FRIARS CLIFF RESIDENTS' ASSOCIATION

WORLD-LEADING MILITARY DEVELOPMENTS AT STEAMER POINT

At the eastern end of Friars Cliff our view today is mainly of housing developed from the 1930s onwards, but at Steamer Point we see instead a car park, the former MCA coastguard training site and a green area containing a few circular concrete plinths.

Along with a further site near Grange Road, Somerford, this entire area was formerly the 'Air Defence Research and Development Establishment' (ADRDE), and then later the Signals Research and Development Establishment (SRDE).

- ***Air Defence Research and Development Establishment (ADRDE)***

All the land stretching east to west from Highcliffe Castle to Southcliffe Road, and to the north up to Seaway Avenue / East Cliff Way, was requisitioned and fortified in 1939 by the Ministry of Supply to become ADRDE (formerly ADEE).

Here, in conjunction with workshops in Grange Road, Somerford, they developed Coastal Defence Intercept Radars, Gun-Laying Radars and Searchlight Control (SLC) Radars (codenamed 'Elsie') which were crucial in tracking German bombers.

Incredibly, Elsie was conceived by 3 Somerford scientists working largely in their spare time, who came up with the idea of integrating a searchlight with radar.

There was much co-operation behind the scenes with American scientists, and ADRDE experts would go 'into the field' to examine captured enemy Radar etc. Much of the testing used aircraft flown from the 'Special Duties' trials flight at RAF Christchurch.

The Chief Superintendent at the time was the legendary Professor Sir John Cockcroft who later helped develop the atomic bomb, led research into nuclear fusion, and gained the Nobel Prize for splitting the atomic nucleus.

By 1942 Churchill realised, after a British raid on a similar German technical installation in France was carried out, that the British site was vulnerable and ADRDE was then moved to Malvern.

- ***Signals Research and Development Establishment (SRDE)***

SRDE moved into the vacated ADRDE buildings in 1943. It was a highly classified research establishment developing multiple lines of advanced military technology, and contributing to much that we take for granted today. A huge amount of early 'R&D' was conducted into military technology, satellite communications, fibre-optic cables, cryogenics and even technology used in MRI scanners. The earliest (Gen1) Night Vision detectors were also developed and tested on-site in the long green 'Night Building'.

From 1965 onwards SRDE participated in the development of Satellite Communication Systems. A distinctive SRDE feature was the large white satcom 'radomes'. The largest of these housed a 40ft dish inside a 70ft radome which became operational in June 1966, conducting extensive satellite in-orbit testing of the Skynet military satellites, the world's first orbit system.

This work led to SRDE developing transportable satcom ground stations which saw their first operational use in the Falklands war.
In 1963 SRDE had an open day, and at one of the live technical demonstrations (at Steamer Point, Area 8 – where The Green is now) guests were allowed to send their own messages via teleprinters to the moon and back!

Most of the time at SRDE there were 800+ staff working around the two sites, and many local lads did their apprenticeships there.
As an aside, the Steamer Point Nature Reserve was a part of these facilities from when it was requisitioned from Highcliffe Castle in 1939 and was finally released by the MoD in 1983. Christchurch Council bought the land and so began the process of turning it into today's nature reserve.