

Kirby Muxloe Local History Group October 2008 meeting.

Mr Roy Bonsor on Braunstone Airfield.

In March 2008 Roy gave us a talk on local airfields. He had so much material on Desford that Braunstone was held over to this special meeting, where he gave us some of the results into his 22 years' research into Leicestershire airfields.

Leicester City Council started to explore the possibility of establishing a municipal civil airport [or 'aerodrome'] in 1927 and consulted Sir Alan Cobham and other leading experts. On 30 January 1928 they decided to set up an airport at Braunstone Frith, west south west of the city, on 536 acres (0.84 square miles, 217 ha) of farmland. The Council already owned much of the site, the remainder was purchased. The site met all necessary criteria:

Plateau? Yes, 326 ft above sea level

Prevailing wind? From SW, so factory smoke unlikely to obscure visibility

Major obstacles? No nearby church spires, etc

Locality? Only 3 miles from City Centre

Rail access? Adjacent to LMS Leicester – Burton passenger line

Main road access? Near A47 Hinckley Road.

In August, 32 calls for tender were issued. Leicestershire Aero Club, then based at Desford, agreed to manage the airport on condition that it was provided with a clubhouse, a hangar, use of the airfield for Club flying, and a yearly fee of £200 plus expenses. Kellett & Sons' quoted £5000 to build the clubhouse was haggled down to £4000, partly by lowering the roof. There would be no runways, aircraft would land on grass. En Tout Cas of Syston started work 10 April 1933 and by September the ground had been prepared. It was left to settle over winter before seeding in spring. The Aero Club premises were at the west of the site. On the east side the commercial structures included the terminal building, with the booking office, waiting room and Customs office; there was a restaurant on the first floor, with the control tower above.

By summer 1934 the Aero Club-house, its adjacent 60 ft x 60 ft hangar and a swinging base for aircraft compass calibration were ready. The intended opening date of 7 July had to be cancelled, drought having retarded grass growth. The clubhouse was used socially from November. In March 1935, the Licence to Operate was at last issued, celebrated on Sunday 31 March by a gala with 20 visiting aircraft. Sir Alan Cobham was refused permission to bring his Flying Circus. Two civil airlines commenced operations, Provincial Airlines and Crilly Airways, Braunstone being the latter's base and operational hub. Using De Havilland Dragon twin-engined streamlined biplanes, Crilly offered a morning and an afternoon departure to half a dozen British cities, such as Liverpool and Bristol. To Norwich for example, fares were 30 shillings single, 50 s return [2 to 3 times the first class train fare; 50 s equates roughly to £400 today], journey times were about an hour. To increase usage of the airport, a private firm proposed to train RAF Volunteer Reserve pilots. The Air Ministry refused.

The City Council requested the popular Prince of Wales (later King Edward VIII) to perform the formal opening ceremony; he declined [it was the Silver Jubilee summer], as did Lord Wakefield. Third choice, Lord Londonderry, accepted but was then superseded as Air Minister by Sir P Cunliffe-Lister, who did the honours on a sunny afternoon. There was a demonstration of new aircraft types including the Gloster Gauntlet and the Hawker Fury, Crilly Airways gave joy rides to 700 passengers, the RAF flew a display and the whole event set the City Council back £2000, including £7-7-6 to Pearce's Jewellers for a silver cigarette box for Cunliffe-Lister.

Traffic fell away in the winter. One of the Aero Club's four Hawker Tomtits crashed in fields west of the airfield, killing the pilot; the sole remaining example is in the Shuttleworth Collection, Beds. There were two air shows in May 1936, including the Empire Air Display, but the autumn brought a crisis – Crilly went bust. Provincial had already gone, so there was no resident airline, leaving empty hangar space. Various improvements were completed, including installation of night flying equipment. Two hangars were let to Reid & Sigrist of Desford. In 1938 activity was mostly confined to club flying until, late in the season, the Civil Air Guard started to give cheap

flying lessons. But there was excitement when an early Wellington twin-engine bomber landed with engine trouble; it later took off successfully. Grandiose schemes for major extensions of land and buildings, with a new railway station, came to nothing. In February 1939 permission for formation of an Auxiliary Air Force unit was refused: Braunstone was deemed too close to Desford flying school. Also the site, the second smallest airfield in Britain, was thought too small. But there was a small increase in flying in the year, partly by aircraft acting as exercise targets for anti-aircraft (AA) gun and searchlight batteries.

In conjunction with the airport, Everard's built the 'Airmen's Rest' hotel just across Ratby Lane, opposite the airport entrance gate [hence in the County: Sir Lindsay Everard was an aviation enthusiast]. It probably opened in 1938 and was intended as a comfortable jumping-off point for affluent air travellers. The Scottish landlady, Mrs Reid, ran a tight ship. The hotel had a dozen bedrooms and a large dining room and bar. It was an excellent example of 1930s architecture, with curved walls and steel-framed windows, with internal murals.

Late in August, with war almost certain, the City was ordered to camouflage the buildings, at a cost of £425-7-2. All civil flying stopped on outbreak of war in September. On 15th of the month, D Napier & Son of Acton proposed to take 50 acres for an aero engine factory, costing £15,000 for a new hangar and £30,000 for other works. The Air Ministry and Ministry of Labour refused, as Leicester had full employment. Napier's went instead to Luton, the forerunner of Luton Airport.

On 20 October 1940 [just after loss of many pilots in the Battle of Britain], Braunstone airfield was requisitioned by the Air Ministry to form a satellite of 7 Elementary Flying Training Squadron, Desford. The airfield continued in this role throughout the War, flying Tiger Moth tandem two seat single engine biplanes, although a Stirling bomber visited once. Although far removed from the fast monoplane fighters and bombers of the day, the Moth was a forgiving aircraft and no suitable side-by-side seat basic trainers were available. Some temporary huts and three blister hangars were put up. Inevitably there were mishaps; sometimes, given the small size of the airfield (800 yards east-west and 600 yards north-south), landing aircraft finished up in the hedge. Bizarrely, on 10 March 1942, an Instructor, Flt Lt Newbury, landed on a soldier, who was killed. Newbury was acquitted at court-martial. Meanwhile, Reid and Sigrist, under Major Reid DFC (actually a Squadron Leader) patented their Turn and Bank instrument, which the firm manufactured for almost all wartime RAF aircraft. R&S repaired Defiant fighters at Desford, but not at Braunstone.

As it was satellite to Desford, it is unknown how many trained at Braunstone. Many pilots received their basic training in Canada or Arizona, where the topography was so different that they needed additional training at Braunstone or elsewhere in Britain to accustom them to European conditions. On 1 December 1944 the establishment was two officers, 4 NCOs and 120 other ranks, but no WAAFs. At that time there were the 3 civil hangars, 2 open blister hangars, no lighting, some flying control and some radio.

Flying immediately ceased with the end of the war although the airport was not de-requisitioned until late 1947; meanwhile the War Agricultural County Executive Committee cut the hay crop, the only activity. The City realised the site was too small for modern civil aviation, especially as housing was encroaching, so it was used as playing fields and a golf course, with Broward's making car springs in the original hangar. Eventually the area was redeveloped as Braunstone Frith Industrial Estate [with British Thomson-Houston, now BAE Systems, as the anchor occupier. Decca, now Thales, took over the commercial hangars]. Despite its pitted concrete surface, the spine road, Scudamore Road, had *not* been the runway – there never was a runway! Today it is hard to believe the airfield ever existed; all the buildings have gone except the Club hangar (now used for industry) and the Airman's Rest car park's distinctive pair of lampposts. Surprisingly few photographs seem to have survived, although Roy's collection includes a Luftwaffe aerial view covering Kirby Castle to Braunstone Park, including Braunstone Airport, taken from a German civil airliner in July 1939. Loughborough, too, has the ghost of a municipal airport, on a site since swallowed up by the University campus.