

Plea to save air raid tunnels

9:40am Thursday 10th July 2014 in [News By David Trayner](#)



Plea to save air raid

tunnels

CAMPAIGNERS have applied to protect historic bomb shelters underneath a site earmarked for 231 newhomes and a hospice.

Activist group Skipp has called on English Heritage to list the air raid tunnels, which lie 25ft beneath the former Ekco factory site in [Priory](#) Crescent, Southend, and, some historians believe, stretch under Priory Park and beyond.

The 75-year-old tunnels were built to protect the electronics company's 3,000 staff from German air raids, but could be lost forever when BellwayHomes and Havens Hospices redevelops the key site.

Skipp member Mark Sharp believes the tunnels should be saved for "future generations".

He said: "We all know there is a vital need for housing in Southend and we want to see this site developed for that purpose.

"However, Skipp has a duty to help protect the heritage of our town.

"Considering the cavalier attitude to the remarkable history hidden beneath the Ekco site, we feel we have no choice but to take action.

"We have submitted an application for listed status to English Heritage.

"We would urge Bellway Homes to stop and think. Maybe a few a simple alterations to the plans would allow the development of the housing to proceed and at the same time preserve these unique shelters for future generations."

Some local historians believe the Ekco shelters are part of a network of wartime tunnels that lead to the airport and a “hospital” for shrapnel victims hidden below Priory Park.

Arthur Woodward, of Bournemouth Park Road, Southchurch, claims to have gone into the tunnels under Priory Park about 30 years ago.

The amateur historian said: “There’s a section that goes into Priory Park, which I believe is still there. They are about 30ft deep. There were seats and a couple of bunks there, if I remember right.

“From them you can go deeper and come out at the airport and on to [Rochford](#).”

Park staff have searched for the rumoured entrance to no avail.

Brian Ayling, Independent councillor for St Luke’s, who is also campaigning for the tunnels to be preserved, said: “I’ve spoken to people who worked at the Ekco factory and they said the tunnels were linked under Priory Park.”

But Judith Williams, who has written a number of books on the history of south Essex, said: “I am very sceptical about all these rumours of tunnels. I think most of them are cellars.

“Many cellars were built with arched ceilings for strength and they look like the beginning of a tunnel.”

An English Heritage spokeswoman said: “We have literally only just received the application to list, so can’t give any more details at this stage.”

Simon May, Southend Council’s group manager for libraries and museums, said: “The Ekco shelters are of interest and as such the council ensured they were surveyed and a public record made by the County Council Archaeological Unit before the land owners filled in the shelters after demolishing their buildings in 2008.

“This is often done in similar situations where structures do not have specific protection in planning law, but it does mean that their location is recorded.

“Items from the shelter have been taken are being kept in storage by the Museums Service.

“In terms of Priory Park, there are no entrances to any underground bunkers in the buildings in the works yard at Priory Park.

“A councillor visit recently took place, organised by a member of the parks team, which confirmed this. Buildings currently used in the works yard were built after World War Two.

“There is also no evidence to suggest that there are tunnels under Priory Park.

“Both geophysical and archaeological surveys were undertaken in the area of Prittlewell Priory, prior to the renovation works in 2011. These did not show any evidence of tunnels.”