

# Fairford Flyer

## Extra No 38

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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](mailto:enquiry@fairfordhistory.org.uk)

The next meeting is on FEBRUARY 24 at 10 am. February's meeting is normally a daytime meeting but the room is only available at half term so we have had to move it to the fourth week. The topic for this month is on FAIRFORD FARMS. We have had this talk before in 2014 but it is always enjoyable to see Edwin's photographs which no doubt will bring back memories. Edwin hopes to have input from Chris Peachey.

### The legacies of the Cotswold Wool merchants

At the January meeting Chris gave members a very informative and interesting talk of what the Cotswold medieval wool merchants left behind as personal and communal legacies. These took the form of church buildings or repairs, church windows, church fittings, tombs and memorial brasses, the repair of roads and bridges (in their interest so wool could be transported more easily) and 'invisible' legacies including candles and torches for the church and alms for the poor. Sheep were often bequeathed in their wills instead of or as well as money. The Cotswold 'wool' churches i.e. churches built or extended from the proceeds of the wool trade included Bibury, Burford, Chipping Campden, Chipping Norton, Cirencester, Fairford, Kempsford, Lechlade, Northleach, Rendcomb, Sevenhampton, Stow on the Wold, Minchinhampton, Tetbury, Winchcombe and Witney. Examples were given of who and what could be found in each place, whether stained glass, brasses, parts of the church being rebuilt, etc.

John and Edmond Tame of Fairford are unusual in that John is depicted in armour, there is only one other wool merchant in the Cotswolds shown like this. Neither John nor Edmond have any symbols of the wool trade on their brasses, no sheep, wool sacks, or merchants' marks. Sir Edmund would have organised his father's brass and as he was a very important, upwardly mobile county person in the service of Henry VII and Henry VIII he wanted to emphasise this by the style of the brasses for his father and himself.

One merchant who caught everyone's fancy was Reginald Spicer of Cirencester (died 1442) with his four wives. The logistics of burying them all in the same grave (if they were) was remarked upon.



## RAF FAIRFORD'S 1947 WINTER TRAGEDY

On 13 February 1947, seventy-five years ago this month, RAF Fairford suffered its most serious post-war loss when one of its aircraft crashed on Grindon Moor at the southern end of the Peak District. The squadrons based at Fairford had sustained many losses during the Second World War especially during the Airborne Forces operations at Normandy and Arnhem but fatal peacetime accidents have thankfully been quite rare.

The winter of 1946/47 was one of the harshest in recent British history. Heavy snowfalls caused major difficulties throughout much of the country and severely restricted transport movement in many areas, including around Fairford itself. Power stations ran out of coal for several weeks causing an energy crisis and many factories had to shut down. Radio broadcasts were restricted and television services were suspended. The situation became so critical that the military was mobilised to assist wherever possible.

Rural areas were particularly badly affected, especially in Staffordshire where some villages were cut off from the outside world for several weeks and began to run short of food and coal. On 11 February RAF Fairford was notified that the villages of Butterton, Grindon, Longnor, Onecote and Wetton near Leek could not be reached by road and that an emergency supply operation had to be mounted by air. The residents had been isolated by snow drifts 15 feet deep or more for almost two weeks and were by then said to be living on potatoes and milk and were burning wood as their coal had run out. At this time there were four Transport Command squadrons based at Fairford, each flying the Handley Page Halifax which, like the Short Stirlings that had flown from Fairford during the war, was a bomber aircraft modified for the Airborne Forces role with the ability to carry paratroops and tow large assault gliders.

Later on the 11<sup>th</sup> several Ministry of Food lorries arrived at Fairford with loads of flour, sugar, bread, meat, butter, cheese and other foodstuffs. The food was packaged in containers and loaded onto 10 Halifaxes overnight. On Wednesday the 12<sup>th</sup> Wing Commander W H Ingle, DFC, the Commanding Officer of No. 47 Squadron briefed 10 of his crews at 06:30 for the first drop but weather conditions in Staffordshire were too poor to permit a formation drop which was the normal technique for parachute drops so the aircrew had to stand down. At 12:15 Wing Commander Ingle took off on a lone reconnaissance flight of the dropping zones which were marked by large crosses made of soot that had been laid out in the snow by the villagers and farmers. The weather over the villages was very poor with a cloud base down to 300 feet with very poor visibility. After two dummy runs over Longnor the crew dropped the supplies which were picked up by the villagers and later distributed by the village Police Constable and the grocer. However, the weather was so bad that the Wing Commander deemed the operation to be too dangerous and cancelled the rest of the drops planned for that day. Fairford's Station Commander Group Captain J A Tester was also on board the Halifax as an observer.



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The next day take-off by 11 aircraft was planned for 08:00 but the weather had not improved so the crews were again placed on stand-by. At 09:02 Squadron Leader Donald McIntyre, one of the Squadron's Flight Commanders, took off in Halifax RT922 for a reconnaissance flight to check on the weather over Butterton which was thought to be the village in most need of supplies. As well as the crew of six (one of whom was from the Glider Pilot Regiment who was probably on board to help with the dropping of the food) two civilian Press photographers were also present as the operation was of significant public interest and would have been good publicity for the RAF. Fairford's Meteorological Officer received a weather report from Longnor as "*Slight granular drizzle, visibility three-quarters of a mile, cloud covering the peaks but estimated 1,000 feet over Longnor*". The message was passed to Squadron Leader McIntyre who was already en route to his dropping zone at Butterton.

Longnor is about five miles north of Butterton and when Squadron Leader McIntyre arrived over his dropping zone at 09:51 he reported that in fact the cloud base was at just 100 feet and that he was going around for another attempt. His last message was *"Second run in to Butterton, unable to find village, trying again"*. A few minutes later RAF Fairford tried called the aircraft to order the Squadron Leader to return to base as all further attempts to reach the area were cancelled for the day due to the appalling weather conditions. It was not until 11:50 that RAF Fairford received a message to say that the aircraft had crashed near Butterton.

The aircraft had crashed near Sheldon Farm on Grindon Moor about a mile south of Butterton with the loss of all on board. An eyewitness stated that the aircraft's wing hit the ground then the Halifax struck an isolated tree, broke up and exploded. It took an RAF Mountain Rescue Team four hours to cover the 10 miles from their based at Harpur Hill near Buxton to the crash site by which time some of the villagers had removed the bodies from the burning wreckage. The aircraft had crashed at the highest point of the moor at about 1,000 feet above sea level and was probably flying in cloud at the time. The next day the roads were cleared just enough to get vehicles close to the scene to recover the bodies of the eight men.

There are memorials to the crew in Grindon church one of which is made from a piece of aluminium found at the crash site in 1985. A small roadside memorial stone was set up in 1999 near the crash site and a Service of Remembrance is held each year in one of the local churches on a Sunday nearest to 13 February.

The men who died in this tragic accident were:  
Squadron Leader Donald McIntyre, age 31, Pilot  
Flight Lieutenant Ernest Smith, age 23, Navigator  
Warrant Officer Gordon Victor Chapman, age 24, Air Bomber  
Warrant Officer Richard Sydney Kearns, age 32, Flight Engineer  
Flight Sergeant Kenneth Charles Pettit, age 21, Wireless Operator  
Sergeant William Thomas Sherry, age 24, Glider Pilot Regiment  
Mr. Joseph Gordon Reardon, age 32, Keystone Press Agency  
Mr. David William Savill, age 33, Daily Herald

Most of the deceased were buried in their home towns but the pilot and navigator were buried in the Commonwealth War Graves Commission's (CWGC) plot in Buxton Cemetery and Warrant Officer Kearns is buried in the large CWGC plot in Botley Cemetery in Oxford. A newspaper report gave Squadron Leader McIntyre's place of residence as Coln St Aldwyns but he may just have been renting a property there during his posting to Fairford as the CWGC records state that he and his wife lived at Silverton, Devon. The men are commemorated by the CWGC as Second World War casualties as the end date for the war was selected by the Commission as 31 December 1947 to match the official end date of the First World War of 31 August 1921.

Although further food drops had been planned by No.47 Squadron they were not needed as the roads were being cleared to allow access to the isolated villages and farms in the Peak District. At the inquest held in Leek on 25 March the District Coroner Mr S A H Burne stated that according to witnesses the food situation was nowhere near as bad as had been reported and he blamed the Press and the BBC for exaggerating the situation and that there had been no real need for the RAF to drop supplies by air. If this was the case then it is a sad conclusion to a tragic accident that resulted in the deaths of eight brave men.

Two of the many contemporary newspaper reports on the accident are reproduced below together with two brief reports on the return of Fairford's church windows after having been stored during the Second World War to avoid the risk of damage.



## From the Newspapers -1947

Aberdeen Press and Journal 13 February 1947

### RELIEF BY AIR FOR MAROONED VILLAGERS

The marooned villages of Longnor Staffs, six miles from Buxton, whose 400-odd inhabitants had for days been existing on potatoes and milk, was relieved by an RAF plane yesterday.

Men, women, and children rushed from their cottages as a machine from Fairford aerodrome came over and picked out the big black cross of soot and the fire made according to radio instructions.

Then there was a terrific cheer as a dozen different coloured parachutes floated down each bearing a 50 lb container of food. Longnor is but one of several Staffordshire villages isolated. Weather permitting, fourteen Halifaxes will take off from Fairford today to take them relief. The total amount of food to be dropped is approximately fourteen tons.

Gloucestershire Echo 26 March 1947

### FAIRFORD 'MERCY' TRIP WAS NEEDLESS

The RAF Halifax plane which took off from Fairford on February 13 and crashed in an attempt to drop food supplies to the people of Butterton near Leek, (Staffs), had 'got into a treacherous district where the countryside might rise as high as 1,500 ft without it appearing to be more than a gently rising contour.'

This was stated by the Coroner at the adjournment inquest at Leek on Tuesday on the eight victims of the crash. A verdict of 'Accidental Death' in each case was returned.

#### SITUATION NOT BAD

Thomas Herbert Henshall of New House Farm, Grindon, who was complimented on his efforts to rescue one of the victims, said he had been told that there was no need for the 'plane to have been sent as the food situation 'was not at all bad. Wing Commander Johnson RAF Hawarden, said the pilot was told quite definitely not to take any risks at all. He was a very experienced pilot and was relying on visual observation.

That there was no question at all of starvation in the village was the statement of Mr H C Barker, Food Executive Officer at Leek. Recording his verdict, the Coroner remarked he had been told or had read that the venture was not necessary.

#### TRIP UNNECESSARY

He had been handed an extract from a newspaper purporting to be a resolution of Grindon Parish Council, in which he had said they had played no part in recommending the 'mercy' plane trips and unanimously agreed that such a request was unnecessary.

It was a little difficult, he added, to know where the suggestion regarding starvation had come.

'Because a large number of people nowadays seem to have a palate for sensational headlines, it may be that some of the more popular papers distorted what they represented as starvation in the district', he said.

He thought the Food Office had acted quite reasonably and prudently in asking for their support.

### OTHER 1947 NEWSPAPER REPORTS

Gloucester Citizen 21 April 1947

The famous stained glass windows of Fairford Church - 28 in all - have now been completely restored after 18 months work, costing nearly £1,000. The event will be marked by a Thanksgiving service on May 1<sup>st</sup>, when the preacher will be Rev W P Gilpin. A collection will be made in aid of the fund and it is hoped the deficit of about £30 will soon be covered.

Gloucestershire Echo 3 May 1947

### Fairford Treasures

About 1,000 yards of wire was used in the work of restoring 1,500 square feet of stained glass to the 28 famous windows of Fairford Parish Church which during the war were buried for safekeeping at Fairford Park.

The work completed, a special service of thanksgiving in which a large congregation took part, was held at the Church on Thursday evening and an address given by Canon W P Gilpin.

The windows first dedicated 450 years ago have been replaced at a cost of £1,800.