

Fairford Flyer

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FAIRFORD HISTORY



SOCIETY

We hope you are enjoying these online newsletters. If anyone has anything they would like to contribute or have any local history questions please email enquiry@fairfordhistory.org.uk

Bibury Airfield by Syd Flatman

Most of you have been to Bibury. You've seen the historic Arlington Row, bought an ice-cream, probably fed the fish with your children or grandchildren and also smiled to yourself at the swathes of Japanese folk and their obsession of photographing anything and everything. But Bibury airfield? Sorry, don't know that one.

It really exists, well, what's left of it, even then you have to know what you are looking at.

Two miles to the North, it is closer to the village of Ablington, even then it is a half a mile further on heading out towards Stowell Park, near Northleach. So why is it not called RAF Ablington?

Radio communication eighty years ago, of course was nothing like today. One can only imagine what it must have been like trying to communicate, strapped in an un-pressurised cockpit, a few inches from a roaring engine with open exhausts and just a wafer thin sheet of aluminium or stretched canvass between you and the outside world.

With many hundreds of airfields in operation during World War II, there were bound to be some name similarities and Ablington sounded very much like RAF Abingdon. We had the very self-same problem here in our Town. RAF Fairford by rights should have been named RAF Kempford. After all, the perimeter fence skirts the village and on top of that the airfield lies within Kempford Parish but could easily be miss-heard as Kempston, the military barracks. Yet another fine example close to home is RAF Brize Norton. Why name it that when the airbase sits in the heart of Carterton? Again, it could easily be mixed up with RAF Cardington.

RAF Bibury, or Bibury Farm as it was known in the early days, was operational by April 1940 preceding RAF Fairford by four years, but unlike Fairford which survives and thrives, Bibury had ceased flying by November 1944 and its final closure was in 1950.

With its grass runway it was mainly used for night sorties by Spitfires and for a short while Hawker Hurricanes. Its other function was congestion relief for South Cerney and their fleet of Airspeed Oxfords.

On the 19th August 1940 the airfield came under attack. Three Bombay Transporters escorted by six Spitfires en route from Pembrey landed to overnight at Bibury. The convoy had barely been on the ground two hours when the Germans came calling. A Junkers Ju88 bomber doing a fast run bombed and strafed the airfield. One Spitfire was destroyed, one seriously damaged and three others hit by stray bullets, leaving one airman dead. The attack resulted in two Spitfires angrily giving chase but Junkers Ju88 bombers were not easy to catch unlike our lumbering Lancasters and Wellington Bombers. These German craft were fast and could give a fighter a run for its money. It was over the Solent before the Bibury airmen caught up with the raider. After a short sharp combat the bomber and its aircrew perished in the sea.

Bibury was also to play host to some early jet flying. Being a short hop from Gloucester, this was an ideal distance for experiments by Frank Whittle and his pioneering team. Little did they know they were about to change the world.

The grass runway by the end of 1942 was getting badly churned up, so a Sommerfield metal runway was laid on the surface.

The wartime buildings were divided into four areas, three alongside the Ablington to Northleach road and one on the Eastern perimeter of the airfield. All cleverly erected near existed farm buildings and copses so as not to draw too much attention from the air.

So what remains today?

Leaving Ablington on the Northleach road, looking right, the first wartime building that comes into view is half engulfed in ivy and about the size of a garage. It's constructed of red brick and render much of which is falling off. One hundred yards further along are two of the original five blister hangars. The first is now a farm fertiliser store which only a few years ago was re-roofed with modern style grey corrugated tin.

The second blister hangar is almost hidden from view behind evergreen trees, earthen banks and coils of razor wire. This hangar still has its rusty wartime covering. Bristling with security devices, it contains high value restored classic motor vehicles being within the confines of the Classic Motor Hub. On the left hand side of the road looking into the farmyard entrance, at the far back is a tall four bay open-fronted garage, red brick and rendered. This possibly housed the fire tender and fuel tankers. Going a further quarter of a mile northward, beyond the Classic Motor Hub, turning right onto a farmyard track which, in times gone by, was the Bibury and Ablington by-pass used by the horse drawn wagons to avoid the undulating terrain of the Coln Valley.

The track forms the eastern boundary of the airfield. By some low farm buildings there is evidence of some hut bases and a red brick air raid shelter now home to a couple of lonely horses. Nearby is the pump house, the engine and pump long gone, but all the pipework still remains.

There is a commemorative memorial celebrating the airfield and all who served. It's made of stainless steel, one meter high, but sadly, not on view to the general public. It's situated on the right-hand side behind the heavy security gates of the Classic Motor Hub which, in World War II, was the main entrance to the airfield. Today it's only the likes of classic car petrol heads who are privileged enough to see it on Hub Open Days.

Today, looking out onto that windy headland, it's hard to imagine that over eighty years ago all that activity was going on for the defence of our country.



Memorial



Military building



Blister hangar



Bibury Scramble

RAF Units at Bibury compiled by Chris Hobson

87 Squadron based at Exeter

Had a detachment at Bibury 5 July 1940 to 28 November 1940 flying Hawker Hurricanes

No. 92 Squadron based at Pembrey

Had a detachment during August 1940 flying Supermarine Spitfires

3 Service Flying Training School based at South Cerney

Used Bibury as a relief landing ground 6 July 1940 to 1 March 1942

3 (Pilots) Advanced Flying Unit based at South Cerney

Used Bibury as a relief landing ground 1 March 1942 to 15 November 1944 flying Airspeed Oxfords and North American Harvards

1539 Beam Approach Training Flight based at South Cerney

Used Bibury as a relief landing ground 13 July 1943 to 15 November 1944 flying Airspeed Oxfords

7 Maintenance Unit based at Quedgeley

Used Bibury as a sub-storage site 1 December 1944 to 28 February 1950, No aircraft

Cotswolds Sayings: Chris Peachey wrote in to say "Waiting for Cotswold barley to ripen, you were supposed to go on a fortnight's holiday when you thought it was fit, cos it would be when you got back."

Don't mess with the elephant!

On the 15th of October 1860 the Swindon Advertiser and North Wilts Chronicle published the following report: "FAIRFORD ACCIDENT - On Tuesday evening last, Wombwell's Menagerie was being exhibited in the Market-place, when a commercial traveller from Cheltenham got teasing the elephant, and was seized by the animal, lifted in the air, and dashed with great force to the ground. Medical aid was immediately procured, when it was found that he had received severe internal injuries. It is seriously hoped this will act as a caution, and prevent others from doing likewise."

The Cirencester Times and Cotswold Advertiser carried a similar report and showed great restraint by merely calling the injured man a 'not over wise individual'. George Wombwell was a shoemaker of London who in the first decade of the 19th Century bought exotic animals that were brought in by ships to the London Docks. Originally he displayed them in premises in Soho but in 1810 he founded his Travelling Menagerie which toured the country exhibiting at fairs and other events. By 1839 his menagerie consisted of 15 wagons with animals imported from Africa, Australia and South America. The animals included the first lion to be bred in the UK, as well as tigers, leopards, kangaroos, monkeys, ostriches, giraffes, a rhinoceros and, of course, elephants.

Unfortunately the occurrence at Fairford was by no means the only incident involving Wombwell's animals. In fact local newspapers across the country report many such incidents in which keepers or members of the public were attacked and injured by some of the animals. The worst incident happened in 1834 when a lion and a tiger escaped near Newhaven and killed four people before they were captured. In 1849 William Wombwell, nephew of George Wombwell, was killed at Coventry when attempting to separate two elephants which were fighting in their van. The following year George's niece Ellen Bright, who performed under the name 'The Lion Queen', was killed by a tiger at Northampton. In 1892, the same year that the Farmor's School log book report the menagerie's visit to Fairford, a lion tamer was killed at Hednesford.

George Wombwell died in 1850 and is buried in Highgate Cemetery under a large tomb surmounted by a statue of his pet lion *Nero*. The company struggled on until it shut down in 1932 and the animals were homed in Whipsnade Zoo.

Fairford History – Month by Month

From the Newspapers & other Records

100 Years ago this month

On the 9th of March 1921 Lieutenant Colonel A. J. Palmer of Fairford Park was appointed High Sheriff of Gloucestershire for the ensuing year. Albert John Palmer was the son of Samuel Palmer, one of the early directors of the Huntley and Palmer biscuit company of Reading. Albert and his wife Catita (also known as Catherine) leased Fairford Park from the Raymond Barker family in 1900. He was the Commanding Officer of the Royal Gloucestershire Hussars during the First World War and was awarded a DSO for his leadership in the campaigns in Egypt and Palestine. One of his duties as County High Sheriff was to attend the Gloucestershire Assizes which Albert was familiar with having been a justice of the peace for Fairford since at least 1906. He died in 1940 and Fairford Park was taken over by the War Office soon afterwards. Sadly, the mansion house was demolished in the mid-1950s.

200 Years ago this month

Nicholas Dawkins, innkeeper of The Bull Inn, placed an advertisement in the Oxford Journal of the 31st of March 1821 reminding patrons that he held the fishery rights at Fairford. He concludes his brief advertisement with “N. B. A good larder, choice wines, and well-aired beds. Neat post chaises and careful drivers.”

The post chaise was a fast four-wheeled carriage accommodating two or four passengers and driven by a postilion who rode on one of the horses. Presumably Mr. Dawkins employed his own postilions or ‘careful drivers’ and hired out his carriages to visitors. Nicholas Dawkins was innkeeper of The Bull from at least 1813 until his death in 1832 at the age of 48 when his wife Charlotte (the former Charlotte Rose) took over but quickly handed over management of the inn to her brother Richard Townsend Rose.

300 Years ago this month

On the 30th of March 1721 bachelor Walter Stokes was laid to rest in St Mary’s churchyard at the age of 21. He had died without making a will but his older brother Henry was granted administration of Walter’s estate on the 28th of April. Walter’s estate was very small as the inventory consisted of just two items: his wearing apparel valued at just five shillings, and a bond from Thomas Gearing of £5 2 shillings and 6 pence. His total estate was the equivalent of about £310 in 2021 terms. He may well have lived at home with his parents hence the very small personal estate.

400 Years ago this month

No baptisms, marriages or burials were recorded in Fairford during the month of March 1621. However, the year as a whole was a bad one for Fairford as there were 25 burials and only 10 baptisms. An epidemic of smallpox (a major killer in the 17th Century) raged in London and elsewhere in Britain in 1621/22 and this may account for the unusually high number of burials in Fairford.

Gertrude Winik

During a search of the national register which was taken in 1939 as part of the preparation for the distribution of identity cards, an unusual name appeared in the entry for Morgan Hall. Thirty-year old Gertrude Winik was a parlour maid employed by Walter and Gladys Jones. Further research revealed that Gertrude was from Vienna and was a Jewish refugee from Nazi oppression. She was interned in the Isle of Man in 1940 as an enemy alien and lived in a special camp for women and children. Gertrude remained in Britain after the war and died in London in 1998. A full account of the life of Gertrude Winik will shortly be added to the Topic/ People section of the FHS website.