

# BISHOPSCOURT PEACE CAMP

1983 - 1986

A retrospective  
broadsheet

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## The strategic importance of Bishopscourt

by Brendan Munnally

The road east out of Downpatrick leads gently into the sleepy farmland of the Lecale peninsula, bordered to the north by Strangford Lough and to the south by the fishing port of Ardglass, an apparently tranquil countryside of rolling drumlins and century old monastic ruins: a place of quiet refuge in a troubled province.

Then eight miles from Downpatrick and just outside the tiny coastal village of Ballyhorman, it comes into view: an awesome complex of early warning aerials, telecommunications antennas, aircraft runways and military buildings. "Like something out of the film, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*" as one visitor described it. A large sign at the entrance reads: "This is a PROHIBITED PLACE within the meaning of the OFFICIAL SECRETS ACT. Unauthorized persons entering the area may be ARRESTED and PROSECUTED."

This is the Royal Air Force radar station at Bishopscourt, NATO's main strategic asset on this island and Ireland's number one nuclear target. RAF Bishopscourt is the most westerly situated of Britain's nine military radar stations; their purpose is to detect, identify and track all aircraft in British airspace and as far out from its shores as possible. The system is known collectively as the United Kingdom Air Defence Ground Environment (UKADGE) and has its controls at the Air Defence Operations Centre, RAF High Wycombe near London. Direct links also exist with British civil air traffic control, with France's Strida T1 air defence system and with NATO headquarters in Belgium.

The County Down station constantly monitors the skies two hundred nautical miles out into the north east Atlantic; it is linked to other stations in the UKADGE system through British Telecom microwave radio links at Ballygomartin in west Belfast and at St John's Point on the Down coast ten miles south of the base.

If an aircraft shows up on the Bishopscourt radar screens which cannot be identified from civil flight plans and which fails to respond to interrogation on the standard radio frequencies, then RAF Phantom jets are scrambled from their bases at Leuchars in Scotland to intercept the radar contact and identify it. Such interceptions of Soviet aircraft take place on average four to five times per week; far from being nuclear bombers en route to attack Britain, these Soviet surveillance aircraft are "going about their lawful business over international waters", in the RAF's own words.

RAF Bishopscourt's role lies less in detecting a Soviet air attack on Britain - a feat beyond current Soviet capabilities, according to most independent experts - but in facilitating the passage of US military aircraft across the Atlantic. In the so-called limited war in Europe scenario, NATO central European forces would depend heavily on huge reinforcements by air of weapons and personnel from across the Atlantic. By virtue of its location, RAF Bishopscourt would be vital in detecting the presence of Soviet aircraft seeking to attack this NATO Atlantic Air Bridge and in guiding RAF interceptor fighters on them.

Dozens of military aircraft fly over RAF Bishopscourt each week, mainly US Air Force transporters commuting between the



As it was - the peace camp entrance.

States and NATO bases in Britain and Europe. They pass along an air route known to civil pilots as Upper Red Three, which stretches from Manchester, over County Down and out to Tory Island off Donegal.

This inclusion of military aircraft on the busy transatlantic civil air routes over Ireland can have its problems. One evening in May 1979, RAF controllers at Bishopscourt watched in horror as a Laker Airways DC 10 and a US Air Force C5 Galaxy transporter came within less than two hundred yards of each other in the skies above northern Donegal.

RAF Bishopscourt is currently being modernised as part of a £400 million upgrading of the UKADGE system; half the money is coming from the British Ministry of Defence and the remainder from central NATO funds. The modernisation will include the stationing of an additional mobile radar at Bishopscourt and the digging of a "hardened" underground concrete bunker. It is not known if the new radar has yet arrived, but the construction of the underground bunker, designed to resist the effects of a nuclear bombardment raining down upon the RAF base, is certainly and visibly underway. However, Wing Commander Slinger (CO of RAF Bishopscourt) was quoted in the "Down Recorder" of 21/6/84 that he expected the new radar installation to be finished by 1980, and centralisation and modernisation of the whole base by 1990-91.

All this makes RAF Bishopscourt a high-priority target for Soviet attack, most likely from SS-20 ballistic missiles launched from within the Soviet Union. In the most recent large scale British Civil Defence exercise, Hard Rock '82, Bishopscourt was hit in the first wave of a Soviet attack on the British Isles; at 0600 hours on September 27th, to be exact. Two other targets in the North were subsequently hit in that exercise: the military airfield at Ballykelly on Lough Foyle and Aldergrove airport near Belfast.

Bishopscourt Retrospective broadsheet, page 1.

DAWN TRAIN 6, page eleven.

# A quiet Ballyhoo

by Peter Emerson

In a society as violent as that which exists in Northern Ireland, it is necessary to demonstrate that pacific protest is effective. And in a society as dangerous as that which exists in the world at large, we must all do what we feel we can, in whatever way we feel best.

And every so often, little 'coincidences' help us along. When Bishopscourt's peace camp was first established, I was sort of free and ready for a spell in the countryside; some friends were willing to look after my house and to pay a spot of rent, so to support the peace camp; and Corrymeela was ready to get rid of a surplus caravan for a good cause. An even greater co-incidence was the existence, just opposite the radar base, of a derelict house and an unused field.....soon to become a garden full of vegetables and, from time to time, a park full of tents and anti-nuke campers.

One important aspect of pacifism, I feel, is respect for the human being whose deeds we don't respect. In the case of Bishopscourt, this involved respecting the police and RAF personnel, as well as the DoE (Department of Environment) officials who tried to get us evicted, a tactic somewhat at variance with that of other DoE officials who acknowledged our existence and awarded us both an official address and a rates bill.

Respect for the police. The point was emphasised most emphatically one day when, during one of our many blockades, while we were sitting in a circle peacefully protesting against that which may lead to a future war, the police were listening to news of an explosion which had just killed one of their comrades in this Irish war of the present.

Perhaps it is wrong for the security forces not to oppose government nuclear policies; perhaps it is wrong for them to support all the dictates of the Northern Ireland Office; perhaps it is wrong for those not engaged in violence to fail to see how violent was and/or is discrimination, emergency legislation, oppression by institutions various be they government or church or multi-national company; and perhaps it is wrong for all of us in the West to live as we do, for 'tis our consumerism which exacerbates the famine in Africa! It is also wrong to kill, or so believes the pacifist, no matter what the cause. And the fact was that one man had been killed. In such circumstances, it would have been quite wrong if we so-called pacifists had not expressed sympathy with those who now mourned. Indeed, emotions were strong, and we felt moved to do just that. And thus, if only by a little, were they comforted.

And respect for all meant telling them if and when we were going to protest, and by what means. We even told 'em that we were going to jump over the perimeter fence, though without telling them the exact time or place....

".....'cos you'd just come and stop us, wouldn't you?"

"Well yes," the sergeant replied, smiling...and understanding.

The policy paid off. Over a cup of tea and a biscuit, in Downpatrick police station, the conversation ran as follows: -

"They should be tried and sentenced, because that would act as a deterrent against the others," suggested the deputy superintendent.

"No, I disagree. For once released, they'll only go and do it again, won't you?" said the 'super' who also felt that any trial would give the police-cum-RAF bad, and CND good, publicity. When such are the thoughts, you know you're half way to persuasion.

Later on in the year, many were the peacekeepers who came from all over Ireland to participate in the demos, and some of them stayed to take their turn in maintaining the vigil - Tony, Jim, Phil, Tom and Miriam, and others too numerous to mention.

During such demos, we practised peace camp politics. For me, this was a wonderful though at times difficult learning process.

Bishopscourt Retrospective broadsheet, page 11.

DAWN TRAIN 6, page twelve.

gorgeous in those moments when all were still, and quiet, holding hands, offering no resistance to the police if and when they wished to move us, respecting each other, powerful in mutual support; tense when those like me who are male or others who are not spoke longer than was necessary, or when those like me long in the camp or others of less vintage dominated proceedings; and sometimes, for me at any rate, sad, if and when some - male or female, old hands or newcomers, avowedly Christian or not so - wanted to do things their way, and not perhaps with the consensual support of all present.

On balance, however, I can look back on those days as some of the most delightful of my life. And in the evening, on my own or over a chessboard with Tony, when all had returned to homes and families far, I somehow felt there was a sort of Bishopscourt peace camp community, and that the net effect of our actions was positive.

I'm a firm believer in the collective unconscious, the noosphere, and the collective will. When public opinion is strong enough, then it can indeed bring down the tear, stop the war in Viet-nam, or whatever! What we have to do is just plug away, forever seeking to increase that level of anti-nuke public opinion, forever knowing there is a threshold at which disarmament will occur. Back in Bishopscourt for the winter, the postmen called; he brought some mail of course, his own Christmas greetings and..... a bottle of whiskey.

"I thought you were all head-cases at first. But now I've changed my mind. Cheers."

And despite the fact that Paddy and I had just recently acted illegally in the bunker in Belfast, infringing laws of trespass and breaking and entry - in a totally pacifist way, of course, doing minimal damage, compensating for whatever breakages they might have considered committed, and reporting ourselves to the authorities - one of those servants of the state whom we had respected popped in one day also to wish us a Happy Christmas, and to add, "You're quite right about that Wind-scale business!" He asked, understandably enough, to remain anonymous. And this, his wish, I will respect.

## Why a peace camp?

by Sara Whelan

When I first fell in the door of the Peace Camp caravan at Bishopscourt, I really hadn't a clue what a peace camp was all about. It was around midnight and after a night's hitchhiking into the "Unknown North", I was lucky to share a taxi with a few girls on their way home from a night out in Downpatrick. As we came near the RAF base, the yellow floodlighting over rolling hills of countryside seemed more eerily like a war scene than anything I had seen before. Night-time it when you really feel the chilly paranoid air of an installation like this - so imagine how the peace campers in residence felt when the car drew up beside the caravan at that unexpected hour!

The aims of the Bishopscourt Peace Camp, established in March 1983, were brightly painted on the outside of the caravan:

1. To oppose cruise and other nuclear weapons;
2. To oppose the British government's nuclear defence policy;
3. To oppose RAF Bishopscourt as part of NATO.

This served to inform passers by, but as Bishopscourt is a fairly quiet backwater of a place, there wasn't a lot of traffic. At least the cheery invitation to "Come in and have a cup of tea" did encourage some curious children to sign the visitors book - peace campaigners of the future, one hopes!

About the time I joined the Bishopscourt Support Group in August 1984, one and a half years into its existence, some of the original group were weary, losing enthusiasm, and moving on to other activities. There had already been a great deal of good work and active protest, mostly on a permanent resident basis, by Peter Emerson, Tony Thompson, Jim Maguire and others. I often heard of the earlier days (particularly the all-night vigil blockades) when the commitment and solidarity seemed stronger, and the alternative to accepting RAF and NATO policy was firmly put forward.

Any endeavour such as a peace camp requires a new wave of energy now and again, however naive and optimistic it might seem at first to those drained by experience. I was amazed that so few people knew of the radar station at Bishopscourt, even in Northern Ireland. So I opened my big mouth and proposed holding a very noisy Disarmament Festival at Bishopscourt in the summer of 1985. The reasons for the "Stay alive in '85" Festival were agreed: to reactivate the peace camp; widen awareness of the Bishopscourt threat; and hopefully form a new focus for anti-nuclear protest in the happy aftermath of the Camrose hoax. To place this focus 30 miles inside the Northern Ireland border, a very strategic part of NATO territory and yet psychologically distant to the majority in the South seemed a worthwhile challenge to the view that there was only one big issue in the North. It was always a problem for peace campaigners who came to Bishopscourt from the Republic to deal with their inbred instinct to see the RAF as "Brits" first. Equally, the Northerners had a lot to learn too.

In a way, the excitement/fread of putting together a music festival in a place with no water or electricity did regenerate the Peace Camp for a while. There were preparatory meetings and weekend workshops to try and cover all the details. It could not have been done without the help of a lot of people (particularly Miriam Killeeney, Tom Keery, Rob Fairmichael, Eoin Dinan, Keith Donald and Davey Goban). The VSI workcamp volunteers were fantastic to put up with that last panicky, tense week of never-ending work in terrible conditions. And there were some good follow-up events such as the Reclaim the Airspace kite-flying weekend and the recent submarine protest.

The second aim, to widen awareness, was also achieved to a certain extent. Three hundred people visited this tiny out-of-the-way spot and felt the not-so-good vibrations of Bishopscourt microwaves in between a crazy mix of punk and folk music, which truly attempted to "Rock the Radar"! Three hundred people who would each tell many others of the dangers of this radar base that could drag us all into any future war. The festival site bordered the base itself at the main road junction in Bishopscourt, so the RAF and local population certainly heard us, and RTE and local newspapers carried reports.

The last idea, to form a national focus for peace protest needs more support and commitment, from central organisations especially, and was not realised. A radar system, even the more sophisticated and deadly variety now in operation, does not seem to be as immediate a threat as cruise missiles sitting in their silos, but these weapons are made to hit targets like Bishopscourt.

However, the practical problem in keeping Bishopscourt Peace Camp going is its somewhat isolated location and the resultant difficulty in finding a live-in active coordinator. The caravan was sally vandalised by RAF members and taken over by rats and rot, until it had to be given to someone who could make better use of it, and because we were spending too much time repairing and cleaning it.

To return to my initial curiosity that brought me to Bishopscourt – why a peace camp? I think the answer must be to draw attention to a dangerous threat to peace in a particular place and provoke people to do something about it. Does it work? Yes, if there are long-term resident members committed to keeping up a series of actions and providing information. Yes, if there is a central organisation to give support. Yes, because it means peace work at a very personal level, face-to-face with the local people, the military, and between the activists themselves – effective and non-violent training in a real sense.

I am still hopelessly optimistic – on our last action weekend, 2 dozen students achieved the most successful blockade of the base yet, and we had a warm response from the locals when we leafleted the nearby fishing village of Argliss. The best opposition to nuclear madness is from ordinary people, and perhaps Bishopscourt Peace Camp has played its part in setting the seed of protest in the coast of beautiful County Down. I believe we will see the fruit of it yet. It will take years maybe, but then it's hard to believe we are hearing about arms at Greenham Common being dismantled – the harvest of 50 years of the peace movement beginning? Let's hope so.

## Nonviolent action

– the Bishopscourt experience by Rob Fairmichael

It is vital that we remember some of the things that happened, and how they happened, because they are extremely relevant to other situations. Above all the Bishopscourt peace camp experience, and the blockades and actions there, show nonviolent "direct" action is possible in Northern Ireland and – given the numbers involved – highly effective in highlighting an issue. While we were often disappointed in media coverage, for one reason or another, there was enough to be "noticeable".

As Peter Emerson records in his piece, an effort was made to have good relations with the police. Generally this held up well even during the blockades with the tension of them shifting us out of the way. We felt some sort of success if we could even delay traffic for five or ten minutes. Traffic in and out of the base was cut down very considerably. Sometimes the RAF closed off the main gate and used back or side entrances. Sometimes we tried to cover these too.

There were a few incidents of aggro between some protesters and police but in general the police did not see us as a threat. I would feel that nonviolent action – of the various blockading and invading (space occupied by the camp) kinds – is appropriate as a fairly easy option for other situations in Northern Ireland where again the police will not feel threatened. I am not trying to rule out nonviolent action in other situations but to say that in this it can be safe, sensible and satisfactory. I think this applies to community, environmental, anti-sectarian and other issues where a campaign is not seen as being sectarian based. There are other provisos that will apply locally but the opportunities are enormous!

Undoubtedly the RAF, some of, did feel threatened, individually and collectively. A heavy fine was promised for any member found talking to peace campers. Given the "apartheid" situation of an RAF camp behind barbed wire in a majority Catholic area of the North, we never sorted out as a mass what our strategy was in relation to RAF members. And how should we respond when they went in for verbal abuse and obscene comments? That is something a forthcoming Christian CND workshop will be looking at in the North. Another, different problem, was that sometimes the police seemed ingratiatingly friendly – tactic or reality? How should we deal with that?

Because of the paucity of full-time campers (after the first year it was often or usually a part-time camp) we did not link in with the support that existed locally, and in Downpatrick, as much as we could. Now if Peter and Tony had more full timers early on..... Nor did support from elsewhere always materialise: Coleraine sometimes had more people present than Belfast, which says a lot for Coleraine and not so much for Belfast.

The reasons for such small numbers (sometimes only a couple of dozen on a blockade, maximum 100 or slightly over) is outside the scope of this article: a number of factors undoubtedly apply, including fear in the North of confronting any arm of the state lest that be the cause of a cracked skull or you out of a job. But the point I make above is that nonviolent action may be much easier and safer than it is realised – depending on the issue and the approach taken.

Perhaps the most amazing example of the power of nonviolence at Bishopscourt was the August '83 'slow march'. As dusk began, protesters gathered at the bottom of the approach road, a hundred yards from the main gates. Candles were lit, and spontaneously a slow, silent march began towards the base. Candles flickered and people moved in the slowest motion, strength and pride in themselves, their cause. Eventually with the gathering dark the gates were reached, still in silence. The police told everyone to move away; no one moved, no one responded. We stayed where we were all night, in silence. The RAF might have had their guns behind their man-made barricades of wire and steel, but that night we showed our strength. And many of the women needed it to put up with the comments coming from the RAF men a few feet away.

Obviously the peace camp meant different things to different people. To some perhaps it was most importantly a witness, a Bishopscourt Retrospective broadsheet, page iii.  
DARN TRAIN 6, page thirteen.

vigil, a presence of hope and peace in a place that threatened despair and war. Often the aims of blockades were not thought out: were we trying to (a) inconvenience the RAF - (b) sow seeds of doubt in their minds (conversion) - (c) gain publicity for the cause - (d) have a good time in a good cause? Some events, such as a kite flying session, were mainly symbolic and fun. Other times it wasn't clear what mixture of the above we were attempting.

And training was haphazard. Sometimes there was at least discussion before we went to blockade, and others by the time we had waited for arrivals it was felt necessary to get up and at it or the day would be gone. In those instances important discussions did sometimes take place during blockades, as when issues arose, should an ambulance be let out/back in (empty)? In this instance the matter was resolved by reckless, dangerous RAF driving (drive through them and on no account stop, when there was no need); we got out of the way or would have been seriously injured.

But our preparation was often somewhat lax, partly because of the difficulty of different people and different groups arriving at different times, and there not being an adequate, disciplined (i.e. self-disciplined) structure for seeing that everyone was prepared and a consensual plan agreed. There was also an unwillingness by individuals to be seen as authoritarian, a positive factor - but coupled with an unwillingness or inability to always put the effort into consensual agreements and organisation.

We did do some preparation, analysis, and prepare guidelines (the latter, of September 1983, entailed an hour's preparation before blockades, including breaking into affinity groups if numbers warranted it, and consensus decision making). Consensus was something generally adhered to, but difficult when there were different ideological persuasions present (e.g. pacifists and anarchists of the non-anarcho-pacifist persuasion). Affinity groups were half tried but people tended to vote individually with their feet: part of it was perhaps the feeling they were unnecessary for a bunch of 50 people. Another rule that emerged, no consumption of alcohol on blockade, was generally observed.

Different blockades followed different patterns and with slightly different responses from police and RAF, as to whether people were shifted away from the main gate (RAF using a back entrance) etc. St Patrick's Day 1984 was perhaps the most controversial in terms of relations between blockaders and police, with arguments over antagonism, doing damage to property or not, and getting arrested or not. This was one of the larger events with over 100 at it, including 12 Women for Disarmament who had walked all the way from Dublin. With police not around at the gate on the Kildale road in May 1987, an RAF member practised driving as fast as he could towards on the road protesters - stopping in contact with one woman's foot - to try to intimidate us out of the way (he didn't succeed).

Had numbers been much larger, and it more difficult to get any RAF vehicles through, there might have been mass arrests on blockades (as opposed to temporary moving or holding). Any arrests and charges related to damage to property and the like - lighting a fire in the roadway, painting graffiti etc. Nobody was arrested or charged for blockading the base and nobody was charged for entering the base - despite a number of incursions over the three years of the camp; people were handed over to the RUC by the RAF, the former took names and then released them. Remember that the next time someone says nonviolent action isn't possible in Northern Ireland. While I wouldn't try to extrapolate that to all situations, there are many where it is highly relevant.

I have spent a little time exploring some of the group dynamics and logistics of involvement. I have done this to concretise the peace camp and blockading experience. Despite some of the problems and difficulties - some of which were growing pains - it was overall a positive, affirmative place to be involved. Many of us received as much or more than we gave. With more preparation and work it could have been even better; that is the lesson we must take to our other campaigns, whatever they may be. And, of course, that nonviolent action is possible in Northern Ireland.

Bishops court Retrospective broadsheet, page iv.

DAWN TRAIN 6, page fourteen.

## Campers speak!

Bob Fairmichael has been leafing through the peace camp visitors book.....

Locals and metropolitans, Irish and foreigners, young and old, all grace the pages of the peace camp visitors book. Plenty of juvenile scrawl - "Thanks for the cup of tea, your a kind man and a nice man." Obviously not everyone signed, especially not some members of the RAF who preferred to leave their calling cards of a harder nature through the caravan windows - but some of their children did call, at least a couple for a school project on peace.

All I can do is extract a few comments from the pages. A Northerner commented "Thanks you for your kindness and caring. May we have the world." A German wrote: "Important to see that people live things they are fighting for!" A guy from Glemmerville signed: 4 people from Greenham had knocked on his door (North of Belfast) asking to use the phone - he gave them a lift all the way down to Bishops court! One of the Greenham women said "Thanks and much love & peace to everyone who was here - had an amazing, peaceful time. Be back very soon" - and many Greenhamites did indeed return.

One Downpatrick woman quoted Dorothy Day - "You are making the world an easier place to be good in". Sometimes people signed under the reason for their gathering - a workshop, a weekend of action/blockade, or Irish CND national committee meeting. "Deepest love, tears and smiles" came from an Irish CND supporter of the camp. The lighter side of camp life is reflected in the comment: "After cooking a 'super' meal, drinking a lot of Guinness, but not being sick like certain other people, I had a marvellous time..." Ho, ho!

A Dublin woman gave "Hotel Bishops court" three stars \*\*\*; she judged the New Years Eve (1984) vigil "Tour of radar base very stimulating" (inside this wall). Ardglas comment that "As in 1914, so in 1984 - the trenches are no longer in Flanders fields, but in the minds of men."

Cheek by jowl then the comment on the same page "Balls balls banquets & balls, 'is / Drac" (Dundalk) and the RUC Chief Inspector's signature. On to a London woman: "The presence of few takes on the conscience of many - fighters for life". More jocularity: "We're the Albanian secret service / come to subvert the system / we like it here it's like Siberia / it's always fucking freezing".

Signatures from the VSI workcamp preparing for the music festival, 1985. The chairperson of British CND signs in. Another saying "I feel the power of those who have come here before me and I know that we are all together in spirit..." The local woman who kept an eye on the caravan when no one was there reported "Lock broken and window" (a soon familiar story). A Dutch woman survived a winter fortnight on her own. Some punks report on clearing up the mess the caravan was on, and another report on windows being broken while people were in bed. Dublin stalwart says "Hope the 'RAF's don't miss me" (real rodents were moving in). And so to Nagasaki weekend 1986 - farewells.

Finally, the thanks of those involved must go to the local people, women and men, who supported the peace camp in whatever way they could; for reasons you will appreciate you will remain anonymous here! Not least because the Ministry of Defence in London subscribes to Dawn. We have not forgotten Bishops court or you. We are still working so that the Bishops courts of this world will be no more, and betimes, we hope to be back in Ballyhoman.

DAWN magazine (the old monthly) reported at length news and analysis of Bishops court. For those wanting to follow it up, there is material in issue numbers 76-77 (strategic situation of base) and on the peace camp in all issues 82 - 107 inclusive with the exception of Nos 98, 100 and 105.

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