

# Wargrave Local History Society

## Latest News - February 2013

### Local Airfields (in Berkshire)

Aviation historian Aldon Ferguson enlightened the February meeting of the Wargrave Local History Society about Local Airfields, when he spoke about the less well known as well as the well known Berkshire airfields. Although he said it was not an 'exciting subject' - and that, unlike counties such as Lincolnshire or Norfolk, the Berkshire airfields were only used a little 'operationally' during the war, it was a most interesting account, illustrated with both contemporary views and more recent ones (many of which he had taken 'from the air').

Aldon began with a map, showing the location of the 14 airfields that had existed in the county. (Not including fields used for informal flying, such as Alan Cobham's 'Flying Circus' in the 1930s) He explained that the direction of the prevailing wind was important to early planes, as they had to take off and land 'into' the wind - and so the main runway would normally be laid out from south-west to north-east. However, the original grass airfields could enable planes to take off and land in any direction - as was the case at Woodley originally.

Furthest from Wargrave was Membury. Built as a bomber training airfield in 1942, it had three hard runways, and (like several others) was designed to last only for the length of the war. Soon after it opened, however, it was transferred to the American Air Force. They used it for photo- reconnaissance work. The runway was extended in February 1944, so that it could be used for glider operations. Three squadrons of the 101st Airborne Division were based there, Douglas C-47 Skytrain planes to tow the gliders, and 90 of them took part in operations on D Day from Membury. Although very active in June 1944, it had closed as an airfield in October 1946. A few of the original buildings survive on the site, but most of it is now occupied by the M4 Membury service area.

Welford was planned as a satellite field to Membury, with three concrete runways, and also passed to the Americans. As with many airfields, it was like a small town, 2368 people living on the site. The buildings were widely dispersed, to make it more difficult for the enemy to attack. A demonstration on the use of gliders was given in March 1944 to VIPs such as Winston Churchill and Dwight Eisenhower, the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe. It was also used during D Day - in the first wave to take paratroops, and then the planes returned to tow gliders across to Normandy. It then became a re-supply base, ensuring vital materials reached the troops in Europe. The airfield was returned to the RAF, and closed in March 1946. However, the Americans subsequently took it over to use as a large ammunition store. Originally, access was by a railway branch from Newbury, but after that closed road transport was adopted, and Welford now has direct access to and from the eastbound M4.

Hampstead Norris was built in 1940 as a satellite field to Harwell, and was an early RAF station to have three hard runways. An operational training unit for Wellington bombers was based there. The site was bombed in May 1941, and then from the November was used as the base for the Ferry Crew training flight. The field closed in 1945, and virtually nothing remains of the site (north east of Hampstead Norreys).

Greenham Common was again designed with 3 runways, the main one being along the ridge, and living areas to the south. It was opened in 1942 as a satellite to Aldermaston, and passed to the Americans in October 1943, who based Mustangs (good for long range work) there. It was also used for Dakota C47s to tow gliders across the Channel in 1944, spearheading operations on D Day, but like the others, the field

closed at the end of the war. However, it was given to the Americans in 1951 to use as a dispersal site for the nuclear bomber deterrent. The main runway was extended to become the longest in the country, at 11,000 feet, with adjacent taxi ways able to act as a runway in an emergency. It had space to accommodate 57 bombers - the enormous 6 engined B47 being based there. In 1979, the Americans decided to base cruise missiles there, housed in bomb-resistant shelters. This led to the Women's Peace Camp protest, when they encircled the site for several years. Eventually, the missiles were removed, and the site has returned to use as common land - although the bomb resistant shelters have not been able to be removed!

Aldermaston opened in 1941, and similarly passed to the Americans the following year. It was also used by the Ministry of Aircraft Production to assemble about 500 Spitfires - work previously done at Cockpole Green. On D Day, 104 planes left from Aldermaston to tow gliders to France, but again the station closed at the end of the war. It was then used for training civil aircraft crew until 1948, when the site became the atomic weapons research establishment - which remains there.

Theale was a small airfield, to the east of the village, and rather liable to flooding. It too went out of use at the end of the war, and much of the site is now a gravel pit.

Smith's Lawn in Windsor Great Park was used as an airfield by royalty from 1930. A hangar there as used for building Wellington bombers during the war, but there is now no evidence of its use as an airfield, being now the Guard's Polo Club.

Winkfield was another grass airfield, opened in May 1941. It was relatively small, staffed by 3 officers, 3 NCOs and 60 airmen, and like many others, closed at the end of the war. A few hangars remain on the site, however.

Cock Marsh was a private airfield, and situated on the Berkshire side of the River Thames, opposite Bourne End. To assist early aviators, the AA produced maps showing the location of these small landing fields - marking such features as the height of overhead power or telegraph cables. Unlike the other Berkshire airfields, it did not see war-time use - in fact it was blocked to prevent use by enemy planes.

Waltham St Lawrence and Bray were both grass fields that opened in 1941 for use as relief landing strips. Both closed at the end of the war, and no clues remain to their former use.

RAF Henley-on-Thames was actually in Berkshire, at Cockpole Green. As well as an RAF presence, about 250 Spitfires were assembled between 1941 and 1943 in hangars at the south-east corner of the site. As the Spitfire became bigger and more powerful, they could not use the airfield there, and so the production moved to Aldermaston. It later became to base for Hoverflys - the first helicopters used by the RAF, but nothing of the RAF station remains on site now.

Woodley began as a private grass airfield in 1929. To help pilots, who had no radio, navigate, the word READING was painted on the grass. A very active flying club began in May 1931, and it was whilst flying from here that Douglas Bader crashed, and then had to have his legs amputated. Phillips and Powis - later Miles Aircraft - began building aircraft at Woodley in 1933 - the 2nd largest aircraft builder in Britain at the time. During the war, it became an RAF training base. Over 6,500 planes were built at Woodley. Miles even developed a supersonic wind tunnel, and a design for an aircraft - but the British government insisted all the data be given to the Americans ! After the site closed in 1963, the airfield was built on, many of the new roads bearing aviation related names.

White Waltham is the only airfield still in use in Berkshire. It began in 1936 as a training school for de Havilland, and has always been a grass field without hard runways. During the war, it became the centre for the Air Transport Auxiliary. The 1152 male and (more famously), 166 female civilian pilots ferried over 308,000 aircraft between factories and RAF bases - of all types during the course of the war. After the war, the Fairey Rotodyne - an early form of helicopter - was built there. They were very noisy - and not efficient enough to be commercially viable. The flying club also continued to function, and was where Prince Philip, Prince Charles - and Aldon - learnt to fly, and it remains an active airfield.

---

The next meeting will be on Tuesday, March 12th, when the Society will hold its Annual General Meeting, and the programme for the forthcoming year will be announced. On Tuesday, April 9th we will welcome Michael Aris and Neville White to speak about The Duke of Wellington's Country House at Stratfield Saye - telling us about both the man and the house.