

**RANCH  
MEMBERSHIP  
202**

 **ROYAL  
AIR FORCES  
Association**

The charity that supports the RAF family

**RAFAGEN**

THE NEWSLETTER & MAGAZINE OF THE LETCHWORTH, HITCHIN &  
DISTRICT BRANCH (now with Stevenage)

**SPRING 2022**

**WELCOME TO OUR  
NEW BRANCH  
RAFALO**



**Branch formed 15<sup>th</sup> October 1946**

Association Registered Charity: 226686 (England & Wales) SC037673 (Scotland)

Branch Registered Charity No. 1071536 Branch



# RAFAGEN

The official newsletter and magazine of the  
**ROYAL AIR FORCES' ASSOCIATION**  
**LETCWORTH , HITCHIN & DISTRICT**  
**BRANCH OFFICIALS FOR 2022**

*Now including Stevenage*



**Hon. President Viscount Lord Trenchard**

**Chairman:- Rev. Lindsay Dew**

**Vice Chairman:- Ken Needham**

**Secretary:- Marie Mahoney**

(Contact:- [secretary@rafa-leitchworth.org.uk](mailto:secretary@rafa-leitchworth.org.uk))

**Treasurer:- Ken Needham**

**Wings Appeal Officer:-Eric Dagless**

**Branch Welfare Officer: Vacant**

For Welfare Contact:-Branch Secretary

Email :- [secretary@rafa-leitchworth.org.uk](mailto:secretary@rafa-leitchworth.org.uk)

**Membership Secretary:-**

**Branch Padre:- Rev. Canon Lindsay Dew**

Contact details :- Tel :- 01462742165

Email :- [lindsaycharlesdew@gmail.com](mailto:lindsaycharlesdew@gmail.com)

**General Committee:**

**Jim Box: John Airey: Lesley Starr:**

**John**

**Branch R.A.F.A.L.O. Flt. Lt. Liam Obiston**

**RAFAGEN is compiled and edited by Ken Needham**

(email [kwn056@btinternet.com](mailto:kwn056@btinternet.com) Telephone 01462671534)



**VISIT OUR  
WEBSITE**

[rafa-leitchworth.org.uk](http://rafa-leitchworth.org.uk)

# WELCOME TO OUR NEW BRANCH CHAIRMAN



Our retiring Chairman, Shaun (right) welcomes the new Chairman, Jim to the post.

Jim joined the RAF in 1960 and trained as an Air Signaller. After completing the Maritime Operational Training course at Kinloss on Shackletons, he was posted to 210 Squadron at Ballykelly, and then 38 Squadron at Luqa and Hal Far, Malta.

In 1967 38 Squadron was disbanded and he returned home to a posting with 22 Squadron, SAR helicopters.

After the training course at RAF Valley, he joined 'A' Flight at Chivenor, and finally 'D' Flight at Manston.

After leaving the RAF he worked in personal finance for building societies and finally with National Mutual Life Insurance in Hitchin. he maintained his interest in aviation, and was a volunteer Flight Controller for the St John Air Wing at weekends until it closed down in 1992 , and also member of the Shackleton Association. Following retirement, he is a volunteer with the Shuttleworth Collection



**As Liam Osbiston  
comes into land as  
our new RAFALO,  
we let him  
introduce himself.**

Hello all,

Firstly, I'd like to say thank you to Mr Griffin (Shaun) for offering me this role on his retirement. I certainly have big shoes to fill and a lot to learn!

A little about myself: I moved to Letchworth in Jan 2021 to live with my partner Corinne, a primary school teacher, who I met whilst at Loughborough University. I began my career with the Royal Air Force, like many do, as an Air Cadet at my local Squadron where I grew up, just outside of Nottingham. I made the decision to join following some advice that joining the Air Force would be the cheapest way to become a pilot. I spent all my teenage years there, developing skills and relationships which undoubtedly helped me succeed in getting to where I am today. Whilst an Air Cadet: I obtained my Gold Duke of Edinburgh award; a gliding and flying scholarship; an exchange to Australia with the International Air Cadet Exchange and a place in the top 6 of the Dacre Sword, the top Air Cadet Competition for 2013 to name just a few of the highlights.

I then went on to study Air Transport Management at University, where I left the ATC and joined the University Air Squadron. In my second year I made a successful application for a Pilot Bursary and in my final year I was selected as a member of the Senior Leadership Team of the Squadron and given the promotion from Officer Cadet to Acting Pilot Officer. I began to learn the skill which I would require to help me through Initial Officer Training and also begin really learning how to become a military pilot, flying as and when University allowed.

Following my graduation, I began my Officer training almost immediately in August 2017. I graduated RAFC Cranwell in March 2018 during the Beast from the East, one of my most coldest experiences to date! The picture hanging in College Hall Officers' Mess certainly stands out amongst the rest. From here I was posted to RAF Wyton as the Station Adjutant to begin holding awaiting flying training. During this time we helped to celebrate RAF 100 by flying the RAF Baton from the Station to IWM Duxford as part of the relay. I also was offered the opportunity for a training fast-track. By which, I would forgoe my opportunity to be send rotary or fast-track in order to complete my training much quicker. I accepted and began Elementary flying training at RAF Wittering in July 2019. I flew the Grob Tutor with No16 Sqn. Completing the course I then held for a further 6 months with 206 Sqn based at RAF Brize Norton. 206 are the Heavy Aircraft Test and Evaluation Unit, and I used this time to build my flying experience, participating in the beach Natural Surface Operation trials of the A400m and also many low-level UK sorties with the C-130.

In Nov 2020, I began my outsourced multi-engine flying training with L3 Harris at Bournemouth airport - formally RAF Hurn. The course was intense and we completed the equivalent of a Commercial Pilots License and the Multi-Engine Instrument rating, albeit without the certificate to prove it in just 4 months during the numerous COVID lockdowns. On completion of the course, I was awarded my Wings and posted onto the mighty C-17 Globemaster, initially with 24Sqn, the Operational Conversion Unit (OCU) and on completion, to 99 Sqn in Jan 2023.



During my time holding between the awarding of my wings and starting my OCU, I have participated in two huge Military Aid to Civilian Authorities (MACA) operation. The first was a posting to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, London following Op

PITTING and the draw down of operations in Afghanistan. Whilst I cannot talk specifically on my role, it was certainly extremely rewarding

and eye-opening to be involved in humanitarian relief in some descriptions but also to work alongside a government body and Civil Servants and understand their ways of working. I also took part in Op WINTER RESILIENCE. Again posted to London, I spent the Christmas period of 2021, working in London to help vaccinate the population from COVID-19.

Since joining the C-17 fleet, I have been to many places in the world that I couldn't have dreamed of visiting. Like many of you, the Air Force has allowed me to see the World in ways which many people only see on the news, albeit, the Air Force of today is not as adventurous and far reaching as it may have been back in the day, with outposts reaching far out into Asia and the likes of RAF Germany! Because of this, it does mean my time to meet many of you in person is limited, however, I hope to be present as much as possible. I also would like to open up the Air Force of today to as many of you as I can by organising visits where possible to our Main Operating Bases. I'd like to draw on those members who still are serving to help facilitate this and keep connected, the many generations of the Royal Air Force family, we all have at some point the pleasure in serving in.



*From the large aircraft we see on the cover, to the one above, Liam is in full control. I know that when he is able to join us at NAAFI BREAK there will be lots of questions, as there was when he joined us at last years Armed Forces Day.*



## NEWS FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

You may have realised that Warrant Officer Shaun Griffin has stepped down from being our Branch Chairman, and RAFALO. The reason for his departure is that after many years of excellent work for the Branch in the two positions, and he will later this year, be leaving the Royal Air Force, and joining life in Civvy Street. He will be entering civilian life in Humberside, quite a distance from North Hertfordshire, and has therefore decided to stand down.

It was because of Shaun that the Branch is where it is today. After the Covid lock-down we found it very difficult to form a Committee, but with Shaun's perseverance and negotiations with HQ, a Committee was formed, and has since grown in strength. During the Covid pandemic Shaun collected volunteers from the Branch to telephone on a regular basis all of our vulnerable members.

Shaun believes that the Welfare of members is the prime objective of RAFA, and has always been there for members when needed. We will miss him, and the help and advice he has given the Branch officials over the years.

As regards to a replacement RAFA Liaison Officer, (RAFALO) Shaun made sure that he had a successor in place before he left, and found one for us who he knew would fit perfectly into our Branch.

## MORE NEWS FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

Those members who helped at last years Armed Forces Day will have already met **Flt. Lt. LIAM OSBISTON**. Liam was the one in his RAF working uniform, which made one veterans remark “You weren’t allowed off camp in work clothes in my day”. Things have changed over the past 70 years.



Welcome to the Branch Liam, good to have you on board.



Prior to our February NAAFI Break, we held our Annual General Meeting, which made a few changes to the Committee. The full list of appointments are as follows :-

- Chairman .....Jim Box (Trustee Position)
- Vice Chairman .....Ken Needham (Trustee Position)
- Secretary .....Marie Mahoney (Trustee Position)
- Treasurer ..... Ken Needham (Trustee Position)
- Wings Appeal Officer..... Eric Dagless (Trustee Position)
- Asst. Wings Appeal Officer .....Lesley Star
- Branch Welfare Officer ..... Vacant
- Membership Secretary .....Ken Needham



## MORE COMMENTS FROM THE EDITOR'S

Branch Padre .....	Rev. Lindsay Dew
Media Officer .....	Lisa Berry (Co-opted)
Local ATC Coordinator.....	John Tunesi
Conference Delegate .....	John Airey
Webb Master .....	Mike Strange (Co-opted)
RAFAGEN Compiler .....	Ken Needham
Standard Bearer .....	To Be Reviewed
R.A. F. A. Liason Officer .....	Liam Osbiston

The appointment of R.A.F.A.L.O., is made by H.Q., and the post carries an automatic seat on the Committee.

Members wishing to join the Committee during the year, may be co-opted on (with the agreement of the existing members of the Committee).until the next AGM. A co-opted member of the Committee does not have voting rights.



This year is the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the bombing of the Rou Dams by the Dambusters. I would like to mark the annaversary with articles in our Summer issue. If you have any stories relating to the Dambusters, I would like to hear from you. I have a couple, as R.A.F. Scampton, the home of the Dambusters, was my last posting before demob.



It is with very great sadness that the Branch came together on a cold snowy morning in Cambridgeshire in Dec 2022, to say our final farewell to our friend and long standing Branch Member, Roy Newbury.

Roy had joined the Royal Air Force as an engineer serving in Palestine after WWII, and Stations in the UK.

Having served on the Branch Committee for many years, Roy would always volunteer for vacant positions, this is how he became our Branch Standard Bearer for a long period. His exacting standards and eye for military detail were evident in all he did. He researched Lancaster crews who were shot down, keeping detailed records. He wrote extensive and detailed instructions for the Standard Bearer role. As an honorary member of the Air Crew Association, he often attended parades and memorials in France honouring those bomber crews, he was very highly thought of member in that Association too. A very loyal Wings Appeal collector, he would charm everyone whom he met, often with a cheeky smile, or quick line of introduction and explanation about our Branch and charity.

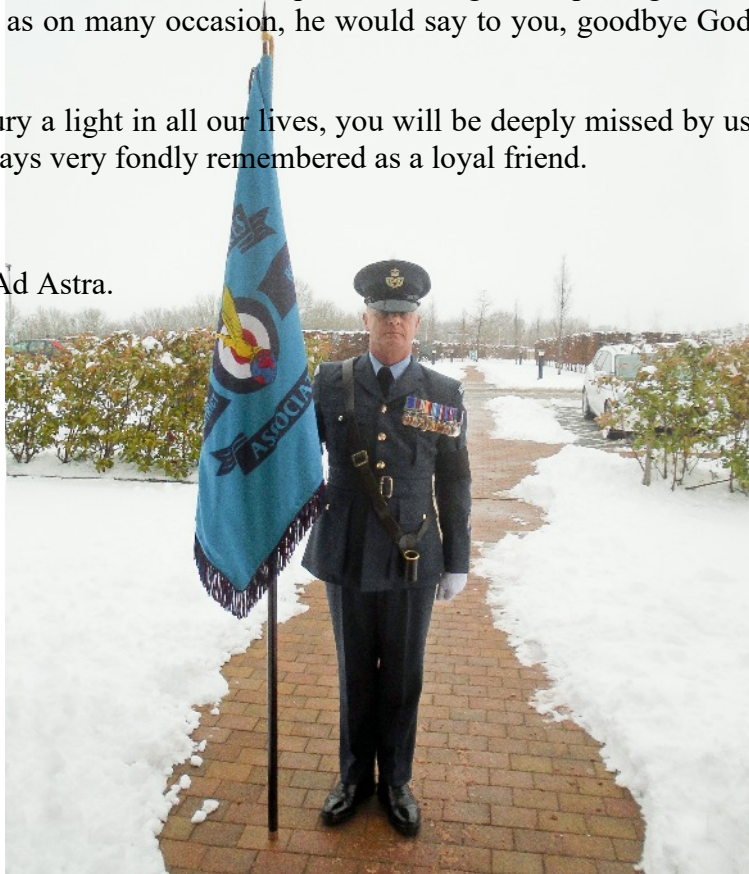
A frequent attender at Branch NAAFI Breaks, Roy once he lost his driving licence through age, would regale stories to our Branch Padre who would collect him. He always liked to arrive early for breakfast,

and pick up fish and chips on his way home. Sadly many never witnessed his epic playing of the spoons, as a means of entertaining folk, or his singing whilst collecting for Wings Appeals, as our former Chairwoman Lisa reflected. Perhaps most fitting is his parting words of goodbye as on many occasion, he would say to you, goodbye God bless.

Roy Newbury a light in all our lives, you will be deeply missed by us all, and always very fondly remembered as a loyal friend.

Per Ardua Ad Astra.

Shaun Griffin



Donations if desired to the  
**'Royal Air Forces Association'**  
may be made via Roy's 'In Memory' page at  
[www.newlingsofroyston.co.uk](http://www.newlingsofroyston.co.uk)  
or sent c/o Newlings of Royston  
Kingfisher House, Fish Hill  
Royston SG8 9LB



**It is with deep regret that we  
have to announce the death of  
Life member**

## **William (Bill) O'Donavan.**

**(Aged 91 years)**

Bill until recently, attended our monthly meetings. Then came Covid and when we returned to our monthly meetings, this time in the form of NAAFI Break, Bill was not able to join us.

Although no longer an active member of the Branch he didn't forget us, as I know he enjoyed reading what we were up to through the pages of RAFAGEN and AIRMAIL.

It was recalled in RAFAGEN that one June day, when the family were with him celebrating his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday, two spitfires flew over his house, and he was certain that it was an RAF flypast just for him and his birthday. In fact it was the Letchworth Armed Forces Day that had organised the planes to fly over Letchworth, but as far as Bill was concerned, it was for him.

The Branch send out our condolences to Elizabeth, Bill's wife, and the family.

### **The Last Post**

A chance to pause for a moment in quiet contemplation for our friends and colleagues who have passed away



# COMMITTEE NEWS

**January 2023**

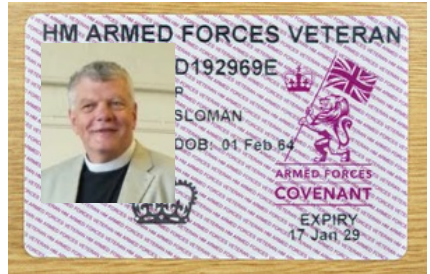
Our Vice Chairman was in the Chair, and after wishing all present a Happy New Year, he went on to thank Jim and Brenda Box for a very successful NAAFI BREAK Christmas lunch. I think the both of you may have the job of organising the next Christmas Bash.

Most of the time at this meeting was taken up with preparing for the Annual General Meeting in February. The Committee had to make sure that they had a least one name for each of the senior posts, to ensure that the Branch could continue. I think by the end of the meeting they were also there. By the time the A.G.M is with us, we are hoping that we have many candiadtes for all of the appointments. It makes for an exciting meeting.



The NAAFI Break Christmas lunch held at the British Garden Centre Hitchin.

Upon checking to see if there have been any updates on applying for the Veteran's ID Card, I find that it has not been updated since February 2022, which has already been passed on to you. That is to say it is only being giving to serving personnel as they leave the forces.



# MEMORIES



Hitchin railway station a little before I came to live in Hertfordshire, but one or two of you may remember it looking like this.

# WELCOME TO NEW MEMBERS

Information supplied by Membership Department of The Royal Air Forces Association

Miss Patricia Norton of St Albans

Mr. Simon Brown of Hertford

Ms. Claire Ness of Henlow



**DIMPLES Bar & Cafe. Willian Way,  
Letchworth Garden City.**

**The home of the Branch NAAFI BREAK**

**Last Wednesday morning of each month 10.00 hrs til noon**

**ALL MEMBERS OF THE RAF FAMILY WELCOME**

# JANUARY

## NAAFI BREAK GALLERY





# FEBRUARY

## A.G.M. With NAAFI BREAK GALLERY



**Sir Oliver Heald, MP for North East Hertfordshire, is backing the campaign to commemorate the brave pilots and navigators of the Photographic Reconnaissance Units (PRU) during the Second World War.**



The PRU was formed on the 24th of September 1939 and throughout the Second World War it operated highly dangerous, clandestine photographic reconnaissance operations over all theatres of operation, and captured more than 26 million images of

enemy operations and installations during the war.

The purpose of the PRU was to provide up-to-date intelligence to strategically plan the Allied actions in the war. Flying Spitfires and Mosquitos, the intelligence it gathered was used by all the armed forces, giving same day intelligence on enemy activity.

The intelligence provided by the PRU was used in the Cabinet War Rooms – now the ‘Churchill War Rooms’ located underneath the Treasury – and was instrumental in the planning of major operations; D-Day and the Dambusters Raid, the monitoring of major shipping movements such as the Bismarck and Tirpitz, and the locating of the site of the V1 and V2 rocket launching site at Peenemünde.

Due to the clandestine nature of their operations – they flew solo operations, unarmed and unarmoured – the death rate was nearly fifty percent. However, despite having one of the lowest survival rates of the war – life expectancy in the PRU was around two and a half months – there is no national memorial to the PRU.

The 'Spitfire AA810 Project' has therefore led the campaign to establish such a memorial to the PRU pilots and navigators.

Among those who served in the PRU was Anthony Hill.

S/Ldr Anthony Eustace Hill DSO DFC was the eldest son of Col. Eustace Hill DSO, former commander of the 104th Essex Yeomanry Brigade, the family living in Elmwood House in Ashwell.

Educated at Harrow he was set to become a director of Fordham Brewery. He was a keen aviator and he joined the RAF Volunteer Reserve, becoming a Pilot Officer in March 1939 and a Flying Officer in September 1940.



Squadron Leader Anthony Hill

He joined No.1 Photographic Reconnaissance Unit and was the first pilot to photograph the Scandinavian cities of Copenhagen and Malmö in April 1941.

He was awarded the DFC for his reconnaissance skills in May of 1941 and by August of that year he was promoted to Flight Lieutenant. In December of 1941 he carried out the reconnaissance of the Würzburg radar station at Bruneval ahead of the British commando operation that captured elements of the radar unit which gave the allies significant intelligence on the German radar

capability.

He gained a bar to his DFC in March 1942 with the citation stating; 'this officer has carried out many successful operational flights over hostile territory and has shown outstanding skill and determination.'

Tony was to become a specialist in low-level reconnaissance photography of radar sites, over many months he brought back many

images of different types of radar installation, his work earning him the DSO in August 1942 and then the rank of Acting Squadron Leader.

He was given the command of 543 Photographic Reconnaissance Squadron, to take effect from the 19th October 1942 - that very same day he was to photograph the results of a daylight raid on the Schneider Works at Le Creusot in France. German fighters were waiting for him and his Spitfire was brought down with him badly wounded.

He was taken prisoner and was transferred to hospital but eventually succumbed to his injuries on the 12th November 1942.

Tony Hill was just 28 and is today still buried in a small cemetery in Dijon.

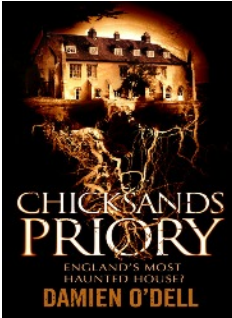
Supporting the campaign is local MP, Oliver Heald. Commenting:

“I am delighted to support this campaign to commemorate those who served in the Photographic Reconnaissance Unit.

This includes Anthony Hill (known as Tony), who served admirably under difficult conditions, and sadly lost his life during service.

I look forward to working with the Spitfire AA810 Project to establish this memorial and to being able to pay my respects there once it is completed.”

***If there is anyone related to Anthony Eustace Hill, or if anyone know someone who served in the PRU during the war, please go the Spitfire AA810 Project website ([www.spitfireaa810.co.uk](http://www.spitfireaa810.co.uk)), or get in touch with Tony Hoskins, [Tony@spitfireaa810.co.uk](mailto:Tony@spitfireaa810.co.uk).***



# **Chicksands Priory - England's Most Haunted House?**

**Serial Paranormal Historian Damien O'Dell has completed his most inspiring book to date - a ghostly history of Chicksands Priory - a top secret UK Intelligence centre in Bedfordshire.**

Chicksands' contribution to Intelligence gathering is legendary, being located within the "Golden Triangle" of Bletchley Park (of Code-breaking Enigma Machine fame) and Woburn Abbey. O'Dell knows Chicksands well, having volunteered there as a guide for many years.

Inspired by his paranormal investigations and painstaking research, O'Dell investigates the facts and myths of the Priory's many hauntings over the past 1,000 years. He asks:

- Why did Tony Robinson's Channel 4 Time Team investigate the property?
- What part did Chicksands play in the sinking of the German Battleship Bismarck in 1941 and the Allied D Day landings of 1944?
- How did the US Air Force use this base during the Cold War of 1950 to 1995? and
- In Medieval Times, what are the stories about monks and nuns before King Henry VIII dissolved the Priory in 1538?

Alan Murdie, Chairman of the London-based Ghost Club, writes in the Foreword:

“The positive enthusiasm for research and interest in recording events at this location shines throughout. Whatever view one may take on ghostly experiences, all those interested in this topic will surely be impressed by the amount of fascinating material shared in these pages concerning this unique location.”

Damien O’Dell, born in West Kensington, London, has been interested in the unexplained since childhood. His grandmother, Rose Tobin, was a gifted psychic.

He has authored a series of paranormal books including

“Ghostly Bedfordshire Reinvestigated”,

“Paranormal Bedfordshire”,

“Paranormal Cambridgeshire”

“Paranormal Hertfordshire.”



He set up APIS (Anglia Paranormal Investigation Society) in 2002 and has led numerous vigils around the UK. He is a highly experienced public speaker, giving talks on various subjects including the paranormal. He is a member of the Ghost Club, which meets regularly in London. He lives in Royston, Hertfordshire, with his wife Vicki and daughter Sarah.

**PUBLICATION DATE - 15<sup>th</sup> November 2022 ISBN:**

**97809552057-1-2 Price: £15**

Published by: Tan House Publishing,  
Tan House, 15 South End,  
Bassingbourn, Royston, Hertfordshire,  
SG8 5NJ.

# Rishi Sunak visits RAF A Kidz Leeming



The Prime Minister Rishi Sunak recently visited RAFA Kidz Leeming as the nursery celebrated its one-year anniversary

Mr Sunak, who is also the local MP for Richmond in Yorkshire, met children of serving personnel, nursery keyworkers and representatives of the RAF Association, which runs the nursery at RAF Leeming as well as nurseries at four other RAF stations.

As well as taking part in a play activity, he also visited the Kidz Club facilities where the nursery's wraparound childcare is delivered. Last year the Government announced that 20,000 service children would be eligible for up to 20 hours of free childcare – worth up to £3,000 per child.

Speaking at the event, Nick Bunting, Secretary General of the RAF Association, said; "We know that access to childcare is a key concern

for serving RAF families, and we have been responding to this need over the past few years with the introduction of our RAFA Kidz nurseries."

Mr Sunak said; "RAF personnel and their families contribute a huge amount in the service of their country, and deal with some unique challenges in doing so. I am delighted to have been able to visit RAFA Kidz Leeming as they celebrate their one-year anniversary and see first-hand the positive impact the nursery has on the children and the serving community here at RAF Leeming."

### **RAFA KIDZ are at the following Stations**

**LEEMING: BRIZE NORTON: CRANWELL: DIGBY: ODIHAM:**

### **What RAFA Kidz offer**

**Year-round opening.** We provide childcare 50 weeks of the year, offering you flexibility and choice.

**Sleeping area** When children are tired, we provide comfortable and quiet sleeping areas. Our staff work with you to understand your child's sleeping arrangements.

**Bespoke rooms** Five bespoke rooms designed for babies, toddlers and pre-school plus our before and after school club and a sensory room

**Wraparound Care** We run Holiday Kidz Clubs and before and after school care, offering you flexible childcare solutions to suit their needs.

**Toilet training** We will fully support your child with toilet training as its important they develop their own independence when using the toilet.

**Outdoor play** We believe outdoor play is important to your child's development. Our outdoor areas and gardens are well equipped for your child explore.

**Special Educational Needs** We recognise that children are individuals with their own needs. Our trained staff will work closely with you and other professionals to identify any additional support that is required to meet your child's





# How Meteorology Helps The RAF

## **Tomorrow's weather today**

The Mobile Meteorological Unit provides critical frontline Meteorology support to operational, strategic and safety decisions. You might struggle to even bang in the first tent peg on an operation if the ground is frozen or flooded. The success of every sortie, every training flight and every logistical move depends on knowing the weather.

Meteorologists and engineers from across the civilian Met Office serve as RAF Sponsored Reservists in the MMU. When required they can be actively deployed as part of the military in times of war, crisis, peace-keeping operations and exercises in the UK or overseas.

They provide year-round support for major UK operations and exercises: from a full-sized met office on a major deployed airbase to a single meteorologist embedded within a unit's ops room.



Setting up MMU satellite communications at Camp Bastion on Op HERRICK early in 2007. © Met Office/Crown.

Meteorology has been intertwined with the military since the early days of science. The Mobile Meteorology Unit can trace its history back to just after the D-Day invasion when small mobile teams were formed from Met Office staff serving in the RAFVR: they deployed into France to support temporary airfields. While the first recorded use of the name 'Mobile Met Unit' was in 1953, the modern MMU came into being in response to the 1961 Kuwait Crisis.

The MMU Engineering team is constantly developing and testing new systems to enable them to keep pace with the rapidly evolving developments in IT and communications. While some use is made of military coms, MMU Engineering have developed a range of satellite-based communications systems. Meaning that at many locations, MMU may have the best comms tools. Display



Radiosonde (weather balloon) launch in Kandahar on Op HERRICK. © Met Office/Crown

and production systems have evolved from 'mobile' Outstation Display Systems that needed three or four people to lift them, to hand held weather sensors and satellite-based systems that can fit into a briefcase.

# MEMORIES

## SQUARE BASHING CAMPS



R.A.F. West Kirby on the Wirrel, Cheshire. Basic training camp for many raw recruits ( me included) in the early 1950's. This photo was taken on 16<sup>th</sup> November 1950.

RAF West Kirby was a Royal Air Force basic training camp near West Kirby, Cheshire, later Merseyside, England.

The camp at Larton, then in Cheshire, was actually located 3 miles from West Kirby

West Kirby was set up at the beginning of the Second World War, as a basic training camp, to train new recruits into the Royal Air Force. Known as a "square bashing camp" in the vernacular, it was very first base (after kitting out at RAF Cardington) of most personnel there during the 1940s to 1960, although the final passing out parade took place on 20 December 1957. Most (*but not all. I wasn't*) of the personnel were newly called up for their 2 years National Service in the British armed forces, in the rank of AC2, the very lowest rank in the RAF,



At this RAF Station, the men were given their initial training on their first entry into RAF which included first learning the RAF parade ground drill. with rifles, intensive physical fitness training, training in ground combat and

defence under non-commissioned officers of the RAF Regiment and some education about the RAF and its history. Men, while undergoing their basic training at West Kirby, were accommodated in wooden barrack huts, each one housing about twenty men. Because West Kirby was a basic training camp, with no airfield there, discipline was very much stricter (*you are not joking*) than in any normal RAF operational or trade training camp. (*They never went to RAF Netheravon for their trade training*)

Recruits normally spent a period of eight weeks, (later on 6 weeks) on their training at West Kirby before being posted on to their "trade training" camp elsewhere in the United Kingdom. Approximately 150,000 conscripts went through its gates up until 1960, when the camp was demolished and the land converted back into farming fields. A dedication plaque was installed, where the camp entrance used to be, in 2004.



# RAF PADGATE



During World War II, Padgate had a small RAF base which provided basic training for air force recruits. It opened in April 1939. This type of base was described as a recruitment training camp. This RAF station will be well-remembered by thousands of young men who were selected for RAF National Service, and on this site received their first taste of military discipline, ill-fitting uniforms and a severe haircut.

The site of the RAF base is now a housing estate, bordering Cinnamon Brow. In the centre of Padgate, next to the train line, is a large area of land and playing fields known as Bennett's Recreation Ground or simply Bennett's Rec. A rifle range and part of the running track are still visible on the site. It is the home of the Woolston Rovers rugby league side. Vulcan Close, Valiant Close, Anson Close, Harrier Road, Viscount Road, Blenheim Close, Lancaster Close and Wellington Close are just some of the street names in the Blackbrook area of the town which are named after aeroplanes used in the war. Padgate Community High School is on this land.

The university campus in nearby Fearnhead, affiliated to the University of Chester, was used as a camp for Canadian servicemen (called Canada Hall) during the Second World War, before becoming a teacher training college in 1946. This was used to house some of the servicemen stationed at Burtonwood. Around 4,000 personnel were stationed at RAF Padgate during its lifetime.

Famous Boxer Freddie Mills was stationed at RAF Padgate. He was world light heavyweight boxing champion between 1948 and 1950. Also did Hughie Green, the man in charge of TV talent show Opportunity Knocks and Bob Monkhouse (comedian, presenter, actor and cartoonist), who also presented Opportunity Knocks, but in the 1990s.

## **RAF BRIDGNORTH**



RAF Bridgnorth was a Royal Air Force Station, created after the outbreak of World War II on 6 November 1939, at Stanmore, to the east of Bridgnorth, Shropshire, England. However, as RAF Stanmore Park already existed in Middlesex, it was named RAF Bridgnorth. Although during its existence various static aeroplanes were displayed as Gate Guardians, RAF Bridgnorth never had a runway.

The first unit stationed there was No.4 Recruit Centre. Their role was to carry out the basic training of new recruits in the RAF, originally designed for 2,000 recruits and 500 permanent staff. In 1940 spare accommodation at Bridgnorth enabled it to be used as a transit and kitting out centre for troops returning from France. In August 1941 the Station was renamed No.1 Women's Auxiliary Air Force Depot involved with the training of WAAF recruits.

By September 1942 saw another change of name to the No.1 Elementary Air Navigation School. Other changes subsequently took place as dictated by the needs of the war effort. From its inception until after the war, the station also had a 114 bed hospital.

The site was used for training WAAF, airmen and Aircrew during the Second World War. It was also a reception centre for forces personnel returning from Dunkirk which included Czech, Dutch and French forces too.

Aircrew training consisted of No 1 Elementary Air Navigations School, the Empire Air Navigation School, No's 14, 18, 50, 70, 80 & 81 Initial Training Wings (ITW's) which covered training in air gunnery, navigation, bomb-aiming and wireless operating. From 1939 until well into 1946, the station and a 114-bed hospital. However, besides the 3,000 – 4,000 station personnel to cater for, the station hospital also served around 3,000 people from the local area, which saw the bed numbers rise to 140 by 1940.

Only after the war ended in 1945 could the Station revert to its original task of providing basic training to recruits, as the No.7 School of Recruit Training. It retained that name until closure in 1963. The unit badge carried the Latin motto *Haec porta moenia viri* (This is the gate, the walls are men).

In December 1943, a flu epidemic on the station meant that all the WAAF personnel were moved off camp so that their quarters and living areas could be fumigated. Training continued with Basic Recruits being billeted in hangars around the base.

On Armistice Sunday 6 November 1949, a massed parade of 3,400 men supported the Mayor of Bridgnorth. On 12 April 1950 the Borough of Bridgnorth granted RAF Bridgnorth the Freedom of Entry to the town. It was the first RAF Station to be granted Freedom of Entry in the UK. Also in 1950, No 7 School of Recruit Training was 'adopted' by Training Command under a patronage scheme that saw all 5 recruit training schools being adopted by one of the Royal Air Force Commands.

On 7 June 1951, RAF Bridgnorth exercised its right for the first time to march through the town, via the North Gate, with bayonets fixed, drums beating and colours flying. A Lancaster flew overhead. That was only possible after the RAF Service had received the King's Colours on 26 May 1951.

Tens of thousands of recruits passed through Bridgnorth for their initial eight weeks training or 'square bashing' as it was called and included entertainer Des O'Connor, comedian Ronnie Corbett and ex-test cricketers Cyril Washbrook and Raman Subba Row. One of the notable commanders on recruit training after the Second World War was Squadron Leader George 'Johnny' Johnson, one of the aircrew who took part in the Dambusters Raid.

The Station closed down on Friday 8 February 1963. (A commemorative plaque was unveiled on the former '3' Wing mess hall / cook house chimney on 28 May 1994.) The chimney is now in the part of the former RAF Station that has been designated a Country Park





*The RAFAGEN is produced every quarter and sent to members of the Letchworth, Hitchin & District branch of the Royal Air Forces Association.*

*If you would like to tell your story in RAFAGEN or have any comments about the magazine, the branch or the Association, we would like to hear from you. It can either be by hard copy through the mail, (any photographs will be returned immediately) to Ken Needham 68 Broadwater Avenue, Letchworth Garden City, Herts SG6 3HJ, or via email to [kwn056@btinternet.com](mailto:kwn056@btinternet.com)*

*The next issue will be published in June 2023*

**NAAFI BREAKS** for the next few months are as follows :-

Wednesday 30<sup>th</sup> March 2023

Wednesday 27<sup>th</sup> April 2023

Wednesday 25<sup>th</sup> May 2023

Wednesday 29<sup>th</sup> June 2023

Should you wish not to receive the regular issues of RAFAGEN, would you please advise the branch secretary on [secretary@rafa-letchworth.org.uk](mailto:secretary@rafa-letchworth.org.uk), who will arrange for your address to be deleted from our list.

