THE ROYAL AIR FORCE AND EWELME
by Carol Sawbridge

As we look back over the events of past centuries, we can observe that two major decisions, taken almost exactly five hundred years apart, irrevocably affected the life and fortunes of this small village. The first was taken by a newly married Earl and his Countess who decided to make Ewelme their home; to improve the Church and endow a School and Almshouses. The second was taken by a jittery Government becoming increasingly alarmed at Germany's military expansionism, and the posturing of its bellicose leader, Adolf Hitler.

The local story goes that at some time in the mid-1930's a Minister of the Crown, dining with Peter Gemmell, gazed westwards from a window at Ewelme Down House and realised that the wide plain between Ewelme and Crowmarsh would be an ideal place for an aerodrome. Ewelme was destined for dramatic change.

Notwithstanding the signs of the times, this decision did not go without some vigorous local opposition. *The Daily Herald* of March 1937 reported that residents were indignant, but their protests had been in vain. Letters to the Air Ministry and the Prime Minister had gone unanswered. Miss Jervis of the Manor complained that the Air Ministry had chosen some of the best agricultural land in the neighbourhood and she was quoted as saying - *"However great the need for new aerodromes may be, there is plenty of waste land that could have been used. The whole peace and tranquillity of this little backwater of mediaeval England will be entirely destroyed."* Mrs Eagle-Bott at Hill House dreaded to think what the village would be like when aeroplanes roared over it at all hours of the day and night. Tom Orpwood based his objection on the farming value of the land to be lost to building. Commander Hampden believed *"the land was too marshy".*

The centuries of sleepy agrarianism were over, and, like it or not, Ewelme was propelled into the modern era. Farmland was purchased from those concerned - Edwards, Wilders, Wingfields, Orpwoods and Chamberlains. Bill Edwards recalled that the Air Ministry paid £18 per acre, a princely sum considering the average was £5 per acre at that time. Clearance work began in 1937. Roads, footpaths and bridleways were diverted; the villagers lost their direct route to Wallingford via Clay (now known as Green) Lane. Despite initial anxieties it was not all bad news; the majority of the villagers whole-heartedly welcomed the development, as it offered employment opportunities to labourers and to artisans. Some were to spend their working lives at RAF Benson.

These events opened up a whole new series of adventures for the local boys living in Clay Lane and at The Lamb Inn. Ground levelling was required, and clandestine rides were sneaked on the steam driven giro-tiller used to rotate the soil. The clay spoil was ferried to infill land in the locality, and the boys would cling to the lorries for a free 'ride'.

Messrs John Laing & Sons undertook the construction work and imported workmen from all over the country. Unfortunately, there was a serious accident involving a Laing foreman - John Dunn from Carlisle. He was walking back to the aerodrome at 10.15 pm on the 26th June 1938 after drinking at the Shepherd's Hut with a friend. Dunn apparently lurched into the path of a 1931 Morris Cowley van driven by Mr George W Gee. He was struck by the door handle and fell into the road. Dunn's friend assisted him back to the camp canteen. The police and the doctor were called, and Dr David Harris of

Dorchester attended the injured man. Dr Harris believed Dunn had concussion and that his visible injury of a bruised arm was not too serious. However, Dunn had an inter-cranial haemorrhage, slipped into a coma and died the next morning in Wallingford Hospital.

The Lamb along with the Shepherd's Hut, the Greyhound and the KCB Café thrived on the influx of patronage both civil and military. Mr Tom Dymond, the landlord of the imposing 200-year-old Lamb Inn, had 5 bedrooms available for construction workers. He took in eight Irish labourers who paid £1 a week for their bed, breakfast, dinner and laundry! They also took a packed lunch to their work. Mr Dymond bought boiling beef for 2^{d} a pound, it was cooked and pressed and then packed and handed out each morning as the men filed through the door. When the labourers were paid, they drank their wages, dipping a hot poker from the coal fire into their beer. Although the front room was full of crockery and pictures, nothing was ever vandalised or broken. When they wanted to cadge another drink after exhausting their money, local blacksmith Leslie Miners would say - *"Go and drink God's whisky – it's good for you."*

The Station was officially opened in February 1939, seven months before the beginning of World War Two. Having an operational military establishment in the backyard, the villagers and the Royal Air Force were destined to forge an unavoidable and close association which continued for many decades. The newcomers were quickly made to feel at home as Fred Greenway noted – *"Our RAF friends ...played darts and drank in fellowship with our menfolk."* He also wrote, *"On 9th September 1939 one of our RAF friends returned from an operation over enemy territory, badly shot up, necessitating the amputation of both legs."*

In early April 1939 No's 103 and 150 Squadrons arrived with ageing Fairey Battles (a single-engine, monoplane light bomber) but they soon left for France on September 2nd, 1939. It had been intended to base Whitleys of 97 and 166 Squadron at Benson, but the grass runways proved unsuitable and on September 9th 1939 No's 52 and 63 Fairey Battle Squadron and a few Anson's were flown in. In April 1940 207 Squadron arrived and the three squadrons amalgamated to form No 12 Operations Training Unit. Polish and Czech pilots arrived for Fairey Battle training. The Battles were not ideal aircraft for training and many crashed round Ewelme - one behind the present Hampden Way and another behind Church Farm. The confused pilot, having taken the top out of a fir tree by Saffron House, said his altimeter was reading 4,000 ft! In due course the Battles and the Poles were posted elsewhere. One famous casualty of the unpredictable Battle was Pilot Officer Richard Shuttleworth who founded the Shuttleworth Collection of vintage aircraft at Old Warden. He was sent to Benson to carry out local training, but shortly after midnight on 2nd August 1940 he was practising 'circuits and bumps' he crashed into trees on Mr Medleys farm. Sadly, many villagers' memories of this time feature aircraft - *'always crashing...'*

In September 1939 the long and proud association of RAF Benson with the King's/Queen's Flight began. This was to last from 1939 to 1995 with a four-year break. An Envoy, a Hudson and a Percival Q.6 arrived within a few months. The Envoy was soon re-located to Northolt. In March 1940 a Percival Q.6 arrived from Northolt which was shared by King George VI and the Air Officer Commanding Bomber Command and then a Flamingo DH.95 was positioned ready for service in the event of an invasion. In 1942 the Flight was disbanded and not reformed at Benson until 1st May 1946.

At the outbreak of war in 1939 the villagers were asked to take in London children considered to be at risk from enemy bombing. Fred Greenway noted that on September 2nd the Women's Institute was warned to prepare for "evacuees". Tom Orpwood was Evacuee Officer, assisted by Mrs Strickland and Mrs Bowles (of the old Mill House). The rendezvous was the Reading Room where the children were allocated to their host families. Some occupied the stables at The White House; Mrs Burkitt of New Place (the present day 'Loretto') put up others in her garden shed (or chicken house). Kath Baker remembered her parents taking a Mancunian couple plus their two children into their home at Kings Pool Cottages. Everyone cheerfully squeezed up. Some evacuees had not slept in a bed before, and startled householders found children under the beds - explaining that their parents occupied the bed at home. Mrs Jones took in an East End seven-year-old, a *'terror'* who enjoyed swinging the family's cat round by its tail. There was an outbreak of lice and fleas at the school and the inevitable 'run-ins' between the local boys and the incomers.

Houses were requisitioned for the RAF personnel. WAAF's were billeted at The White House. Even the Master's Room had Warrant Officer Brooks, his wife and three children living there. Other RAF people lived at Saffron House. The influx meant more children attending the school, and new voices in the Choir. As time passed Ewelme was considered to be too dangerous for evacuees due to the closeness of RAF Benson and most left. However, some evacuees still return annually, such is their affection for Ewelme and those who cared for them during those dark days.

RAF Benson became so busy that it was decided to build a satellite airfield near Dorchester, named RAF Mount Farm (Berinsfield is now on the site). Further construction works were also needed at Benson. In 1940 pillboxes were built and a perimeter track started in August and finished in November. Wellington light bombers had been intended for Benson's 12 Operations Training Unit but the water-logging predicted by Commander Hampden hampered their operation from Benson and they were located to Mount Farm's metalled runways.

Fred Greenway recalls a false alarm on the 25th June 1940. Four days later there was a real alarm at midnight when 18 high explosives fell in the vicinity during a high-level attack. On 13th August a German Ju88 dived out of low cloud and dropped three high explosives and an oil bomb. One bomb fell on an unoccupied air raid shelter hurling debris onto the roof of the Airmen's Mess and damaging an Anson. Fred Greenway records this incident, remembering how on *"a grey and cloudy afternoon a lone 'Jerry' bombed and shot up the aerodrome."* No one was hurt. Fortunately, the WAAFs who were supposed to run to the shelter did not hear the warning siren or they would have been killed. A startled Percy Tuckwell, who looked after the farm horses stabled near the Shepherd's Hut, witnessed this drama. Young Aubrey Gilbey who was with Sydney Wingfield atop a load of hay at The Pightles, near Cottesmore Lane, saw an Avro Anson approach and land, closely followed by the Ju88. They saw the bombs leave the aircraft and explode.

Daylight strafing was not uncommon, and some villagers remember strafing of workers in the watercress beds. The airfield was cleverly camouflaged, and one frustrated German pilot aimed his guns down the High Street. Mr Howard from Roke, who occasionally lived at The Lamb, had to fling himself into the water to save his life. As he later told the bemused Dymonds - *"I dived myself under the cress....!"*

Other precautions were taken to safeguard vulnerable military equipment. *'At night,'* Fred Greenway writes, *'the quiet and friendly lanes were filled with convoys dispersed for safety.'* Fred Greenway also records that in September 1940 the London blitz could be seen from Ewelme Street with the red glow of the fires and blue flashes lighting up the sky. As he listened to the News on his wireless, Tom Dymond would shed tears at the destruction and loss of life. However, the villagers were amused by the arrival of four runaway barrage balloons that drifted over in a gale on 17th September, but they were quickly shot down. By October the fields were studded with strong posts as an anti-German glider measure. On 3rd October bombs fell on Swyncombe Woods - the fire light from a gypsy encampment probably attracted the aircraft.

In late 1940 another high-level decision was taken which would involve the people and buildings of Ewelme in what was to develop into a vital contribution to the war effort and eventual victory. At the end of December Benson's most important wartime role really took off with the arrival of No 1 Photographic Reconnaissance Unit from Heston. Suddenly, the sky overhead was graced with the sight of sleek, blue-painted Spitfires and filled with the unmistakable purring growl of powerful Merlin engines. Stripped of armament and adapted to carry maximum capacity fuel they were modified and tuned to the highest performance for height, speed and endurance. Even the rivet heads were filed down to obtain the advantage of speed. Their performance was threatened later in the war by superior enemy machines, especially the new Focke-Wulf FW 190. But by then an improved Spitfire fitted with a 2,100 h.p. Griffon engine, twice as powerful as the Merlin, was ready for service and capable of flying faster and higher than anything else in the sky.

For the PRU Spitfire pilots it was perilous, uncomfortable and lonely work flying between 30,000 ft and 38,000 ft - heights not generally attempted before the war. Operating at these altitudes gave rise to a previously un-encountered phenomenon - the condensation trail. If their aircraft left a vapour trail the pilots had to react immediately - to climb above or descend below that height. If they did not, they would give their position away and invite enemy attention. Finding the target and photographing it accurately required exceptional navigational accuracy and flying skill. 'Verticals' were taken from height in runs over a target and the photographs were developed into overlapping pictures called mosaics. The pilot had to get each run parallel to the next, not always easy in a strong crosswind. To be assigned to photograph large areas was also dangerously time-consuming, sometimes lasting up to 45 minutes. At the other extreme, and fortunately less often, PRU pilots were required to photograph a target at low level, producing 'horizontals'. This dangerous manoeuvre was known as 'dicing' and could only be accomplished with the element of surprise and at high speed.

The presence of the PRU inevitably affected the people and buildings of Ewelme. PRU personnel were billeted around the village and at Benson. Mr and Mrs Quixley at the school housed Vic Leighton, a photographic interpreter and his wife. At least two local men undertook the skilled job of loading cameras. Commander Hampden's house, The Old Mansion in Cottesmore Lane (known as Ewelme Farm to the aircrew), was used for first-phase interpretation and accommodation. New buildings were erected in the Old Mansion's orchard and on part of Mr Medley's field. These housed the developing and film processing equipment. Another 'modification' had to be made as a warning to low flying aircraft by placing a red light in the top of the magnificent Cedar tree. For safety reasons, in February 1941 the offices of the Group Headquarters moved to Mrs Wainwright's home at Fyfield Manor (actually in Benson Parish). A notable occupant was the Commanding Officer, Air Commodore John Norman Boothman, winner of the 1931 Schneider Trophy.

The first phase of the photo-reconnaissance operation involved the collection of film from the returning pilots, usually in the late afternoon. The film was developed immediately at Ewelme whilst the 'first-phase officer' de-briefed pilots. From the pilot's estimations and the actual photographs, the position of pictures would be plotted, and initial information put into a report. The secondary photographic interpretation was carried out at Danesfield House, Medmenham, 15 miles away. By 8.00 pm the photographs and plotted positions would be at Medmenham where highly skilled interpreters worked through the night to 8.00 am. The photographs were interpreted, and a comprehensive report was then sent to the Air ministry. Each area of enemy territory was allocated to a specific interpreter in order to keep an almost daily lookout for any changes that could indicate hostile activity.

Initially, the PRU concentrated on photographing the German Navy and shipping movements. As the bombing offensive intensified Bomber Command requested more efficient information on potential targets and after-damage assessment. A strategy evolved to record the Germans rebuilding a damaged facility. When the work was almost completed, new photographs would indicate the most effective time for the bombers to return and for the process to begin again. This tactic ensured maximum waste of enemy resources and many potentially ineffectual bombing raids were averted. Later in the war, after-damage assessment of the United States Army Air Force's daylight bombing raids was undertaken by the PRU Mosquito's. The resulting photographs were rushed to the Americans' Midlands bases to be available for inspection when the Squadrons returned. This operation was essential in order to keep up American morale, so heavy were their losses.

Gradually, the importance of accurate aerial photography to assist intelligence gathering was realised. Every day of every month RAF Benson was at the forefront of the formidable task of building a complete picture of the happenings in Germany and in Occupied Europe. The diligence of all personnel involved paid off - as the PRU soon had a massive library of photographic intelligence. As the war progressed, the tasks for the men and aircraft of the PRU expanded and diversified; the aircrew were often unaware of the reason for their assignments or how critical the results could be.

From a detailed analysis of PRU photographs the 'boffins' at Medmenham were able to make highly accurate models, essential to assist the aircrews and the airborne troops with precious identification details of targets. This was highly specialised work involving translating the photographs into three dimensional replicas, giving the heights, distances and features of a target. Even buildings, trees and fences were made to scale in their relative positions. This precision technology was soon put to good use. On 15th December 1941 Squadron Leader Tony Hill was assigned to investigate an electric bowl, about 10 ft across, situated on a cliff edge near Bruneval on Cap d'Antifer in northern France. The photographs he obtained from his 'dicing' run in his Spitfire were to become famous. With the aid of the resulting models and the intelligence gleaned, the Bruneval radiolocation complex was successfully raided by combined Forces on the night of 27th February 1942, and the main parts of the Wurzburg radar secrets captured. Subsequently, hundreds of other enemy radar installation sites were discovered and put out of action. As a direct result, Bomber Command's losses were substantially reduced.

One top-secret task was to photograph the Ruhr Dams for the proposed raid by Lancaster's of 617 Squadron. Many sorties were flown to the area and an accurate assessment made not only of the topography, but also of the depth of the water. Scale models were built at Medmenham to provide crucial information for the development of the Barnes Wallis 'bouncing bomb' and for Wing

Commander Guy Gibson's attack strategy. Early in the morning of 17th May 1943 Flying Officer 'Gerry' Fray left his temporary billet at Crowmarsh Battle Farm to take Spitfire EN343 to photograph the results of the previous night's 'Dambuster' attacks on the Mohne, and Eder Dams. He captured the escaping water glinting in the sun and the devastation caused by the breach of the Mohne. Another two sorties were flown that day and the Benson photographs became world famous, being front page news several days later. Although the daring raid failed to cripple the Ruhr industries, the boost in British morale was considerable. The Spitfire gate-guard presently standing at RAF Benson is a replica of EN343.

Another assignment was to locate suitable fields for use as landing strips in occupied France. This enabled the Special Duties Squadrons to drop and retrieve secret agents (who were formerly on a one-way ticket). For the Normandy landings the PRU had previously taken thousands of photographs of the proposed landing areas.

Despite the PRU Spitfires' superiority of height and speed they were not immune from danger, as the casualty record shows. Pilots had to perform complicated feints and doglegs in an attempt to disguise their destination target area. Although this inevitably complicated navigation and used more fuel, it was vital when detected by enemy radar, or to disguise a predictable target, such as photographing the results of a bombing raid. If the ruse failed, the intercepting fighters gained the advantage and a cat and mouse strategy evolved. The unarmed British pilot's only recourse was to use his aircraft's superior performance to outrun or out-manoeuvre the enemy, engaging in a desperate game of hide-and-seek amongst the clouds.

If an aircraft was late returning, the anxious ground crews waiting at Benson spent a nail-biting time calculating the amount of fuel left in the tanks; and as the hours slipped away praying for a safe landing elsewhere. Many just failed to return, their fate unknown.

The Spitfire, although an admirable photo-reconnaissance aircraft, was limited by range, and on 13th July1941 No 1 PRU acquired its first Mosquito flown in by Geoffrey de Havilland himself. The Mosquito was a twin-engined aircraft with the range of a bomber and the performance of a fighter and ideally suited to PR work. It carried two crewmen; the pilot's task being made easier with the help of a Navigator. The *'Tirpitz'* battleship was found in a Norwegian fjord by a Mosquito of RAF Benson's 544 Squadron. This discovery allowed for the battleship's subsequent disablement by Lancaster bombing in 1944.

Wing Commander Bill Newby was posted to Benson in 1943 as a Navigator on 544 Mosquito Squadron. He remembers that for RAF personnel Ewelme and the PRU were synonymous. For example, the second-phase interpreters often came from Medmenham to liaise with the aircrew regarding specific targets for which they were responsible. Sarah Churchill (Mrs Vic Oliver), the Prime Minister's daughter, was a WAAF Officer interpreter and Wing Commander Newby recalls her visiting him at the Ewelme PRU to discuss the Kiel targets, as he was assigned to photograph that area. Nearly 60 years on he remembers the village with affection. He writes – *"I was delighted to be able to explore Ewelme on my 'cycle; to see the old buildings, the watercress beds; the mediaeval buildings of the old hall and school; Fyfield where I was commissioned and the River Thames where we practised our dinghy drill escapes and learned to sail."* Despite his dangerous occupation (he was eventually shot down and taken prisoner), he added - *"Those were some of the happiest days of my life…"*

One of the most important contributions of the PRU campaign was related to the V1 and V2 weapons. Pilots from RAF Benson identified the V1 and V2 flying bomb and rocket production sites at Peenamunde, and subsequently the V1 launch sites located in northern France.

From May 1942 to March 1943 Spitfire sorties brought back photographs of an unusual development site at Peenamunde, situated on the Baltic Coast. On 3rd October 1943, Flight Officer Constance Babington-Smith, an interpreter at Medmenham, found a small aircraft shape with a wingspan of about 20 ft on the edge of the airfield at Peenamunde. Meanwhile, Spitfires of 541 Squadron concentrated on photographing northern France, and by 30th November 72 sites containing a 'J-shaped ramp' with a centre axis pointing directly at London had been discovered. A Mosquito of 540 Squadron was despatched to photograph bomb damage to Berlin, but as cloud obscured the city it flew instead up to Peenamunde. The resulting photographs showed an installation exactly like those in northern France. The link between Peenamunde and those mysterious sites was established, and the dreadful conclusions drawn.

Timing became crucial. The Central Photographic Interpretation Unit at Medmenham figured that it would take approximately 120 days from the clearing of a launch site to its completion. Models were made to represent the terrain a pilot would expect to see when flying at speed at the low height of 30 ft. Forty-eight Mosquito bombers were sent on the mission to destroy the launch sites on 22nd December and again on 23rd December 1943. The result was to delay the deadly V1 peril until June 1944.

One recollection of Flt Officer Babington-Smith was from an ex-King's Flight airman (Bob Potts) visiting for the 1998 King's Flight Reunion. He said in the late 1940's he was hitch-hiking in uniform to Henley when a lady stopped to offer him a lift. During the journey she told him she had been to Benson for a PRU reunion and that she used to 'ski' behind a Tiger Moth there! He later discovered that his 'driver' was Constance Babington-Smith.

Overall, the Station was lightly bombed, although one event caused consternation to the Gilbey family in Clay Lane. They heard William Joyce, derisively known as Lord Haw Haw, the traitor turned Nazi propagandist, speaking on his *'Germany Calling'* wireless transmission. He chillingly referred to a potential target near a church clock with two number 'eleven's'. In 1794, on Benson Church clock-face, the Roman numeral for nine o'clock was mistakenly painted upside down and is still shown as XI. Everyone expected RAF Benson to be attacked.

One theory for the light bombing suggests that a decoy of cut-out shapes of planes and roadways in the turf on Swyncombe Downs above Swyncombe Woods caused the Luftwaffe to drop their bombs away from their targets. However, despite the clever camouflaging of the whole area, German attacks did occur on the afternoon of 30th January, 1941, when 19 high explosives and 3 incendiaries fell on the airfield. Enemy strafing and bombing on February 27th destroyed a Wellington and damaged four other aircraft. Amy Reeves remembers an unfortunate Wellington crew who were preparing to land at Benson when they were 'jumped' by an enemy aircraft and shot down. The impact of the crash blew out windows at the Shepherd's Hut.

Further disruption occurred in May 1942 when concrete runways were built at Benson and the landing areas extended to the borders of Crowmarsh Gifford. The old Lamb Inn was demolished, causing the

Dymond family to move to Saffron Close along with their 'lodgers' - Mr and Mrs Knowles, and Eric and Carole. Their father was stationed at RAF Benson and both children have memories of an idyllic childhood spent in the village despite the war. The Lamb was like a smallholding with geese, chickens and pigs. In the early days Eric Knowles remembers the Fairey Battles attempting to land whilst dodging the trees, their engines revving alarmingly. Granny Dymond would rush to the large dresser which housed crockery and jam jars and attempt to push them back to safety before the vibration from a heavy landing toppled them over the edge. Carole Knowles remembers a Spitfire knocking off the chimney. They all remember the comfortable kitchen with a wireless going 18 hours a day to catch the latest news.

The Dymonds received only £100 compensation for the loss of The Lamb, and Morlands Brewery did not help them find a new home. The wines and spirits licence was passed on to the Shepherd's Hut which was just an ale house at that time. Fortunately, Miss Maxwell had kindly invited the Dymonds to make their home at Saffron Close, which also billeted two RAF officers. The Knowles family enjoyed the new luxury of hot and cold running water, indoor flush toilets and, probably due to the RAF officer's presence, two servicemen sent by the Station each day to pump the water up into the storage tanks.

Their forced departure from the Lamb curtailed the 'adventures' of the Miners and Knowles children, usually accompanied by their friend Roy Dickinson. Wallace Miners and Eric recall being able to go into the dispersal areas behind the Lamb and watch the ground crews with their bomb trolleys re-arming the planes with bombs. They were even 'permitted' to sit in the parked Fairey Battles and Ansons. The boys would salvage Perspex from a Wellington that crashed to the north of Fyfield Manor. The wartime spirit of co-operation was much to the fore. Wallace recalls Granny Dymond asking him to take a large pink jug of tea out to *"those fellows out there",* meaning the men manning an anti-aircraft gun emplacement behind the Lamb. He would push the jug through the wire and retrieve it when empty. The drivers of the petrol bowsers and vehicles from the PRU would wait outside the pub and give them a ride on to the airfield. The family recall being able to cycle to Wallingford past the Guard Room, round the western perimeter track, and emerge near the present Hydrology Institute at Crowmarsh Gifford. They still find it incongruous to reflect that during the war airfield access was virtually unrestricted, yet after the war villagers could not go through the airfield due to 'security'.

Other homes demolished at this time were seven bungalows in an area known as The Pightles, behind the Shepherd's Hut along Eyres Lane and Cottesmore Lane. One, occupied by Edgar Wingfield, was overlooked as it was not shown on the Ordnance Survey maps and still exists today. Also, to go were the remains of Eyres Farm (opposite the Shepherd's Hut). All these buildings were too close to the line of the approach to the extended runway, and anything considered a hazard to low flying aircraft had to go. There were elms along The Pightles, and Fred Greenway recalls that the *'beautiful elms that made a green chancel of the road from Benson to Ewelme were felled. The elms in the garden of New Place* (now 'Loretto') *were lopped....'* All the trees had to be lopped to a height of 6 ft. The boys from Clay Lane remember the lumberjacks of the Canadian and New Zealand 'Armies' who felled the trees and then walked along the trunks wielding their axes to lop off the branches. Firewood was scavenged and piled into prams and carts by village boys for domestic use.

Another casualty of the runway extension was the thatched KCB (Keep the Countryside Beautiful) Café and Filling Station, situated on the old London to Oxford Road which went down Beggarbush Hill and

across to Benson. Built in 1931, it was acknowledged as the most attractive filling station in the country and the café was a popular meeting place for RAF personnel.

As the war progressed German and Italian prisoners of war were billeted locally. Mr Robinson of Days Cottage was the overseer and Italians were used to work on the land and paid 1/- per hour. They worked at Fords Farm and also landscaped the garden of Kings Pool House and Brownings under Fred Greenway's supervision. Others remember the German POW's who used to march through the village. Some were on friendly terms with the villagers and made wooden toys for the children. One Christmas the Townsend sisters received a dolls' house and 'nodding' toy ducks. Greetings were waved as they marched to church and the Rector Rev. Jenkins would *ask "our German friends"* to choose a hymn. Their favourite was *'Now thank we all our God'.*

Other incomers were the Land Army girls brought in to take the place of the men and work on the farms. Many remained after the War, married locally and are still living in the village today.

Ewelme villagers, like everyone else, had to cope with the difficulties of wartime. Fred Greenway was put in charge of rations at the outbreak of hostilities, and an emergency food supply was kept in the Wesleyan chapel (now the village shop) next to Bennetts stores (now Kings Pool House). Some remember that he received provisions from RAF Benson NAAFI. Mr F. P. Chamberlain of Crowmarsh Battle Farms ploughed the Common, producing potatoes and wheat. Food production was vital, and the Land Girls' ranks were swelled with local volunteers, sometimes over 40 on the Common any one evening. Engineers from Howberry Park, Crowmarsh would arrive to lend a helping hand in their spare time.

Even the school children were given time off school to help with the potato harvest and also engaged in the 'Dig for Victory' campaign on allotments donated by Mr Orpwood near the school. A photograph shows Mr Quixley, the headmaster, supervising the village boys who were joined in their labours by the evacuees. He made the boys dig by numbers *'1-2-3-4 move along'*. The resulting produce, beetroot, carrots etc. were kept in boxes in the old Stable (now called the Annex). The boys often wondered about the 'method' of distribution and concluded the produce must have gone to the Almsmen!

Those who lived through it say they never went short of essentials. Most families kept chickens and pigs and had a vegetable plot. There were two dairies in the village and the Government rationing system ensured a supply of butter, cheese and sugar, which, although meagre, could improve the diet, as they were available to those who had not been able to afford them beforehand. There was a system for swapping surpluses. Bob Quixley, the Schoolmaster's son, recalled how everything was salvaged in the campaign to 'Make do and Mend'. An orange box would be broken up and the wood saved, and the nails straightened for further use.

Ewelme villagers 'did their bit' to raise funds and provide other services for the war effort. Fred Greenway remembers the week of 30th November to 6th December 1942 as one whirl of social activity to provide food parcels for prisoners of war. In March, *'Ewelme Parade – The Show with a Sparkle'*, an all-village variety show, ran for four nights in the ARP Room, to raise money for the Merchant Navy Comforts Service. On 6th December 1942 the famous violinists Adila Fachiri and Jelly d'Aranyi, who lived in Ewelme, gave a violin recital in the Church to raise money for food parcels for the prisoners of war. The village donated the cost of nearly five hundred 10/- parcels to be distributed through the Red

Cross. In June 1943 they had a '*Wings for Victory'* Week and an undisclosed sum was raised which met the target. In August 1943 a Garden Fete at the Old Rectory garden raised another undisclosed sum for the *'Aid to Russia Fund'*. Again, in July 1944 they achieved the target in a *'Salute the Soldier Week'*. Fred Greenway notes that Lady Somervell was tireless in organising many of these events.

Carole Knowles remembers the schoolgirls knitting scarves for the Merchant Navy. The scarves consisted of *"Fifty-two stitches garter stitch, slip the first and knit into the back of the last stitch, when it was as long as yourself you could cast off."* The more accomplished young knitters made balaclavas, fingerless mittens, gloves and socks in colours of grey, maroon or navy blue. Red Cross strips costing 6d each were saved and sent via the Red Cross to prisoners of war. One or two POWs visited the Sunday school on their repatriation.

Whilst villagers coped with difficult conditions and attempted to contribute what they could to the war effort, only a few yards away the grim business of defeating the enemy was pre-occupying the men and women of RAF Benson. The Spitfires ranged over the Low Countries, northern France, West Germany, the Ruhr, the Rhineland and to the south of Paris. With extra fuel tanks they even made it to Berlin. The Mosquito reached northern Norway, the Baltic ports, East Germany, Poland, Austria, Italy, Southern France and even Yugoslavia. Though not as effective as the RAF, the USAAF began flying photo-reconnaissance aircraft from the airfield at Mount Farm (now Berinsfield) in 1943 and from Chalgrove in 1944. President Roosevelt's second son, Colonel Elliott Roosevelt was based there.

Bob Quixley, the headmaster's son was born at the School House in 1928 and observed war through the eyes of a growing boy. He recalls that no-one talked about the military events. There was an ever-present fear of fifth columnists and everyone knew that *'Keep Mum', 'Walls have Ears', 'Careless Talk Costs Lives'* were all-important to security. Mr Robert Quixley the headmaster, an ex-Indian Army officer, discouraged the schoolboys from counting departing or returning aircraft - he would state *"Your worst enemy is your tongue."* In his idle hours Bob would stand on the Ewelme-Benson road by the runway to watch aeroplanes. One occurrence that left an emotional mark was seeing the ghastly consequences of enemy action on B17's (Flying Fortresses) of the USAAF. At that time, they were carrying out daylight bombing raids over Occupied Europe and suffering heavy casualties. One afternoon he remembers seeing B17's limping into Benson, all with fuselage and/or engine damage, all were on fire to a greater or lesser degree, and the last to land staggered in on only one fully-functioning engine. He went home profoundly moved and told his parents, but they did not respond and told him to keep quiet about it. On another occasion he was standing in the same place plane spotting when he heard an unfamiliar engine noise. In a gap in the clouds he saw a Heinkel followed by the sound of exploding bombs on the airfield. On running home he was disappointed to receive a similar reception.

Mick Gilbey along with his family lived in Clay (Green) Lane. The houses along Clay Lane were incorporated into the airfield and during the war, to reach their house, they had to pass a sentry complete with sentry box and rolled wire across the road. Mick could lean over the rear garden fence and touch the parked aircraft. He recalls an unscheduled visit of USAAF Liberators (B-24s) one evening. (It is recorded that thirty-nine incoming B-24s landed at Benson on 16th November 1944 when bad weather affected their home base. They all landed within 19 minutes). Mick recalls that, presumably due to enemy aircraft in the area, the runway lights were switched on momentarily to allow the first two to land and then quickly extinguished. The succeeding aircraft followed the taillights of the plane in front until they had all landed and were parked behind the houses in Green Lane. Mick remembers the American

crews giving them chocolate, which his mother melted in her copper to make a chocolate drink for everyone. The airmen gave his father 'Lucky Strike' cigarettes. They stayed a few days and when about to leave they ran up their engines. The heat from the exhausts singed his father's cabbages and the pig's bristles and soot blackened the rear windows of the house. His father successfully claimed 19/- War Damage from the Air Ministry.

One notable person stationed at RAF Benson was a medical officer, Squadron Leader Leonard Hussey who held the Polar Star. He had been on the ill-fated Shackleton Expedition to the Antarctic as a young Meteorological Officer and had spent the winter of 1916 on Elephant Island whilst Shackleton and a few brave men made their epic journey in an open boat to South Georgia for help. He was with Shackleton in January 1922 prior to a new expedition, when the great explorer suffered a fatal heart attack. An example of Squadron Leader Hussey's military role is in the front of the Pilot's Log Book loaned by Flying Officer P W Robeson. 'Doc' Hussey writes - *"10/6/45 Passed for Decompression Chamber Tests for Photographic Reconnaissance, and Light Bomber Mosquito Squadron High Altitude flying. L Hussey S/L Senior Medical Officer, RAF Benson, Oxon."* 'Doc' Hussey was a banjo player and villagers can remember him playing at concerts in the village hall after the war and giving a slide lecture on the Antarctic Expedition. Carole Knowles remembers how kind he was to the 'evacuees' and how he took her to Benson Village Hall to sing in a concert with the RAF Band.

At last, the war was over and Ewelme villagers celebrated victory on VE Day. The men who survived came home to try to gather up the threads of their former lives and to move on to build the peace. But for some family's life would never be the same again. On 13th March 1946 a Parish Council meeting minuted a vote of thanks from the chairman to ...*"the Home Guard, ARP, NFS, Potato Pickers, Mrs Strickland for running the British Restaurant, fellow councillors and all those who pulled their weight during the War."* Ewelme shared in a wider tribute. In his volume *The Second World War,* Winston Churchill acknowledged the role of all the people, mostly unknown, involved in the collection of information which was then skilfully pieced together. This acknowledgement inevitably included the men and women of Ewelme who worked as PRU camera loaders and in other capacities.

The PRU squadrons were utilised for other purposes. Ministries of Agriculture, and Town & Country Planning commissioned survey photographs to assist in the massive rebuilding programme required after years of enemy bombardment. On 1st October 1946 Lancaster's arrived with 82 Squadron, charged with mapping uncharted areas particularly in West Africa and Kenya. One of the 82 Squadron Lancaster's based at Benson was PA474, now famously known as *The City of Lincoln* and part of the Battle of Britain Flight. She still visits Benson to thrill spectators on Open Days or overflies en route to an air display in the south of England.

In late 1945 a photographic Lancaster was destined to give the headmaster's 17 year old son a great adventure. Bob Quixley made model Lancaster aircraft out of wood, which were displayed for sale at 10/- each in the London Road Inn. A young Flying Officer Lancaster pilot from New Zealand, Murray McPherson, ordered a model. He was so delighted with the result that he offered Bob a joyride in a Lancaster to Coulommiers, a French airfield taken over by the PRU, in order to collect photographic equipment. Bob, who was in the Air Training Corps, was delighted to accept, but as it was strictly unofficial, he could not see how he could impersonate a serving airman. Undeterred, Murray offered Bob the loan of his spare battledress tunic, (complete with Flying Officer shoulder tabs and pilot's wings), to wear with his ATC uniform trousers. Bob's older sister Isobel was serving in the WAAF and

purchased a Van Heuson shirt off-ration from the NAAFI. She also loaned him an RAF officer's cap, a sentimental keepsake from a former beau. Fortunately, Bob was very tall, with spectacles that matured his looks. A Royal Navy Officer's mackintosh completed the disguise.

On a Saturday morning at 7.0 am he 'cycled off to meet Murray by the guard-room and reached dispersal to board the Lancaster unchallenged. Murray had briefed him with a cover story. *"His flying training was done in New Zealand, and he gained his wings, but on the journey to England his eyesight deteriorated, so he was now employed doing a 'penguin' job in Hamilton House, the New Zealand HQ in London, before returning home."* Thankfully, not one of the NCO crew enquired about their passenger. Bob was interested in navigation so helped the navigator plot the course for France, and then went down to the bomb bay to look at the French countryside through the nose cone.

They arrived at Coulommiers at about 10.30 am. Bob went for a wander round the nearby village where he changed his money into francs to buy small gifts for his family. After lunch in the Mess (an old French chateau) they intended to return to RAF Benson but were told that there was a fierce thunderstorm over the channel. They could not fly over it, as the aircraft was not equipped with oxygen. They were grounded in France. Bob was concerned to get a message to his parents who were not on the telephone at the schoolhouse. Murray went to the communications truck parked on the side of the airstrip and equipped with radio-telephones. He contacted a friend in the Mess at RAF Benson to ask if he would telephone Miss Hope Young to take a message to the Quixley's. Hope Young was used to *'the boys'* from RAF Benson, and occasionally welcomed them to afternoon tea in her home (Thatchings in The Street). By coincidence, Bob's sister Isobel had arrived on a 48-hour pass and when she heard she said *"don't expect him back tonight."*

The crew were determined to enjoy their enforced stop away from base. Bob stayed in the Officers Mess with Murray and was introduced to French beer and brandy. The next morning dawned clear and Bob went to the steps of the Mess to clear his head. He was joined by a Wing Commander who lit a cigarette and then struck up conversation. When Bob glanced at him, to his horror, he saw New Zealand Air Force flashes on his shoulders, matching those on his borrowed battledress. Fortunately, the senior officer did not question him about his 'native' New Zealand, so the deception was not discovered. The flight back was uneventful, although Bob recalled that - *"Flying in a Lanc was very noisy, 'rattley' and draughty."*

Bob was aware of the consequences that the disclosure of his clandestine joyride could have on his 'Kiwi' friend and mentioned it only to some of his close friends at Henley Grammar School. The tale was so bizarre they did not believe him! Relating the story again after 53 years he was moved to try to contact the Murray again. He knew he was posted to West Africa with the photo-reconnaissance Lancaster's and then left the Service, presumably to return to his native Christchurch. Bob telephoned Directory Inquiries in Christchurch and obtained a number. A lady answered who said yes, he could speak to his old friend and handed over the receiver. They reminisced about the incident and Bob was given permission for the tale to be told, believing it was a bit late in the day for the RAF to Court Martial the errant 'Kiwi' now. Murray told Bob, that, at the time, he had not divulged to any of his non-commissioned crew that Bob was not what he appeared to be - a grounded Flying Officer in the Royal New Zealand Air Force. However, they eventually rumbled the ruse and Murray confessed. They were not pleased. This was not because they had been unwitting accomplices in an unofficial exercise, but assuming Bob was a commissioned officer, they had called a teenage schoolboy *'Sir'* all the way

through the flight! A final comment that delighted Bob was that Murray still had in his possession the model Lancaster he had made in 1945!

The re-equipment with jets for PR work finished RAF Benson's role as the nation's premier PR station. In March 1953, 82 Squadron, along with the other PR units and squadrons moved to RAF Wyton. It was the end of an era but RAF Benson continued as a working Station. The King's Flight was re-formed at Benson on 1st May 1946 after an absence of 4 years. Viking's were the mainstay of the Flight for some years. The Queen's Flight was established at Benson on 1st August 1952. It was a poignant day when a long and distinguished era of service to the Crown ended on 31st March 1995 when the Queen's Flight merged with 32 Squadron which became the Royal Squadron relocated to RAF Northolt.

There have been other royal connections. Several members of the royal family have received pilot training at Benson, including the Duke of Kent, Prince Michael of Kent, the late Prince William of Gloucester, the Prince of Wales, Prince Andrew, Prince Edward and the Duchess of York. A bird's-eye view of the ancient and scenic features of Ewelme would also become familiar to hundreds of other young men and women of the Universities of Oxford, London and Reading with the arrival the Bulldogs and Chipmunks of the University Air Squadrons. After RAF Abingdon was sold by MOD (Air) these units arrived in July 1992, as did 6 Air Experience Flight with Chipmunks. The Chipmunks stayed until 3rd December 1995 when they were retired, leaving the Bulldogs to carry on the air experience training.

Although the Queen's Flight had been equipped with two Wessex helicopters, the future role of RAF Benson as a helicopter station really began in March 1992 with the formation of 60 Squadron with Wessex helicopters from 72 Squadron previously based in Northern Ireland. The Wessex was a rather noisy, elderly workhorse and 60 Squadron was disbanded on 31st March 1997 with the last two leaving on 11th February. The quieter Puma of 33 Squadron replaced the Wessex, but the aircraft movement increased noticeably. The next helicopter type to arrive will be the Griffon EH-101 helicopter - considerably larger than the Puma and a replacement for the familiar but Chinook twin-rotor troop carriers which regularly visit from RAF Odiham. Construction works costing millions of pounds are currently underway to support the two types, with additional housing and repair of existing houses for Service personnel.

The coming of the Royal Air Force unavoidably affected life in Ewelme and doubly so as it coincided with the outbreak of war. The skies became noisier, of course, but new employment was available to men who traditionally had been limited to working on the land. Some villagers worked on the Station for many years; Brian Orpwood received an award for long service. After being widowed, Marjorie Miners worked in the Ration Store for a number of years, and often had sole charge of the keys after normal working hours. On the evenings she worked late she handed them in to the guardroom as she left the camp and recalls the bemused face of the duty officer, puzzled that a mature civilian lady was in charge of this vital installation.

The parochialism of centuries was inevitably diluted. Initially, there was an influx of servicemen and their families into the village, choir and school. The community quickly embraced strangers from distant parts of the country. Entertainment expanded with the availability of the 'Astra' Cinema on the camp. The new station cinema and theatre had opened on 19th March 1944 with a performance of '*While the Sun Shines'* by Terence Rattigan. The full London Company including Michael Wilding and Hugh McDermott put this on. Air Commodore Boothman and his wife were acquainted with many

West End actors and actresses and invited them to stay in the Officers' Mess for weekends. Grateful for temporarily escaping the perils of London, they would put on shows for the Station. Wing Commander Newby remembered that John Clements and Kay Stammers were regular visitors. There were also Station dances and other social occasions in which Ewelme villagers were invited to participate, giving rise to opportunities for making new friends.

For decades after the war there was a steady turnover of National Servicemen enjoying the village's public houses. Then, slowly but surely, the former integration dissipated. RAF Benson gradually became self-contained. Village billeting was no longer required as married quarters were built. A Station school was opened, and a Padre appointed for the Station church.

As the RAF moved into a new era, the image of the 'old Air Force' as a large 'flying club' servicing a waning Empire was replaced by a modern, streamlined, highly technical organisation. Regrettably, in the mid-1970's the threat of terrorist attack necessitated the erection of a phalanx of wire encasing the Station. This metamorphosis inevitably changed the relationship between the Station and the local population. Accessibility was severely restricted and the familiar sight of uniformed personnel walking and driving in the area vanished overnight. Today, that precaution is starting to relax slightly, but RAF Benson as a major military establishment stands aloof. The professional airmen and women get on with their job inside their guarded compound and although villagers see and hear the over-flying aircraft, only occasionally, as in 1998, are they invited to breach the wire and attend a Families Day Air Display. A few officials representing community organisations may be invited to a social function, but the previous informal social affiliation is a thing of the past and the close 'comradeship' originally forged in the dark days of the war has gone. The village as an extension of RAF Benson and *vice versa* is a distant memory and the villagers' former cordial colloquialisms of *'our friends'* or *'the boys'* have long since fallen into disuse.

The inevitable aircraft noise and its affects on the population have polarised the village somewhat and there was a public meeting held in September 1998 to express the concerns of some residents. There was objection to the constant drone of the Bulldogs from the Air Experience Flight and the clatter of helicopters practising circuit flying. On the other hand, there were villagers who felt incomers should have known of the possible noise nuisance of an airfield nearby and could have chosen to live elsewhere. The expression *'You should have been here when.....*' was voiced to illustrate that the present inconvenience was as nothing compared, for example, to the whining sound and pervasive 'paraffin' smell of the four-engined Argosy transport aeroplane. As a result of that meeting a local Liaison Officer was appointed to represent the village and he meets RAF Benson representatives on a regular basis.

At the start of the new Millennium, we await the arrival of the giant Griffon EH-101 helicopters with some trepidation. We know that the Ewelme skies will continue to buzz with activity and rely on the goodwill of the Commanding Officer and Squadron Commanders to minimise the over-flying of the village.

We cannot with certainty predict the future, but we can reflect on the last 61 years of RAF Benson and its relationship with Ewelme. Regarding the early importance of the Station and its vital wartime photo-reconnaissance role Wing Commander Bill Newby, the PRU Mosquito navigator, wrote for this project - *"We were all sworn to so much secrecy that I am sure no-one ever spoke about how much of the success*

of the Allied War Effort depended on the airborne intelligence gleaned by crews from RAF Benson. 'Bensonians' and 'Ewelmers' (to coin a phrase) ought to be very proud of this association."

One villager was a girl of 8 years of age when she saw RAF Benson opened in February 1939 and must have the last word on the Station's impact on her home. She reflected*: "Ewelme would have been pretty dead without it!"*

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