The military's last outposts.

In the nuclear age civil defence is obsolete, survival of government is everything. Some of these innocent-looking bungalows hide the entrances to Britain's Regional Seats of Government.
The Spies for Peace original pamphlet of 1963 identified the general locations and telephone numbers of all the RSGs, and the exact locations of many were quickly announced thereafter. The Reading Papers confirm long-held public suspicions that the system has not merely been maintained, but built up into a larger and military-dominated network. The telephone and telegraph lines the Papers describe have of course long since gone, following the closing of Warren Row seven or eight years ago. But the new information fills in vital gaps in history, since the spider’s web they created reflected the structure of the emergency headquarters network.

The new system—three times larger, and originating in 1964—included old buildings dating from the war, old RAF burrows, RSGs, and now, purpose-built centres.

One of the latter is SRHQ42, at Sovereign House, Hales Road, Hertford. It contains the local DHSS, Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries and employment offices. A modest, six-storey building, Sovereign House shelters a solid concrete central core, surmounted by huge, blast protected ventilators, and an unusual array of radio aerials. The ventilators don’t provide Sovereign House’s surface inhabitants with air conditioning. From the Reading Papers it is clear that SRHQ42 was ready for use in 1967.

A short railway trip to Basingstoke will take you directly to another hideaway. Faced the station is a long row of office blocks between Alencon Link and Churchill way. One of these blocks, merely known as Alencon Link is the HQ of the Civil Service Commission, but also conceals SRHQ62. On its roof are the familiar aerials and ventilators. At the back of its basement car park there are other features, not on the plans the government filed with the Berkshire planning authority. A large part of the car park is missing, blocked off. Another corner is executed in reinforced concrete and entered by metal doors an inch thick. Concrete shields protect some small ventilators. These ornaments are missing from official plans.

Details such as these enable centres like Basingstoke to be identified quite independently of any Post Office wiring diagrams. Indeed Basingstoke doesn’t appear in the Reading Papers since it took over from Warren Row around 1972, as SRHQ62.

In the open country tall ventilation shafts and high radio masts would stick out like a sore thumb, but not so in Basingstoke. Its location may be even more important than it is at first apparent. Along Churchill Way from Victory Roundabout (sic) to the M3 Motorway are a string of large offices, many of them populated by highly dispensable organisations like the AA. The town may be one of the chosen centres for a government driven out of Whitehall by war or strife.

Another confirmed SRHQ is 102 at Dukes House, Houghton Street, Southport, Merseyside. Its location has been well publicised by the local media, not least because the centre is now said to

SRHQ51, is below the Civil Service Commission in Basingstoke (above right) took over from Warren Row in the early 1970s. Neither the concrete blast shields (left) nor the steel door entrance (below right) are on the building’s official plans.

SRHQ71, at Ullenwood near Cheltenham.

Tourists to Dover Castle daily pass the entrance to the emergency HQ. Once RSG12, it now probably houses an AFHQ, no 6.
be flooded and useless. Above it are the DHSS, tax, customs and employment offices, a county court and a technical college. Although ostensibly in sub-region 101 (covering Liverpool and Manchester), Kelvedon Hatch effectively controls the more northerly sub region 102 from Cumbria to Lancashire. Sub region 101 doesn’t appear to have an SHQ, according to a Home Office briefing to local military officials.

Construction was due to commence last year.

Other popular sites are county police HQs. Surrey Constabulary’s SHQ at Mount Browne was converted from an old RAF control centre. Some older bunkers have also been used as SHQs, including the 1950’s War Room and the RSGs. The War Room locations were declassified during the late 1960s. Details of these sites can still be found on the Civil Service list. But many of these sites still house key government installations.

Brooklands, Cambridge – originally the site of the Brooklands aerodrome. Four – became the communications centre for RSG4, which appears to have been located at RAF Alconbury, near Huntingdon. Like the Kirknewton War Room in Edinburgh, which is now the Scottish Regional Central Control – its size has been at least quadrupled by the addition of fresh tons of concrete and steel. So Cambridge probably still has a role of equivalent importance. Alconbury was one of the most unusual RSGs. Because the area is flat fenland RSG4 was largely built on the surface, according to one of its staff, who described it as having a total of massively thick concrete more than 60 feet high and 200 feet across the surface. It was camouflaged by covering with grass and bracken.

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News Feature

1945: regional emergency HQs at hutted government offices.

1952: the ‘War Rooms’ erected in each region.

1953: ‘Rotor’: the RAF build too many bunkers to a standard design. Soon some are converted to RSGs.

Diggers’ Progress . . . (above). Five successive generations of emergency accommodation have provided ever more lavish quarters for ‘civil’ defence:

the Army; their Land Operations Manual on ‘Counter-Revolutionary Operations’ (Vol III) spelt out their ideal of the ruling triumvirate—with military representation at every level in the civil structure, and parallel civil and military headquarters. It is apparent that this goal has been achieved. The ‘enemy’ in such operations include ‘subversives’ who are willing to take action—to undermine the military, economic, psychological morale or political strength of the nation’.

There are 10 AFHQs in England and Wales, one for each region. Although many of the titles accord with the county names, the introduction of the AFHQs appears to date from the 1972 reforms, which gave the military a greater role in Civil Defence. Civilian positions were reduced; for example, the sacking of most of the scientific advisers originally appears to stem from a decision in May, 1975, that only one AFHQ.

Only one AFHQ has apparently been positively identified at Ouston, north-west of Newcastle. It was active during the 1978 Home Defence exercise, codenamed ‘Scrum Half’.

A variety of odd notes in official circulars make clear the predominant role now given to the military. County council and other local controllers may make requests of the military but they must ‘remain under the command of their own officers or NCOs’ and may only ‘support the work’ of local authorities if it doesn’t prejudice their prime role; predictably this is the ‘maintenance of law and order’.

Civilian regional governments will only be established when it is safe to emerge from the AFHQs; this could easily take three months. Democracy will by then have been purged from the system, even at local level. Under new orders issued by the Home Office, local councils must nominate a single wartime Controller for official approval, normally their chief executive or clerk.

In appropriate circumstances, the Controller would have the power of life or death. The country, in an emergency, will be run by a clutch of Major Generals and a larger bevy of district officials.

Until June 1971, London was effectively written off. The London area was divided up between five neighbouring sub regions which would deal with what was left of the capital. From 1971 London was, however, reconstituted as part of the Heath government’s resurrection of Civil Defence (with an increasingly close eye on counter insurgency). London should now have its own SRHQ, no 51, and an AFHQ.

The London region SRHQ is at Kelvedon Hatch, near Brentwood. Soon after London became a separate region for the first time in more than a decade the Home Office created a radio centre to deal with the new region’s communications requirements. It was based at Harrow, more than co-incidentally.

But London boroughs would not be ruled directly from the SRHQ. Instead the government divided London into five Groups; north east, north, north west, south east and south west. Each Group headquarters controls the boroughs in its area, and is their link with the SRHQ. The Group HQs—whose location is, according to the GLC, also a secret—each hold 120 people or more, and are protected against blast and radiation. We have established that four of the HQs have been completed, in Wanstead, Southall, Cheam, and West Norwood. A fifth HQ, for the North group is still being planned.

One of the London Group controls—no doubt typical of the rest—is the South West Group Control at Church Hill, North Cheam. It is a stark block of concrete a few yards from the main A24 road, as usual topped by extensive radio masts.

Top GLC officials, not Borough or GLC councillors, will run each Group; North West is for example, in the hands of the GLC Solicitor, J R Fitzpatrick. Each Group has its own Guards infantry regiment assigned to it to ‘maintain law and order’ in an emergency. In this military carve-up of the city, the North West Group will be in the care of the Welsh Guards; the Irish Guards (SW) and the Coldstream Guards (SE) are responsible for south London, while the Household Cavalry in armoured vehicles will deal with London as a whole, and would be attached to the SRHQ.

LONDON’S BUNKERS

Frank Raine-Allen, GLC planner.

The GLC’s chief executive and the top emergency planner, Frank Raine-Allen, would join central government staff at the SRHQ. Until the ’71 reform, each London borough was linked separately to the appropriate SRHQ outside London. Few boroughs, it seems, thought such arrangements worthwhile. One that did was Westminster City Council, whose control centre at St Johns Wood, no 61J, was connected to Warren Row throughout the ’60s.

The Metropolitan Police have their own ‘Alternative Control Centres’ well out of London for emergency use. They too expect to split London up, between north and south. The northern control centre is at Lippitts Hill in Epping Forest. The southern control centre, another blockhouse, nestles close to the junction of the M23 and M25 Motorways, near Mertham.

In the event of imminent war or civil disturbance the police and military will implement a plan for ‘essential service routes’ to be kept free of civilian traffic. The 1971 Home Office circular describing this plan has now been declassified; accompanying detailed maps showing the protected routes remain ‘Restricted’ however. Under the plan most major roads out of London will be Essential Service Routes, together with two Ring Roads, ‘A’ and ‘B’. Ring Road ‘A’ is similar to the North and South Circulars; Ring Road ‘B’ is further out. The military have also prepared plans for ‘Priority Routes’ from which non-essential traffic might also be prohibited. Priority Route 31, for example, includes Fulham Palace Road and Putney Bridge; Route 32 is Shepherds Bush Road.
The biggest bunkers of all, naturally, are reserved for central government use. During the 1950s, as during the Second World War, most of these were in or near London—with a second network in the West, in case of invasion. The Reading Papers provide some clues to the whereabouts of the superbunkers.

In July 1964, the Post Office was ordered to wire up four direct links from RSG 5's communications centre at Whiteknights Park to an establishment identified in the Reading Papers only as the 'Home Office, Harrow'. This is the Home Office's Central Communications Establishment, which is hidden behind the HMSO factory in Headstone Drive, Wealdstone. Bounded by the mainline railway, HMSO and a Kodak factory, it looks innocuous enough although sporting the usual aerials. But the openness of the 1940s office block is deceptive. The office block sits on top of an underground 'citadel' built at the start of 1939 for the Air Ministry, and possibly considerably extended since. Under the remarkable codename of 'Station Z', Harrow was to have been the Air Ministry's refuge if it was bombed out;

In 1972, the main government war control centre may have moved out of London at that time, and become, as Hackett describes, the war HQ of UKLF. There would of course be other centres for the dispersal of central government, UKLF simply being the main one.

In that case, Harrow must have been the emergency centre described in Hackett's book. There are convenient railway lines from sidings at Wilton, the peacetime Railway World magazine reported that UKLF were buying underground sites. The vagaries of licence XL109 suggest that something important was going on; above all, undrillable—lies in the chalk below Salisbury Plain.

The Home Defence network, its regional HQs and secure communications, forms the backbone of the plans prepared by the Cabinet Office's Civil Contingencies Unit for dealing with strikes or other disturbances. The CCU now has extensive plans for every form of disruption officially envisaged. When the chips start going down, the AFHQs, SRHQs and the rest will be alerted. Ted Heath started such an alert in 1974, and preliminary instructions on emergency arrangements were distributed to senior civil servants. When the plans are fully activated, the first task of the police is to 'control the movements of subversive or potentially subversive persons', a clear warrant to lock up, shoot or starve political dissenters. Similar ethics are likely to prevail in later stages of a crisis, when life or death may be determined by which sections of the population are allocated food by the government.

The new network of bunkers—SRHQs and AFHQs—initially revealed by the Reading Papers, presupposes two kinds of 'enemy'. The Thatcher government, with its massive rearmament programme, seems increasingly bent on confronting one kind, the East. In the event of nuclear war the new military command of the network has no interest in the survival either of the population or of democracy. But the disappearance of the latter no longer has to wait for atom bombs. The primary function of the new HQs is to streamline and intensify central control of 'civil disorder'—primarily by use of the military. The UKLF quoted above and the origins of most of it in response to the 1972 miners' strike, shows just what kind of disorder they have in mind.