



The Hundred Parishes

An introductory article about AVIATION AND AIRFIELDS

In 2020, many of us enjoyed the relative peace that the Covid-19 pandemic brought to our skies. It is sad that it took so many deaths to remind us of the quality of life that exists right here, without the need to fly.

The local community's love-hate relationship with Stansted Airport is only the latest in a series of significant aviation events that have occurred within the Hundred Parishes.

In a field at Standon Green End in the parish of Thundridge, a monument marks the spot where Italian balloonist Vincenzo Lunardi landed in 1784 after completing the first manned flight in England. The flight took off from London beneath a balloon filled with hydrogen, watched by a crowd reported to be 150,000. The flight took a little over two hours and Lunardi was accompanied by a dog and a cat. Other balloonists soon followed in his footsteps. Lunardi demonstrated his invention at other locations in England but his fame waned when his balloon escaped its mooring before a planned flight in Newcastle. A member of his support team became tangled in a rope, was lifted high above the ground, and fell to his death. Lunardi went on to record the first manned balloon flights in other countries.



In 1913, Bentfield Hucks was the first Englishman to loop-the-loop in his Bleriot aeroplane. He was born in 1884 in Bentfield Cottage, Stansted Mountfitchet and thus acquired his unusual forename. Bentfield Hucks' association with Stansted was brief as his mother was merely staying at Bentfield Cottage, probably as a guest of the Gilbey family for whom her husband worked. Hucks became a member of a flying circus, performing aerobatics, and then a test pilot at Hendon during WWI. He died in 1918 of influenza.

Duxford airfield first became operational in World War I. Some of its buildings, constructed by German prisoners-of-war, still stand. In 1938, Duxford was the first airfield to take delivery of Spitfire fighter planes - for use by No. 19 Squadron. It is now the location of Imperial War Museum Duxford, a fascinating site that includes many buildings from both World Wars and a huge collection of military and civilian aircraft and other wartime exhibits. The hangar pictured here was built in 1917.

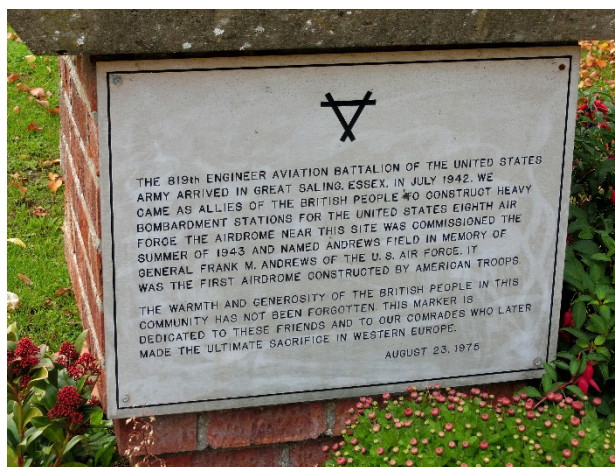


The Museum has several Spitfires on display, including the one shown here. It is even possible to fly in one – for a substantial price.



Frank Whittle flew regularly from Duxford while he was developing ideas that eventually led to the invention of the turbojet engine just before the end of WWII.

RAF Sawbridgeworth (actually in High Wych parish) also originated in WWI and was then used in WWII.



Andrews Field was the first American-built air base in Europe, constructed in 1942/43 using rubble from the London Blitz. This airfield, partly in Stebbing and partly in Great Salming, is well used today by small private aircraft and has a tea room open to the public.

Like most of the area's former airfields, Andrews Field was built by the United States Army Air Force and used to great effect for a relatively short period that helped to end World War II.

Stansted was another American-built airfield. Its runway was constructed to accommodate movements of the heaviest bombers; its length and strength contributed towards the decision to designate Stansted as London's third airport in the 1980s. Today, Stansted Airport spreads over large swathes of three parishes: Stansted Mountfitchet, Elsenham and Takeley. The airport area is excluded from The Hundred Parishes.



Thousands of Americans were based at these airfields; many never saw home again. Their presence and personal sacrifices are remembered on war memorials close to the airfields from which they operated. The memorial shown on the left stands in Little Canfield, remembering airmen who flew from the Little Easton / Great Dunmow airfield. Little Easton parish church has two stained-glass windows dedicated to the American servicemen.

The memorial shown below stands close to Nuthampstead airfield.



The one below stands at the end of the runway at Debden, commemorating the men of the Royal Air Force who served there.



Altogether, thirteen military airfields operated within the Hundred Parishes during WWII. Only two contributed to the Battle of Britain in 1940: Debden and Duxford. Most of the airfields came onstream later, mostly built by and operated by American forces.

Several airfields spread across more than one parish. They were as follows:

Andrews Field (in Great Saling and Stebbing), Castle Camps, Debden/Wimbish, Duxford, Great Sampford/Radwinter, Hunsdon, Little Easton/Great Dunmow, Little Walden/Hadstock, Matching/White Roding, Nuthampstead, Sawbridgeworth/High Wych, Stansted and Wethersfield/Finchingfield.

There was also RAF Barkway which was not an airfield but the site of a very tall radio mast that served the RAF from 1941 until 2011.

The runways, along with various buildings and more recent memorials survive at most of the airfields, while the sites have been developed for a variety of uses. Just two retain a military presence: RAF Debden, mainly in Wimbish parish, is now the site of Carver Barracks while Wethersfield airfield (mainly in Finchingfield parish) was used by the Ministry of Defence until 2023.

In addition to real WWII airfields, there were two 'decoy' airfields within the Hundred Parishes. They were at Barley and Little Bardfield. Many decoy locations were set up around the country to mislead enemy pilots so that they dropped their bombs away from habitation.

Several village signs give recognition to their direct involvement in past wars.



There are also a few informal reminders of wartime activities, for example the brick-surrounded fuel storage tank at Hadstock and the Nissen huts at Little Easton, shown below.



Returning to the theme of the opening paragraph of this article, a significant element of The Hundred Parishes was changed for ever when the former wartime airfield at Stansted was chosen in the 1980s to become London's third airport. In 2002, the Government published proposals to expand Stansted to up to four runways. Strong local opposition was galvanised with the establishment of Stop Stansted Expansion, SSE. This campaign group was actively supported by most local authorities and thousands of individual members. After a lengthy campaign, the threat of growth beyond one runway was 'finally' rejected by Government. A plaque in Broxted records the community's battle; it was installed in 2004, the same year that SSE supporters planted 500 trees on part of the route for the proposed second runway. It is now an established wood.



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