

MINUTES OF THE 97th MEETING OF AYNHO HISTORY SOCIETY HELD AT THE VILLAGE HALL, AYNHO ON WEDNESDAY 31st MAY 2017

Present: - Rupert Clark – Chairman
Peter Cole – Secretary

1) Secretary's Report

Peter displayed the two National Fire Brigades' Association's Long Service medals awarded to Harry and Joseph Humphris.

2) "The Cold War in Oxfordshire – The Americans Hit Town by Simon Parr

This is the story of the years from the 1950s until 1994 when the United States Airforce was stationed at RAF Upper Heyford, Oxfordshire.

The main source for this was the local press - the Banbury Guardian, Oxford Mail and the Bicester Advertiser. There were also two useful books – "Never had it so good" by Dominic Sandbrook, and "White Heat". Plenty is available on the web.

Until WW2 Upper Heyford was a small quiet village. With the development of the air field and the influx of air crew life started to change. While the population of agricultural villages always had some flux, refugees from Europe and Ireland joined the community post war.

Due to the seriousness of the Cold War, in 1946 Premiers Clement Attlee and Harry Truman came to an agreement that Americans could establish aircraft bases in England. There was an official handover in 1951, the base was expanded and developed through compulsory purchase and a massive building program. The Bletchington quarries were able to supply the requisite aggregates and concrete for huge new runways. First were B47 Stratojets, which were not only bigger, but also noisier than the previous Lancaster bombers. In 1954 an American B47 bomber crashed in Stoke Wood.

The design of the station buildings altered in response to different perceptions of how the Russians would attack the base. From bombing, to missiles, paratroopers, even tanks flown in from massive transporter planes. Changes were also made to in effect split the base in two, conventionally armed planes in one area, nuclear on the other. It was rare for servicemen to be able to move from one to the other. The base design did follow a semi standard footprint, used across British and European US operational bases. This helped servicemen find their way around particularly as they were often rotated from base to base around the world. Conversely this would also have helped the Russian's attack.

From the 1950s up until the 1980s it was expanded, it became far bigger than the village. In 1966 De Gaulle withdrew France from NATO, which meant the squadrons posted there moved to Upper Heyford. It became the biggest American base in Europe.

During the 1970s the Americans changed to a smaller plane, the F111, but the roar of the engines remained a thing of note and annoyance.

In the 1980s things became very tense in international relations, so the base extended even more, with a great deal more security added. Only the fall of the Berlin wall allowed for a cessation of constant upgrading to the infrastructure.

The base had been leased from the MOD hence it kept its name. However a whole new community was developed with USA style supermarkets, cinema, bowling alley, barbers shops, restaurants and housing. Familiar goods were available at familiar US prices. Large numbers of

British people were employed on base and by the Ministry of Defence who had a presence there nonetheless the majority of the inhabitants were Americans. The Americans brought millions of pounds to the local economy and there was a great feeling of excitement about the opportunities for locals to benefit. The black market took off and locally there was an abundance of Lucky Strike cigarettes and Southern Comfort. Upper Heyford base was at one time described as a mini America. It was seen as a glamorous place. Unsurprisingly romantic liaisons developed. Inevitably this also caused friction and fights between the local men, particularly local British servicemen and the US servicemen. Similar tensions existed in the 1940s.

Significant efforts were made to integrate the US and British communities. During one late harvest some American servicemen helped a local farm gather the harvest. Anglo-American Community Groups were set up; Aynho's playground equipment was repainted more than once due to this initiative. Tours of the base proved very popular.

The Americans had been given strict instructions about how to fit in with the British such as:

“The British have their own ways of life, and you shouldn't try to change them
They may wear old, patched clothes, but all clothing is heavily rationed and they have to make do
They can't make good coffee, but you can't make good tea
Try not to get involved in discussions about politics or religion
Never insult the King or Queen, who have stayed in London and have been bombed themselves
Don't comment on Northern Ireland matters
Remember that they have been facing daily bombing raids for several years now, and many have lost family friends, their homes and all their possessions
If you get invited into their homes and they say eat as much as you want, please don't, because what is on the table may well be the ration for the whole family for a week”

Conversely some Americans did not like Upper Heyford's poorer weather, smaller size houses with fewer white goods and distance from bright lights.

A number of the visitors were more adventurous, they rented local houses (including in Aynho) and a few children joined local, off base schools. This still happens today albeit from RAF Croughton.

In 1982 there were Peace Camps and CND marches against the use of nuclear weapons. On one occasion 752 protestors were arrested; a statement of intent from the authorities during Thatcher/Reagan “special relationship”. The massed protest only lasted four days but the camp existed for many months.

Its last active service saw the F-111s leave to bomb Gaddafi's desert camp in 1986.

The last air show was in 1992, the end of an era. After the Americans withdrew, the base has been used for storing new cars and the bunkers used to store documents and fireworks amongst other things. Parts have also been used as film locations, notably for the James Bond film “Octopussy”, “World War Z”, and for a Doctor Who episode.

New private housing developments are replacing the servicemen's accommodation and parts of the camp are open to visitors.

3) Forthcoming Meetings

Wednesday 28th June – **“A Sunday afternoon with a School logbook” a review of the Aynho School log.**

There are no meetings in July or August.