Jules Hudson COUNTRY ESCAPE

Jules visits former wartime airfield RAF Madley to discover how a quiet corner of rural Herefordshire came to be at the forefront of the satellite revolution

One of the greatest joys of travelling all over the country is the many unexpected discoveries it can throw up. Often as not, quiet corners of the countryside reveal tales of people and places that can both surprise and inspire.

Ever since we moved to Herefordshire I've been itching to get a closer look at one such quiet corner – and for good reason. Just a few miles from where we live are a series of gigantic satellite dishes strung out across the former wartime airfield at Madley, and which dominate the surrounding countryside.

Built in 1942 as an RAF signals school, the airfield's greatest claim to fame was being the point of departure for Hitler's deputy Rudolf Hess, following his incarceration in nearby Abergavenny. Whether Hess had the notion to appreciate the beauty of the valley in which the airfield sits as he was ferried back to Germany to face trial at Nuremberg remains a mystery; but neither he nor the 3,000 men and women who then manned it could have had much knowledge of RAF Madley's future role.

A few days ago, I got my chance to take a look at this fascinating and somewhat incongruous feature of the local landscape. In the company of one of my neighbours, a former engineer at Madley, I met up with Nick Wood who manages the 218-acre site to find out more about its history and what it does today, 50 years after Hess made his historic exit from its now-abandoned runway.

As I soon discovered, there's a lot more to this place than just the great dishes that give the valley its sci-fi feel. The tale of Madley's development into the last remaining BT-run satellite station in the UK, is also the story of the rise of satellite technology.

Switched on in 1978, the first huge 30-metre-wide dish was soon joined by two more. Each of these were capable of picking up the faintest of signals from the handful of early satellites developed and launched to remain in a fixed or geostationary orbit – which means they remained stationary in relation to a fixed point on the earth's surface. This was a huge step forward from the days of Sputnik and its cousins, which used to circle the earth in orbits that they could only be picked up for a couple of hours a day. Geostationary satellites transformed the way we all use information, providing permanent connections. And Madley was at the forefront of this technological surge. The huge dishes were designed to pick up – and then magnify – a signal so weak, it's been likened to picking up the heat from a one-bar electric fire on the moon here on earth.

These days, of course, the world's gone digital; satellites now number in the thousands, and are used by modern dishes so powerful they're a fraction of the size and cost of those built at Madley. War reporters I know who operate in some of the most dangerous parts of the world carry theirs in a suitcase.

Yet during their heyday, Madley's antennae collected and relayed some of the most telling images of global events as they've happened, from news crews around the world. The Falklands War, the storming of the Iranian Embassy, the tragedy of 9/11 and the collapse of New York's Twin Towers... The men and women who monitor the images that flood into this ordinarily quiet corner of Herefordshire have often been the first to see the most important events in world history before they reach our TVs.

Today, modern technology means fewer staff than ever are needed to man this multi-million pound operation, and the emergence of other satellite providers has, to some extent, taken the pressure off Madley. But despite the digital revolution, satellite technology has proven to be an invaluable fail-safe for the communications business.

Overhead, a dish tracked a satellite an astonishing 22,000 miles away, high above the Indian Ocean. That's the same distance as the circumference of the earth – just the sort of statistic I love. As we left, passing the TV room lined with screens showing some of what Madley's now 65 dishes were receiving and transmitting, I had the strangest feeling. Despite this being my first visit in person, the odds were that my digital self had been here many times before.

• *Black Sheep will return next month*

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