

Grove Airfield

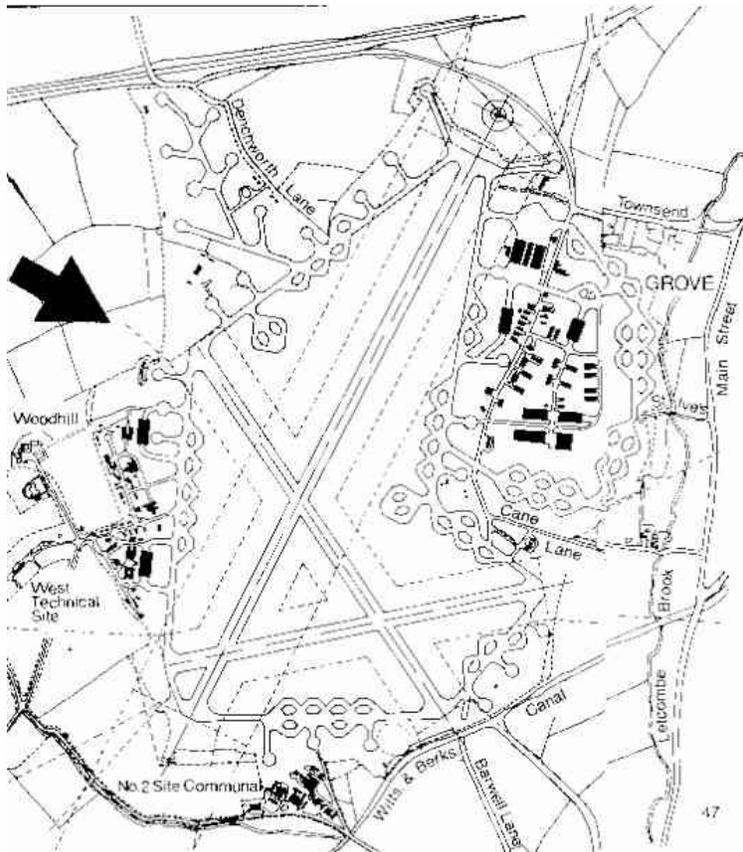
by Bill Fuller

Introduction

The first military grassland airfield in Britain was established on Salisbury Plain in 1911. During the First World War the number of airfields increased to 301, falling back to 27 military and 17 civilian airfields by the end of the war. The number of new airfields remained low until the 1930's when concern over activities in Europe was reflected in the number of new airfields constructed.

One hundred new airfields became operational between 1935 and the outbreak of World War Two. Between 1939 and 1945 (with a peak in 1942) a further 444 airfields were built. Grove Airfield was planned and built during this peak building period.

Originally the airfields were grassland but, with the increased weight and numbers of aircraft, airstrips were introduced around 1940. Standards of construction were set out requiring an ideal airfield to have three airstrips, the main one at least 1,000 yards long (later increased to 1,400 yards, then to 2,000 yards) and 50 yards wide, with an alignment north-east - south-west to the prevailing wind. The other minor airstrips were to be at 60 degrees to each other. At the same time perimeter roads 18 feet wide and standing circles of 125 feet diameter were introduced.



With regard to the site of Grove Airfield, in 1941 the Ministry of Agriculture & Fisheries in correspondence with Sir Archibald Sinclair, Secretary of State for Air, confirmed "the site comprised 272 acres of first quality milk producing land but, as alternative sites had been explored and exploited, and the site was badly needed as an integral part of the plan for bomber use, they would not press any objections over its acquisition". Authority for acquisition was given 14th May 1941.

Grove Airfield followed the standard requirements including three airstrips; the

main, No. One 5,979 feet long, No. Two 4,192 feet and No. Three 3,594, all at 60 degrees to each other with a perimeter road. The airfield included both the older design of 125 foot diameter circular "frying pans", along with the newer design of "spectacle" shaped, dispersal areas. Three building areas existed: West Technical Site (started between Spring 1942 and July 1943), No 2 Site Communal (started between 1942 and July 1943) and East Technical Site (built by the American Airforce during 1944/45).

The Construction

In 1941 Norman James Cross, born 1922 at Grove Bridge cottages, and then aged 20 years old, was working for W.C.French of Buckhurst Hill, London at Harwell Airfield. His employers were aware that he lived at Grove and sent him to work under the surveyor appointed to mark out and commence the building of Grove Airfield. The two started by marking out the intended airstrips. Norman was required to knock countless pegs into the ground, as well as clearing gaps in the hedgerow to get sight lines.

Within a short time the main contractors arrived and started to bulldoze the eight miles of hedgerow and 1,500 trees. As the work progressed Norman collected gravel from Standlake and hardcore stone from Stanford in the Vale. Drivers were expected to move five loads a day, seven days a week, for which they were paid the London rate of 1/6d per hour. For the sixth load they got an extra 1/-, and for the seventh load an extra 2/-. In August 1942 Norman was called up for active service. By then only the concrete airstrips and perimeter roads had been built.

The original plans were to build a fully equipped bomber station for 91 Group. In June 1942 Brize Norton airfield, Oxfordshire became a Glider Pilot Training Centre and Grove Airfield was transferred to Brize Norton control. Grove Airfield During August 1942 Grove Airfield was used for training airmen in the use of Vickers Wellington bombers as part of I5 Operational Training Unit. After a short time the plan was abandoned due to the amount of glider activity in the area.

Records show that on 1st. November 1942 Grove Airfield was under the control of United States of America Air Force Bomber Command for transportation. At the time the airfield was for emergency use only and not fully operational. Hanger No T2 was under construction, and night landing and radio facilities were still incomplete. Only 27 "frying pan" dispersal areas existed, though they did have one snow plough.

Grove Airfield: United States of America Air Force

Having been used temporarily by the United States of America Air Force during the end of 1942, Grove Airfield was returned to R.A.F. use in January 1943. Between late 1942 and 28th July 1943 Grove Airfield was used as a Relief Landing Ground by the Heavy Glider Conversion Unit from Brize Norton, whilst improved runways were constructed. From 27th. April 1943 until 27th. July 1943 Grove airfield became a satellite airfield for R.A.F. Andover, Hants. Of the number of units involved, it is known that No. 15 Pilot Advanced Flying Unit was operational from Grove airfield.

Even into 1943 the airstrips remained incomplete, the airfield surface being marred by depressions and ditches. From 4th. August 1943 the 8th (later 9th) United States American Air Force Support Command took control. Between 1943 and 1945 Grove Airfield was the base for 3rd Tactical Air Depot (9th A.F.) and 31st Air Transport Group (9th A.F.) as a repair and maintenance base, at first for C47 Douglas Dakotas (the mainstay transportation

aeroplane for both R.A.F. and U.S.A.A.F), and later by C46 Commandos and Communication Flights of the 9th.

American Air Force in 1944

The 13TH Photographic Reconnaissance Group (8th A.F.) were there from 13th. October to 23rd. November 1945 followed by 7th Photographic Reconnaissance & Magazine Group who returned to the United States in

November 1945. 36th Bombardment Squadron (formerly part of 482nd Bombardment Group) occupied part of the site from 15th. October till 9th. December 1945 using B17 (Flying Fortress) and B24 (Liberator) Bomber aircraft.

Grove Airfield: Ghost Stories

Many ghostly tales exist involving R.A.F. Stations. Two stories relate to Grove Airfield. The first such story involves the former No. 2 Communal Site. Rumors have circulate that in the vicinity of the site of the former wartime Chapel and Officers Mess a presence has been felt late at night and during the early hours. A ghostly figure clothed in flying gear and oxygen mask had been seen on several occasions.

Two theories are held as to the origin of the "ghost flyer". He was possibly a fighter pilot whose aircraft crashed on landing at Grove Airfield during 1945 and was burnt to death. The other theory is that it was a local man named Symons from Wantage who was one of a crew who were killed 8th April 1945, when a Lancaster Bomber crashed at Fyfield en route to Germany. The unfortunate crew member's father, who worked at Clarke's Mill, Wantage, saw the Lancaster flying low shortly before the accident.

The second story relates to the Western Technical Site in and around the first T2 Hangar built on the site in 1942. Mr. Halliday, who worked shifts for the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority, was responsible for operating an irradiation plant in the old T2 hangar. Around 9pm on a summer evening in 1969, Mr. Halliday was working alone in the secure hangar when he was surprised to hear a group of persons in conversation outside his office. On investigation he found the hangar still secure and empty. A similar incident occurred a few weeks later when the plant had broken down and stillness reigned.

Once the incidents had been reported other employees confirmed similar experiences. Esquires established that an American serviceman had hanged himself in the same building.

Due to the heightened human traumatic emotions experienced during wartime it has become common for airfields and their buildings to be conducive to haunting.

Grove Airfield: Return to RAF use

Grove Airfield remained under United States American Air Force command until 1946. The Operational Record Book records the change: "... 12th. February 1946, Marching in and out inspection on handing over of Grove to No. Z65 Maintenance Unit took place at Grove, 1600hs. Board of Officers consisted of F/Lt P.P.G.Smith, President, F/O W.H.Smith, Major Stockwell (last U.S.A.A.F. Commanding Officer for Grove Airfield), Clerk of Works, members "

At the end of the second world war attention turned from the use of the airstrips (which remained available as relief landing ground to the 180,000+ square feet of storage space. The site contained an assortment of buildings designed during 1941, 1942 and 1943. They included six T2 Hangars which contained large amounts of aircraft parts salvaged during maintenance work.

The final change came on 1st. December 1955 when responsibility for Grove Airfield was transferred to No. 3 Maintenance Unit, R.A.F. Milton, Berks, from No. 431 Equipment Depot. Staff were reduced to storemen and Security Police. Grove Airfield was controlled from Milton Airfield until the last day of 1958 when the Operational Record Book records: "...All functional stock was cleared from No. 6 Site at Grove during the month and it was closed on 31st. December 1958.... signed T.King, Group Captain, Commanding Officer."

The Airfield Today

Little of the original airfield survives, having been returned to agricultural use. All traces of the Eastern Technical Site have disappeared under the new Grovelands housing estate. The airstrips have been broken up, leaving only traces as farm tracks and rough meadow. The best surviving features are on the western side of the airfield. The Western Technical Site partly survives and contains a few remaining buildings, including the first T2 Hangar to be built. In the same area are traces of boundary fencing, gates, a fire engine building and a few huts. In the fields towards Challow are the remains of the bomb stores and camp sewage works. Woodhill Farm uses the former operations block as farm stores. The sign on the Police Office door survives along with one of the airstrip gas powered beacons. The Western Site is now Wantage Business Park. The former control tower has recently been demolished. It will only be a matter of time before redevelopment will result in the loss of further former airfield features.

Emergency landing of secret bomber

A dramatic accident took place on 2nd. March 1944 when the then highly secret Vickers Armstrong "Windsor" Bomber, DW506, was forced to land at Grove airfield in poor weather conditions. The aircraft was considered to be technically advanced for its time. The requirement had been for a high altitude heavy bomber capable of flying at 345 m.p.h. and 31,000 feet. Two prototype aircraft were built at Brooklands Race Track, Weybridge, Surrey, assembled at Farnborough Airfield, Hampshire, and flown on 23rd October 1943. After only 34 hours of flight testing reaching a speed of 302 m.p.h. and 25,000 feet, the first prototype was forced to land at Grove airfield owing to a piece of metal having become lodged in the constant speed unit of the starboard inner propeller. The aircraft is reputed to have crash landed near the site of Hunter's bridge on the Wilts. & Berks. Canal near Barwell link road roundabout. As a result of the accident the bomber broke its back and was written off. The aircraft was dismantled and returned to Weybridge.

This article was based on an abstract from a book published by Bill Fuller in 1997 "An Artist's Walk through Old Grove" obtainable from the Museum.

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