

Saltby - The Distant Past

There are various derivations suggested for the name 'Saltby'. One source has it that it got its name from the ancient trackway that was used for the transportation of salt from the salt mines at Droitwich to the coast near Wainfleet. Another has it probably from Salte's by, Old Swedish 'Salte may exist'. Domesday Book has it as Saltebi. In 1871 there were 58 houses in the village with 290 inhabitants.

Saltby Heath, on which Saltby airfield was constructed was enclosed in 1780

A trackway, possibly prehistoric, originally known as Sewstern Lane (the Leicestershire / Lincolnshire border) formed the original eastern boundary of the airfield before the extension in late 1943.

There were originally a possible eleven Bronze Age round barrow sites on Saltby Heath, clustered to the west of the Sewstern Lane together with 'King Lud's Entrenchments' in the vicinity of the Wyville to Saltby road. The Entrenchments consisted of three banks and two ditches. Another site ½ mile to the south known as the 'Folding Dykes' was covered by the airfield.

One suggestion has it that the Anglo-Saxon King Lud was buried in the tumulus known as The Tent. It is also possible that he had no connection at all with the either the entrenchments or the earth beneath.

Two barrows to the south-east of the junction of the Wyville to Saltby road and the road to Croxton Kerrial were destroyed with the erection of airfield buildings

A number of the barrows had been opened during the 18th century. Human bones, pottery and charcoal were found in various ones, one barrows were described as constructed of earth and another with some stones at the summit.

One barrow, the most south-easterly, was excavated by Leicestershire museums under Patrick Clay in 1978. Another, slightly to the north, is still largely intact protected by a conifer plantation (in 1978)

The Sewstern Lane was later used as a drover's track, part of the route bringing animals from the north to London. On this Lane previously stood The Three Queen's inn, Hungerton, a mile or so to the north.

In 1940 there were secret plans that would have turned the Sewstern Lane into a 'drovers track' of a different nature. In case of a German invasion and to prevent the chaotic scenes of refugees blocking the roads of Belgium and France the plan was to use the Sewstern Lane as part of a route for fleeing refugees from the south towards the north. This was to free the Great North Road, the A1, for military traffic.

Saltby Airfield

Saltby airfield lies 6 miles to the south of Grantham and to the east of Saltby, the edge of the field being less than a mile from the village.

Much of the village and most of Saltby Heath on which the airfield was built was originally part of the Duke of Rutland's Belvoir Estate but was sold by auction in March 1944 to meet death duties. A lot of the land in the parishes of Saltby and Sproxton was then acquired by Buckminster Estates.

The airfield was originally wholly in Leicestershire but the extension of runway 07-25 at the end of 1943 crossed the ancient trackway Sewstern Lane, at the eastern side of the airfield, into Lincolnshire.

30 Aug. 1941	14 O.T.U. of No. 7 Group Bomber Command arrives (grass airfield at first) with Handley-Page Hampdens, Avro Ansons. Also one Westland Lysander for drogue gunnery target towing
Sep. 1942	Wellingtons began replacing Hampdens, completed Jan. 1943
11 May 1942	" Transfer to 92 Group
Aug. 1943	" Moved
Date unknown	No. 32 Glider Mtce. Unit of No. 2 Heavy Glider Mtce. Unit based there and 32 Airspeed Horsas stored until transfer to American Command in Feb. 1944

Airfield probably closed from Aug. 43. as the tarmac (?) runways were becoming unserviceable

They were rebuilt with three concrete runways by No. 5352 Airfield Construction Wing, two of 4,200 feet (02-20 & 13-31) and one of 6,090 feet (07-25) and other improvements to the airfield.

18 Nov/Dec.(?) 1943	Transferred to control of U.S. 9th Troop Carrier Command, headquarters at St. Vincents, Grantham (airfield not operational)
Early Feb. 1944	Runways completed and first arrival by members of 314th Troop Carrier Group, Part of American 9th Troop Carrier Command, 52nd Wing, comprising 32nd, 50th, 61st and 62nd Squadrons. A small contingent of 1st. Airborne Division troops were stationed here for a time for training and liaison purposes.
20 Feb. 1944	Main party of above started to arrive, C 47s of 32nd Squadron
Late Feb. 1944	Other Squadrons arrive
Early Mar 1944	Remainder of squadron's C 47s arrive from Italy
19 Mar 1944	Ground echelon of 32 Squadron arrive from Italy via Corby railway station

4 Apl 1944	Start of exercises dropping paratroops :- 36 C 47s dropped 82nd Airborne Division paratroops
8 Apl 1944	36 C 47s dropped British 1st Airborne Division paratroops
During April 1944	Start of towing in Waco CG-4A gliders from Greenham Common base
D-Day 6 June 1944	60 C 47s of Group flew to Normandy with 950 men of American 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment and other units of the 82nd Airborne Division
D + 1	52 planes re-supply troops in Normandy
17 September 1944 17 & 18 Sep.	The Assault on Arnhem, Part of Operation "Market Garden" Some 72 planes of The Group each day carried men of the British 1st Airborne Division to Arnhem. They consisted mainly of the 2nd, 3rd, 11th, and 156th Parachute Battalions .
21 Sep.	The Group carried some 604 men of The 1st Polish Independent Parachute Brigade in an attempt to relieve Arnhem. In all , The Group flew 198 C47 and 6 C53 sorties carrying some 2,330 British and 604 Polish paratroops. 4 aircraft lost and 15 men died.
End Feb. to 20 March 1945	314th. T.C.G. leave for France
March 1945 to August 1945	R.A.F. No.1665 Heavy Conversion Unit arrived (Stirlings & Halifaxes)
7 May 1945	38 Short Stirlings departed for Copenhagen with 1st Airborne Division troops
May 1945	349th T.C.G. arrived for two weeks with C 46s to assist in ferrying 1st Airborne Division troops to Norway & Denmark (23, 312,313 and 314 T.C.Squadrons ?) The Group made 224 lifts from Saltby and carried 1,163 personnel of the 1st. Airborne Division and some 1,700,00 lbs. of freight to Oslo, Stavanger and Copenhagen
June 1945 to 28 Nov. 1945	R.A.F. 38 Group Transport Command
Until 10 Sep. 1948 or 26 Oct. 1948 (?)	R.A.F. Nos. 216 & 255 M.U.s, 40 Group, using airfield for storage purposes then closed
26 Sep. 1955	Airfield de-requisitioned

Saltby Airfield Communications, some facts and memories

All U.K. Airfields relied on The G.P.O. Engineering Department for the provision and maintenance of all land-line communications and certain other signalling facilities.

A typical Bomber airfield included the following facilities :-

A single position Ops. switchboard

A two position Admin. switchboard for typically 100 extension lines. At airfields of The U.S. 9th Troop Carrier Command in the area the telephone operators used a telephonic code in answering calls at the switchboard. These had the initial 'T'. Two were 'Tomato' and 'Tomahawk'. I believe that Barkston Heath was 'Tomato' and either Saltby or North Witham was 'Tomahawk'. A 'Privacy Set' (scrambler) was connected to the most important telephones, e.g. C.O. This was a large, heavy (over 90 lbs.) mains operated box, valve equipped (before the days of transistors!)

As a trainee G.P.O. engineer from September 1943, one of my earliest tasks was to repair scores of telephone switchboard cords that were brought into Grantham by the linemen from airfields including Saltby, a never ending task!

There were speech and teleprinter Private Wires to Group or Base. In the case of Saltby this was the Bomber Group H.Q. at St. Vincents, Grantham and which housed the U.S. 9th T.C.C. from late 1943 to March 1945. Others would be routed to Cottesmore.

'Conference Amplifiers' were specially designed, enabling the Headquarters command to have a full conference with station and squadron commanders and others via private wires.

Met. and Admin. / Ops. teleprinters These were routed via four-channel V.F. equipment to the G.P.O. Defence Teleprinter Network station at St. Vincents, Grantham. Adapters enabled the use of American teletype machines at the U.S. Airfields.

The Met. teleprinter was linked via the appropriate headquarters to the Met. centre at Dunstable and churned out almost incessantly the forecast on the hour with the general synopsis and the innumerable groups of numerical code giving the details.

The Private Wires and exchange lines were routed into the airfield by 'outlet cables'. There were two to give continuity of service, these were spurs off the main telephone network cable. The main feed to Saltby was from Grantham with the alternative towards Melton Mowbray.

A perimeter cable (a 38 pairs lead cable) provided service to dispersal points, defence posts, airfield controllers and remote control circuits for beam approach etc.. The cable layout was circular in configuration to give continuity of service in case of a break due to damage, enemy or otherwise. The peri. cable at Saltby suffered from many faults during late '43 and early '44, no doubt due in part to the reconstruction works at that time. I recall the stories of the cable jointer and his mate from Grantham, toiling in the wet and mud to locate, dig and repair the cable faults time after time.

Distribution cables and poles fed the telephone extensions to the various sites, buildings and huts. In the American photo. of the technical site near Herring's Gorse, G.P.O. telephone distribution poles can be seen alongside the low lying buildings. In the case of the American occupation in particular these were augmented by their own provision of field cables and field telephones.

Remote control cables fed to W/T, H/F and Direction Finding Stations around the airfield.

Personal Reminiscences of Saltby Airfield

The following are extracts from the recollections of Air Commodore Cecil A. Alldis in retirement after the war :-

In 1942 when Saltby was a satellite of Cottesmore in 14 O.T.U., he was an instructor and took over the command of the detached Flight and the " Subordinate Command " of the airfield as a Squadron Leader at the age of 23. He had a total service of less than three years and had just completed a tour of night operations with No. 144 (Hampden) Squadron. He was almost totally innocent of the knowledge to run a Training Flight, let alone a Station.

The Hampden was considered a tough and reliable operational aeroplane but was a tricky machine on which to train inexperienced pilots. It's fuselage was too narrow to allow dual control, so that new pilots could not be instructed in the air. After ground instruction and a certain amount of demonstration flying, the pupil had to be sent off on his own.

One of his Flight Lieutenants was in his early 30's and was regarded as a grandfather. The rest were roughly about the same age as himself.

The airfield was only half completed, with some of the necessary buildings unfinished, it was also very dispersed with the roads still being built. As a result, in wet weather the whole place and a good many of the inmates were pretty well covered in mud, which did not help the serviceability of the aircraft.

He lived with his wife in one of Sir Denis Le Marchant's farmhouses at nearby Wyville. Saltby took part in the first 'Thousand Bomber Raid' on Cologne in May 1942.

Instructors were formed into scratch crews with aircraft which had to be withdrawn from training a week or two before the raid.

Peter Stevenson lived between Denton and Woolsthorpe during the war and was a member of the A.T.C. He recalls having flights in C-47s two or three times in 1944 from Saltby, amongst other airfields. The aircrew were more accustomed to navigating over the wide open spaces of Texas than the fields of England. As he was keen on map-reading and navigation, when having cross-country trips in the rear of the C-47s the crew would often call from the cockpit and ask if it was such-and-such place that was sighted and he would confirm if they were on course or not !. He remembers one sight that stood out when, from his home, he witnessed the sky seemingly covered with a training mission of low-flying C-47s, probably not much more than 500 feet up, so big that the edges of the formations couldn't be seen.

Ray Bennett's parents kept the pub at Sproxton. He remembers that Irishmen stayed at the pub when the airfield was being built and when it was operational, two R.A.F. Officers had rooms there. One was the Station Medical Officer together with his wife. Aircraft crashes of one sort or another were fairly common especially near a training airfield. He recalls a Hampden that crashed into farm buildings one night along the Coston lane from the pub. The story told was that the pilot was told before take-off that the aircraft wasn't in too good a shape but he replied that they were only going to a dance at Cottesmore so it would be all right !. It is believed that three lost their lives.

D.Stewart recalls one visit to Saltby probably in April / May 1944 (pos. 24th May). My father was a Police Sergeant in Lincolnshire bordering the Saltby Airfield. He had arranged with the American Provost officer for us to have flight in a glider. We waited in the guardroom, which stood on the north side of the Wyville to Saltby road, for some time but eventually the trip had to be called off because an exercise was due to take place. As a consolation we did have a look in an Airspeed Horsa glider, shown round by a British Airborne officer. He told the story, possibly apocryphal, of a senior officer being shown round the Horsa, seeing a large diameter tube inside and placing it towards his mouth said "I suppose this is the speaking tube". The tube in question was otherwise known as The Sanitary Tube !. Whilst in the guardroom we had a serviceman pointed out to us doing some 'gardening' in a plot across the road. We were told he was in the 'cooler' having gone AWOL and was a full-blooded Cherokee Indian - my first sighting and he was dressed in fatigues !.