

# Sign of a very special wartime relationship

Rescued from obscurity, a unique fragment of Norfolk's wartime history has been restored to its former glory as a monument to a special trans-Atlantic relationship. **Steve Snelling** reports.

It was a garden ornament like no other, a curiously eccentric relic of war bizarrely transposed to a Norfolk country cottage and a peaceful resting place camouflaged by pots of primroses and polyanthus.

Not that Janet Adams knew anything about its origins. She had no idea how it came to be there, no idea where it came from and, certainly, no idea that the elaborately decorated slab of stone was, in its own weird and wonderful way, an enduring symbol of a grand trans-Atlantic alliance.

As a child of the Sixties growing up in rural Bedingham, the cartoon-style image of the cigar-chomping, bomb-toting black buzzard was merely a mysterious but familiar presence to be seen from the kitchen window.

"Looking back, it was a strange thing to have in your garden," admits Janet. "It's quite a warlike thing and yet it never seemed wildly aggressive in appearance as it always seemed to be surrounded by mum's plant pots."

"It was just a feature of the path between the house and some sheds.

And because it was there as long as we were there we just took it for granted. It was only when friends or visitors came to see us that it became a bit of a talking point."

Now, half a century after her family's first encounter with the garden oddity, the comical bird and its lethal bomb load is a talking point all over again, having been rescued, restored and returned to its original home – the former United States Army Air Force base at Thorpe Abbots.

Last weekend Janet made the sentimental journey from Weymouth where she now lives to unveil the striking new exhibit at the 100th Bomb Group Memorial Museum – the inlaid insignia of the 351st Bomb Squadron that had for so long adorned her family's garden path.

And it was there that she was reunited with the man who was instrumental in ensuring a fading fragment of the

county's wartime heritage was not just preserved for posterity but repatriated to its rightful home.

Arthur Snelling had grown up watching the sky over Norwich filled with vast armadas of American bombers. He had regularly cycled from his home in Thorpe Hamlet to see the ungainly, bulbous-shaped Liberators take off and land at Rackheath. And the experiences had left him with a lasting fascination for all things Eighth Air Force and an abiding admiration for the young crews who brought a thrill of excitement to an austere, ration-fed childhood.

Fast forward to the 1970s when he was working as a maintenance foreman at Laurence, Scott & Electromotors. One of his colleagues was Janet's father, toolmaker turned foreman supervisor Ken Adams who, as a sideline, used to sell eggs from his Bedingham smallholding to his city workmates.

"At some point after that," recalled 81-year-old Arthur, "Ken invited me out to his home, Pear Trees, as it was called, seemed to me an idyllic place. It was wild, rambling and natural. As well as the chickens, there were pigs and orchards scattered about the place."

But there was also something he hadn't bargained for. "As he was taking me around the garden I suddenly saw the slab of concrete decorated with what was clearly some kind of American air force insignia," he recalled. "Being interested in militaria and especially anything to do with the Yanks, I cheekily asked if I could have it."

"Ken, who'd always liked it without really knowing much about it, said 'no'. But I never forgot it and it became a standing joke between us."

Intrigued by the emblem and the mystery of how it came to be there, Arthur did some digging of his own. "All I knew was that it was there when Ken bought the cottage in the early 1960s and was thought to have been brought there by the previous owner after the Americans returned home at the end of the war," he recalled.

“It was amazing to see it there, embedded in the concrete pathway... but with a little clean there was no mistaking that it was the insignia of the 351st.”



"My first inclination was that it might have come from Hardwick, which was one of the former US bases nearest to Bedingham, but I eventually found out that none of the squadron insignia there matched the design in Ken's garden."

"It was amazing to see it there, embedded in the concrete pathway," recalled Ron. "By then, it was pretty well covered in green lichen and moss, but with a little bit of a clean there was no mistaking that it was the insignia of the 351st."

Moving it wasn't easy. The inlaid slab measured some four feet square and was about two and a half inches thick and great care had to be taken to raise and then transport it while keeping it intact.

Having successfully accomplished that particular mission, the museum volunteers then had the daunting job of restoring the squadron emblem to its former glory and deciding how and where to display it as well as researching its mysterious history.

Ron made no bones about the fact that he was sceptical as to whether it dated back to the war or, indeed, had ever been sited on the base. "We couldn't believe that something quite so elaborate as this was made on the base during the war," he explained. "Of course, there were signs on wooden boards that incorporated the badge, but this was rather a work of art and required someone with skills in stone masonry to have done it."

The picture showed what looks like two American servicemen propping up the great decorated stone slab, with the squadron insignia plainly visible. It was taken in the spring of 1945 and David thought it had been sited "near the

orderly room". Back at Thorpe Abbots the decision was taken to create a special brick-pillared stand complete with covering to protect the unique emblem and to celebrate its discovery and recovery by giving it pride of place, facing the wartime control tower that houses so many of the 100th Bomb Group's artefacts.

Questions, of course, still remain and research is on-going as to how the stone came to be dug up and transported cross-country to Bedingham. "Perhaps," said Ron, "it was taken by someone who was involved in the demolition of parts of the base after the war, possibly even the owner of the cottage who lived there before the Adams family. Hopefully, somebody out there will know the answer and let us know."

For now, though, he is merely happy to think that another piece of Thorpe Abbots' wartime history has been successfully saved and preserved for posterity. "It never ceases to amaze me that even after all these years we are still making such exciting finds and still discovering new information about the base," said Ron. "But this one was really quite astonishing. It's amazing to think that something of this quality was made on the base at that time. But now we know it clearly was. It's back where it belongs."

The 100th Bomb Group Memorial Museum, Common Road, Dickleburgh, IP21 4PH, is open weekends and bank holidays from now until October 31 (10am-5pm). It is also open Wednesdays from May to September. Admission is free. For more information about the museum and events visit: [www.100bgmus.org.uk](http://www.100bgmus.org.uk)

visitor centre and a further building to house more exhibits.

It remains the only surviving control museum in Norfolk dedicated to airmen who flew and serviced the Flying Fortresses of the 3rd US Air Division and attracts some 6,000-7,000 people each year.

"We've tried to keep the place as authentic as possible," said Ron, 66. "We don't go in for hi-tech displays. We try to keep it personal, try to tell the human story and visitors seem to respond to that. They feel there is a special atmosphere here and I think they're right."

Entirely manned and run by around 20 trustees and volunteer helpers, the museum is anxious to recruit more people to help the cause.

"Most of the volunteers here are retired people," said Ron, "and our biggest concern, collectively, is who is going to come along and carry on what we have started because it's important to ensure that we remember what happened here during the war."

"We can't just let it slip away," he insisted. "It needs to be preserved for future generations to see what sacrifices were made by these young Americans."



## Mission of remembrance

◆ Thorpe Abbots' 100th Bomb Group Memorial Museum is a monument not just to American sacrifice but to one small Norfolk community's determination to remember a special relationship in war and peace.

◆ It is entirely voluntary run and dates back to a visit made almost 35 years ago by aviation history enthusiast Mike Harvey. Introduced to Ron Batley, who had grown up with stories of the 'Bloody Hundredth' and was working on the Thelverton estate, he floated the idea of restoring the base's wartime control tower.

◆ "I remember thinking it was a crazy idea," recalled Ron. "The tower was pretty beat up; the render was off, windows rusted, doors hanging off. And we hadn't got two ha'pennies to rub together. But despite all of that we thought it was worth a try."

◆ With the support of the landowner, Sir Rupert Mann, who let them have the site for 999 years at a peppercorn rent, they began work and within four years the museum was officially opened.

◆ Since then it has expanded to include a

**Main picture:** 100th Bomb Group Memorial Museum curator Ron Batley at the former second world war airfield with the newly-restored insignia.

**Far left: Reunited:** Janet Adams and Arthur Snelling at the unveiling of the wartime squadron emblem restored to its former location.

**Above right: Photos from the archives of the 100th Bomb Group who were based at Thorpe Abbots with their B17 Flying Fortress aircraft.**

