



War-time Airfields and the Icknield Way

For those old enough to remember the events of sixty years ago, or those older who may have been involved, the memories are still quite strong. In those days, East Anglia was often thought of as a giant aircraft carrier with airfields numbered in their hundreds. The earlier Ordnance Survey maps revealed the existence of very many of these but now they have nearly all gone. On the ground there are few signs: dispersal hard standings, an occasional Nissen hut, traces of runway, sometimes a memorial to the squadrons who served.

The route of the Icknield Way picks up a sample of these sites which fall within two or three miles of the walkers' path and, interestingly, they form a historical record of the progress of the European air war.

The Bedfordshire-West Herts end is not really suitable territory for rapid airfield expansion and Henlow (from WW1) is not included as it was not operational. The list therefore starts close to Royston with **Bassingbourn** and its satellite **Steeple Morden**, followed by **Fowlmere**, **Duxford**, **Little Walden**, **Newmarket Heath** (yes, the racecourse, all being fair in love and war!), then **Tuddenham**, **Honington** and finally **Knettishall Heath** itself. A little further off the route, **RAF Mildenhall** is still operational today.

Of these, Bassingbourn and Honington were the result of the pre-war middle thirties re-armament programme, whilst the grass racecourse at Newmarket received its first Wellington bomber on Saturday 2nd September 1939, the day before the declaration of war, with the grandstand and buildings converted to accommodation.

Bassingbourn's Blenheim squadrons were soon dispatched and the site used as an Operational Training Unit, converting crews on to the Vickers Wellington, then the latest and most formidable aircraft of Bomber Command. The pressure of training soon required additional facilities and in 1941, Steeple Morden came in to use for 'circuits and bumps', this being noted by a German Luftwaffe intruder squadron which caused several incidents, including a particularly nasty collision over the village of Ashwell one night. Bassingbourn also has the unenviable record of being bombed on 27th May 1940 by a lost RAF Whitley of No.10 Squadron from Detling in north Yorkshire. It was also bombed in 1941 by the Luftwaffe causing a number of casualties when a barracks was hit.

Honington was operational by RAF Bomber Command from the start, but a fact not probably appreciated is that, in those days, the German Navy was seen as the only legitimate target, and even then orders stated that 'Great care is to be taken that no bombs be allowed to fall on the shore'. In fact, on 4th September 1939 when Wellingtons from No. 9 Squadron attempted to attack some German warships near the entrance to the Kiel Canal, two aircraft were lost and the raid achieved very little except experience, whilst in December another raid of nine Wellingtons was aborted when the target was considered to be too close to the shore to bomb. Unfortunately these aircraft were attacked by Messerschmidt 109s and only two returned to Honington. These losses were attributed largely to the lack of self-sealing petrol tanks on the aircraft in those days which meant that bullets could cause lethal leaks and fires.

Duxford and Fowlmere, of course, were involved in the Battle of Britain and as the base of the legendary legless ace Douglas Bader. His big wing strategy to meet the large German formations had a serious impact on the Battle.

After the air war turned nasty in 1940-41 and Luftwaffe attacks also turned to night bombing, the public mood was such that people wanted to hit back at Germany. The decision was made to achieve a psychological impact by the 'thousand bomber' raid of May 1942. This involved total effort by Bomber Command using anything available, including even the instructors and more advanced pupils at the OTUs like Bassingbourn. Almost 12% of these training aircraft were lost on this and two other '1000' raids.

With the coming of the United States of America into the war, in the late summer of 1942 advanced units of the Eighth US Air Force began to arrive in East Anglia – at Bassingbourn with B17 Fortresses, amongst which was the now famous 'Memphis Belle'. The US had great confidence in the ability of the B17 to defend itself, especially in mass formations but it learned the hard way after heavy losses that, for deep penetrations into enemy territory, escort fighters were needed. The answer to this problem was the North American P51, or Mustang as it was popularly known, and also the Republic P47 Thunderbolt. These new additions which had disposable fuel tanks giving them the necessary range also needed bases, so these aircraft flew from Steeple Morden, Duxford and Fowlmere in escort duties, these having been transferred to the Americans in 1943. Amongst a number of other airfields specially constructed for this purpose was **Little Walden** (perhaps better known as Hadstock Common).

In the Autumn 1995 edition of Icknield Way News, there was an account of the excavation of the US Air Force P51 crash site 50m off the Icknield Way Path along Hoops Lane at Therfield. This aircraft was piloted by a Lieutenant Cook and it had taken off from Little Walden shortly before it crashed. Lt Cook has a memorial stone at the American Cemetery at Madingley.

Newmarket Heath was operational from Day 1 and suffered similar experiences to Honington in the early days, losing many peacetime aircrew. They also got involved in long-distance raids to northern Italy when that country joined the Axis powers in 1940. Later, the supply of agents and materials to the French, Belgian and Dutch Resistance groups was undertaken by Special Duties Squadrons from this airfield, although towards the end of the war it was also used by fighter aircraft – before returning it to the Stewards of the Jockey Club in 1947.

Tuddenham was also used by RAF Bomber Command from its completion in the autumn of 1943. It also undertook some Special Duties work. There is a fine memorial in the village to 90 Squadron which was present for all of its operational service which, apart from bombing raids, included minelaying – a dangerous low-level task – and attacking the V1 and V2 rocket sites.

Knettishall became serviceable in late summer 1943 when it was exclusively US Air Force B17 territory, with later raids conducted as far as the Polish border, a distance of 1800 miles. It also ran shuttle missions to Russia. A memorial stone records the deaths of over 1300 American airman killed or captured in the period.

Mildenhall was opened in October 1934 as a truly inter-war years prestigious and modern airbase, a showpiece for the junior service. At that time it was hardly envisaged that seven or so years later most of those that followed would be relatively primitive, functional airfields – muddy, Nissen-hutted and parade-ground-free. In 1935, the year of George V's Silver Jubilee, a review of the RAF took place there. Mildenhall was used operationally by Bomber Command from September 1939 until the end of the war in 1945. This airfield has had a more enduring effect on IW walkers - the approach path most commonly in use for the US transatlantic military freight and passenger flights crossed over the Icknield Way Path about half way along the Icklingham Belt through the King's Forest. It was especially busy during the Gulf Wars.

Such then was the impact of the Second World War on a slice of lowland England, almost totally agricultural with few facilities that we now take for granted – like sanitation, water supply and refuse collection.

Although this article has little connection directly to the Icknield Way, it may be cause for thought and reflection as walkers pass through the areas involved with the air war between 1939 -1945 (and subsequent wars).

Peter Baker

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