The history of Warren Cottage and the Warren area. Part 1

Introduction
I have known and loved the Warren area at Spurn since the early 1980s. Others have known it even longer. I have felt impelled to write this little history because of the changes that have seen in recent years, some natural and some man-made. Anyone arriving in this area for the first time on their way down the peninsula would have little idea how diminished it is, or what an important place it used to be. This account is for them, and for those of us who have loved it over the years. Because of its situation at the very northern end of the peninsula it has acted as a sort of gateway to Spurn itself. The presence of Warren Cottage here since the mid-Victorian period has been a focus too. The Spurn Bird Observatory was established there and its activities were centred on the Warren for many years. And this was where the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust’s warden lived and where the Trust’s Information Centre was. Another story, covered here, is the area’s role in two World Wars. I am very sad to see this area now, with so many buildings demolished. I won’t pretend that I approve of the way it has been treated. I believe that some of the buildings could have been saved. I do not go along with the YWT in its belief that this area will ‘re-wild’ and sand dunes will return. I think it is far too late for that. But time will tell. The sea will continue to take more land, that is a certainty. Anyway this is my attempt at a history of the area. At the end of Part 2 there will be a short list of sources.

The rabbit warren
Unlike the hare the rabbit is not a native species in the British Isles. Rabbit bones have been found among the remains of Roman habitation, so they must have been brought over by the Romans, but died out some time after they left. They were apparently reintroduced from the Continent by the Normans in the 11th and 12th centuries. Rabbits were at first ill-adapted to the British climate and also prey to foxes, so they were kept in special enclosures (warrens) and farmed for their flesh, skins and fur. In those years they were regarded as something of a delicacy. Their fur was sent to towns to be made into hats and trimmings for clothes. In some areas black rabbits were bred and specially prized for their fur. Where ancient rabbit warrens existed, black rabbits are still sometimes seen. It was the job of the warrener to look after the coneys, as they were called (the term rabbits being reserved for the young). It was quite a highly paid job. In the 18th century rabbits sold for two shillings a couple – quite a lot of money at that time.

A painting of a mediaeval rabbit warren in the 14th century Luttrell Psalter
Rabbit warrens were very common in East Yorkshire, especially on the Wolds, until the 18th century and later 19th centuries, when the open fields were enclosed. Sandy areas near the coast were often used for rabbit warrens, being of little value for crops. In Kilnsea a warren was first recorded in 1268. Besides rent
for the herbage, money was received for the sale of the rabbits, as many as 292 in 1296-7. It would appear that rabbits were farmed in Kilnsea for many centuries, possibly until the mid-19th century; when the open fields of the parish were enclosed. There was also a rabbit warren on the Spurn peninsula, and in the late 17th century the area near an earlier lighthouse was called Conney-hill in some documents. No physical evidence remains of either of these warrens, (apart from the rabbit descendants!). In some areas warrens were enclosed by turf banks topped by gorse, but at Kilnsea; with the Humber on one side and the sea on the other, I would not expect the rabbits to have strayed far, so no form of enclosures would be needed!

The warren area ran in a broad strip, from where the present gate to Spurn is now; then broadened out into a large area of rough grassland, which must have been full of gorse bushes and sea-loving plants. Though the land was unsuited to arable farming, it nevertheless formed an important part of the local economy, as its natural assets could be used by the villagers. Besides the rabbits, there were wild fowl and fish; brambles and elderberries for food, and gorse for fuel and animal bedding.

In the late 18th century the Kilnsea Warren was recorded as 50 acres (just over 20 hectares). An idea of how large the warren area was at that time can be gathered by comparing the area with Walker Butts, which also covers about 50 acres (as it still does). The warren contained two extensive meres: Great Pit Marsh Water and Little Pit Marsh Water. The map below gives an idea of their extent in relation to the warren area – very large, especially Great Pit Marsh Water. To the north was South Field, cultivated in strip farming at that time, as it had been since mediaeval times.
The first 1828 Ordnance survey map of Kilnsea showing the warren and the old village

Kilnsea retained its open fields until 1846, at which time only about 15 farmhouses and cottages still remained, due to the constant erosion of the cliffs. Around those houses and cottages had been little gardens and small fields, with a village pond and a green; a church and, until it was removed in 1818, a large ornate stone cross (now situated in Hedon). Before enclosure, all the buildings in the parish were located within the confines of the village itself, with the single exception of an isolated farmhouse, later known as Southfield Farm or Southfield House. In 1824 the chancel of the church fell over the cliff and a year or so later another large landslide took the partition, with the north wall; its pillars; pointed arches and pulpit, down the cliff ‘with a tremendous crash’! The south wall of the church; a solitary window and the ruins on the western side, continued to stand ‘in a threatening state’, but soon they too succumbed. The tower remained for only a year or two, before finally falling over the cliff in 1831.

Kilnsea church in 1829

After the enclosure of Kilnsea, many changes took place; the strip farming was replaced by large rectangular fields, and new houses; farms; pubs and a church were built on the western side of the parish. From the Blue Bell crossroads a new straight road, called ‘Rough Lane’ in the late 19th century, was made by the enclosure commissioner, ending at what is now the entrance to the nature reserve. The warren area remained as open land, though technically, like the
whole of the Spurn peninsula, it was owned by the Constable family of Burton Constable. To the south stretched the Spurn peninsula.

**The building of Warren Cottage and the Watsons**

In the late 1840s Warren Cottage, an attractive cobble single-storey cottage, was built by the Constable family. In the late 1850s Walter White visited Spurn and described Warren Cottage and its surroundings in *A Month in Yorkshire* (1858):

“A short distance from the Crown & Anchor stands a small lone cottage built of sea-cobbles, with a sandy garden and potato plot in front, and a sandy field in which a thin, stunted crop of rye was making believe to grow. Once past this cottage, and all is a wild waste of sand, covered here and there with reedy grass, among which you now and then see a dusty pink convolvulus, struggling, as it were, to keep alive a speck of beauty amid the barrenness. ... Presently there is the wide open sea on your left, and you can mark the waves rushing up on either side, hissing and thundering against the low bank that keeps them apart.”

Around that time relations between the people on the Point and those at Kilnsea were at a very low ebb and Warren Cottage may be seen almost as a frontier post, between the two areas. Constable’s first tenants were James and Jemima Watson. James’s father and mother had been lighthouse-keepers at Spurn, and he followed them in that role in the 1830s and 1840s. When he lived at Warren Cottage, although described as an agricultural labourer in the censuses of 1851 and 1861, Watson and his wife, Jemima, were there to collect the dues from the gravelling ships and pass them on to Mr Child, Constable’s agent, who lived in Easington. Indeed the Gravelling was taking place on a very large scale in mid-century, and many disputes took place between the villagers of Kilnsea and Easington and the life-boatmen (who relied to a great extent, upon the income from gravelling).

Maps of the 1820s and 1830s show the neck of the peninsula as extremely narrow and at very high tides it was regularly washed over by the sea. The usual name at that time was Spurn Island, demonstrating how it was perceived by the people who lived there. Most people came by the river or the sea because the journey by road was so difficult. Travellers on land had to take the road from Easington east to the sea (still called Ten Chains Road) and then went south towards Kilnsea along the cliff top. After the enclosure of 1846 a new road to Easington was constructed – the one still used today.

At that time (as indeed again today), Spurn was not protected by any system of sea defences, and the practice of collecting shingle on a large scale for commercial purposes was accelerating the process of erosion, making a catastrophic breach much more likely whenever the conditions most favourable to it – a high spring tide and prolonged north-westerly gales – should coincide. In the last week of December 1849, several days of gale-force north-westerlies in the north Atlantic, pushing masses of water around Scotland into the North Sea, built up a huge tidal surge, which was to cause flooding and damage, down the whole of the eastern coast of England from the Humber to the Thames. The crisis at Spurn came on 28th December when, during an exceptionally high spring tide, the sea tore through the peninsula at a point about three-quarters of a mile north of the compound enclosing Smeaton’s lighthouse, in the area now known as Chalk Bank. The gap deepened and widened in the ensuing weeks, as the bad weather and strong winds continued. Fishing vessels and other small craft soon began to use it as a short cut from the sea to the Humber at high tide. Maps of this time show Spurn as a string of islands, just south of the Warren.
The Watsons were in a good position to view these dramatic events, having lived on Spurn, and now living at Warren Cottage at the north end of the breaches. James Watson died in 1868, aged 64, and his wife Jemima died in 1879 aged 79. Both are buried in Kilnsea churchyard, though have no headstones. According to the 1871 census Jemima was still living at Warren Cottage, so she probably died there.

The Tennisons
The next occupants of Warren Cottage were members of the Tennison family, from 1879 – the census of 1881 lists Robert Tennison, fisherman, (62), his wife Elizabeth (50), son William and daughter Laura, both born at Spurn. Robert Tennison had been a lifeboatman on Spurn from 1858 until November 1879, when he was discharged because of age (being too old, over sixty years of age’). He died in 1887 and according to Benfell (1994) his widow’s only possessions were ‘pieces of house furniture’, but Trinity House allowed her a pension of three shillings and six pence a week. It appears that Elizabeth was allowed to remain in Warren Cottage after Robert’s death. Robert and Elizabeth had several other children, including George, also born at Spurn. His grand-daughter, Margot Johnson, recounted this very interesting story, told to her by her mother:

‘While Elizabeth was living at Warren Cottage she went for a walk along the beach on the sea side, and found a log coffin with the skeleton of a man in it with his legs bent backwards from the knees to fit in. She could read and write and she let Hull museums know; but by the time anyone got there, the locals had turned out the skeleton looking for 'treasure'. The log was taken empty to the museum and was long in the collection in Albion Street; but this was demolished in the bombing. I contacted the museum but was told that the log coffin must have come from the churchyard of Kilnsea church which fell into the sea - very unlikely! The hip bone hung over the door of the inner room, where my mother remembered it’.

This log coffin could have been very ancient. If it were indeed a hollowed-out log it must have been, but how did it survive, as wooden objects, unless preserved in wet areas, rot away? Unfortunately there is no
way of knowing, since it was destroyed when the Albion Street Museum was bombed in World War II. And what happened to the hip bone? I suspect its history was forgotten and it was thrown away.

Margot recounts that her mother stayed with her grandmother Elizabeth several times and was impressed by the numerous rabbits which sat in the warren in the early morning. ‘One morning a sailing ship grounded near the Warren and mother remembered seeing the sails at close quarters when she awoke’. She also remembered that the path from the gate was bordered by fritillaries; that there was a summerhouse made from an up-turned boat cut in half and facing the Humber, and a caravan, lived in by a gamekeeper called Savage.

![Warren Cottage with ‘campers’!](image)

The photo above does not show the caravan near the cottage. We have no date for this photo but it must be before 1885. The people are probably members of the White family.

**The White family**

William Savage, a Northamptonshire man, was the gamekeeper and lived at the Warren in a small caravan placed near the cottage. He was employed by Colonel White of Hedon. At that time the Whites had begun to spend considerable time at Spurn. Major, later Colonel, William White (1849-1929) was the head of an important Hedon family, which had made its money from a Hull-based fruit importing business, moving later into sugar and subsequently deep-sea trawling. White’s military titles came from his membership of the East Riding Royal Artillery Volunteers. He was mayor of Hedon several times in the 1890s, and was also a magistrate. He lived at Lambert House, Hedon, surrounded by pieces of ruined Holderness churches, which
he collected and displayed. Colonel White was a keen sportsman, and he rented Warren Cottage at the entrance to Spurn, ‘as a shooting-box’, from the Constable family, from at least 1880 until c.1910.

*The White family picnicking at Spurn (includes Colonel White’s parents)*

In the early 1890s Elizabeth Tennison was attacked and injured by a ram, and, no longer able to look after herself, she was found a home in Hedon by the Whites. The White family spent much time at Spurn, erecting several further buildings at the Warren, so that it became a little community at the entrance to the peninsula. When Elizabeth moved to Hedon this may have freed up Warren Cottage for use by the family. White’s wildfowling interests are demonstrated by the fact that from the end of the 19th century until he left Warren Cottage he employed gamekeepers, first William Savage, and later Samuel Robinson who, with his wife remained, there for some years. Considering that Warren Cottage was to become the head-quarters of Spurn Bird Observatory, Robinson’s role in bird protection is worthy of a digression.

In 1891 the Yorkshire Naturalists Union had set up a committee dedicated to bird protection. It was initially called the Wild Birds and Eggs Protection Committee, and had an early success in persuading the East Riding County Council to apply a protection order to the Little Terns at Spurn Point in 1895, and employ a local man to implement it. The protection scheme was only a limited success, for several reasons. In 1897 the whole colony was washed out by very high spring tides and the 1899 season was a bad one, with ‘30-40 eggs taken by a single individual’. Petch, writing in *The Naturalist* in 1900, said that ‘Spurn presents more difficulties than any other protected area I know of.’ He cited the length of the colony, the children living there, the Grimsby trippers and the gravel diggers who walk from Kilnsea to Spurn daily. Also, local people were encouraged by so-called ‘naturalists’ to collect eggs as they had a ready market. It was even asserted that the watcher connived with those naturalists who were also still collectors. Graham Oxley stated that ‘The Wild Birds Protection Act is a dead letter,’ and condemned anyone ‘who poses as a naturalist with his right hand, and with his left employs men … glad in these hard times to earn an additional penny, to collect
for him every clutch they come across.’ The birds were ‘so harried by egg robbers that … they left the few eggs remaining to them to the heat of the sun and sand during the daytime, only returning to them at dusk when their enemies had departed.’ In 1900 several YNU members collected a small fund to pay a watcher, and Colonel White’s gamekeeper, Samuel Robinson, took on the task of protection. Robinson achieved some success (at least 100 pairs hatched), helped by the local policeman, a lighthouse keeper and ‘inhabitants’. Despite setbacks the protection scheme continued. Moreover, the 1906 floods in Kilnsea produced a good beach, and some of the colony established itself there too.

The White’s photograph album has survived and includes several photos of the Warren area, the Cottage, and other buildings. A wooden bungalow near the Cottage, was built in 1885, and called The Rest.

![Building ‘The Rest’ 1885](image)

![Bringing the tea to ‘The Rest’, 1885](image)

The caravan was sited between Warren Cottage and ‘The Rest’.
As shown above it was a traditional Victorian caravan, though less ornate than some fairground Gypsy caravans.
Standing in the lane is the gamekeeper Samuel Robinson, and his spaniel. The party in the garden probably includes visitors from a local Women’s Institute. The Whites had a large family and a photo below shows two of the boys with their nursemaids in the sand dunes. We know the name of one nursemaid is Letty Stone.

The White boys playing in the sand dunes

The White family with pony and trap at the Warren, n.d.

The Whites did a lot of entertaining and picnics were probably common. Here are several photographs, though not everyone seems to be enjoying themselves!
The photos are superb, but one wants to see more. For example on the right of this one is a fence. It may be that the Warren area was fenced. Certainly this map of 1909 below suggests as much. If the Whites were cultivating garden plants around their buildings they may have been trying to keep out rabbits. In an article in *The Naturalist*, 1893 there is a reference to ‘Warren-house garden’ being full of Robins in October. ‘Cat gorged with small birds’.

On the OS map above, the tiny square to the left of Warren Cottage is probably the caravan, whilst ‘The Rest’ and another building lie a little further to the left. On the road near what is now the entrance to the
Reserve a small pond is shown, which is probably the one now known as Pallas’s Pond after a Pallas’s Warbler found there.

‘Enjoying’ a picnic in the sand dunes?

*White family and visitors sitting on a groyne on the beach*

We are fortunate that one of the White album photographs shows the inside of Warren Cottage in 1896.
At that time, what later became the Common Room, was two rooms. The photo shows the northern one. The fireplace is not the same one that many people will remember (removed when the Common Room was subdivided to provide another bedroom). On the far wall the picture seems to be a painting or engraving of Kilnsea Cross. Suspended from the ceiling is what appears to be a boat paddle. A wonderful photo, and a wonderful glimpse into another world.

**Dr. William Coates**

It is not known exactly when the White family’s association with the Warren ended. Colonel White died aged 80 in 1929, but it seems that he stopped visiting regularly before World War I. Dr. William Henry Coates had come to live at Bleak House in Patrington in 1891. He became a very important person in the town, as a magistrate, general practitioner, county councillor and local benefactor.
He soon discovered the pleasures of Spurn and Kilnsea, visiting by horse and trap from at least 1900, and had a sort of beach hut (which he called ‘Our Flat’) built in the dunes, where he entertained visitors, many of them ‘theatricals’ from Hull and further afield.

When Warren Cottage became vacant, Dr Coates rented it to use as a pied-à-terre. By 1906 he had bought a car and was probably the first person to motor to Kilnsea. On 16th September of that year Mr. Walker of Tower House Easington wrote in his diary ‘Dr. Coates’s motor car, three others, and a motor bicycle passed here for an outing at the Warren’. Dr Coates’s visitors made regular treks down to the little community on the Point, and entertained the locals and visitors. Lily Hopper, the daughter of James Hopper, licensee of the Lifeboat Inn, recollected that whenever the family visited Hull, they had the very best seats at the Hull theatres.

World War I

After war was declared on Germany in 1914, Spurn and Kilnsea became military forts and this little part of South Holderness was never the same again. Prior to the outbreak of WW1 various military preparations were being made around the Humber Estuary in case of possible attacks. However the war started before plans for Spurn had been completed and arrangements to take over the peninsula had been made. In 1914 things moved rapidly, with the Army leasing the land and building a system of camps and fortifications as fully described in Frost (2001). completely transformed by war, situated as they were on the east coast, at the mouth of the Humber, which was of strategic importance for the defence of Britain. At the beginning of
World War I, when the military authorities were considering how to defend the Yorkshire coast and the River Humber, Spurn seemed an ideal place to install land-based defences, despite the obvious problems of constructing heavy buildings and armaments on sand. The Constable family, the owners of Spurn itself, were informed that they would be required to lease the peninsula to the War Department for the duration of the war. Accordingly in 1915, Spurn Fort, (which incorporated Green Battery) was established on the Point. A little further up the peninsula near the lighthouse the Port War Signal Station was built. From here all vessels using the area were monitored, using pennants; lights and sound to indicate that they were friendly vessels. At the mouth of the estuary two forts: Bull Sands Fort and Haile Sands Fort, were erected on sand banks, whilst at Kilnsea, Godwin Fort was constructed. A military railway was built to link Spurn and Kilnsea, and, as a means of giving early warning of the approach of aircraft (mainly Zeppelins), the Kilnsea Sound Mirror was erected in fields a little to the north of Godwin Battery. The railway was built to enable the builder of the military forts to distribute materials delivered to a jetty at the Point. The MOD then realised it would be useful to keep it in situ for their own use. So the railway was not a military one by design, but by accident.

The railway line passed just to the east of Warren Cottage, which seems to have been uninhabited during the war years. But standing as it did at the head of the peninsula the Warren area must have been much disturbed by all the military activity.

Around this time the caravan was apparently moved to Easington, and sited down Vicar’s Lane. A postcard of the time suggests that ‘The Rest’ was moved there at the same time. Regarding Warren Cottage itself little is known, but two references in the Naturalist describe it as ‘a ruin’, soon after the War.
Peter Webster recalled his father and uncle taking groceries to Spurn both before and during the World War I. When they reached Southfield Farm they could assess the state of the tide and decide if it were safe to take their cart straight away. Then they went down Warren Lane to the beginning of Spurn. At that time, of course, there was no gate. Warren Lane was a rough gravel track, and from where the gate is now was a mud track. During the war Warren Cottage was seldom occupied. After leaving the Warren the Websters went onto the sand dune in front of the cottage, and then down on to what they called ‘The Growp’. This was called travelling the growp (or groop), that is going along the line of the peninsula, with one set of wheels on the gravel and the other on the firm clay/sand. They carried on until they reached Cart Gap, where a break in the bank had been created for them by means of stakes holding back the chalk, to allow passage. When the army came at the beginning of World War I the cart still went down, but were forced to stop at Godwin Battery (Kilnsea Camp) to get the password, so that they could pass the barrier at Warren Gate.

This photo shows Warren Cottage after the caravan and ‘The Rest’ had been removed. Note how much land there is to the west, i.e. in front of the cottage.
The Inter-War Period
According to the terms of the 1914 lease, Spurn had to be returned to ‘its original state’ before being returned by the military to the Chichester-Constable family. However, demolishing the fort and all its appurtenances would have cost far more than the land was worth, so the War Department decided to compulsorily purchase it for £7,800, despite Brigadier Raleigh Charles Joseph Chichester-Constable’s objections. This was the equivalent of £300,000 today so he did not do badly from the deal! As he later said ‘they took the easiest way out. Not that its original state was anything to write home about.’ The War Department accordingly bought 335 acres, which included the whole of Spurn Head apart from a small area around the lighthouse. This also included Warren Cottage.

The cottage itself got new tenants in 1929, when a lifeboatman, George Washington, left the Point and moved in with his family. Edith Wheeler-Osman (née Clubley) remembers staying there with her friend Peggy, one of the Washington children.
The Washington family, who lived at Warren Cottage for a time

After the Washingtons left, the cottage was used on occasion for permanent staff regulars (instructors) attached to the Territorial Army and their wives. However, when naturalists began making regular visits to Spurn and Kilnsea in the 1930s they began to cast envious eyes on Warren Cottage, which they realised would make an ideal residential base. At that time the Warren area was still quite wide; surrounded by a rich habitat, with marsh; rough grassland and sand dunes. In 1938 enough naturalists (mainly from the West Riding) were visiting Spurn to make it worthwhile keeping a communal log. A report in the *Naturalist* for 1939 stated that ‘in 1938, between July 25th and November 2nd there have been competent field ornithologists on Spurn Point on 26 days. Notes have been made on species seen and subsequently tabulated in the “Spurn notebook” and “roll call” thoughtfully provided by Mr R.M. Garnett using his abbreviations.’ It was Ralph Garnett too, who suggested that the garden of Warren Cottage would make an ideal site for a ringing trap. From *Gleanings from the Log*, by Ralph Chislett one gets a nice description of the situation before war broke out:

“We usually stayed at Kilnsea, Easington or Patrington; or came down in early morning for the day. For a year or two before the war a communal "log" was instituted and borrowed for use by any of us. Often had we looked at Warren Cottage with its garden and trees and bushes surrounded by a hedge, and by rabbit-eaten turf and marram grass. Pied Flycatchers and Redstarts were often present, and occasionally Barred Warblers. The entrance to the Warren was then closed to motorists. The road did not exist. A single rail-track ran from Kilnsea to the Point, traversed by a lorry, sometimes propelled by wind and sail, to serve the needs of the lighthouse keepers, the lifeboat crew, and the military camp at the Point. Guns and their servers, and barbed wire were absent from the Warren. A few people came down from Hull on fine days; but Colonel Aldridge and his friends who used the Cottage in summer; and Miss "Daisy Smith" who painted birds from a tiny green bungalow for a few weeks each summer, were the only visitors who stayed. … The possibilities of the Cottage as headquarters were obvious, but at first I only thought to obtain it for the use of my wife, myself and a few ornithological friends. The late H. B. Booth first told me that if I did get a lease of the cottage "you ought to let the Y.N.U. in on it." R. M. Garnett then arrived in Yorkshire from Norfolk where he had used a ringing-trap, not very successfully, and suggested the cottage garden as an admirable site for such. G. H. Ainsworth and J. Lord, who came down for days from Hull, had published evidence in *The Naturalist* of ornithological interest in the peninsula; and on April l8th, 1939, Ainsworth accompanied the Chisletts to Spurn for the day; and an association began not without future significance. Our approach to the W. D. Northern Command was met sympathetically and we were promised the tenancy when vacant. The last pre-war visit was paid by the Chisletts in late August 1939, when the atmosphere at Kilnsea and Spurn seemed still peaceful; but as they passed homeward through Hull, shopkeepers were sand-bagging their windows. Subsequent visitors who carried binoculars were liable to be arrested and detained for interrogation.”
The Second World War years
On 1 September 1939 Germany invaded Poland, and Britain declared war on Germany on 3 September. Carrie Leonard, running her café at Kilnsea, opposite the military camp, remembered it well. “I stood and looked with pleasure at my peaceful little kingdom — the silence was unbroken except by the murmur of the calm sea. But, “Hell, what was that”? A sudden and prolonged clattering, thumping and banging, shouting and roaring had broken out. The Army had moved in….’ Carrie’s café became a home from home for these men, who at the beginning of the war had been “torn away from loved ones and herded together like cattle”. Like Carrie herself, no-one knew what was happening — some thought that bombs would fall that very day. Most thought that the war would be over in six months.

Spurn and Kilnsea were once again transformed. See my book, The People along the Sand: Spurn and Kilnsea, a History 1800-2000, Chapter 6, for further details. The batteries down at Spurn and at the Port War Signal Station were expanded, Godwin Battery at Kilnsea was taken out of moth balls. Hundreds, sometimes thousands of military personnel flooded into the area. As well as the threat from the sea, a new threat had now come into being — attack from the air — and near Warren Cottage at the north end of the peninsula an anti-aircraft installation was built, initially with a battery of two 4.5” guns. Rows of about 30 huts and a NAAFI, for a mixed corps of c.40 men and c.50 women were built between the present gate to the reserve and Warren Cottage. Other buildings were also erected nearer the cottage. Lewis guns, which were all that were available at the outset of the war for air defence, were later replaced by Bren guns, 3.7” anti-aircraft, and Bofors guns, both around the Warren area and up and down the peninsula. In the early years of the war there was a Royal Observer Corps barracks at the Warren (later the Corps had barracks down near the lighthouse). The Spurn area was soon bristling with defences. Carrie Leonard described the Point as “looking like a giant’s neck covered with a rash of spiky guns and large blister-like Nissen huts”. People who know Spurn now, with its peace and tranquillity, would have found it unrecognisable in 1940.
near the lighthouse, Spurn Fort covering the Point itself, and the two river forts, Bull Sand and Haile Sand, now fully functional. Spurn was ready to take its place once more on the front line!

The soft contours of Spurn Point and the coast running north became punctuated by concrete and iron defences — tank blocks; tank traps; pill-boxes; barbed wire; iron fencing; stakes; anti-invasion scaffolding; and so on. Most of the pill-boxes still visible on Spurn and at Kilnsea were erected at that time, though there were some which dated from the previous war. The measures that were taken in the area were aimed firstly at making movement of invading troops difficult on the ground. Tubular fencing was erected from an area just north of Kilnsea village, as far as Warren Cottage. Lines of anti-tank blocks (large concrete cubes) were put in place right across the peninsula just north of the entrance to Spurn, and along the beach north of Kilnsea village. Some of them still remain, though the most striking ones, which were laid out in three rows of blocks, were broken up in the 1970s, when some were moved and used as sea defences.

The tank blocks near Big Hedge before removal

The railway, which had served well enough during the First War, was not able to cope with modern transport requirements, and it was decided to create a road down the peninsula. It was built, in concrete sections, with points where the railway crossed it in either direction. The shape of the peninsula had changed subtly in the 20 years since the railway had been built, and indeed during a strong storm surge in 1942 a section of the railway at the narrows collapsed, and gangs of men were delegated to make concrete sandbags to build up the banks. The concrete road was finished by early 1941, and the road and railway worked together to link the camps at either end of the peninsula.

The Narrows with road and railway lines, c. 1950

The general public of course were totally excluded from visiting the area. The birds migrated along the coast unmonitored by naturalists. The wildlife of the peninsula no doubt adapted to the large numbers of military personnel. The Wrens planted garden flowers around their quarters, and some of the more unexpected flowers, such as the Spiked Speedwell, may be their responsibility! Bombs were dropped at the Warren in 1941, and the children in the school down on the Point must have spent many hours in air-raid shelters in the early years of the War. A bomb crater still remains near Little Hedge as a memento of the war years. In the latter stages of the war a rocket battery was constructed at the Warren to shoot down the flying bombs (V-
1s) which were expected to be aimed at Hull. The two bungalows there were very hastily built for NCOs manning the battery. In the event only one V-1 fell on Hull.

Spurn Bird Observatory takes over Warren Cottage after the War

The war ended in 1945 and Warren Cottage was once again vacant. Ralph Chislett had developed a warm relationship with the military authorities and also Lieutenant-General Sir Phillip Christleton who was in command at York, and was an experienced ornithologist. The Army Lands Department agreed to allow Chislett and his colleagues to lease Warren Cottage. That was agreed, and Spurn Bird Observatory was set up, under the auspices of the Yorkshire Naturalists’ Union, in 1946.

They found the area somewhat changed after the war. Warren Cottage itself had been used throughout the war by the military. It was surrounded by army buildings and Nissen-type huts stretching as far as the present gate. Barbed wire was there in profusion, and gun emplacements, in a semi-circle of four, were located just south of the buildings. The peninsula was still mined, and visitors to Warren Cottage had to be very vigilant in certain areas. The railway remained, behind the cottage, and rail-cars continued to run until it closed in 1951. The new concrete road, which ran between the cottage and the Humber foreshore, made the Point more accessible, and visitors became more common especially in the summer months. Nevertheless, the area retained its peace and charm, especially as, unlike today, there was still an extensive marshy area between the buildings and the sea.

Members of the YNU set about furnishing and equipping Warren Cottage. The principal people involved at that time were George Ainsworth, John Lord, and R.M. Garnett. Women were few: Eva Crackles was the exception. She was then more of an ornithologist than the botanist that she later became. She made her first visit to Warren Cottage on 24 March 1945, returning on 2 June, when “We followed the new military road from the Bluebell inn.” In October 1946 she recorded in her diary “I was driven down to Chalk Bank by Mr Chislett, who has a big car and is very generous in giving lifts. Barbed wire in marsh.” She remembers the way that the Sea Purslane used to grow through the barbed wire “so that you could not see it and it looked like high mounds of just plants”.

In the photo Eva is walking east, with what became the Information Centre on the left and a Nissan Hut on the right.

The cottage has two small bedrooms, a kitchen, and what became the Common Room, a room which had once been two (and was to be again!) There was no bathroom and no toilet. Carrie Leonard, who lost a lot of customers for her café after the military left, now found herself feeding the bird-watchers. Every effort was made to provide coverage for the migration periods – March to June, and July to December. Several retired
people like Chislett himself were able to cover weekdays. At that time only a minority of people had cars, and access to Spurn by public transport involved quite lengthy journeys, especially for those who came from the West and the North Ridings. The nearest railway station was Patrington, and then a bus provided the link to Kilnsea. As described by Chislett several of the members of the observatory were teachers, who brought pupils to Spurn to help with recording. Anyone who thought they were coming for a holiday was given short shrift!

**Warren Cottage, 1955**

An early priority was to build a Heligoland trap at the Warren, and on 17 November, 1945 the observatory ringed its first bird, a Blackbird, which was recovered near Grimsby on 19 February 1947. In the early years of Spurn Bird Observatory, bird-ringing was the absolute priority for most of the naturalists staying at Warren Cottage.

**Heligoland trap and one of bungalows (later Barry Spence’s house), 1950s**

From the beginning of Spurn Bird Observatory, the daily census was an essential part of the routine. Every evening those people staying in Warren Cottage congregated in the Common Room for the recording of the ‘log’. That routine has gone on every day since, though now takes place further down the road at the ‘New Obs’ at Tharlesthorpe. Over the years Spurn Bird Observatory became increasingly attractive to bird-watchers, and during the migration season some people found themselves having to bring tents and sleep outside.
During the immediate post-war period the only military activity on Spurn itself, was the regular maintenance of the sea defences carried out by the Royal Engineers. The Territorial Army was reconstituted in 1947 and took over responsibility for coastal defence.

In 1948 most of the temporary buildings around the Warren (what Chislett called ‘the hutments’), were taken down, and the naturalists announced plans to put up a fence and plant bushes to attract birds. The Observatory’s landlord, the Lands Branch of the Army at York, was very happy with their tenants and the Clerk of Works, Mr Iveson and the Garrison Engineer Mr Batchelor were always thanked warmly in the annual reports. It must have seemed in the late 1940s that the army would gradually withdraw entirely from the Humber area. However during the early 1950s the Cold War ensured that Spurn again became the centre of military activity, when the guns on the Point and at Godwin Battery were taken out of care and preservation and placed on six hours’ notice. In the Warren area, two new bungalows were built for the caretakers of new anti-aircraft guns, which were placed there as the Cold War intensified. These buildings were later to become respectively the residence of the warden when the Trust took over, and the ‘Annexe’ to the Observatory. The army retained a care-taker, Thomas Jardine, who lived in what later became the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust’s warden’s bungalow.
June Davison, H.T. Williamson and Olive Pennock, c. 1955
In the photo of visiting naturalists above, note the military buildings and fence in the background.

Aerial view of the Warren area, 1959
Few photographs exist of the Warren area during or immediately after the War, for obvious reasons. The aerial photos above show the four anti-aircraft gun emplacements south of the Warren. The foundations of the one furthest west is still visible on the (1996) stretch of tarmac road to the peninsula. The eastern one is now on the beach. Barry Spence remembers how many military buildings there were still in the early sixties — very useful to nesting swallows. In his book, *Sailing the Rails* (2001) the author, Howard Frost, remembers a visit to Spurn in 1955, when he took a photo looking north from 'The Narrows' with a Kodak Brownie box camera. Although he knew he mustn't take any pictures of any of the guns he didn't realise from such a distance that a tiny speck in his picture showed not only the military buildings at the Warren, but also a top secret gun known as Gun X4, capable of shooting down high speed jets using an early computer system and associated radar. It had been placed upon the western-most emplacement, and a blockhouse had been built to house the associated radar. At that time naturalists were warned to beware of live minefields, with large notices saying **KEEP OUT OR BE KILLED!**
Spurn Bird Observatory attracted more than ornithologists. Warren Cottage offered accommodation for naturalists of all kinds, and in the summers of 1947 to 1953 parties of entomologists came to stay, with their nets, pooters (insect-collecting tubes) and sugaring equipment. An article by W.D. Hincks in the *Naturalist* of 1951 gives a good account of their findings and how the peninsula looked not long after the war. Spurn at that time offered quite a range of differing habitats to insect-collectors. The Walker Butts area included the so-called ‘Marsh Meadow’, a pond, the Walker Butts Bank Dyke (a smaller feature than the present Canal), whilst to the east of Warren Cottage lay an area of Phragmites, also with a pond. To these were added the marram dunes, the Warren area, the saltmarsh, Chalk Bank and the Point area, with its covering of Sea Buckthorn, Elder and wild flowers. The entomologists armed themselves daily with packed lunches, or lunch was taken at the cottage if they were working near to it, and:

after the evening meal, taken at the Kilnsea café [Carrie Leonard’s café, Gwendene], on our return to the cottage, diaries were written up, specimens were mounted and often identified, text-books and microscopes having been brought by most members of the party. Discussions of the day’s collecting accompanied the mounting which often went on, of necessity, until the early hours of the morning. On suitable evenings moths were collected, often in numbers, from the lighted windows of the cottage, with paraffin lamps, car lights, or ‘at sugar’. Occasional evening or ‘after dark’ excursions were made, usually, but not entirely, by the lepidopterists.

Hincks described the area investigated by the entomologists and he gives a good picture of how it had been left after the war. Many of the hutments erected for the military had been taken down, but “are still lying about, making the place unsightly”. The garden of Warren Cottage, though it has been “badly cut down and damaged during the past few years”, still contained a Corsican Pine, Whitebeam, Bullace and Sycamores. Privet was dominant, with some bushes over 10 feet high, and in the summer scented the air around the cottage. Apparently the soldiers staying at the Warren had made some attempt at cultivation by planting brassicas, which by the late 1950s had run to seed. In the marshy area to the north-east of the buildings, rabbit warrens covered the ground, and Shelducks used the burrows as nesting holes.