence by the usual (very) slow route home. I recall that Bill and I had a very good weekend, but 48 hours does pass rather quickly.