

THE YANKS ARE COMING!

Early in 1942, it was announced that the flat area of land at the top of Wood Hill, known locally as Hadstock Common, had been identified as a site for building one of the airfields needed in Eastern England to house the United States' Eighth Air Force. By the summer work had already started with a view to it being operational by the spring of 1943.

The villagers were not happy. Bombing raids to Germany were to be made from the airfield. Would this make it more likely that the village would become a target for enemy bombs? Furthermore, Hadstock Common, a name which still conjured up romantic images of a pre- Enclosure rural idyll, was to be buried under concrete.

With Debden and Duxford airfields already operational, dog-fights had been witnessed in the skies over the Common. In one such incident a German pilot who was shot down managed to bale out but as a result of his parachute failing to open he met instant death as he hit the ground with such impact that he was virtually buried. This incident was watched at close hand by George 'Duck' Swann. Another fatality involved a Hurricane from Debden which crashed on Bowers side of Hadstock Wood while the pilot was learning to dogfight. Even before the pegs had been put in the ground to mark out the airfield, Lord Hawhaw, who had once lived at Great Chesterford, announced in one of his Nazi propaganda broadcasts that Hadstock airfield was to be bombed. Following this, a number of incendiary bombs were dropped around the outskirts of the proposed airfield. Further bombs were dropped on the airfield side of Hadstock wood, opposite Lower Farm, and at the top side of the spinney on Penn Road near 'Covent Garden', all leaving craters, some of which became ponds.

Before the airfield was operational, a British fighter plane engaged in a dog-fight was shot down over The Baulk. The pilot baled out and was taken to Hall Farm to have his wounds dressed by Mrs Custerson. This incident is vividly remembered by Roy Swann, a small boy at the time, who was with his father on top of 'The Baulk' cutting lucerne with a horse-drawn Haytor. His father threw him to the ground and lay on top of him while bullets flew through the air. Such incidents did nothing to reassure anxious villagers.

Once the construction work was started, there was a constant stream of lorries passing through the village to deliver hardcore to the site. The truth of the adage that some people are made rich through wars was soon evident to locals who realized that many of the lorries registered their arrival on the Hadstock side of the site, but instead of unloading, drove straight off the other side, circled round through Little Walden, Saffron Walden, Ashdon and Bartlow, only to register again while carrying the same load. Additional material for the construction of the airfield was supplied by a gravel pit located on the left hand side of

Penn Road near the present day stables. To supply fuel to the airfield, a pipeline was constructed from the distribution centre at Saffron Walden (near Ridgeon's) to the round red brick fuel tanks still standing on the nature reserve.

Progress was hampered by the harsh winter of 1942-43, meaning that it was not until March 1944 that the airfield was ready for occupation and operations. By this time, for some unknown reason, the name had been changed from Hadstock to Little Walden and the first occupants were actually from the Ninth Air Force, not the Eighth as originally planned. They were a bomber group engaged in bombing targets in France. In September 1944, they were re-located, being replaced by a fighter group from the Eighth Air Force, whose role was in the air over Europe, especially Germany. In February 1945, they were succeeded by the Eighth Air Force's most junior bombardment group, which made raids on Germany for about six weeks until the return of the fighter group, who flew their last missions during a few weeks in April, by which time the war in the air was nearly over and Victory in Europe only days away.

During the course of the war Havocs (A20s), Mustangs (P15s), Flying Fortresses (B17s), Thunderbolts (P47s), and Invaders (A26s) flew from the airfield. Villagers soon became accustomed to the constant sound of aircraft taking off and returning, often counting them out and counting them back in again. However, there were tragedies: villagers recall three serious crashes which made a big impact on the population.

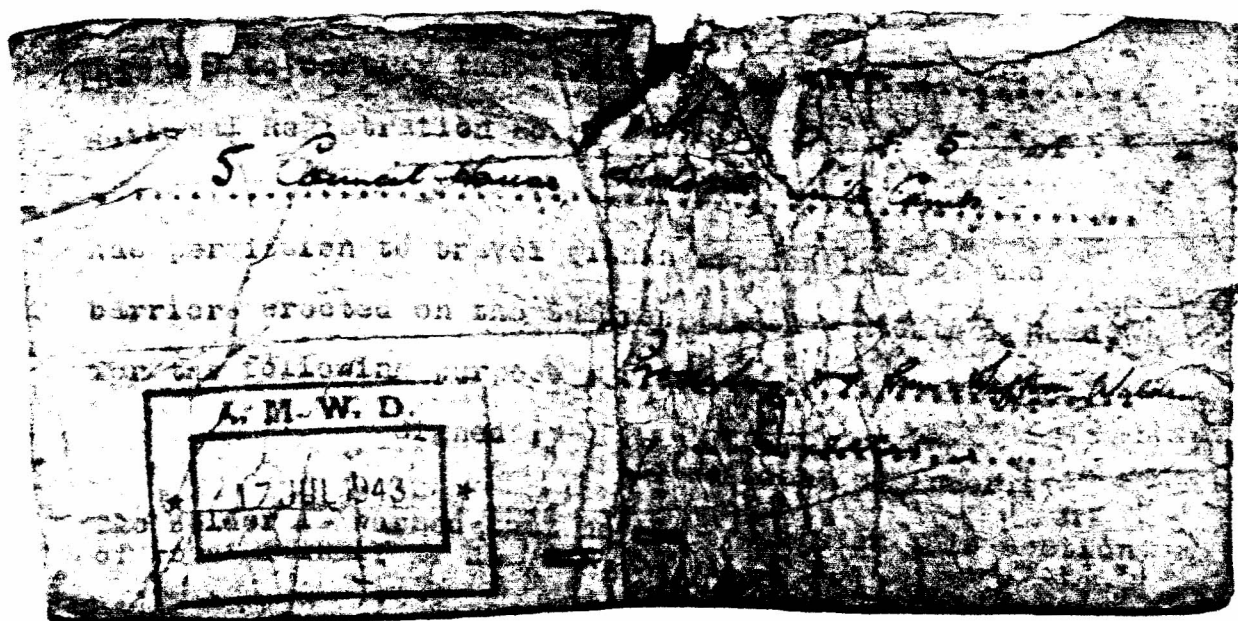
In the early days of learning to fly with both wing and belly tanks, a pilot taking off in a Mustang had difficulty getting off the ground. He nose-dived into the bottom of The Leys 40Acre along Penn Road, bursting into flame and creating a huge hole which is now a pond.

A fatality was narrowly averted when a Mustang returning from a bombing mission caught a wing on the walnut tree on the Arnold's Lane side of the garden at Hillcrest. It hit the road, bounced over the house and crashed into the meadow behind. The pilot, Lee Murray, was pulled from the wreckage by some local men who lived nearby, including Stan Mackay and George Swann, before it burst into flames. After he had recovered from his injuries, the pilot visited 'Yews Farm' to thank the men who had saved him.

The most horrific of all the crashes was when a Flying Fortress trying to land, lost height, went through a hedge and ploughed through a field before hitting a tree in the spinney at the bottom of Arnold's Lane where it burst into flame. Although the tail-end gunner managed to jump out before the plane hit the ground, he dropped dead, supposedly of shock, while making his way across fields to the airfield. Villagers who ran to the site of the crash recall a scene of carnage with body parts hanging from the trees and bullets whizzing through the air as they exploded in the heat of the fire. Strangely, only one tree died as a result of that crash; locals said it was because a man's brains had hung there. That was not the end of the tragedy on

that day: two military policemen on motorbikes who were dispatched to the scene cross-country, also met their deaths when they hit a ditch at speed.

While the airfield was operational, security was minimal. Although there was a barrier at the top of Wood Hill, locals knew so many other routes to the airfield that it was impossible to keep them away. Regular users of the road to Saffron Walden were issued with passes, which entitled them to cross the airfield but there was little regard for safety. Eric Swann had recollections of cycling across the airfield with planes taking off only yards away and the pilots waving to him. Sometimes he would jump off his cycle and lie flat on the ground to avoid being hit.



Eric Swann's pass enabling him to travel across the airfield during the American occupation of the airfield

Lorries carrying ammunition to the airfield were a common sight as they travelled through the village having loaded up at Linton railway station. They were always driven by black Americans who were under no illusions as to why they were given this job. Village children of the time recall the drivers throwing handfuls of sweets to them as they passed by.

The Americans were over here to do a job and many of them lost their lives in the process but as well as working hard they certainly played hard. Once they were established on the airfield it did not take the locals long to realise that the Americans were 'over-paid, over-sexed and over here'. They soon made themselves at home in the village; it was not unusual to look out of the window or to come home and find a group of uniformed Americans relaxing in the garden, smoking and playing cards. Many of them, clearly missing their families and their own country, were keen to wheedle their way into family life. This was

often achieved by befriending village children to whom great generosity was shown with gifts of sweets, chewing gum and uniform badges. Unaffected by food rationing, the Americans enjoyed treats that were scarce in England. Tinned fruit, tins of jam and condensed milk frequently found their way into homes in the village as a thank-you to their hosts, especially if the women were doing their laundry. The food wasted on the airfield came as a shock to villagers. Sid Swan, who worked at Yews Farm, had the job of driving the farm lorry to the airfield each day to collect the food waste for pig swill. His son, George, who often accompanied him, remembers occasionally grabbing a pancake as it was about to be tipped in with the scraps. On arrival back at the farm, one canister of scraps was always emptied into 'The Cage'. The cannisters in which the waste was transported had to be thoroughly cleaned before being returned to the Americans.

Social life was important to the Americans who regularly 'borrowed' military vehicles to take themselves to dances in Cambridge. On returning, they would frequently abandon the vehicles in the village and sneak back into camp unnoticed. The following morning villagers would wake up to find a collection of fire engines, ambulances and jeeps dotted around the village. George Swan recalls his parents waking one night to see flames leaping outside their bedroom window in the brick cottages opposite the pub. Further investigation revealed an abandoned truck which had burst into flame, probably as a result of having been driven back from Cambridge with a flat tyre. Of course, no driver or passengers were to be seen.

In their smart gabardine uniforms and side hats, the American servicemen certainly caught the eyes of the local girls whose social life blossomed. Dances were regularly held on the airfield. U.S.A.F. trucks would tour the surrounding villages to pick up the girls and then take them home again after they had danced the night away to the music of Glen Miller and Benny Goodman, which blared out across the airfield twenty-four hours a day. Serious long-term relationships with local girls were discouraged and any serviceman who was perceived as becoming too involved would find himself promptly transferred to another airfield. In spite of this, the Americans unwittingly made a contribution to village life by providing youngsters with their sex education. It did not take them long to realise the purpose of the trysts in the lanes around the village, in Banton and in Hadstock Wood. Nor were there any doubts about the purpose of the mattress in the spinney at the top of Penn Road when they observed the same lady from a nearby village making her way there at 4p.m. every Thursday afternoon. The village lads could be counted on to find a good vantage point to observe these assignations.

Trade at the pub rocketed during the Americans' stay in the village, the scene often resembling a Wild West bar rather than a sleepy village inn. When fights broke out, the 'Snowdrops' (white helmeted military police) were summoned. Arriving in their Willey's jeeps, followed by a truck, they jumped out, long, white wooden truncheons in their hands and leapt into action, dragging the miscreants along the corridor in the

pub, beating them and throwing them into the back of the truck. The 'Snowdrops' did a regular round of the local pubs in an attempt to preserve law and order.

As the war drew to an end over the summer of 1945, the Americans prepared for their departure, leaving in October and November. Soon after they left, most of their vehicles were lined up on the main runway for inspection by anyone who was interested in buying them cheaply. Much to the delight of the local boys, they discovered the engines could be switched on by turning a knob. Soon they were racing from vehicle to vehicle to see who could get the most running. They never bothered to switch them off but just left them to run out of petrol. Within days of this escapade, the airfield was deserted and a distinctive era in the history of Hadstock had ended.

One of the legacies of the war was to widen the horizons of the villagers, many of whom had previously had no contact with people of other cultures. It was during the war that many saw black people for the first time and servicemen returning to the village told tales of life in other countries. Cultural barriers were crossed in a way which would have been unheard of before the war when Ruby Davey and Kavel Mackay set off for new lives in America as G.I. brides and Betty Rowlandson married a Polish soldier who had been stationed on the airfield. Eyebrows were raised even higher when in 1947 Percy Mackay, who had served in India in the Imperial Police Force, returned with an Indian wife.

The youngsters in the village had their aspirations heightened by the presence of the American servicemen who provided role models for a different, and perhaps better, way of life. More casual than their British counterparts, they seemed to want for nothing. In their smart uniforms and displaying a pride in every detail of their appearance, they exuded a confidence which the village lads were keen to emulate, resulting in a more self-assured and less deferential generation. As well as fostering an interest in fashion, the Americans introduced the village to the popular music of the period with the Big Band sound which was blasted across the airfield.

Although the airfield was handed over to the R.A.F. on the departure of the Americans, it was never occupied apart from a brief stay by some Polish soldiers who were less accommodating to the local youths than the Americans had been. The hangar nearest the village was soon taken over by Myhills grain merchants, their brown lorries becoming a familiar sight as they shuttled between Hadstock and their other grain store near Linton station. Their practice of burning surplus corn in the area in front of the hangar brought villagers flocking to salvage it for free chicken food when its distinctive smell drifted across the village.

For many years after the war, the abandoned airfield, known locally as 'the drome', provided village children with an exciting adventure playground while learner drivers from miles around arrived to practise their driving skills along the wide runways. It was in the late 1950s that the process of returning the land to agricultural use was started with the breaking up of the runways. Huge heaps of broken concrete dominated the landscape until they were removed for use as hardcore by a fleet of red and cream lorries belonging to M. Dickerson. In most places, narrow roadways were left with the reclaimed land on either side soon becoming water-logged and providing the ideal habitat for a colony of lapwings which bred there successfully from some years until it was finally taken back into cultivation.

It is thought there are still a large number of unexploded incendiary bombs in Hadstock Wood. After the war, village lads, totally unaware of the dangers, took on the challenge of searching for these and would often take them into the village to play with, throwing them against walls to see if they would explode. Eric Swann used to recall an incident when he and some other lads were bouncing one against the brick wall between The Yews and the old butcher's shop, only to have it confiscated by Jack Crawley. The T-bars which had held the German incendiary bombs under the planes were jettisoned with the bombs. When these were found, they were collected by locals to use as stakes and more than one dog chain in the village was anchored by such a T-bar.

Many of the buildings on the airfield had been made of corrugated iron and as time passed, they started to fall into a state of dereliction. There was a possible correlation between this and the number of corrugated iron sheds which sprang up in the village at this time. Whatever else had changed, the villagers had not lost their instinct for looking to their immediate environment to furnish their needs.