

Celebration of an RAF 'jewel in the crown'

Fifty years after RAF Bircham Newton closed, the former air station's long and distinguished service is about to be celebrated in grand style, as **Steve Snelling** reports.

To new arrivals it appeared wretched in its isolation, with shabby, wind-blown huts scattered across a sprawling ridge-top base in a corner of north-west Norfolk that was likened to a wasteland.

Almost a century on from those early and decidedly unfavourable impressions, the aspect is much altered and the verdict of history altogether more complimentary.

Remnants of the former Royal Air Force station perched on high ground in the parish of Bircham Newton, where the sorry state of the buildings was once bad enough to prompt fears of a pneumonia epidemic, now stand proud as enduring monuments to a unique record of distinguished service which is about to be celebrated and commemorated afresh.

With its towering barrack blocks, its iconic guardroom and former officers' mess, it is a place steeped in aeronautical history spanning almost half a century of war and peace.

It was here, in the autumn of 1918, that giant, biplane bombers prepared to embark on a trailblazing mission to raid Berlin only to

have the mission cancelled by the signing of the armistice.

It was from here, less than 20 years later, that Edward VIII made his first flight as king, travelling to the capital by air with his brother, the Duke of York and future King George VI, just hours after the death of their father at Sandringham.

And it was from Bircham Newton that squadrons of Coastal Command aircraft flew countless sorties in defence of a beleaguered realm during the darkest days of the second world war when an invasion of the eastern shoreline seemed imminent.

The myriad flying feats which took wing from this corner of Norfolk represent an epic saga about which David Jacklin is unusually well-acquainted. A retired squadron leader and chairman of the Bircham Newton Memorial Project, he grew up on the neighbouring satellite airfield at Docking and is in no doubt about

the former base's historic significance.

"So far as Norfolk is concerned," he says, "it is a uniquely important airfield. It was opened in the first world war and was continuously operational throughout the inter-war period, for most of which time it was the only RAF airfield in the county.

"A lot of airfields, like Coltishall, Marham and West Raynham, opened prior to the second world war, and some were temporarily open during the first world war, but Bircham was the only one to span that entire period and went on to give 44 years of continuous service during which it became arguably the most important Coastal Command airfield along the east coast.

"Between the wars, particularly, it was right at the forefront of aircraft development. Bircham was a place where a lot of aircraft were introduced into the

service, where vital trials were carried out. It was a very important base, a real jewel in the crown of the air force in those days."

His enthusiasm for a base that remains close to his heart is plain and is reflected in the biggest event yet planned by the memorial project

trustees to help keep memories alive of the former air force station.

Designed to mark the 50th anniversary of the base's closure in December 1962, the special open day on September 30 will honour the history of RAF Bircham Newton with a range of activities and displays, including, weather-permitting, a flypast by a Tiger Moth, Hornet Moth and Chipmunk from Felthorpe Flying Group.

Marshal of the Royal Air Force Sir Michael Beetham, trust patron Sir Michael Oswald and Andrew Walder, the director of the National Construction College which now occupies the former base, are expected to join civic dignitaries and a host of heritage organisations at the ex-RAF station for a celebratory afternoon culminating in a re-creation of the original closing ceremony.

"As a symbolic act of remembrance, we will be performing a special 'sunset ceremony'," explains David. "Members of

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the Air Training Corps will be helping us to relive that historic moment by lowering the RAF ensign just as it was done 50 years ago."

The sounding of 'Last Post' promises to be an emotional moment not just for the hundreds of spectators expected to be drawn to the former base, but for the small band of dedicated volunteers who have devoted years to ensuring a piece of Norfolk's aviation history is not forgotten.

The memorial project was launched in 2005, following publication of local author Peter Gunn's seminal history of RAF Bircham Newton and David's own study of the neighbouring satellite airfield at Docking.

Together with former RAF officers, Neil Grant and Brian Hall, David was one of the original triumvirate of trustees.

His ties to one of Norfolk's most distinctive former air stations, however, date back much further. A child of the second world war, his father served as a ground crew fitter at Bircham and, following demobilisation, in the late 1940s, a prefabricated hut on the old Docking airfield site became his home.

"It was still then exactly as the air force had left it," he recalls. "All the buildings were there; the control tower, hangar and Nissen huts." By then, neighbouring Bircham, once at the forefront of

aeronautical development and latterly a key Coastal Command base, had also been overtaken by technological advances. "The coming of the jet age and heavier bombers changed everything," says David. "For jets you needed concrete runways and Bircham was a grass airfield. There were still Ansons and Oxfords flying there when it was acquired for a short time by Transport Command, but aircraft were rapidly disappearing."

Indeed, while David pedalled off to West Raynham and Sculthorpe to gain inspiration for his own future RAF career by watching RAF Hunters and Javelins and US B45s and B66s roar over his head, Bircham ended its days as an air force training school with a solitary Chipmunk providing a last link to its glory days as a frontline flying base.

Now living near Diss, the former Halton apprentice, who worked as a technician on the RAF's V-bomber nuclear strike force before becoming an education officer and teaching at air force training schools, has, metaphorically speaking, come full circle.

A personal aviation odyssey that began in and around Docking has brought him back to north-west Norfolk as part of a group of like-minded trustees whose first aim was to establish a heritage room where the history of his father's old wartime base could be displayed and



saved for future generations.

"We wanted to build up an archive of people's memories, logbooks, photographs, plans and all sorts of air force memorabilia," explains David. "There had been something in the distant past and the CITB-Construction Skills had some historic photographs and a board featuring all the former commanding officers which we inherited, but there wasn't a place where the general public could visit to view the history of the airfield."

The gift of pictures from present occupiers to the trust keen to preserve memories of the site's past occupants has proved merely the beginning of an enduring and fruitful collaboration.

Part of the former station commander's house which had been used by the college as a lecture theatre was given over to the trustees so that the base's long and distinguished service record could be displayed. Since then, the collection has grown and the displays have spread from one room to two with the creation of a reading room where people research the archival material that has been gathered together.

Heritage mission accomplished, the trustees then set about establishing monuments to all those who served and died while based at RAF Bircham Newton and its satellite airfield at nearby

Docking. The result was twin memorials, which were duly dedicated at the two sites in 2006 and 2007.

Five years on and with the trust's original objective's more or less achieved, the work continues to ensure a remarkable history endures and is more widely recognised.

"Our main focus now is expand and improve the heritage room," says David, who is also seeking to forge closer links with schools in the area. "It's a dynamic situation. We are continuously seeking to enhance it and, of course, people are donating photographs and other pieces of memorabilia all the time."

"But we'd like to increase access to the general public. At the moment, we open around 11 days a year as well as opening up on an ad hoc basis for private parties, such as families whose relatives served at the base or school parties, but we'd like to do more. And for that we need more volunteers, particularly younger volunteers."

"There are basically just eight of us, all volunteers, and we're all retired people, not getting any younger. So it would be good to involve some younger people."

One thing the heritage trust hasn't had to worry greatly about is the preservation of so many of the original RAF buildings, some of which date back to the 1920s and most of which were added during the huge expansion programme initiated in

Main picture: Bircham Newton Memorial Project Trust chairman David Jacklin. Inset left: Coastal Command Lockheed Hudson of 206 Squadron at Bircham Newton in 1940. Top: Avril MacArthur (in pink) and Denise 'Dizzy' Goff MBE. Avril handles the trust's publicity while Dizzy is treasurer and has organised the celebrations which are taking place on September 30. Above centre: The former Station HQ at Bircham Newton. Bottom right: Handley Page V/1500 at Bircham Newton in 1918.

Pictures: Ian Burt.

the run-up to the second world war.

Taken over by the Construction Industry Training Board in the 1960s, many of the surviving air force buildings have found new uses, not least the station's former wartime operations centre which now serves as the college reception. In acknowledging the great debt owed to the CITB, David adds: "We have to thank the people at the college for maintaining the buildings and even re-roofing some of them. They've generally kept them in good nick since they moved in."

All of which contrives to make Bircham Newton that rarest of all relics of a vanished era in Norfolk's aeronautical history - a ghost station where echoes of the past abound and a sense of history lives on not merely in the imagination but in a tangible way worthy of next weekend's grand celebration.

The displays to mark the 50th anniversary of the closure of RAF Bircham Newton take place at the former air station, now the Construction Skills/National Construction College, on Sunday, September 30, 2-5pm. The college is signposted off the A148 and B1454. Postcode: PE31 6RB. Entrance is free.

A day to remember

◆ Military vehicles and model aircraft will feature among the activities planned for the 50th anniversary event at Bircham Newton.

◆ There will also be music from the Fakenham Town Band (3-4.30pm) and, weather-permitting, a flypast by aircraft from the Felthorpe Flying Group (3pm approx).

◆ Chairman of the memorial project trustees David Jacklin will give an illustrated talk on the history of the former RAF air station

◆ (3.15-4pm) which will be followed by the 'sunset ceremony' re-enacting the closing act in the base's 44-year record of service (4.40-5pm).

◆ Throughout the afternoon the RAF heritage room, with its displays of memorabilia and photographs, will be open to the public.

◆ Meanwhile, other heritage groups will be represented at the event, including Docking History Group, Great Bircham War Graves Group and the Friends of Langham Dome.

