

RAF Watchfield Unveiling Ceremony

The Shrivenham Heritage Society welcomes you all here today in what might be described by some as a long overdue mark of respect. We felt that before we unveil this Memorial, it might be prudent to give you just a few of the facts about this important site. We have a mass of information, stories and events that have occurred here and can be accessed on our Online Catalogue or read at our Heritage Centre at the Memorial Hall, Shrivenham. But just for a few minutes, the main facts.

It is not certain when or why the first aircraft landed at Watchfield but the A.J. Tricket Aircraft Development Company from London had 2 aircraft here in 1937. An Application for Licence for Aerodrome, was submitted to the Air Ministry for Watchfield to be named, Cub Airport. The Proprietor of the company was Anthony James Walter who had become the sole UK agent for the American Taylor that later became the aircraft known as Piper Cub. The airfield was granted a licence on 6th July 1939 for what had become known as Swindon (Watchfield) Aerodrome, and it stipulated the type of aircraft that might be used here for training purposes.

However, just two months later war was declared with Germany and there was an immediate cessation of all private and club flying throughout the UK imposed by the government. A very frustrated Mr Walter responded to the Air Ministry requesting permission to continue flying but it was declined. But things were to go from bad to worse for him when his airfield was requisitioned by the Air Ministry and extended in size. By July 1940 the airfield that was on the other side of these gates was known as RAF Watchfield, and its main purpose was for the training of airmen.

Very soon there were five large Belman Hangars here with the smaller private Hangars being used for storage. All around the perimeter of the airfield pillboxes, gun posts and sleeping shelters were erected. But accommodation for personnel was slow in coming and as 1939 turned in to 1940 the situation at Watchfield was somewhat crowded with aircraft and rather chaotic with building construction.

It was No 3 Elementary Flying Training School and No 11 Air Observer & Navigation School, both from Hamble at Southampton Water that were the first to occupy RAF Watchfield. Both schools involved a huge amount of flying that involved how to control the aircraft and also how to take high quality photographs in aerial reconnaissance. At the end of July 1940 it was noted that difficulty was being experienced with lectures owing to insufficient lecture rooms and the noise from building contractors. Food was noted as being of very poor quality and badly served, so much so that a London Caterer was contracted and there was an immediate improvement in the standard of food.

When interim examinations for No 3 Air Observer course were marked in August of that year, allowances were made for below standard results, due to the poor conditions and no electric lighting being available restricting evening study. Flying Training Command issued a ruling that at least a third of the pupils were to be billeted off station at night as a precaution against enemy intruders. Subsequently No 11 Air Observer & Navigation course pupils were taken nightly by two buses to Faringdon.

The station was managed by Air Service Training Ltd which was a subsidiary of the Hawker Siddeley Aircraft Company. But the military side of it was commanded by Wing Commander H.F. Jenkins and the Chief Flying Instructor was Flight Lieutenant E.H. Coleman. Blind Approach School Instructor, Fred Guilmant (whose daughter Valerie, we are delighted to say, is with us today) recalled that, *'Apart from a Cipher Officer, Doctor and one or two flying related people, everyone else was civilian.'*

Fred Guilmant recalls that there was a very small but covert operation going on at Watchfield that few people knew anything about. The Germans had been planting secret beams at strategic positions around the country in order to guide their Bombers to find targets. At Watchfield, an Anson twin engined, very old monoplane was hidden away in a corner of the big field, well away from prying eyes, and this was the pride and joy of a Pilot called Flight Lieutenant Battersby, *'Bats'* to the few that knew him. He would wander off with his old aircraft bristling with aerials and antennae at about four in the afternoon and fly very low for hours, searching for German Beams; and he found lots.

Because most accidents and damage to aircraft occurred on landing in poor visibility, it was decided to form what was known as a, *'Beam Approach School.'* Eventually there would be 40 or 50 of these schools but Watchfield was number 1. The system was based around a transmitter in a building that still stands today just off the Faringdon road. In the words of Fred Guilmant, he described that, *'You had to be trained to ignore what the seat of your pants was telling you – the instruments were always right. Just do as you are told. Your life and the life of your crew depend upon you being calm and very collected in circumstances where you were fully entitled to be scared stiff.'* The Instructors

here at Watchfield were the best in the country. There were times when the whole of the country was enveloped in thick fog and the only aircraft actually flying would be right here at Watchfield. Fred Guilmant said, *'the thicker the fog, the more our Instructor Pilots wanted to take off.'* The Beam Approach system was also used to train pilots for night landing which was to prove so valuable at airfields around the country through the war years.

It was right here also that the Figure of Eight Control System was developed and thoroughly tested. And it's interesting to note that after the war it was adopted as the basic Control System at Heathrow Airport and New York when they were first set up.

The School of Flying Control was formed in September 1940 and by December of that year it was relocated here at Watchfield. This involved training ex pilots to become airfield controllers and there was a Control Tower here that became something of an icon. Again this system was the basis of most of the commercial airports in their early days.

Taking all this information into account it is clear that the function of this airfield was for training. To give an example of the intensity of it, during the month of April 1943, some 745 pupils had reported for training and 743 of them had passed out of the four schools to take up their duties around the country. So this airfield was vital to the war effort.

In April 1944 the Anson Detachment was formed that consisted of 50 Anson aircraft that could carry out light transport tasks, emergency freight, casualty evacuation. It was called the Anson Detachment so that it's true purpose could not be recognized within the opening stages of Operation

Overlord and the Normandy Landings, commonly known as the D-Day. Watchfield was chosen as the site was big enough to accommodate all the aircraft in one location along with all the personnel.

By 1949 the base known as RAF Watchfield was deemed to have served its purpose and was to close. During the 6 years that the Beam Approach School had been operating the official figures within the records at the National Archives state that 8,500 pupils flying for a little under 100,000 hours had passed through. An amazing statistic.

But it wasn't the end of the use of the Airfield, far from it. Number 1 Parachute and Glider Training School was based here for a short period and many of Britain's Airborne soldiers learned their parachuting skills. During the making of the famous film *The Red Beret*, some of the drop zone scenes featured actual drops here at Watchfield.

In 1959 the airfield and camp had been taken over by the Army and became known as Arnhem Camp under the control of the Royal Army Service Corps and the following year No 21 Transport Company and No 1 Army Air Supply Organisation were resident here. It was during this period that many Air Dispatchers were trained and there was much experimentation with heavy drops. I can remember being at school at Shrivenham and being ushered outside to watch the spectacle of Jeeps and Lorries pouring out of the back of huge aircraft with 4 or 5 massive parachutes opening to bring them down. I also remember the time when all the chutes got tangled and the Jeep and its trailer went down like the proverbial ton-of-bricks. Exciting stuff to a young school boy.

By 1974 the Airfield and Base was empty and falling into decay. But before it was returned back to agricultural use it served one last purpose when in August 1975 the Watchfield Free Festival was held here. For a week the air was filled with rock music and thousands of festival-goers made a complete and utter mess of the former airfield.

What went on here - through those gates - should not be forgotten. And the Shrivenham Heritage Society hope you will all approve of our Memorial. Many of you will know the man I am now going to introduce. Veteran Airman Alec Chambers, aircrew in the Berlin Airlift and has actually flown in and out of this airfield. Who better to ask if he would kindly now unveil our Memorial.