Secrecy, obscurity, security, obsession: ‘Guardian’ telecommunications bunker deep under Manchester city centre and Cold War urbanism

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Cold war urban and imperative of survival telecommunications

Why did they build deep bunkers for telephone exchanges under city centres in 1950s?

Hugely expensive, at a time of austerity.

We will (re)interpret its meanings through different periods of time and perspectives.

But first, lets see what was built.
George Street shaft

AT8. 1956

Central tunnel sections
The secrecy behind the Guardian created speculation that was deflected by the government in as ‘mundane’ a way as possible.

There are still secrets - NATO funded, but why? Was it directly linked to TAT1?

The tunnels were obsolete in terms of their resistance to nuclear weaponry.
What did they know?
Not only did equipment become rapidly out-dated, but the site wasn't actually protective in terms of radioactivity. The standard air filtration system was thought to be sufficient.
City kept ten-year telephone 'secret'

By MICHAEL MORRIS

For 10 years, an emergency trunk telephone exchange has been secretly operating beneath the centre of Manchester. It has cost between £3 millions and £4 millions.

The announcement yesterday of the existence of an elaborate system dispelled rumours, which had persisted for years, that visible deep pile driving had been part of the building of an atomic shelter.

Mr Stonehouse, Postmaster-General, said in Manchester that it had been one of the city's best kept secrets. Silence had been necessary for defence reasons. He was opening the surface trunk exchange which will relieve the underground installation of some duties.

Service protected

Later, a GPO spokesman said the exchange, known as "Guardian," was built 150 feet underground, near Piccadilly, so that the trunk service would be protected in an emergency. It could be sealed off, and had living accommodation for the staff, and food and water supplies.

The exchange, on which construction began in 1954, was carrying trunk traffic at the end of 1958. It is reached by walking 30 steps into the basement of the new Rutherford surface exchange, and taking a 30-second lift ride.

A main tunnel 1,000 feet long and 25 feet wide, stretches from below Piccadilly Plaza towards Oxford Road. This contains the equipment, providing 2,000 trunk-circuits. Cables from the
1968 off the Official Secret Act, but still secret! 1970s Picc-Vic personnel had to sign confidentiality clauses. The exchange was operational, but not ‘secure’. As well as newspaper ‘release’ Peter Laurie’s revealing book was published. Who was responsible for allowing information into the public domain?
Decline in significance. Documented by others in the 1980s/1990s period of decline. Several known tours and semi-official visits. Personal & catalogued English Heritage appraisal, Hogshawrabbits video documentation, Civic Society, etc.
Bunkers for sale.

Unwanted asset. Videos online and estate agents brochures promoting their re-use.
Securitised critical infrastructure

Underground becomes a threat space,
Deterioration of physical fabric, Urbex infiltrations.
April 2004 fire - new level of physical security of entrances.
Security stepped up
Elevated to Holy Grail status for urban explorers

39 Guardian Telephone Exchange

LOCATION Subterranean Manchester, Lancashire, England
NEAREST POPULATION HUB Manchester
SECRECY OVERVIEW Access restricted: a long-secret communications network beneath the city streets.

Originally constructed in the 1950s during the Cold War, this complex of underground tunnels was designed with a view to safeguarding communications in the event of a nuclear strike. It mirrored similar enterprises undertaken in other major British cities such as London and Birmingham. Today the tunnels house a vast network of telephone cabling, though rumours about the Exchange’s exact status continue.

The tunnels that housed the Exchange are thought to cover around 3 kilometres (1.8 miles), stretching from Manchester’s city centre to the Ardwick and Salford areas. The complex was built in 1954 by a
We've not been into the Guardian. Indeed all our polite enquires to BT and others have been ignored. Low profile but the George St. compound still holds secrets.
The expenditure on the project was huge and seemingly not justified by the ends...
Post Office and Telecoms in the ‘Warfare State’...
Computers, technology education, nuclear energy research, telecommunications, ‘high-tech’ weapons manufacture all in/around Manchester in the 1950s...
Further reading:


Image references:

- Slide 1: Blast door at the entrance to main exchange area. Source: Photograph by Tony Perry, English Heritage, 1988 ref. AA98/02423.
- Slide 2: View of racks of telecommunications equipment being installed in the top half of the main Apparatus Tunnel 8 in April 1958. Source: tunnel engineer Patrick Gough, courtesy of George Coney.
- Slide 3: The extents of the Guardian tunnel network under Manchester city centre. Source: Authors compilation; map drawn by Graham Bowden, Cartography Unit, University of Manchester.
- Slide 4: Photographs: (top) the service building at 56 George Street, Manchester, dated November 1960; (bottom) the main equipment tunnel, which was divided to create two working levels, March 1956. Source: tunnel engineer Patrick Gough, courtesy of George Coney. Street plan: HM Land Registry records, ref. GM728631, courtesy of Ben Jenkinson.
Slide 5: (top) title page of Act of Parliament that legalised the construction of the Guardian exchange. (bottom) minutes of government discussions on the secrecy of the construction of the Post Office tunnels, source: National Archives, CAB130/71.

Slide 6: View of the prominent headgear located at Piccadilly needed to winch men and materials to the GUTE tunnel workings. The façade of the exchange at York House, York Street, is to the left of the image. Source: Photograph by A. Dawson, 1955. Courtesy of Manchester Archives and Local Studies, ref. m56369.


• Slide 14: Book cover of 100 Places You Will Never Visit. Google Books showing the page featuring the Guardian telephone exchange.

• Slide 15: View along the main pedestrian tunnel into the Guardian exchange. Source: Photograph by Tony Perry, English Heritage, 1988 ref. AA98/02422.