

THIS BUNKER CO

Now the

On maps it is marked simply as "Building 210" and from a distance it looks like a large partly grassed mound of earth. But this Huntingdon facility was one of the most secretive military installations in the country, costing as much as £42 million to build. And now the Ministry of Defence plans to blow it up.

Not that the MoD would tell you anything about it. Typically, despite noises made by New Labour about open government, this issue comes under "Classified Information".

But *Punch* can reveal that Building 210, in the middle of the British countryside just down the road from John Major's constituency home, was a command and control centre built by the Americans just six years ago for use in the event of a nuclear war.

It took two years to build and was operational for just six months before the Americans decided to pull out of this top-secret spy base on RAF Alconbury.

We were shown around the bunker by a former worker on the base who now works for the consortium which has leased it from the MoD.

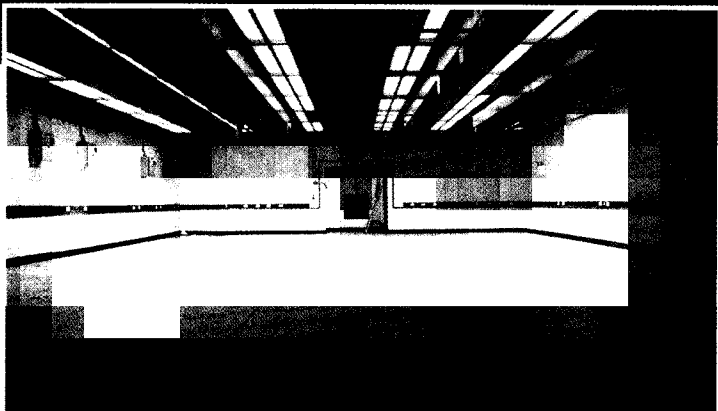
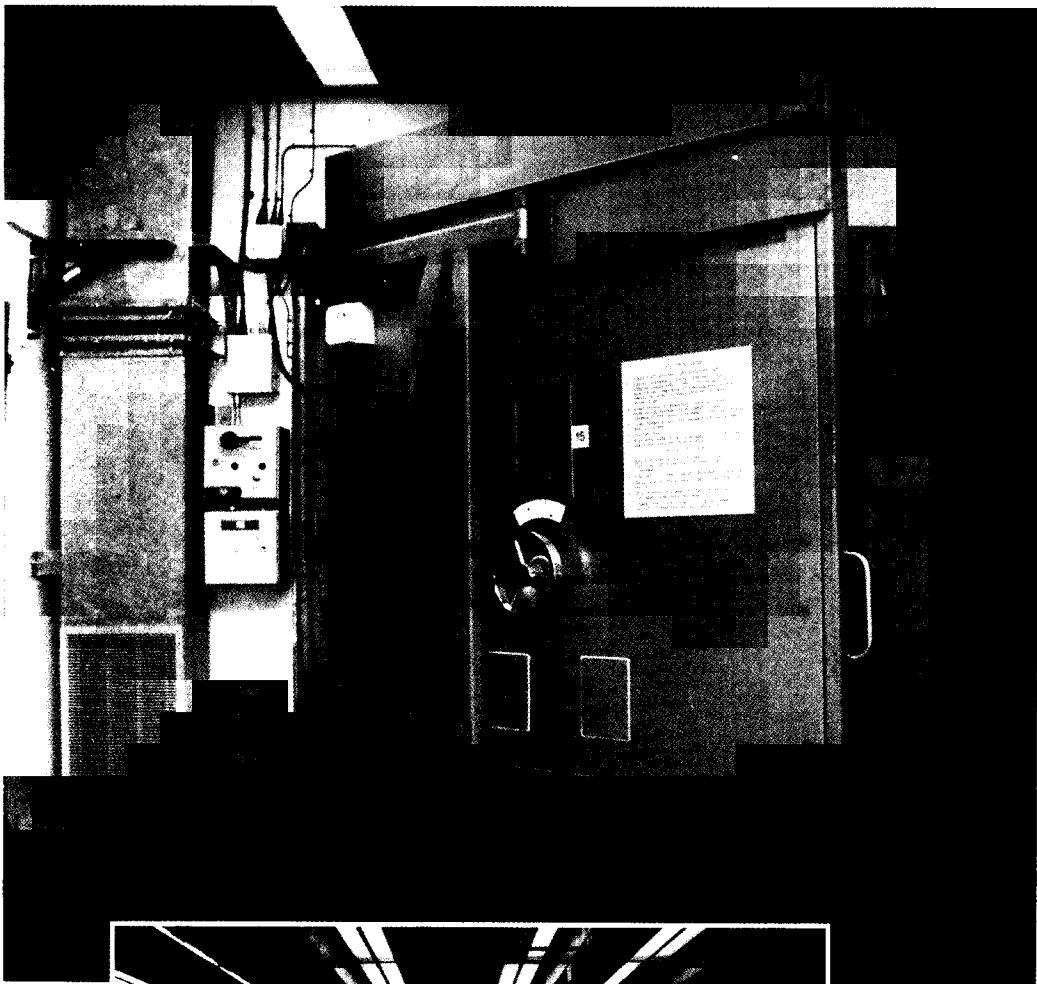
Until 1995, Alconbury was the home of the US Air force's 17th Reconnaissance Wing. U2 spy planes from the base took part in operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm against Iraq in 1990 and 1991.

Originally established in 1938 as an RAF bomber base, the base was taken over by the Americans during the Second World War, returning it briefly to the RAF after the war, before taking it over again in the 1950s.

The sprawling complex covers around 3,000 acres in total. Its perimeter fence is 10 miles in circumference. Its motley collection of hangars, nuclear bomb storage bunkers and ancillary buildings was painted drab shades of green and brown to blend in with the surrounding countryside. In the midst of it all is Building 210, a large bunker with two ungainly squat aerials stuck out of the bare earth. In the event of the unimaginable, these would have been the bunker's links to what remained of the outside world.

Access to the bunker is via a long drive-through tunnel lined with rows of circular air vents. Its main entrance is through a suite of steel doors and shutters designed to keep the radiation out and the occupants in. Our guide told us: "Once the portcullises come down you are in there. You don't come out until somebody says so."

This entrance suite leads to an eerie



DOWN UNDER: Inside the bunker, a world of steel doorways, radiation-proof walls and recycled air, water and sewage. Once the doors were closed, there would be no escape for those inside

PICTURES BY GEORGE IMPEY

ST £42 MILLION y want to blow it up

Pete Sawyer and
photographer
George Impey
gained access to a
white elephant in
Cambridgeshire

corridor completely lined with stainless steel. Leading from the corridor are a series of large white rooms devoid of equipment or furniture. Raised floors hide communication and power cables. Wall sockets and fixtures give away few or no clues as to what kind of equipment was installed there. Other doors lead off in all directions to smaller rooms.

We asked the local council's planning department about Building 210. They told us that the Crown (in other words the MoD) could grant itself planning permission. "The council would have been consulted as part of the process, but the files would be restricted access. Even now. Assuming, that is, they have not been shredded."

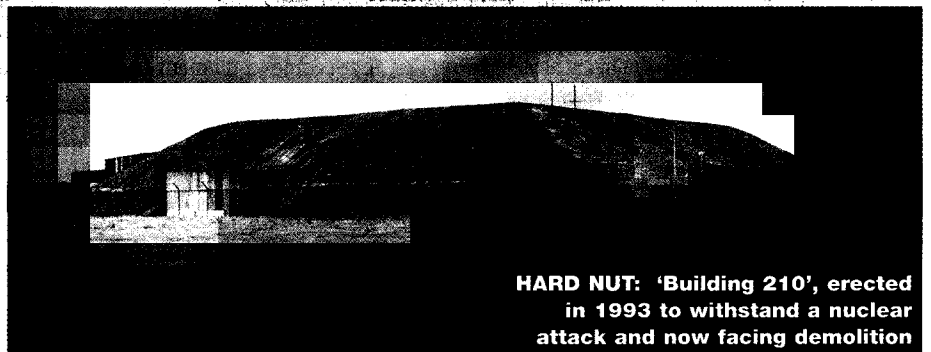
We contacted the Pentagon. After a wild goose chase across several state lines, we were put in touch with the US Air Force's Historical Research Agency at Maxwell Air Force Base, Montgomery, Alabama. A friendly officer invited us to e-mail our request but, to date, no reply has been forthcoming.

'It was built to withstand the bomb. You don't blow up something bomb-proof'

The irony was that only days beforehand, we had been happily shown around the bunker by Alconbury's new owners. The Cold War may have ended but government paranoia and secrecy still remains.

After the Americans moved out four years ago, the Alconbury site was sold by the MoD to a consortium led by BAA called Alconbury Developments Ltd (ADL). As is usual in deals involving defence sales, the MoD would not say by how much the taxpayer benefited from the sale, citing "commercial confidentiality".

ADL had grandiose plans to build an air freight terminal on the site but this has met fierce local opposition. A public inquiry into the proposals is due to start next May.



HARD NUT: 'Building 210', erected in 1993 to withstand a nuclear attack and now facing demolition

With the site sold to ADL, the MoD has scratched its head over what to do with the remaining specialist buildings on the base.

Its latest plan is to blow them up. First, it tried to blow up a hardened aircraft hangar. Not surprisingly most of the hangar still stands. After all, they were built to withstand a nuclear blast.

Then they moved on to a phenomenally expensive and specially designed building used by the US Air Force to acclimatise its U2 pilots to high-altitude atmospheres. Pilots would rest on couches for about an hour there before their missions in order to get used to the conditions in the aircraft.

This building is potentially of great historic interest to Cold War scholars. Or rather, it was. The MoD started blowing up the inside of the building and testing out steel-cutting equipment and explosives on its external doors. The ground around the building has

with its own power plant, closed-circuit air conditioning and water supply. Everything was recycled: air, water and even sewage

Our guide said: "If the Reds had finally pushed the button, this is where our leaders would have scurried to and tried to survive for five or six years." John Major was allegedly on the list of those considered important enough to be given sanctuary. "Maybe his government is still down there," quipped our guide.

When he was Prime Minister, Major used to drive the half mile from his house to the base, where a helicopter, parked beneath floodlights on a concrete apron, stood ready to whisk him to London.

Major would not comment on his use of the base, for "security reasons", even though the base is now defunct. Strange to think that the British Prime Minister had to use an American spy-base to fly from. No security risk there.

Finding out what really went on at the base after the Cold War years was hard going. According to our helpful guide, Building 210 was located on a part of the base used by the CIA. "When the CIA was operating, wires would be strung across the entrances sealing the area off," he said.

Official information on the building was also scarce. A spokeswoman for the MoD said: "The bunker was not built or paid for by the Ministry of Defence. So our involvement was simply on advising the USAF on local planning rules and how to get planning permission."

We asked for an official estimate on how much the bunker might have cost and were told: "The cost depends on the soil conditions, type of ventilation system, and how long you want people to be shut away for, but bunkers are expensive. Very expensive." Especially if you want to blow them up after only six months' use. □

been rucked up by the force of the explosions.

The MoD tried to market Building 210 to high-tech firms demanding a "clean room" environment, but with no luck. So it is likely that Building 210 will suffer the same fate as the U2 building, much to the disappointment of those who actually work on the base. "They want to demolish it. It was built to withstand the bomb. You don't go blowing up something that is bomb-proof," said our guide.

With such a scandalous and unaccountable waste of public money being accepted as a matter of fact, it is not surprising that the armed forces on both sides of the Atlantic are facing swingeing budget cuts.

The bunker was completely self-contained,