

Sandbach History Society
Report of the March 2024 meeting
Rod Cameron: Wartime Byley and Cranage

The subject of the presentation at the March meeting of Sandbach History Society was Wartime Cranage and Byley. The talk, given by Rod Cameron, a member of the Society, showed how Byley, a small village north of Holmes Chapel, played an important part in the Second World War.

Mr Cameron said that war was declared in September 1939 and shortly after that, land at Earnshaw Hall Farm was compulsorily purchased and construction work began. RAF Cranage was planned as a flight training school and eventually used as a School of Air Navigation. The first aircraft to use the airfield for navigation training were twin-engined Avro Ansons. From December 1940, 96 Squadron, equipped with Hawker Hurricanes were stationed at Cranage, their task being to protect the industries of the north-west midlands and Liverpool from German bombers.

After the war, RAF Cranage was used to house RAF families returning from all over the world. The airfield remained in use for storage until it finally closed in July 1957. Many buildings were demolished but the remains of others are still to be seen.

The three runways were only ever grass but reinforced, as necessary, with perforated metal sheeting and linked by cinder taxiways – a short length of which was concreted and still exists.

The WW2 defences at the airfield have been scheduled by Historic England. The schedule says that it falls into six separate areas and includes the upstanding and buried remains of part of the defences and, in particular, the battle headquarters building from where the defence of the airfield was co-ordinated; an anti-aircraft gunpost; three upstanding pillboxes; the buried remains of a fourth pillbox and a sleeping shelter.

Mr Cameron said that the importance of defending airfields was realised before the outbreak of war, with air raid shelters and gun emplacements designed to provide protection from air attacks but over time they became more concerned with the capture of airfields and the pillboxes and battle headquarters at Cranage show that shift. The buildings at Cranage which remain are rare and important examples nationally.

He showed photographs of the battle headquarters building which was originally entered through a metal hatch and down a short flight of stairs. The building gave a good view over the whole airfield for the commander whose office was at the centre of the building. It contained an office, a messengers' room, sleeping accommodation and a telephone exchange. Telephone connections to the defence posts and runners allowed the commander to monitor any attack on the airfield and have control over the whole defence force, as well as receiving incoming information on enemy troop movements and aircraft. At the eastern end of the building was an observation post with a narrow viewing slit, about 2 inches high, all the way round.

Adjacent to the battle headquarters is a light machine gun post. It housed four men, armed with 3 light machine guns and a rifle. An earth bank, now eroded away, gave protection to the gun crew. Three pillboxes, all of different dimensions, are hexagonal in shape and are made of brick and concrete. A concrete and brick sleeping shelter, with 11 cubicles, each with two bunks, provided night accommodation for a maximum of 22 men.

The graves in the churchyard of St John's Church, Byley, remind us of the significant part played by RAF Cranage in World War 2, said Mr Cameron. At least 36 men were killed flying to and from the airfield and 18 are buried there. He said the worst air crash occurred on 28th April 1942 when a Lockheed Hudson was being used as a ferry flight from Scotland. It stalled on the approach and all nine men on board, including 5 pilots, were killed.

Just after the war, on 11th February 1946, two Royal Navy aircraft collided over Minshull Vernon killing the 4 officers and 2 Petty Officers on board. The accident was witnessed by Joe Wilson, a member of the Society, who was present at the meeting. Two of the men are buried at Byley.

On 3rd May 1941, a German Junker plane was shot down over Lostock Graham. Two of the four men on board attempted to bail out but their parachutes failed and they fell to their deaths. The other two men were captured and became prisoners of war. The casualties were initially buried at Byley but later re-interred at the military cemetery on Cannock Chase.

Mr Cameron explained that in 1935 the government decided to create a shadow aircraft industry and new factories were built. The one at Broughton, near Chester, was started in 1937 and at Byley, adjacent to the airfield, in April 1941, both of them being of the same design and assembling Vickers-Armstrong Wellington Bombers. The Wellington bomber had a wingspan of 86 feet, a range of 1885 miles, a speed of 180 mph and was manned by a crew of 5. The completed aircraft would be towed from the factory to the airfield for their first flight and onward delivery. The first Wellingtons took off from Byley in November 1941.

When Harry Coates bought the factory site at Cranage after the war for his transport and storage business, he decided to retain the hangars and flight sheds for posterity and incorporate them in new buildings. Photographs of the interior showed some of the original equipment, such as a roof crane. Mr Cameron said that the wings for the aircraft were brought to Byley from Broughton using large lorries known as Queen Mary's. Photographs showed the difficulty of getting such large loads through Holmes Chapel necessitating a diversion to the south of the village and the removal of the metal church gates at the narrowest point.

More photographs showed personnel at work in the various departments. At least 300 people worked at the factory - mainly women - some being local but the majority brought in by coach.

The first line of defence at RAF Cranage was the local platoon of the Home Guard. An observation tower was built on the roof of the main building and an HQ suite on a mezzanine floor inside the building together with a viewing platform. The platoon was made

up of men who worked at the factory, others who worked locally and yet more who worked at the Broughton factory.

Mr Cameron ended his presentation by saying that in the vestry at St John's Church at Byley is a plaque in memory of the Revd Robert William Lloyd Jones who was Rector from 1937 to 1962 and was the officiating chaplain at RAF Cranage. He said that one of his duties would have been to bury the 16 men in the churchyard, reminding members of the large debt owed to brave young pilots who made the ultimate sacrifice.

The next meeting of Sandbach History Society will be on 2nd April at 8.00 pm in Sandbach Library when John Pemberton will talk about "The History of Moston in Warmingham". Talks are popular and the accommodation is limited so visitors (entrance fee £3) are asked to contact the society by phoning 01270 760810 or via the website www.sandbachhistorysociety.org.uk

John Higgins
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