

RAF BICESTER CHRONOLOGY

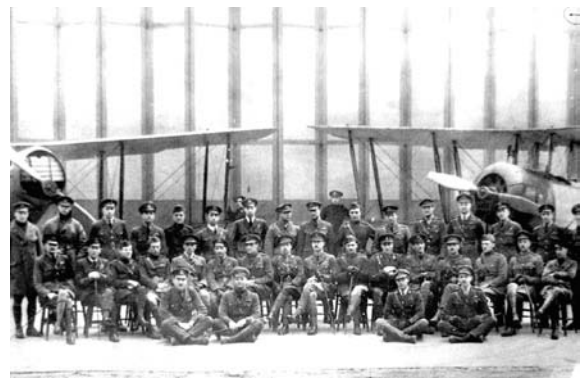
1916 Work commenced on the site to build a Royal Flying Corps training airfield under the charge of the Royal Engineers using Canadian sapper, Portuguese and Chinese labour groups and German prisoners of war.



BICESTER - RAF TRAINING DEPOT SITE PLAN 1918

1917 It opened at the end of 1917, with canvas hangars, under the control of Southern Army Command.

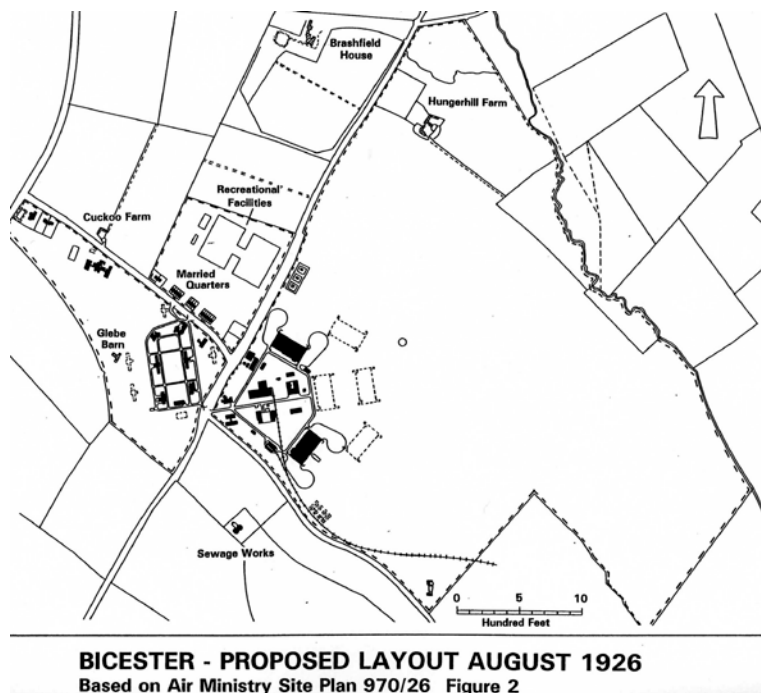
1918 The first unit to be based was 118 Sqn. with Bristol F2b Fighters which moved in during August. In October No. 44 Training Depot Station moved in from Port Meadow, near Oxford, with the role to train Fighter and Reconnaissance crews. Following the cessation of hostilities, Bicester became a clearing house for British prisoners of war and in November 118 Sqn. disbanded.



1919 2 Sqn, a reconnaissance unit, moved in from France with Armstrong Whitworth FK8s during February. Its stay was short as it moved on to Weston-on-the-Green in September making way for 5 Sqn. which moved in from Germany with Bristol Fighters. 44 TDS was redesignated as 44 Training School in August but disbanded in the December.



1920 5 Sqn. disbanded in February and **the station officially closed on 17 March** and the wartime buildings were soon demolished.



1926 In 1925 Bicester was earmarked as a three squadron airfield with six permanent hangars. Additional fields to the west of the airfield were acquired and during reconstruction, defence cuts had reduced the number of aircraft in a squadron from 18 to 12, and only two hangars were erected.

1927 **Bicester re-opened** but did not receive its first aircraft until December when 100 Sqn, with Hawker Horsleys took up residence.



1930 Prince Jean Ghica, a Romanian aristocrat departed Bicester in a de Havilland Moth Gipsy Moth on 9 July, in an attempt to beat the world non-stop record for distance in a straight line, with Constantinople as his destination. His attempt was unsuccessful as he crashed in Bulgaria the following day.

In November 100 Sqn. moved out, making way for 33 Sqn. which moved in with Hawker Harts. **33 Sqn. is now based at RAF Benson with Puma helicopters.**

1934 In November 100 Sqn. moved the short distance to Upper Heyford and the following month 101 Sqn. moved in with Boulton Paul Sidstrand medium bombers.



1935

The Sidestrands were supplemented by Overstrands which were initially converted Sidestrands and also new build aircraft were delivered. **The Overstrands featured an enclosed power-operated gun turret in the nose, the first to be used in an RAF bomber.**

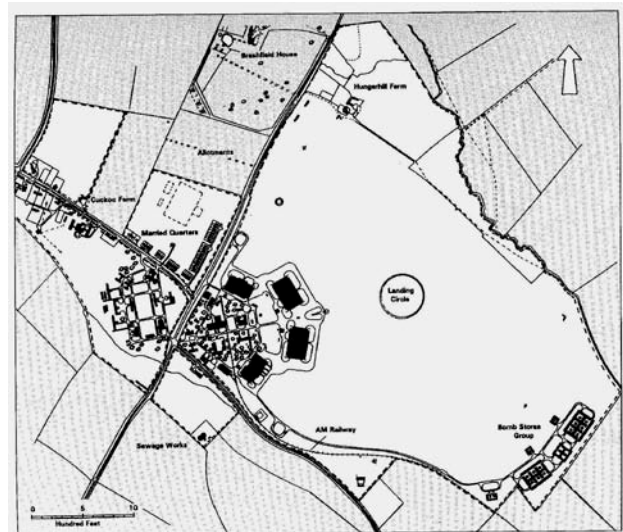


1937

During January 144 Sqn. was formed from 'C' Flight of 101 Sqn. with four Overstrands and by the end of the month these had been replaced with Avro Ansons and in February the unit moved to Lincolnshire. During March, 90 Sqn. was reformed from 'B' Flight of 101 Sqn., initially with Hawker Hinds but these were replaced with Bristol Blenheim light bombers during May, **99 being the second RAF squadron to receive these new monoplane bombers with retractable undercarriages.**



As part of the RAF expansion plans the construction of two new hangars commenced in front of the existing two during July. During the year a bomb dump, an additional barrack block and additional officers and airmen's married quarters, a fire station and a watch office (control tower) were taking shape.



1938

In July 101 Sqn. started to replace its ageing Overstrands with Blenheims and it was fully equipped by August.

1939

In March, 99 Sqn. became the first RAF squadron to be equipped with the long-nosed Blenheim Mk.IV. During May 90 and 101 Sqn. departed for Norfolk, being replaced by 12 and 142 Sqn. which moved in during May with Fairey Battle light-bombers.

90 and 101 Sqn. are now based at RAF Brize Norton, 99 with C-17 transports and 101 with VC-10 air-to-air refueller/transports.

On 1 September, 12 and 142 Sqn. were ordered to prepare for mobilisation as part of the Advanced Air Striking Force and the following day departed for France. **War was declared at 1100 on 3 September, and shortly after the squadrons Battles were at war.**



104 and 108 Sqn. moved in during mid-September equipped with Blenheims and Ansons as training units, tasked with training crews for operational squadrons. **In the meantime the prototype Handley Page Halifax four engine bomber had been completed at the companies Cricklewood factory but due to lack of a suitably sized airfield it was dismantled and transferred to Bicester where it was re-assembled. It made its first flight on 25 October and the Halifax went on to follow the Lancaster into service as the RAF's second four-engine bomber. On completion of production in 1946 6,176 Halifaxes had been built.**

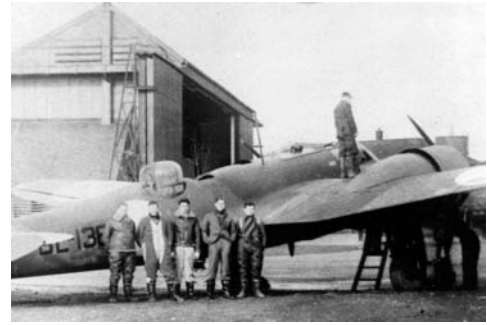


1940

During February, 12 Blenheims were delivered to the Finnish Air Force from Bicester, their swastika markings being whitewashed over.

During April, due to a change in RAF policy, 108 and 108 Sqns. were merged, becoming No. 13 Operational

Training Unit (OTU) with 36 Blenheims and 12 Ansons. 13 OTU became one of only two major medium bomber training Units.



BICESTER'S ONLY WAR CLAIM. On 13 October, a Luftwaffe Junkers Ju 88 machine-gunned aircraft on the eastern edge of the airfield but swift action from the Anti-Aircraft defences soon sealed its fate. It headed towards the channel, trailing smoke, but 15 minutes later crashed on Rowden Down near Harwell in Berkshire. Three of the four crew members survived and soldiers of the Royal Artillery, which manned the AA guns, claimed the downing of the aircraft.



The Luftwaffe again visited during October and November, causing only minor damage, without casualties.

1941

On 28 February, HRH The Duchess of Gloucester made an inspection of the Station in her capacity as Air Commandant of the WAAF. During May a new Officers' Mess opened on the Buckingham Road and by August the aircraft establishment of 13 OTU was 48 Blenheims, 16 Ansons and 2 Lysanders.

1942

13 OTU's Ferry Training Flight was redesignated as 1442 (Ferry Training) Flight during January but disbanded during August. During June 4164 hours were flown by the OTU and 308 by the Ferry Flight.

In July the Blind Approach Calibration Flight moved in from Watchfield with Ansons, Masters and Oxfords to check and calibrate equipment used at bomber bases. It was redesignated as 1551 Beam Approach Calibration Flight (BACF) during November.

307 Ferry Training Unit was formed at the end of December to train crews for delivering Blenheim Mk. Vs to Africa but moved on to Finmere satellite two months later.

1943

By now the Blenheim had become obsolescent and during May the OTU was sporting a mixed bag of types both at Bicester and its satellite airfields; Albemarles, Ansons, Blenheims, Bostons, Defiants, Havocs, Martinets, Mitchells, Mosquitoes, Oxfords and a Tiger Moth. During August 1551 BACF moved on to Hinton-in-the-Hedges.



Lilian Rolfe served as a WAAF at Bicester during 1943/44 but went on to join the Special Operations Executive and during 1945 became one of three female agents executed at the Ravenbruck Concentration Camp for spying. Although not the main character, she was immortalised in the film 'Carve Her Name with Pride.'

1944

The OTU aircraft establishment in January was 9 Ansons, 7 Bostons, 3 Martinets, 26 Mitchells and 26 Mosquitoes, most of which were operating out of the Finmere satellite and shortly afterwards a pair of Spitfires were added. During the month the Ferry Training Unit, which had now added Wellingtons, departed to Melton Mowbray.

420 Repair and Salvage unit was formed in February but moved on a couple of weeks later. The final 13 OTU Blenheim flight was made on 25 February and since its formation the Unit had operated more than 240 individual Blenheims.



The build up for operation 'Overlord,' the invasion of mainland Europe was now underway, with Bicester playing its part. The Forward Equipment Unit (FEU) took up residence in February as part of the 2nd Tactical Air Force, and during April 2588 tons of equipment arrived, 1420 of which were soon with 2 TAF, much being collected by Dakotas. To operate this task 30 officers and 833 other ranks had been posted in and by the end of June this had risen to 42 officers and 1035 other ranks.

Bicester's small grass airfield was now bursting at the seams and the OTU moved across the border to Harwell on 12 October. By December the Station had 1811 RAF and 600 WAAF personnel on strength.

- 1945 The FEU was retitled 246 Maintenance Unit in January and during the week ending 27th, 936 tons of equipment were issued. During July 2nd TAF became British Air Forces of Occupation and the supply of units in Germany ceased in September. Bicester then became an issuing unit for MT vehicles.

During the war years there were numerous aircraft accidents due to the intense training carried out, both on and away from the airfield. To ease the burden on the airfield 13 OTU had satellite airfields where training was carried out. At various times these included Finmere, Hinton-in-the-Hedges, Turweston and Weston-on-the-Green.



- 1947 40 (Maintenance) Group moved in during May and the Station became a sub-site of 3 Maintenance Unit, an aircraft equipment depot.

- 1949 246 MU was disbanded on 1 April and by the end of the year the Transport Command Parachute Servicing Unit were in residence.



- 1951 The Civilian Supply and Technical Officers' School was formed during September.

1952 An American Ammunition Depot, 282 Maintenance Unit was formed during August with sub-sites at Finmere and Wing but moved in total to Finmere by the end of the year.

1953 A new long term resident, 71 Maintenance Unit, a Repair and Salvage unit reformed at Bicester during December. It had responsibility for the salvage and repair of aircraft in most of southern England. It also housed and maintained aircraft for public exhibition.



1956 *'The Windrushers Soaring and Gliding Club'* was formed. **On 11 August the Station held its first Public Open Day, which attracted more that 2000 visitors.**

1958 Bicester ceased to be a sub-site of 3 Maintenance Unit during May and in July 6204 Bomb Disposal Unit moved in.

1959 In January, after many years without any powered flying, Oxford University Air Squadron took up residence with Chipmunks, moving in from Kidlington.



1961 **On 15 August, a first took place, when a Jet Provost became the first (and possibly only) jet-powered aircraft to land on Bicester's grass airfield.**

1963 At a ceremony to mark the long association between the town and RAF Bicester, held in the Officer's Mess on 28 February, the Station Commander was presented with a plaque bearing the Arms of Bicester and he in turn presented a 71 MU shield to be hung in the council chamber.

The RAF Gliding and Soaring Association (RAFGSA) HQ moved in from Little Rissington during the year.

1965 **HM the Queen and HRH Prince Philip inspected the Station on 10 May.**

1966 The Inter-Service Gliding Championships were held here during Easter Week.



1967 The Parachute Servicing Unit moved out in January after a stay of 18 years, making way for 2 and 5 Light Anti-Aircraft Wings, RAF Regiment. This was followed in December by 26 RAF Regiment Squadron.

On 27 September, Merlyn Rees, Secretary of State for Defence (RAF) visited the unit.

1970 5 (LAA) Wing, RAF Regiment disbanded, and during the year No. 2 and 26 RAF Regiment Squadron moved to Germany.

1975 Due to 1974 defence cuts 71 Maintenance Unit moved to nearby RAF Abingdon on 31 March after a stay of 22 years, closely followed by Oxford University Air Squadron.



1978 **HRH the Prince of Wales made his first glider flight from Bicester on 8 June.**

1991 **In anticipation of an escalating Gulf War the USAF converted some buildings into offices and a medical storage facility and turned the domestic site into and Emergency Military Hospital. Fortunately they were not used and with the closure of Upper Heyford in 1994 the facility was closed.**

2003 In celebration of 40 years at RAF Bicester, the RAFGSA held an anniversary rally on 14/15 June, which attracted dozens of light aircraft.

2004 After 41 years, in early June the RAFGSA departed for RAF Halton in Buckinghamshire. Gliding had not left the airfield as the *Windrushers Gliding Club* was formed the following month using the same hangar and facilities.



2009 The Domestic Site, having been used for defence textile research for many years was placed for sale during the summer. The Technical Site, having been mothballed for many years is due to be sold in the near future. It has been described by English Heritage as the best preserved aerodrome of its type to remain from the World War II period.