

## Flying Finns and RAF Bicester

Seventy years ago Bicester Aerodrome played an important, if secret, role ferrying bomber aircraft to Finland.

Before the Second World War Bristol Blenheim aircraft had been sold to foreign air forces including Finland. The Finns received eighteen aircraft in 1937 but did not have enough planes when war broke out with Russia in the so called 'Winter War' of 1939. The British Government agreed to send more Blenheim aircraft from RAF stocks.

There weren't enough Finnish aircrew to fly all the aircraft to their homeland and RAF crews volunteered to assist them. The mission was so secret, many of the volunteer's families thought they had gone absent without leave at the time.

The planes left Bicester Aerodrome on 23 February 1940 to fly in stages to their base, a frozen lake sited at Juva in Finland.

The British airmen, involved in the highly dangerous operation, were warmly received by their Finnish hosts before they were able to rejoin their squadrons and take up active service roles once again. The planes, however, were to make little difference to the Finnish war effort as the country was forced to capitulate to the Russians just a few weeks later.

The anniversary of this dangerous and intriguing operation is an opportunity to recall the importance of R.A.F Bicester. Bomber Command Heritage wishes to see the aerodrome used as a Heritage Education Centre in conjunction with a continuation of gliding activities, to remember those who valiantly served their country at this important juncture in our history.

Peter Chivers

# "New Railway Passenger Service No Benefit To Bicester People"

Chiltern Rail plan celebrations for the centenary of the opening of the Great Western Railway and Bicester North railway station. Yet, as Bob Hessian from the Bicester Local History Society, it did not receive a universally warm welcome.

"No benefit to Bicester People" was the comment in the Bicester Advertiser when the new Great Western Railway line opened for passenger services on 1 July 1910 with a new station at Bicester – what we now call Bicester North. (The Oxford – Bletchley line opened some 60 years earlier with the station at Bicester – London Road, now known as Bicester Town).

The new line offered an alternative route from London to Birmingham for the GWR, and was 18 miles shorter than the route via Didcot and Oxford. The line joined up with the Oxford – Banbury line at Aynho.

GWR had opened the track for freight services in April of the same year and there was no formal opening of the passenger service. Quite simply the first train left Paddington at 5.45am reaching Princes Risborough at 7.03. Here commenced the "motor service" which called at all stations to Banbury – Bicester was reached by the first train



at 7.51 and there were a large number of people at the station to witness its arrival. Some had walked to Blackthorn to take a ride on the first train, whilst at Bicester there was keen competition to secure the first tickets issued at the new station. The majority booked a ride to Ardley and returned on the train arriving back at 8.39. Mr Joseph Horwood, a seedsman, from Bicester was the proud possessor of the first ticket (and also the first bicycle ticket), each bearing

the number 000. Both tickets were autographed by Mr James, the official in charge of the station who gave the date and particulars of issue on the ticket.

The station was impressive, as were the other main stations at Brill & Ludgershall and Ardley with long platforms and standard Great Western red-brick station buildings, linked by steel footbridges. Bicester also has a large covered goods warehouse and was the only place en route to offer any substantial traffic – passenger or freight. There were four tracks through the station – the up and down stopping platform lines and the two up and down fast lines.

This summer, Chiltern Rail, along with other partners in Bicester will celebrate the centenary of this important moment in Bicester's history. Will the Bicester Advertiser be there?

Bob Hessian  
Bicester Local History Society

