

# Wartime Airfields in Cambridgeshire (and former Huntingdonshire)

There were a vast number of airfields in Cambridgeshire during the 1939/45 war. We had aircrews of many nations on the RAF airfields. There were also United States Army Airforce airfields (these were still designated as RAF airfields).

The RAF stations often had mixed squadrons, at RAF Bourn we had Royal Air Force, Royal Australian Air Force, Royal Canadian Air Force, Royal Jamaican Air Force, Royal New Zealand Air Force and Royal West Indian Air Force. On other stations there were Czechoslovakian, Dutch, Free French and Polish Air Forces. Most of these were part of Royal Air Force squadrons, although some were in their own squadrons.

The aircraft which were always around were :-

## **British,**

**Fighters,** Hawker Hurricane, Vickers Supermarine Spitfire, Hawker Typhoon, Bristol Beaufighter, North American Mustang.

**Bombers,** Bristol Blenheim, Vickers Wellington, Short Stirling, Avro Lancaster, Handley Page Halifax, De Havilland Mosquito.

## **American,**

**Fighters,** North American Mustang, Lockheed Lightning, Republican Thunderbolt,  
**Bombers,** Boeing Flying Fortress, Lockheed Liberator, Boston, North American Mitchel, Marauder.

The airfields were often only five miles apart, although some were much less, as at Bassingbourn and Steeple Morden which were about three miles apart.

Starting East of Cambridge and working clockwise the airfields were:-

## **Bottisham (USAAF)**

This was built during the war and had Lockheed Lightning fighters and Douglas Boston light bombers there from the start.

## **Wratting Common**

Another wartime airfield.

## **Castle Camps**

This was a wartime airfield which was fairly obscure, the approach was by the church and airmen were issued with bicycles as there was no local transport available.

## **Duxford**

This was a pre-war airfield, Douglas Bader was based here and it is now the Imperial War Museum. It was a fighter airfield and was part of the "WING" operating north of the Thames in the defence of London. When the aircraft took off for London, Stanford Tuck flew his wing into Duxford as a backup. See the film "Battle of Britain", it was made here and in Spain. I saw the planes flying in this area while the film was being made. Most of the aerial filming was done from a "Mitchell" bomber with a large opening in the side of the fuselage, it was painted in very conspicuous colours.

## **Fowlmere**

A wartime airfield.

## **Bassingbourn**

## Bristol Blenheim MkIV



Imperial War Museum, Duxford, 1999.

A pre-war airfield, used at first by the RAF with Blenheim Mk I bombers and later by the USAAF with the B17E Flying Fortress, it is now an Army Barracks. My father came here from Debden (Essex) in 1937. It was much nearer home, about 9 miles each way.

### Steeple Morden (USAAF)

This was built during the war and was used by fighters in support of the bombers at Bassingbourn.

### Gransden Lodge

A wartime airfield. Wellington's, Halifax's and Mosquito's were stationed here. Originally a satellite of Tempsford, it later became a satellite of Oakington.

### Bourn

A wartime airfield which was a satellite of Oakington.



This Stirling Bomber crew was lost in a raid on Germany. The mid-upper gunner "Shorty" Sealey (in front of the wheel) was in the Royal Canadian Air Force. Rear Gunner Jack Greenwood <http://www.erowell.co.uk/greenwood.pdf> (no parachute harness) was sick and not allowed to fly. This photo was probably the last one taken of this crew.

My father came to work here in 1940, he worked on the construction until 1943, when he was declared unfit due to chest problems, and transferred to the Air Ministry Works Department (an inside job). The first Camp Commandant was Sqdn/Ldr Colley.

The first planes here were Wellingtons, followed by Stirling's, Lancaster's and Mosquito's. Two large hangars were built here for Shorts to assemble Stirling's which were built at

Madingley Road, Cambridge, the aircraft works is now the University West Science site next to the M11 motorway and the only building left is the old security block next to the A1303 road where it crosses the M11. Two other hangars were built at Bourn for De Havilland and Vickers Supermarine, but these are now gone.

### [Graveley \(formerly Huntingdonshire\)](#)

A wartime airfield.

This airfield was one that was used for experiments with F.I.D.O., which was a system of petrol burners lit during fog to try to lift the fog for aircraft to land. Stirling's were here, followed by Lancaster's .

### [Oakington](#)

A wartime airfield, then an Army Barracks it is now closed and will probably be developed as a new town. It is being used at present as accommodation for immigrants waiting for a decision to accept or deport.

My father worked here early 1940, he bought a 125cc Royal Enfield motorcycle new from Messrs. King & Harper Ltd., for £27:10s (£27.5) not knowing that petrol would only be available for essential journeys and he would not be allowed to use it soon afterwards. It stood in the shed until 1945 when he gave it to me for my 16th birthday.

Planes here were Stirling's, followed by Lancaster's and Mosquitoes.

### [Little Staughton \(formerly Hunts.\)](#)

A wartime airfield.

### [Molesworth \(formerly Hunts.\)](#)

A wartime airfield.

Used after the war as a missile site.

### [Alconbury \(formerly Hunts. USAAF\)](#)

Possibly a pre-war airfield. This airfield was one of the first the USAAF used when they came to England, they continued to use it till about 1997. It is now to be built on as an industrial storage depot.

### [Wyton \(formerly Hunts.\)](#)

A pre-war airfield. The construction of this airfield began around 1937, my father worked on it in 1938. After many threats to close and sell it off for building land, it now has a future within the RAF. The Cambridge and Oxford University Air Squadrons are based here.

### [Upwood \(formerly Hunts.\)](#)

A wartime airfield.

### [Wittering \(formerly Hunts.\)](#)

Possibly a pre-war airfield. Still in use by the RAF.

### [Mepal](#)

A wartime airfield. Later used as a missile site.

### [Witchford](#)

A wartime airfield. My father worked here briefly at the beginning of the war.

### [Waterbeach](#)

A wartime airfield. This is now an Army Barracks and Depot.

It is now proposed to build a new town of 13,000 houses ( rising to 21,000) on the airfield.

There were also some training airfields three of which were Marshall's at Cambridge, who also had a field at Caxton Gibbet. The other one was Sibson near Peterborough. Aircrews were also sent to Canada for flying training. A mention should also be made of the members of the Air Transport Auxiliary, this service was staffed by skilled civilian pilots who were either too old or not fit enough for service aircrew, it also included very skilled civilian women pilots such as Amy Johnson (England to Australia record holder) who was killed while on A.T.A. duties.

Whilst just over the county boundary we had,  
**Newmarket (Suffolk)** on the actual racecourse.

Gas bombs were stored here, in case they were needed for retaliation in the event of the Luftwaffe dropping gas bombs on Britain. I far as I know, the Germans never did use gas bombs but it was thought that they had at one stage. Bombers were actually loaded ready for take-off for Germany, when it was denied and the bombers were unloaded.

**Thurlow (Suffolk)**

**Stradishall (Suffolk)** pre-war airfield, now Highpoint Prison.

**Debden (Essex)** pre-war airfield, mostly demolished.

My father worked here in 1936. When he started he had to cycle 25 miles each way to work (the following weekend he bought a second-hand motorcycle for 12s 6d (62.5 new pence), this was nearly half a week's wages for a farm worker at the time.

**Hadstock (Essex)** a wartime airfield

**Nuthampstead (Hertfordshire, USAAF)**

**Tempsford (Bedfordshire)**. This was the airfield used to fly S.O.E. agents into Europe. I knew the former Camp Commandant, Sqdn/Ldr Wagstaff, in the 1970's. He said it was usual to go to the mess for an evening meal and be sitting with Luftwaffe, Wehrmacht or Kriegsmarine Officers (agents ready to go to the continent). The American equivalent was Harrington in Northamptonshire, home of the "Carpet-baggers Museum" (O.S.S.).

**Thurleigh (Bedfordshire, USAAF)**

**Polebrook (Northamptonshire)**

**Downham Market (Norfolk)**

The first Camp Commandant of Bourn (Sqdn/Ldr Colley) took over here in 1941/2.

**Feltwell (Norfolk)**

A pre-war airfield

**Lakenheath (Suffolk, USAAF)**

**Mildenhall (Suffolk)** later used by USAF.

A first world war airfield

It is now the site used for an annual air show in the East of England.

**Snailwell (Suffolk)**

This was a station in the Newmarket group, I know no more than this. The firm I worked for in 1945 had staff here but I never had occasion to visit.

### Service Hospitals

With all these airfields in the area it is hardly surprising that there were also two extensive hospitals in the area.

The RAF Hospital was at Ely, I worked on it in 1945. It was built with a long brick corridor, with the wards going off each side. These wards were "Romney" huts, and were full of burns cases when I was there. It is now the health service Princess of Wales Hospital.

The USAAF hospital was at Wimpole Hall and was much bigger than the RAF hospital. It was still in use until 1959 when the owner demanded it back. It now belongs to the National Trust.

