



KLAXON



December 2025

Newsletter of the International Research Group Orford Ness

What a brilliant year 2025 has been for IRGON!

Sharing the fascinating military history of Orford Ness with the public, we have been busier than ever. Our members guided numerous, very popular "Island of Secrets" tours on the Ness, presented IRGON to the Royal Aeronautical Society Christchurch Branch in March, to the Debenham History Society in June and showcased IRGON at the Radar in the Air Event in Martlesham. We put up the IRGON gazebo on Orford Ness for the first time for the Cold War Weekend, and again on the open days at Martlesham Heath and Bentwaters.

Our visit to two former secret radar sites in the USA (see below) and interviewing their chief designer hugely expanded our technical understanding of the global "R-System". Often, the key to a better understanding of a local history item is to network with people beyond the horizon - to coin a phrase!

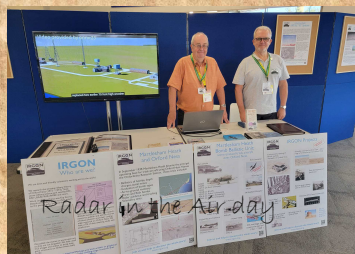
Three enthusiastic new members joined our ranks this year, so we are now a round dozen! And there is still so much more history left to discover ...

2026 will likely see major changes in the ways the public can appreciate Orford Ness. Our offer remains to continue our successful collaboration with our friends in the National Trust in whichever ways are appropriate as they accomplish their transition.

Olaf Kirchner, Chairman



RAeS lecture March 2025



Cold War weekend on
Orford Ness



IRGON gazebo at Bentwaters



Martlesham Heath Open Day 2025

IRGON carries out successful research trip to the USA

In October, two IRGON members completed a research trip to the United States. The objective of this trip was the rediscovery of the secret Cold War-era “R-System,” an over-the-horizon radar built by the U.S. Air Force Technical Applications Center (AFTAC) to detect nuclear explosions and rocket launches from the Soviet Union.



Steve and Olaf on site at Muirkirk, MD

We wanted to locate the remains of the R-System in the United States, and to compare them with the 50-metre concrete ring and other remains at Orford Ness. For this we had already been using Google Earth and online LIDAR imaging. Our trip was intended to enhance this information with on-the-ground exploration. We succeeded in finding and documenting key features like the 50-metre concrete rings and antenna plinths at Muirkirk, MD (the R system prototype) and Roswell, NM.



Part of the 50 metre ring at Muirkirk, MD

We were lucky to have our radar expert back in the UK on hand and were able to do some information exchange in real time. The highlight of the trip was an interview with the original designer of the R-System, who despite advancing age, was able to

provide crystal clear first-hand information plus some detailed photographs and even some cine film.

We encountered some logistical hurdles (we ended up being there in the middle of the Government shutdown), and unexpected encounters, but also had moments of serendipity, such as connecting with a ham radio enthusiast who had photographed the site decades earlier. We presented our findings with a lecture given to the Walker Air Force Base Museum at a church hall in Roswell. Our lecture transcript is available [here](#).

After leaving Roswell, we had our final stop at the National Atomic Testing Museum at Las Vegas, where we had an appointment with the curator. He was impressed with our story and the cold war archaeology bound up with our efforts! We will be delivering a lecture to the museum on the subject of UK/US collaboration in the nuclear intelligence gathering field in 2026.

Upon our return, armed with this additional information, we were able to produce a first article on the R system, which is now available [here](#) on our website.

Dates for your calendar



- Wednesday 17th June 2026:
IRGON will be delivering a presentation to the Little Waldingfield Historical Society
<https://littlewalingfieldhistorysociety.wordpress.com/>

At the time of writing further dates are yet to be confirmed.

But the following talks and/or onsite visits are provisionally planned for 2026:

- Bentwaters Open Day
- National Atomic Testing Museum, Las Vegas

Changes of Opening Times at Orford Ness for 2026

Next year there will be significant changes in opening time for Orford Ness. In this short note we report on the changes and possible impacts. The financial issues facing the National Trust have been well documented in the national press over the last few months. To ease these financial pressures, the Trust has recognised that strategic choices need to be made regarding where money is spent and that cost savings in overheads need to be made.

Earlier this year it was announced that the National Trust would introduce a portfolio approach to estate management. In this model estates are grouped together with an overall general manager in charge and staff shared between sites. Under this scheme Orford Ness has been placed in the Restore Nature portfolio with Dunwich and Sutton Hoo. The outcome has been that three senior posts on Orford Ness have been disestablished. Portfolio management will be based at Dunwich with the remaining Orford Ness staff spending approximately 50% of their time at that location.



The impact of these changes on opening times for Orford Ness and the provision of specialist tours is profound. The reduction in staff presence at the Ness means that the core season will run from 1 May to 30 September, as opposed to the current April to the end of October. Instead of being open 4 days a week, in 2026 the Ness will only be open on Saturdays in May and on Thursdays and Saturdays from June to September. In addition, the number of Island of Secrets and half day tours will be cut by 50% and offered on Sundays. To offset the reduced opening days the ferry will run at 15

minute intervals rather than the usual 20 minute intervals. The effect of these changes will be to reduce total potential seasonal visitor numbers to 8000. By comparison in 2024 actual visitor numbers approached 16000. Because of the increased frequency of ferry trips volunteer numbers will increase from 4 a day to 7 or more.

It is still intended to offer tours to individual groups during April and October, but these slots will be limited. Site availability will also slow the work of groups such as the Heritage Team which is recording the state of buildings on Orford Ness. At this stage it is not known how these changes will impact on other activities such as night photography. It is also unclear how, or if the staff will be able to support any Cold War Network events which may occur in 2026.

We must make it clear that IRGON and the volunteer corps fully appreciates and understands the reasons for these changes and that we will all work closely with National Trust staff to ensure that the new arrangements work smoothly for all.



***Season's Greetings
to all our readers!***



The Australian Connection

IRGON recently acquired the book "Fire across the desert", which is a comprehensive history of the Woomera test range in Australia.

There are a surprising number of references to Orford Ness, and many links. For example, the bomb ballistics range at Woomera was originally designed by the Orford Ness staff, who were suddenly given carte blanche to design their dream range, where space was not a limitation. Australian specialists were trained on Orford Ness, and a number of staff from the Ness served at Woomera.

There are number of interesting leads to follow up from this new information. For example, one of the



volunteers and a draughtsman for AWRE on Orford Ness was asked to design sandproof cabinets between 1961 and 1964, he didn't know their ultimate destination, but Woomera seems likely. Ballistic trials of the wartime German Taifun flak rocket carried out at one of the Australian ranges may have had corresponding lethality trials on the Ness. There are likely to be useful connections between optical instrumentation, telemetry and the like between the two ranges.

We are confident that this connection will yield some interesting research results.

Australia is just one of our international connections. Others include, briefly:

- Germany - tests of enemy weapons during both World Wars
- Germany - Source of kinetheodolites after WW2
- Netherlands - route of original telegraph cable (Orford Ness - Scheveningen in 1853).
- Netherlands - landing on Orford Ness of a Dutch airman escaping from the Nazis, 1940
- Switzerland - tests of autocannon and ammunition on Orford Ness, 1950
- United States: Over the horizon radar projects "R" system and Cobra Mist

The IRGON Christmas Quiz!



- What site for secret military projects is now owned by the National Trust and accessible to the public?
- Where did recent art projects explore the colour palette of the aircraft camouflage (NIVO) that was developed in 1917?
- Where are the buildings in which Watson-Watt and his team performed the early radar research experiments?

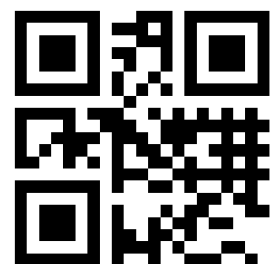
- During the Cold War, where were pagodas built for environmental testing the components of nuclear weapons?
- Where will you find an atomic weapon on display?
- Where is the Green Chapel where The Armourer and his team meet the five forms?

Answers on a postcard to IRGON!

Want to know more or join us? – If you have an interest in military history, if you have a personal or family connection to the work carried out on Orford Ness or access to information that may help us further document this history, you will find our contact details on www.IRGON.org.

Thank you!

Website – Our updated website now has new articles, visit us to find the most up-to-date information and discoveries made by IRGON.



www.IRGON.org