

# RAF BENSON

## Its impact on village life

### *Tape 2 -*

A dinner guest at Ewelme Down House looked across the plain and decided it was a suitable site for an airfield.

Village houses used by RAF for billeting.

### *Tape 3 -*

Their house overlooked the land on which Benson was built. Arable fields farmed by Chamberlains and Orpwood's. Offered employment to two brothers and father in busy times. RAF Benson offered employment to local artisans.

Houses used by RAF for billeting. House opposite Pam Staveley-Parker's used as a photographic reconnaissance centre.

Remembers stray bullets from enemy aircraft and burning parachutes.

### *Tape 6 -*

The road to Wallingford was cut by the runways so that it took a roundabout route to get to the town. Gave more trade to The Lamb.

### *Tape 10 -*

Thought of the coming of the airfield as a good thing as it brought employment to the village. Light aircraft used to land on the cornfields before the runways built to test for suitability. It was started in 1936 and opened in February 1939 by Air Commodore Leather.

Agricultural cottages opposite Shepherds Hut removed when airfield built. Line of bungalows pulled down as they were on approach. Only Edgar Winfields left.

RAF Benson had a magazine called ARGOS - Amy submitted an article for RAF Benson's 50th anniversary in 1989.

Fred Greenaway at Kings Pool House used POW's to renovate the flour store – the present Post Office. (Now the village store). She only remembers girl evacuees. Mrs Warner and Mrs King had some and the Ollies, who lived in the White House. Cindy and Dave Ollie was an evacuee in the White House.

Aeroplane crashed behind Edgar Winfield's cottage (Winmill Farm). Had bits of a Lancaster in his land, it blew up as it came into land, but the crew baled out. (Verify this story). His cottage was not on the O.S maps of the area so was not purchased [and demolished as the others] when the airfield was built. A sneak raider came in one Thursday afternoon, Percy Tuckwell saw it. A string of bombs hit the bunker where the WAAF usually took shelter, luckily they did not hear the siren so did not go to the shelter. A Wellington bomber was shot down on landing, crashed and blew out a window at the Hut. Her husband flew in Fairey Battles. When they left Benson the crews of these aircraft went by train from Watlington. Amy went to the station to sing them off!

### *Tape 11 -*

RAF in 1936 paid £18 an acre for land at Benson and Ewelme – average was £5 per acre in the country.

Older inhabitants very keen to have it there, knew of no objections at the time.

### ***Tape 13 -***

Land belonging to Ford's Farm was compulsorily purchased pre-war. Approx 250-300 acres.

### ***Tape 16 -***

A lot of children came to the school and some sang in the choir. A lot of RAF Benson people came into the village and took part in things.

### ***Tape 18 -***

RAF Benson – in 1938 married quarters built. He worked on the camp on the building. Maintenance contract with a firm from Hayes who built 150 houses. Worked 6 years building and 27 years for the Air Ministry – awarded the ISM (Imperial Service Medal) when he retired.

### ***Tape 19 -***

RAF was built and brought a big influx of population. Norah's mother offered lodgings. Air crashes in both 1947 [Lancaster?] and 1963. [Valetta?].

### ***Tape 23 -***

RAF Built 1937-1939 – not many against it.

### ***Tape 24 -***

A lot of local people worked at RAF Benson but mostly WAAF's interpreted the photographs. Bill Biggs worked there and he loaded the cameras onto the Mosquitoes. Living so close to the airfield he could lean over the back fence and touch the wings of the big aircraft that were parked there. Only outstanding event he remembers are all the runway lights coming on and 30 or 40 American Liberators were being chased by the Germans. \* The first one landed and the lights went out - the others landed in quick succession following the lights of the plane in front! They parked at the back of Green Lane and the crewmen gave them bars of chocolate and his father packets of 'Lucky Strike'. His mother put the copper on and made hot chocolate drinks for the crewmen with the chocolate. The aircraft stayed a few days - he remembers they stayed a few days. When they taxied out for take off the engines blew back at their garden and scorched the whiskers on their pig! The exhaust heat also burnt the cabbages growing in the garden and blackened the windowpanes with soot deposits. His father successfully claimed 19/- war damage from RAF Benson!

\*On 18<sup>th</sup> December 1944 eighteen Liberators diverted to RAF Benson due to bad weather at their base.

### ***Tape 33 -Interviewed by George Cannon***

The helicopters of the Queens Flight used to do night flying and no-one complained about It is interesting to get this perspective.

I talked to several of the born and bred village people and they are not worried about it at all.

Its become part of the village life. So the complaints are coming from the incomers.

### ***Tape 34 -***

RAF Benson - Sq Ldr Hussey was the camp doctor and as evacuees we were fussed over and I can remember him taking me to Benson to sing in a concert with the RAF Band. I also remember him doing an evening on one of his expeditions with Shackleton - I can't remember which one but he was a doctor probably a medical student at that time, I don't know and he played a ukulele. In later years I did see him on 'This is Your Life'

### ***Tape 35 -***

At the end of the War they could cycle through the aerodrome, past the Guard Room round the peri-track and come out on the Wallingford Road this side of the Hydrology Institute. Then after the war they stopped it, were not allowed to do it so we had to go up Days Lane and that way to Wallingford and school.

We could go onto the airfield as kids where they were carrying fuel and bombs to dispersal (behind the Lamb) but after the war they decided to stop it – it was a security risk! But we could go onto the airfield as kids carrying bombs on the little trailers to the planes. They used to let us sit in the parked planes.

### ***Tape 41 -***

Fairey Battles kept clipping the trees in Maxwell's garden. Polish pilots training.

#### *File 46 -*

**Aircraft.** My interest switched from farming to aircraft soon after starting secondary School. One of my leisure activities was to fly free-flight diesel-engine powered model aircraft. My friend Geoffrey Suffolk, whose father was an Argosy crewmember at RAF Benson, was equally keen. We would fly our aircraft from Ewelme Common, which was absolutely ideal. Unfortunately, I lost one of my aircraft on its second flight, it was eventually found in an orchard by Green Lane – it had my address. Geoff had better luck with his aircraft, which always remained within the confines of the Common (sometimes stuck in trees). The final flight for one particular was landing in a pig field beyond the Common. When we finally got to it the pigs had trampled and were eating it. We did recover the engine. I was always keen on photography. My first 35mm Camera with hand held light meter solved the previous camera shake and exposure problems and enabled me to photograph aircraft at close quarters – in flight. And so many hours were spent taking photographs of aircraft landing at RAF Benson. Unfortunately this was 1963 and the most interesting period for aviation at RAF Benson had passed. In the period 1950 to 1960 the RAF Ferry Wing Squadron was based at RAF Benson and virtually every type of aircraft, either in service or coming into service, was delivered to the Squadrons via Benson. In addition a Royal Navy Voluntary Reserve was based at Benson and so all current Navy aircraft could be seen there. I remember when very young seeing the last of the Benson reconnaissance Spitfires and Mosquitoes flying in the circuit over Ewelme. Among aircraft seen flying in the circuit or based at Benson the list would include; Spitfire, Mosquito, Chipmunk, Lancaster, Lincoln, Anson, Valetta, Viking of Queens Flight, Heron of Queens Flight, Dove, Devon, Hastings, Varsity, Venom, Vampire, Meteor, Swift, Hunter, Canberra, Javelin, Shackleton, Sea Hawk, Attacker, Sea Fury, Comet, Beverley, piston & jet Provost and Neptune. When at School and seeing the aircraft in the circuit I quickly learnt to identify them with help from my RAF friends who also attended Ewelme Primary School. It was not uncommon in the early 1950's to hear the sound barrier broken over land, and when this happened we all ran round the play ground shouting they've 'broken the sand barrier' – we only 5 or 6 then. In those days aircraft crashes were not uncommon. I remember seeing a Sea Fury on its belly in a field close to the Shepherds Hut – it had very little damage. In the late 1960's a Supermarine Swift FR 5 had overrun the runway near the Shepherds Hut. It left broken undercarriage parts in the road, its pointed nose was embedded into the field across from the stream with its tail angled towards the sky. There were unfortunately a number of less fortunate accidents where pilots were killed around the locality of RAF Benson. The RAF Benson Battle of Britain at Home Open Day was always held in September. A noteworthy part of the show would be a Martin Baker Ejection Seat demonstration in which a dummy was ejected from an aircraft at low level and surprisingly close to the crowd. A Meteor was usually used and on one occasion a Hunter which were based at the Martin Baker test airfield only 3 miles away at Chalgrove.

My first memories of the Blackburn Beverley was when my mother walked me the short distance from Ewelme to the RAF Benson Battle of Britain Open Day. This was probably in 1956 when I was 8 years old and I remember standing next to one of the undercarriage main wheels which was almost as big as me. The aircraft looked absolutely enormous at the time. I often saw Beverley's in the Benson circuit flying low over our houses and when I got my first 35mm camera would race on my bike down to the runway approach to take photographs. I captured the shot of XL150 landing at Benson in 1964 and, sadly, understand that this aircraft crashed with the loss of all crew in 1967, in the Singapore area. As an RAF Halton Apprentice in 1965 (108th entry) I flew in a Beverley on circuits and bumps from RAF Abingdon which was an interesting experience. It was sad to see many of these aircraft lined up at RAF Bicester for scrapping in 1968/69. In 1974 when I was stationed at RAF Leconfield in Yorkshire, prompted by a tannoy announcement, I saw the last flight ever of a Beverley (XB259) as it overfly the station before landing at the nearby Paul airfield. In 1983 XB259 was moved from Paul airfield to the Army Museum in Beverley East Yorkshire. After the Army Museum was closed in 2003 it was dismantled and moved back to Paul airfield where it still resides. I took some photos of it being dismantled when visiting old friends in the Beverley area which are attached. Couldn't take many photos because the contractors threatened us.

#### *File 56 -*

We climbed the trees in the area behind the pub, from the big ones you could see the runway at Benson.

#### *Memoir 68 -*

The RAF camp let me use their tennis courts and the gymnasium that was across the road from Green Lane.

*File 72 -*

The other big day of the year for me was Battle of Britain day at RAF Benson, held in September. Relatives would drive over and park opposite our cottage and we would walk down to the camp for an amazing day out. Highlights would be a fly past by V-bombers, their thunderous jet engines made the ground tremble. A Lockheed Lightning went by, in what at first appeared to be silence but then immediately it climbed almost vertically at the end of the runway, afterburners on full and the sheer noise and vibrations caused youngsters to cry and dogs to howl, what a spectacle of speed and power. One year I'd saved enough money from potato picking during the summer holidays to pay for a flight around the village in a small plane on Battle of Britain day. It cost me 10 shillings but what an experience. RAF Benson was always a part of my life; I loved watching the aircraft come and go. Various squadrons were stationed there over the years, each one bringing its own special aircraft. If Royalty were visiting the camp, we children from Ewelme school would be marched there in pairs, to line the road by the main gates. We would all be clutching little Union Jacks and eagerly wave them as the cars came by with their Royal passengers. Over the years I've seen many members of our Royal family, attending the church for the christenings of the Hicks children or on route to 'Chequers'. I even got a wave from Margaret Thatcher when she was going there.