



SPEAKING WITH SHADOWS

Transcript of Series 2, Episode 6: Vigilant State – York Cold War Bunker and the Royal Observer Corps

Josie: Welcome to Speaking with Shadows, the podcast that listens to the people that history forgot. I'm Josie Long. Throughout Speaking with Shadows, I visited a lot of pretty impressive, beautiful and awe-inspiring places. But today I'm not at a castle or a grand stately home. Once again English Heritage have sent me on an adventure to uncover a little-told corner of our history.

I've turned off of a wide, elegant street here in very beautiful, very fancy York, and I've come up a side road to a car park, and around me is some pretty modern-looking blocks of flats. And then right in front of me is a building that looks like it could be, I don't even know, a weather station? But the thing that really piques my interest is that there's a sign on the front of it that says 'vigilant state', which, I mean, it's just a little bit too intense and *1984* in its vibes to ignore. I'm promised that in the next half hour I'll get to meet someone who lived and breathed Britain's Cold War and hear about the war that they lived every day that never happened. I'm going to be finding out about the network of nuclear bunkers lurking beneath our towns and cities – but the real surprise is the civilians who staffed them.

[clip] People have this idea that if they dropped one bomb on England it'd make a hole and it would sink, you know... They had nuclear weapons that had multiple warheads so they could hit five targets at the same time – it didn't have to be a big one, it could be a medium one, but five of them.

Josie: I have a feeling that we're about to head underground. I'm glad you can join me.

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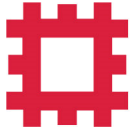
Josie: I'm joined by senior curator Kevin Booth, who's going to fill me in on the awesome hidden history behind this English Heritage site. This is such an unusual place. I mean, where are we? What are we doing?

Kevin: You're in the Royal Observer Corps' 20 Group Control in York, if you know what that means.

Josie: I don't at all. Please.

Kevin: Often known as the bunker, this is essentially the place where you would plot nuclear Armageddon. This is the place where you observe and understand what bombs are going off where.

Josie: When was this built?



Kevin: It's built in 1961. It's built at the height of, really, when the world feels threatened by nuclear war, by imminent conflict. So, it's built in '61 and it survives for 30 years through to 1991, when theoretically the Cold War 'ends' in inverted commas.

Josie: Wow, and I'm right in thinking this isn't a bunker in terms of ordinary people being saved from an air strike?

Kevin: No, this is an entirely functional space for volunteers to do their duty and to work out how the world's going to carry on once war has happened.

Josie: So, this lasted for 30 years, and for 30 years people felt that it was necessary and important.

Kevin: Absolutely. It was part of our attempt, our hope of being able to carry on some kind of life after conflict.

Josie: Were people aware of its existence in York?

Kevin: Well, because you always meet people from the locality who tell you, 'Oh, I never even knew that was there' and they've lived here all their life – that's a classic – it's sort of a semi-open secret, really. It's got an air of mystique about it and yet if you're going to get 20,000 people to volunteer across the country for the Observer Corps, there's got to be a certain public profile, hasn't there?

Josie: So, tell me more about the Observer Corps. 20,000 people volunteered for it.

Kevin: They're a very interesting organisation and the people are very interesting. You get anything from farmers to civil servants to lawyers to bus drivers. You might have a three-man post in the middle of the North York Moors and that could be putting together that farmer and that solicitor in the same space, where normally, perhaps in real life, they'd never associate. You're getting kind of a 50/50 split, women and men. Hierarchies, yes, but not as clear-cut and not as obvious as out in the normal world. It's a really interesting – 'fraternity' is the word I keep coming back to, my feeling about the Observer Corps. At the height, 20,000–25,000 people in the '60s and '70s are serving as volunteers across the country, doing this job, turning up with the idea that were the, as they say, the 'balloon' to go up... were vigilant state... to say that it was 'status red' and they were about to get bombed, then they're here ready to do their job.

Josie: It's weird, because on one hand that is so intense and, you know, life-threatening to all life on Earth, but on the other hand, it does have a feel of, like, a real English neighbourhood watch vibe.

Kevin: If you think about the Armed Forces and the Territorial Army, which is a volunteer force, the Observer Corps remains to this day, largely unknown with the British public. It's not a glamorous institution in most people's minds, if they've ever heard of it. And I don't know that the observers felt themselves as glamorous. They felt themselves as a tremendously tight-knit fraternity of people who understood each other and why they were doing what they were doing.

Josie: Why do you think they chose to put the bunker right here in this spot?



Kevin: You've got to imagine when it's built in 1961 this is a big, open garden behind an old Victorian villa. It's an orchard; there were pear and apple trees. And then later that Victorian villa becomes a tax office, so this is government land, and it's a perfect spot just to plunk a big nuclear bunker in an urban setting where you can get lots of people here nice and quick, and you can get engineers here if you need. And it's tucked away behind the main road, but it's entirely visible to everyone.

Josie: Huh, so it's hiding in plain sight.

Kevin: Hidden in plain sight, yeah.

Josie: Tell me a bit more about what this was designed for. What actually did go on and was planned to go on?

Kevin: The Royal Observer Corps, their role in the nuclear age is to observe where any nuclear explosions are occurring, and by observe, I mean plot the coordinates, detect the altitude, how powerful is this bomb. And all that information relays into this control. So, you can imagine that, actually, across the country, there are 1,500 tiny little concrete bunkers spread all across the countryside. And if you go out, if you're driving along and you're pottering past a field and you see a telegraph pole disappear into the middle of the field and stop at a mound, almost certainly that is one of the old Observer Corps bunkers.

Josie: There are so many! That's so many more than I thought.

Kevin: So, this building here is a group control, and the group is Yorkshire, and there's about 40-odd of these little bunkers in Yorkshire. And this takes all the data that they're providing, and it analyses it and it feeds it on to whichever agencies need it: military, civilian, police, what have you. And it doesn't just plot the bombs; it then has a kind of real-time data gathering of radiation – where is the radiation, how powerful it is, what the weather patterns are – so they can tell people you need to be inside behind your sofa or you can go outside because it's relatively clear. So it's about understanding what's devastated and where you can get to or where you can't get to, or what rail lines might be open or not, but it's also about forewarning the public as to when it might just possibly be safe to come out.

Josie: The first thing I'm noticing is there's a wooden board that almost looks like something you'd have in a church for the hymns. But on here it says, 'attack state' and then it's open to one side and it says 'black', and then on a larger board it says 'black'.

Kevin: So, we might we might close 'black' off and we might open 'white' or, indeed, 'red'.

Josie: I feel like 'red' is going to be worse.

Kevin: Well, 'attack warning red' is I think quite a famous phrase. It essentially means that either imminently we're going to be attacked or we have indeed been attacked. White is all clear and black is heightened threat.



Josie: Oh, here's a question. Were there times in the bunker's 30-year history when, for whatever reason, it was on red?

Kevin: Do you know, that's one of the remarkable things about this place: no.

Josie: Oh, good!

Kevin: Well, it is good. It is good. It means even during the Cuban crisis of whenever that is, 1962, this building was not operable. So, the Royal Observer Corps are this volunteer organisation and they train here on a week, but this building is empty for most of the time. And it would only ever be staffed in anger if we got to black or 'black special' moving towards the real threat of attack.

Josie: So, it was like 30 years of practice for something that didn't actually happen.

Kevin: So, for all of those volunteers across this country it is this long sort-of phony war – phony Cold War of waiting and waiting and hoping against.

Josie: Well, I'm just going to slip it over to 'white' just for my own sense of peace of mind. There we go. So, let's walk in, sorry, oh, there's an airlock! 'Open only if other airlock door is closed and close before opening the next airlock door'.

Kevin: You've got to think that almost everything you see has never moved. It's never left the building, it's never being taken down and conserved and then put back up. This building is, well, it's the last of its kind. It's the last of this kind to survive in anything like this level of detail or completeness, and it is almost the building that the observers walk out of in 1991 when they're stood down. We're now going to drop down into the kind of main body of the bunker. It's a three-storey concrete hulk, basically.

Josie: I just got down the stairs. We're next to the ejector unit room, which has a very satisfying metal grille floor, which is how I imagine a bunker to be.

Kevin: And if you're lucky the ejector might just kick off for us, whilst we're chatting. We're below the level of the mains drains here, so you need this kit to pump all our effluent out.

Josie: That's nicely put, thank you.

Kevin: You're welcome.

Josie: As we got to this corridor, there were coat hangers for people who've come into work. It's really like between some sort of clubhouse and a death-survival place.

Kevin: This feels like an office block.

Josie: Yeah.



Kevin: The idea is that it will survive, hopefully, for up to 30 days, and that's reckoned to be long enough to get the pattern of radiation and how it's decaying over time. And by the time you've done 30 days, your job is essentially done. I mean, here we are. We're in the plant room. This is 1961 kit. This is all the original kit.

Josie: The only stuff that I've seen from this era that it reminds me of is synthesizers – and it really sort of makes me think how civilian my lifestyle is – sort of, of that time. But this technology being used for much more serious things.

Kevin: It's all analogue as well, you see. Down here this plant room was all analogue. There's nothing computerised that's controlling or running the system. You need an engineer down here to make sure this place is maintained.

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Josie: I can't wait to hear who's waiting for me deep inside the bunker. But first let's make sure we're up to date on our Cold War history. Dr Grace Huxford is a senior lecturer in modern history at the University of Bristol. She explained why operations like this were so essential in deterring all-out warfare in the 20th century.

Grace: So, the Cold War is a global conflict that begins in 1945 at the end of the Second World War and that runs up until pretty much 1991, and it's often associated with the tension between the United States of America and the Soviet Union. But actually, now, historians are starting to see it as a much more complex global conflict that involves not just those two superpowers, but communist China for example, newly decolonised states across the world, and also ageing empires like Britain and France.

So, the Cold War is actually much more complex than we perhaps think about initially. And it's called a 'cold war' because it's longer-term hostility rather than necessarily two or more nations at war for any length of time. There are particularly, sort of, worrisome periods during the Cold War and there are some outright conflicts as well. So, we see the Korean war in 1950 to 1953, for example. So, there are moments of real heightened tension during the Cold War.

And nuclear weaponry is a very big part of the Cold War conflict. Less than a month after it was first tested in 1945, the United States used the first atomic bomb in Japan at Hiroshima and again at Nagasaki. That's very much the starting point for a broader nuclear arms race. Britain was an ally of the United States and it had a number of options thinking about nuclear weaponry. So, it could defend itself and its population from nuclear attack from the Communist Bloc and it could build on its experience of, for example, the Blitz during the Second World War. And that might involve organisations, like the volunteer Civil Defence Corps, who could provide guidance or support to bombed communities as they had done during... or as other organisations had done during the Second World War, or they could evacuate people.

However, by 1955 there is a major government report which shows just how woeful some of these responses would be and particularly in the face of the developing thermonuclear weaponry. The



destructive power is so much greater than even the atomic bomb. That causes a lot of worry, both in Whitehall and beyond. So, the other option that Britain has open to it then is to deter the Communist Bloc from ever using nuclear weaponry. So that involves both deterring them using nuclear weaponry of their own – Britain has its own nuclear weaponry program: it tests its first A-bomb in 1952 and its own the thermonuclear device in 1957 – but it's also showing, at the same time, that Britain could fight a nuclear war and could withstand a nuclear war. That's where some of these systems – some of the monitoring posts that we see – come into play. They're part of that deterrence strategy. They show that Britain is capable of carrying out a nuclear war and of fighting and engaging in a nuclear war. So, deterrence is a really delicate balance: having nuclear weaponry, having nuclear infrastructure, but never wanting to use it.

The first advice, that was given to householders, in a booklet called 'Advice to Householders', was in the 1950s about how to respond to a nuclear bomb. The Second World War is a recent lived experience. It's shaping how people respond to the Cold War. So, you see things like people talking about evacuation policies. How might you evacuate people in the event of a nuclear war?

However, by the later 1960s, people are starting to lose faith in some of these more established ideas of protecting the civilian population. Some of the organisations and protections were increasingly seen as antiquated. So the Civil Defence Corps, for example, people hiding under their tables to protect themselves from a nuclear blast – none of that really worked. And we see increasing opposition to the Cold War as well. People are even making fun of some of this advice that is given to citizens.

In 1980, the government, under a lot of pressure, releases another document advising households on what to do called 'Protect and Survive'. And that interestingly has nothing about evacuation in it. It tells people to stay in their homes and how they should respond to a nuclear bomb, but also to nuclear fallout and radiation as well. And it was accompanied, we see, with some interesting public information films, that accompanied it as well.

[clip]: The first two days will be the most dangerous period because fallout will be at its worst. So, it is in your best interest to stay in your inner refuge, the whole of that time. However cramped or uncomfortable it may be. But, if you must leave the refuge to go to the lavatory or to get more water or food, don't stay out a second longer than is necessary. In any case don't go outside the fallout room at all. After two days, the danger from fallout will be less, but it may still kill you. So, the longer you stay in your inner refuge, the better your chances are.

Grace: People start to make fun of this – there's a document called 'Protect and Survive'. To put yourself in the government shoes, they do need to give advice, potentially, and people are asking for advice as well. They were trying to come up with a credible response to ensure that at least an administrative system survived a nuclear bomb, if not the majority of the civilian population.

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Josie: After taking in these really intense ideas, I'm just about ready for some fresh, non-radioactive York air back up at ground level, but there is still a lot of this bunker to see. So where are we going next Kevin?



Kevin: We're gonna go into the kitchen and the canteen. The place of relaxation if you're under severe stress.

Josie: Ah, nice... Oh, wow, yeah! The kitchen... again, it looks like a bit from a time warp. You've got old-fashioned teapots and urns and tea trays.

Kevin: It hasn't changed a great deal. But effectively the doors locked on it in 1992 and it sits for about eight years with no one coming in, and EH – English Heritage – eventually take it on in about 2000, and colleagues who came down at the time say that it, you know, there were kind of mushrooms growing out the carpets and it was severely damp and severely stinky. But all this stuff is just kind of here, still, and it took five years to bring the building back to condition. But we really tried not to strip it out and clean it all back and bring stuff back. We just didn't really want to touch anything.

Josie: So how much – oops!

Kevin: Sewage ejection!

Josie: We've been interrupted by the sewage ejection.

So it is really intriguing to be in this space that was about the only recreational, relaxed space – the canteen – because it makes me think, okay had people been stuck here, had, you know, they actually been living here for those 30 days, what would it have been like? What would life have actually been like for civilians who were a part of this place?

Kevin: Then I think there's someone you should meet who's probably got some answers to that question.

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Josie: So, this is perhaps one of the very few times on Speaking with Shadows that I actually get to meet someone who has lived and breathed the story that we're exploring. I'm here with Ann Metcalf, who was one of the volunteers who trained as part of the Royal Observer Corps here in York. I'm so lucky to get a first-hand account of her experiences down here in the bunker.

Hi Ann, it's so lovely to meet you.

Ann: It's nice to meet you too.

Josie: And it's a really unusual place to meet you as well, but one that, I'm imagining, you are really familiar with.

Ann: Yes.

Josie: So how long were you part of the Royal Observer Corp for?



Ann: I served for 27 years. I joined when I was 17.

Josie: And why did you join at 17? What happened?

Ann: I'd left school, and I had started my first job, and I missed my friends at school, and I was going to join a large youth club, but they were all shut for the summer. And a girl at work said, why don't you come with me to the Royal Observer Corp?

Josie: So what was it like arriving for the first time? Like, what were you expecting? And how did it play out?

Ann: I didn't know what to expect. All she said was that we plot nuclear fallout and bombs and things like that. I had no idea at all. It wasn't like anything I'd ever done before.

Josie: How often would you come and be involved? That's the other thing.

Ann: We had weekly meetings, you know, at the same night every week that you came. I used to go from work into Leeds, have a quick sandwich in a coffee bar somewhere, and then they had a coach that ran from the centre of Leeds and brought you to the headquarters.

Josie: And how many people were there operating in this bunker when you started?

Ann: This one, when I came to York, it was a full crew. We have three crews and each crew had about 40 members. So, on an exercise, you'd come in for a limited time and you'd meet the people from the other crews as well, but they wouldn't all be in here at the same time. You know, some might come for the morning and some for the afternoon. We had one exercise a year where it was the first 40 or so that arrived that went on duty, and then the rest were sort of not needed and they worked on those.

Josie: You brought some photos, and they're really amazing partly because you can see just how long you were involved in the Corp and all the different things you did. But also, I really was interested in the social aspect of it because there were camps that, I can imagine, were to do with training and to do with the more formal aspects, but they must have also been really social events as well.

Ann: Yes, the camp ran through five weeks and you attended for a week. So, there were three or four hundred people there – each camp. You attended classes during the day. The first night there was also a dance. So, everybody went to that one, and the last night there was always a dance as well, and then Wednesday afternoon we had as a free afternoon and they always organised coach trips. So, if you wanted to go on the coach trip, you could do that. So, you did meet and mix with other people.

Josie: It's so interesting to me because it's in part this civilian organisation, but it's in part your learning and your training and its really serious stuff as well.



Ann: You are aware that if you were ever called up, it will be very serious because you'd be on the verge of a nuclear war, which people are not going to survive. You learnt about the effects of radiation on people.

Josie: Can I just ask, like, what was it like to kind of carry that knowledge around in the rest of the day-to-day world?

Ann: I mean, you had to sign the Official Secrets Act when you joined anyway, so it wasn't talked about a great deal. We knew that if there was an emergency that we will become called up. I mean, fortunately, nothing happened like that. It got a bit scary at times, but nothing actually happened. There was one point when there was trouble with Cuba, and it was getting a little bit serious, and it's at that time you think – oh, I hope they don't start anything – because it would have started a lot of trouble.

People have this idea that they'd drop one bomb on England, it'd make a hole in it, and it would sink, you know, and it doesn't work like that. There'd be a few bombs, and they got really clever with the actual way that they sent them because they had nuclear weapons that had multiple warheads. So, they could hit five targets at the same time. It didn't have to be a big one, it could be a medium one, but five of them – and then you can't control the fallout. I mean, obviously, there were those of us, like me, who had children, and that crops up when you think of, if there was an emergency and you were called, would you go? You never know, because he never happened. But I would have thought I'd been trained now to do certain things that would help to save people's lives. And therefore, I hope that I would, you know, take up my duty if I'd been called.

I know a few years ago, somebody asked me if I would have left my children, and I said yes. And if there was a nuclear attack – because I know how people can die very slowly of nuclear, you know, radiation – I would want the bomb to hit my house directly. I wouldn't want my family to be on the edge of it. My son heard this and he was mortified – 'Oh you want the bomb to hit us!' But there is a reasoning behind it.

Josie: We've come into the bunker, but I've only come this far and I feel like there's a lot going on that I've not seen at all.

Ann: Yes, there's more to it than a canteen.

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Ann: Right, if you'd like to come this way and I'll show you the business part of the building.

Josie: Thanks. So we're walking down quite a tight corridor.

Ann: Yes, it's quite dark. This is the main hub of the Ops room.

Josie: Oh wow, it's on two floors!



Ann: Yes.

Josie: We're in like a gallery.

Ann: We're on the balcony. These first boards here that you can see on your left-hand side are all numbered with the posts that were in our group, in the York group.

Josie: These individual seats, and each one's in front of a kind of grid, and it says the time on it. And then the post numbers – so it's like 40, 41, 42.

Ann: That's right, and they're connected by headsets to the people down at the actual posts. Mostly when you first started, you'd be taking readings from the posts. You're in direct contact – telephone contact – with the people down at the post.

Josie: So, this is training for an attack scenario.

Ann: Yes. So, you'd be getting information from the post. They have instruments that would record – if a bomb had gone off, there's a flash – it records that. You'd also have, like, a pressure wave that came from the place that the bomb had gone off and that registers on another piece of equipment. And then that would be triangulated on the table you see here. And when you have information from three posts, where the lines cross, that's where the position of the bomb is.

Josie: And then you can relay that back.

Ann: Yes. If it was a ground burst – they're the most dangerous – it would have a little red bomb sign.

Josie: Oh I see, yeah.

Ann: If it was an air burst, it would be a green one. You can see them on the side of the map.

Josie: So then over the course of, maybe, an evening doing this work, how many simulations would they run?

Ann: They would have an exercise already prepared, and it would have probably, for an evening exercise, maybe four or five bombs, because that's where you're getting your practice from. And you have people down there that are going to be plotting the information that's on this board.

Downstairs in the well of the Ops room, there are two screens. Straight opposite to where we're standing now, you have the Warning team. And they are a different organisation, but they want the information because they are going to assess the wind speed and where the fallout is going to go. And that is why we have the areas around us. If you look at the left hand one, you can see the York area above it – there's Durham. If Durham has a bomb that goes off near our border and the wind is blowing towards the south, we're going to get the fallout.

Josie: So, it's a combination of assessing what's happening, and then warning and preparing afterwards.



Ann: Yes. This piece of kit here is called AWDREY and it's an Atomic Weapon Detection Range and Estimated Yield. And what it does is if there was a nuclear burst, it would record it and it comes out on a piece of paper. The only trouble is, if there was a storm anywhere the lightning could set it off. So we'd all be nicely doing an exercise and AWDREY would go off and churn out the thing, and you'd think – oops!

Josie: Was it not frightening? Did it not feel like – oh no, it's really happening!

Ann: Well, we didn't really think it was a proper bomb, but we didn't know why it went off. But then you'd find out that there was thunder and lightning outside and that's what had set her off.

Josie: What does it feel like coming back down here when you do come back and visit?

Ann: It's strange. It's nice because we spent so much time... I mean, downstairs there's various equipment that we used.

Josie: I think we're going to go into the dormitory.

Ann: Yes, I'll show you where we tried to sleep. You wouldn't get much sleep because the air conditioning was quite noisy. But this is just across the corridor from the general thing, and this is the ladies' dormitory.

Josie: So we're stepping out of the operations room, which has such an aesthetic of the time – the chairs, they're a kind of light orangey colour, the walls are blue – it feels almost like a submarine. And then stepping out into the dormitory, which to me just feels very stark. There's 10, there's maybe 12 bunks in here. Yeah, it's not a luxurious space at all.

Ann: Not really, no. One of our exercises used to go on 24 hours. So, they would have people who would be able to come in here and sleep. But as I say, the air conditioning is quite noisy.

Josie: Did you spend many nights in here then?

Ann: I don't think I ever slept in here at all. It wouldn't be right comfortable.

Josie: What was it like being a woman doing this work in the bunker? Were there lots of women in the ROC?

Ann: There were about as many women as there were men. You weren't a minority at all. You had a leading Observer who was in charge of the training and they teach as well. And then above them you'd have a Chief Observer, and then we had an Officer in charge of the crew. So, all three crews were the same, and I was the first woman Group Officer in York. My claim to fame.

Josie: Oh that's exciting!



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Josie: I'm now back up at the – slightly above ground level and we've got the door open and we've got some nice fresh 21st-century air blowing in. Kevin, thanks so much for showing me around. It's got a really unusual atmosphere this place.

Kevin: Unique Sounds like a... It's not a good enough word is it, really? There is something particular, I find, about this space – those interiors, the sense of people and process that has gone on down there.

Josie: What do the general public tend to think about this place when they visit?

Kevin: We've had people, you know, who write comments for us or talk to us about how it dredges up memories or ideas or thoughts that they had either forgotten they'd ever had, or never really realised that they processed in the first place, and it's bringing to the fore thought processes that, perhaps, they never really formally constituted at the time. But then you get younger people who think bunkers are the kind of thing you see in a video game and expect, perhaps, to see this kind of dark foreboding place, and what they're faced with is the banality of an office block, underground with no windows.

Josie: It's so interesting to meet a former ROC like Ann – the actual people who spent decades being a part of this organisation that was so closed and so unusual.

Kevin: Yeah, and I started meeting these people, what, 15, 16 years ago, so they were actually closer to service then, than in the time that I've known them. But it's taken, in some ways, this long to find these kinds of expressions that Ann was perhaps giving today, you know, about what it was actually like, what it felt like, what their emotions were.

Josie: And I love the fact that, even now, they're still disclosing new things and, sort of, giving you new angles to interpret.

Kevin: And surprising themselves when they do it.

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Josie: You can find out more on these stories by going to the website english-heritage.org.uk/speakingwithshadows or head to the English Heritage website and find out how you can visit the bunker yourself. Share this podcast on your social media with the hashtag #speakingwithshadows.