

# TRIP TO THE RED SANDS FORT

Home of Red Sands Radio 3<sup>rd</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> July 2008

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The Red Sands Army fort, 8 miles out to sea off Whitstable, Kent has a fascinating history. Built in 1943 to a design by Guy Maunsell, it was one of a number of WWII sea forts in the Thames Estuary to help protect London from Luftwaffe attacks. The Red Sands Army fort (code name Uncle 6) was eventually abandoned by the Ministry of Defence in 1958. But in 1964 it was occupied once again and became home to offshore radio stations **Radio Invicta** (July 1964 to February 1965), **King Radio** (February to September 1965) and finally, the most successful, **Radio 390** (September 1965 to July 1967) until being left to the elements once again in 1967. The fort featured in a 1966s episode of the TV series **Danger Man** ("Not So Jolly Roger"), and also in a 1968 episode of **Dr Who** ("Fury from the Deep"). Between 1968 and 1969 it was occupied by Seatribe, a group who wanted to set up a rest haven on the fort. The catwalks connecting the fort's seven towers were removed in the 70s to try and deter any new occupiers.

Discussions were started in 2003 by **Project Red Sand** with government agencies to try and preserve the historic structure. Work has begun and to promote this project, **Red Sands Radio**, made its first broadcast from the fort in July 2007 on 1278 kHz with an Ofcom RSL licence. The front cover of the July 2007 edition of *Communication* marked this broadcast with a picture of the Red Sands Fort, home to an offshore radio station again for the first time in forty years. Inside that issue was a feature on the history of the fort and the three radio stations who broadcast from the fort in the sixties, Radio Invicta, King Radio and Radio 390.

**Red Sands Radio** decided to repeat their RSL broadcast from the fort again in July 2008, on the same frequency, 1278 kHz. Tests from the station were heard on 3<sup>rd</sup> July before launching its ten day-long broadcast, also audible online via their website. Despite the power limitations of the RSL licence, once again Red Sands Radio was heard well away from the North Kent coast. A sea-path helps! A weak clear daytime signal was received west of London in Caversham; also audible, but with some interference from LPAM Crush north of London. Further afield, reception was reported on the south coast in Poole, in Birmingham and across the North Sea in the Netherlands. The station was on air 0700 to 2200 local time, partly due to the few DJs they had on the fort, and because of interference after dark from the French station on 1278 kHz.

QSL cards are available from the station at PO Box 299, Whitstable, Kent CT 2YA, but remember to send 3 x 1<sup>st</sup> Class stamps (or 3 x IRCs or cash) to help cover costs.

For the 2008 broadcast, a new lightweight fibreglass mast was erected in June on the roof of the southern Gun Tower, the tower used for the Red Sands Radio studio and accommodation (also the tower used by Radio Invicta in 1964). This replaced the temporary aerial used in 2007 which collapsed during a storm in February 2008. The new aerial is not as high as the 297 foot mast that gave Radio 390 such wide coverage in the 1960s, but looked impressive nevertheless!

The chance to stay with Dave's brother in Herne Bay, just a mile to the east of Whitstable on the North Kent coast for a few days, within sight of the forts and with armchair reception of Red Sands Radio was too good an opportunity to miss. And we knew from the Red Sands website and listening to the station that it might be possible to take a boat trip out to the Red Sands fort. From the seafront at Herne Bay, the Red Sands Fort is visible close to the horizon along with the similar Shivering Sands Fort, further to the east (which was the first fort to be used by a radio station in 1964, Radio Sutch, then used by Radio City until 1967). Though the view from the shore has changed a bit since the 1960s. The seascape now includes the thirty turbines of the Kentish Flats Wind Farm. And closer to the Herne Bay shore, what was the second-longest pier in the UK has disappeared - destroyed in a storm in 1979.

The drive to Herne Bay on Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> July in continuous rain and strong winds did not bode well for a sea voyage out to the radio station on the fort. A 'phone call to *Bayblast*, who run trips in a rigid hulled inflatable boat from Herne Bay slipway confirmed our fears - no trips that day or the following day because of the rough seas. However a call to Alan, the skipper of the *X-Pilot*, the boat that tendered Red Sands Radio from Whitstable, provided a glimmer of hope for a trip out on 8<sup>th</sup> July. Tuesday dawned brighter but still with a strong Force 4 breeze. We knew from on-air comments from the DJs on Red Sands that fresh food and drinking water supplies were low as the *X-Pilot* had not been out to the fort for four days. Finally a 'phone call from the *X-Pilot* – they would be sailing out to Red Sands at 13.30 with the tide and there would be room for us on board. We quickly drove along the coast to the harbour at Whitstable, taking a “Sea Legs” pill as a precaution – the sea still seemed quite choppy in the strong wind to us landlubbers!

As the name suggests, the *X-pilot* is a 72-ton former pilot vessel built in 1967, about the size of a small tug, now licensed to carry 12 passengers. Already aboard in Whitstable harbour were three other “anoraks” eager to see an offshore radio station in action, plus two photographers going to do a shoot on the fort. The others on board were all Project Radio Sands or Radio crew. Tesco bags full of food, large plastic containers of water plus an expensive and fragile audio processor were stowed in the cabin, before we eventually left Whitstable, an hour and a half later than planned. Once outside the harbour wall the strong breeze and choppy sea meant anyone standing close to the bows or on the windward side of the cabin received a splashing, but there seemed no need for the “Sea Legs” pill, despite the rolling and pitching of the *X-pilot*. The trip out towards the Red Sands fort and the shipping lanes beyond took about an hour – as we approached we could see more detail of the strange structures rising from the sea that are Red Sands Fort which always remind me of Martian invader machines in “War of the Worlds”.

As the *X-Pilot* nudged against the platform at the base of the southern gun tower, we were given hard hats to wear on the fort. At this point in the tide, the top deck of the boat was level with the platform, so it was just a small jump across from there onto the landing platform. We had visions of ascending to the fort on a rope ladder or being hoisted on a suspended crate in the style of the Radio 390 DJs! But a new landing platform and two-stage caged-in access ladder had been constructed by *Mowlem Marine* in 2005. Still a vertical climb up the ladders though to the entry portal to the fort building and we were warned not to look down. Meanwhile the food & water supplies and audio processor were hoisted aboard via a manual rope pulley on a gantry near the top of the fort which extended over the moored *X-Pilot*.

Once inside the two-storey fort building we could see at close quarters the condition of the metal and concrete structure – a lot of rusty metal with patches of original paint but still essentially strong internally. Externally it's a different matter with everything rusty and disintegrating; the

remains of corroded metal walkways cling precariously to the structure. It had been built to withstand enemy fire in WWII of course, as well as the wind and waves. But it seemed a mammoth undertaking still by Project Redsand to restore it. Up a metal staircase to the second floor where the Red Sands studio and accommodation was. Live on air in the small studio was Glynn Richards (on Caroline in the 80s as Dave Richards). No vinyl records or turntables now, but a mixing desk with computer screen to one side with playout system used to cue up music, ads and jingles. In the corner a vintage Orban Optimod (9100A?) unit. No soundproofing and some natural light from the original Crittall metal windows used in the fort. The whole fort shook at one point (when bumped by the tender) which apparently is normal!

Programming on Red Sands was a mix of live programmes from the four DJs out there plus pre-recorded shows. The four DJs on the fort were Bob Le-Roi, Glynn Richards, Black Printz (who had been a DJ on Radio City 299) and Robin Adcroft. It had been difficult to persuade any other DJs to volunteer to spend ten days on a rusty WWII fort in not very pleasant conditions! It's essentially a local station for Whitstable and Herne Bay, promoting local businesses and events and even carrying some music from local unsigned groups. On air slogan was "from the coast to the city". There was some hark back to the 60s with pre-recorded shows such as Tony Gilham's chart shows. Next door to the studio a spacious lounge made as comfortable as possible with old furniture and a TV, from where the news bulletins were also read. The other large room on this floor was used as a dormitory for what sleep the fort-based crew could get. And next door, a small kitchen with Calor gas stove and shelves of canned food etc. where we were kindly made a mug of tea by Robin Adcroft (aka Robin Banks) formerly on Radio Caroline, RNI, Voice of Peace.

Up some more stairs and we were on the open roof of the gun tower, with views of the other Red Sand towers, the shipping passing to the north and the Shivering Sands fort in the distance to the east. In the middle of the rooftop was the newly erected aerial held by guy wires with capacitance hat on top and insulator and lightning strap at its base. At the foot was the transmitter with "Danger of Death" warning sign. A red Project Red Sands flag and a Jolly Roger flag also flew from the tower (although this station had a licence and wasn't a pirate!). As well as the sound of the gulls that live on the fort, the eery clanging of the bell on the "North Redsand Towers" buoy close by was also audible. And on the edge of the roof parapet lived two baby seagulls, unfazed by the attention, and named "Kate & Bill" by the DJs on air.



After an hour on the fort it was time to leave, the wind had become stronger and the sea rougher. All those bound for shore descended to the landing platform and the *X-Pilot* which had been tethered away from the tower tried to position itself so we could get safely back on board. This was to prove a more difficult challenge than when we landed. The sea level had risen so

we had to jump across to the main deck of the *X-Pilot*, which was moving backwards & forwards and in and out against the platform as well as rising and falling with the waves. Dave made it safely aboard but Alan mistimed the jump and his feet missed the boat. Fortunately somebody on the *X-Pilot* managed to grab one arm. Dave quickly grabbed the other and hauled him aboard before he fell into the sea or was crushed between the boat and the platform. A very scary moment but he escaped with just a few bruises and still dry. Bob Le-Roi waved us off and after final photos of the disappearing fort we had an uneventful voyage back to the calm of Whitstable harbour and some welcome local Shephard Neame "Whitstable Bay" beer and fish & chips.

The following weekend, an Amateur Radio special-event station was set-up (with some difficulty) by local company Icom on the Red Sands Fort. Many successful contacts around the world were made by GB0RSR despite noise from the fort's generators and cross-modulation from the 1278 kHz Red Sands Radio transmitter. Full story of this on the Icom website: [www.lcomuk.co.uk](http://www.lcomuk.co.uk)



The final 2008 broadcast of Red Sands Radio was on Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> July – the final programme hosted by Bob Le-Roi (left) was extended until 22.30 local time to try and fit in many of the emails and texts sent to the station by listeners on 1278 and on-line. Another boat load of visitors made it out on the *X-Pilot* for the final evening, though they departed before the final closedown, when once again, there were just three DJs on the fort. Appropriately the closedown music was the Radio 390 theme "Sentimental" (which sounds not unlike "On a Clear Day") followed by the sound of waves, seagulls and the bell of the "North Redsand Towers" buoy which we had heard a few days earlier out on the fort.

The setting up and operating of this year's Red Sands Radio in June and July has suffered somewhat from bad weather. Between 4<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> July only one tender trip made it to the fort (the one we were on). Because of the cost and shortage of volunteers the broadcast was only for ten days duration. Next year they may broadcast in August or September in the hope of more settled weather.

Please check out the Project Redsand website <http://www.project-redsand.com/> and support them in restoring this historic landmark in the Thames Estuary. Bob Le-Roi's website <http://www.bobleroi.co.uk> also has a wealth of photos about the fort and Red Sands Radio. The Red Sands Radio website <http://www.redsandonline.co.uk> has a speeded up version of the webcam footage during the ten days (also on You Tube). And the Pirate Hall of Fame has some Radio 390 photos at <http://www.offshoreradio.co.uk/album31.htm> from 390 presenter Edward Cole. The photo we featured on the front cover of the July 2007 magazine is from Tim Mitchard's gallery: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/doctorboogie/sets/72057594124302151/>. For trips around the forts from Herne Bay see <http://www.bayblast.co.uk/>. And details of the boat we used to visit the Red Sands Fort – see <http://www.x-pilot.co.uk/index.htm>. (Alan Pennington)

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