From the archives Edited by David Rose

Crash landings and RAF activities on Merrow Downs

Local historian and aviation enthusiast **Frank Phillipson** has been researching RAF wartime activities on Merrow Downs near Guildford

The Merrow Downs landing ground on the horizon to the left and the slope of St Martha's can just be seen to the right. Viewed from The Mount.

A DeHavilland DH82A Tiger Moth with camouflaged upper surfaces and yellow under surfaces. It was principally aircraft liked these that used the landing strip at Merrow Downs. Photo by Philip Stevens, AirTeamImages.com

DURING the Second World War, a field on Merrow Downs at Burwood Farm was used by the RAF as a landing ground.

The field is situated to the north of White Lane and is the first field a mile westwards from Newlands Corner along the Drove Road (marked "Trackway" on the Ordnance Survey map).

It was known as 40 Acre Field and may have been used for one of the touring air displays or flying circuses in the 1930s. Certainly an air display was held in a field about a quarter of a mile to the east of the A25 at Newlands Corner in 1935.

Burwood Farm at this time was occupied by the White family, J. White & Son, running Warren Farm Dairy and Thomas "Charlie" White, operating a machinery hire business. The 1944 *Kelly's Directory of Guildford and Godalming* states that he was a steam roller contractor.

Apparently, Charlie and his male siblings were all named Thomas and were therefore known by their second names. Charlie, seemingly in an effort to ensure that his horses were not requisitioned for war use and were given rations, organised a mounted section of the Home Guard to patrol the downs and the Chantries.

The landing ground was used by DeHavilland DH82a Tiger Moth training bi-planes from No. 18 Elementary Flying Training School (EFTS).

This training unit opened on October 2, 1937, by General Aircraft Ltd, and was taken over by the RAF in September 1939 and was situated at Fairoaks aerodrome near Chobham.

To relieve the pressure at Fairoaks No. 18 EFTS used four other landing grounds. There were two Relief Landing Grounds (RLGs) at which aircraft were based, one was at Smith's Lawn, Windsor Great Park, and the other in a field at Winkworth near Bracknell. (In use from May 1941 to July 1945).

Two further landing grounds, were used to practise forced landings (Emergency Landing Grounds (ELGs)) one at Bray near Maidenhead, and the one at Merrow Downs.

At Merrow Downs there were no facilities at all, only a windsock on the highest point of the western field boundary.

The regular use of the field appears to have been on a very informal basis with seemingly no documentary evidence of a lease or agreement.

The first mention of Merrow ELG in No. 18 EFTS's operational record book is on November 12, 1943, (although it had been in use by them from at least 1940), when it says "Morrow (sic) force landing field has been washed out".

Given the proximity of the Special Operations Executive's spy training school at Tyting House, it is interesting to speculate whether the field may have been used to pick up or drop off agents by aircraft. If so, probably of the Westland Lysander single engine monoplane type aircraft.

For a while in 1943 or 1944, the landing ground was used, simultaneously with No. 18 EFTS, as a base by a flight of about three RAF Taylorcraft Auster aircraft (light single engined monoplane aircraft for artillery spotting).

They were parked in the north-east corner of the field and had at least three tents erected for personnel. It is likely that these aircraft left after D-Day to assist the British Army in France.

Another local RAF presence in 1940 was at Newlands Corner where a radio tender (truck) was positioned. Early in the wat two- way communications between fighter aircraft and their controlling RAF Fighter Command Sector Stations was carried out using high-frequency radio signals.

These signals had limited range and therefore mobile relay stations (radio tenders) were set up to extend the area of communications.

These relay stations were connected to the sector stations by a high-quality telephone line. The one at Newlands Corner was initially used by Tangmere Sector but was transferred to Northolt following a request on June 22, 1940.

On the subject of radio, Peter Stanley of Merrow remembers that there was a rectangular area of telegraph poles with a network of wires strung between them for radio purposes situated between the third hole or the fourth tee of the golf course and Trodds Lane.

Vehicles and trailers for equipment were positioned at the north-east corner of this site.

In 1945, a section of the RAF Regiment was in a camp on Merrow Downs near Newlands Corner – possibly in connection with the radio station.

Their presence noted by the Merrow Downs Conservation Committee, who asked their clerk to write to the commanding officer to arrange for rubbish, that had been dumped nearby, to be removed.

Quite a few people remember Tiger Moth aircraft activity on the downs during the war, but one story stands out.

It was about 1940, and Michael Knight, who was seven or eight at the time, was walking on Pewley Downs which were at the back of his house. He recalled: "I saw three aircraft flying (from the east) down the valley starting from the little church of St Martha's (and Merrow Downs).

"Behind us a yellow biplane was doing loops above an RAF training station which was based in a field nearby.

"The three aircraft were a Heinkel (111) bomber flanked by two Me 109s. They flew down the valley so low that we were looking down on the pilots.

The bomber dropped a bomb on the main line railway, but missed. The biplane continued doing loops and the three enemy aircraft flew off."

It has been possible to trace four accidents at or near the Merrow Downs landing ground during and after the war.

In January 1941, a Bristol Blenheim Mk I of RAF. No. 2 School of Army Co-operation (SAC) made a forced landing possibly due to poor weather. It was left there while its crew returned to their airfield by other means.

On January 17, 1941, an Avro Anson Mk I (serial number: W9553), a general purpose twin-engined monoplane, of C Flight No. 2 SAC, brought back an aircrew so that the Blenheim could be flown out.

According to the official report, while attempting to take off again, the Anson "failed to become airborne... due to the smallness of the field, lack of wind and heavy surface (snow)... (and) struck windward hedge", and crashed at 12.40pm into outbuildings of Whiteways, a house south of White Lane.

The aircraft was wrecked and written off. Fortunately, there were no injuries.

The pilot, Flying Officer T.A. Stewart, said that in addition to the above adverse conditions he "could not get throttle into emergency position, as it was wired up – this done by the makers".

There was no disciplinary action against Stewart as he was found not entirely to blame.

After the Anson's crash it seems likely that the pilot of the Blenheim decided against attempting a take off and that the aircraft was probably dismantled and taken away by road.

The aerial photograph (see above) seems to show that there was possibly a road access out of the field mid-way along the eastern boundary leading to the Drove Road and out to Newlands Corner. Road access through the farm or along White Lane seems unlikely given the size of an aircraft transporter vehicle.

On December 11, 1941, a Tiger Moth Mk II (serial number T6466) of No. 18 EFTS force landed in the woods at Newlands Corner due to engine failure in flight.

This seems to have been due to an over-rich fuel mixture setting which the pilot, Flying Officer E.R. Dutt, could possibly have cleared had he been at a greater height.

The aircraft was categorised as repairable and there does not appear to have been any injury.

On the "aircraft accident card" the aircraft "duty" is shown as "duel" but there is no mention of a pupil pilot and no reference to any disciplinary action.

Just over a year later, on March 22, 1943, at 3pm, another No.18 EFTS Tiger Moth Mk II (serial number: T7260), crashed on the landing ground.

The accident record card (see below) locates the crash as at "Merrow, F./L. Field" (force landing field).

The pupil pilot, Australian Sgt B.M. Pritchard, misjudged the landing and undershot the field and "struck bushes on airfield boundary and overturned".

At the time, Pritchard and his instructor Flying Officer E. Cornish had been airborne for 20 minutes and were involved in flying a "training oval".

No injuries were indicated but the aircraft was written off and only suitable for component recovery, while the engine was repairable.

No. 18 EFTS's commanding officer stated that the instructor failed to take corrective action early enough and in consequence Cornish received a caution.

Whether Merrow Downs was used in the post-war period is uncertain at present. However, on Sunday the April 24, 1949, a Tiger Moth (serial number: T7449) of the London University Air Squadron based at Fairoaks aerodrome crashed at 4.45pm, half a mile west of Newlands Corner on the Drove Road.

The pilot, Flying Officer George Brian Clark, RAFVR (Volunteer Reserve) was flying solo and had been airborne for 25 minutes engaged on a local map reading exercise.

He was seen to fly almost a complete circle (possibly over the landing ground). Then, when losing height in a steep right-hand turn, the lower right-hand wing caught the top of a tree, swung the aircraft around and sent it crashing to the ground where it immediately caught fire. Scores of people out on the Sunday afternoon at Newlands Corner witnessed the crash and several rushed to the scene.

The closest person to the crash was Reginald Wright from Camberley, who was 30 to 40 yards away.

He rushed to the plane and dodging the flames tried to get F.O. Clark out.

The pilot, however, was still strapped into the aircraft and Wright and others with him were forced back by the heat of the fire.

Somehow Clark managed to release his straps and get into a sitting position, whereupon Mr Wright and others dashed in and pulled him clear of the flaming aircraft. After first aid had been given he was lifted into Mr Wright's "shooting brake" and taken to the Royal Surrey County Hospital. The fire brigade were unable to do anything to save the aircraft.

F.O. Clark was badly burned on his head and hands, and his condition was stated as being fairly serious. However, he later improved and was taken to the burns unit at East Grinstead Hospital.

The RAF Court of Inquiry could find no precise reasons for the accident, but came to the conclusion that it was primarily due to the pilot blacking out.

It felt that an eye injury Clark sustained was partly due to the poor design of the Mk III goggles. In additional notes, Clark's commanding officer thought that he had attempted too much flying in one day after a long period of inactivity.

The Air Officer Commanding said that he was at a loss to understand how the accident happened as there was no evidence that the pilot fell asleep.

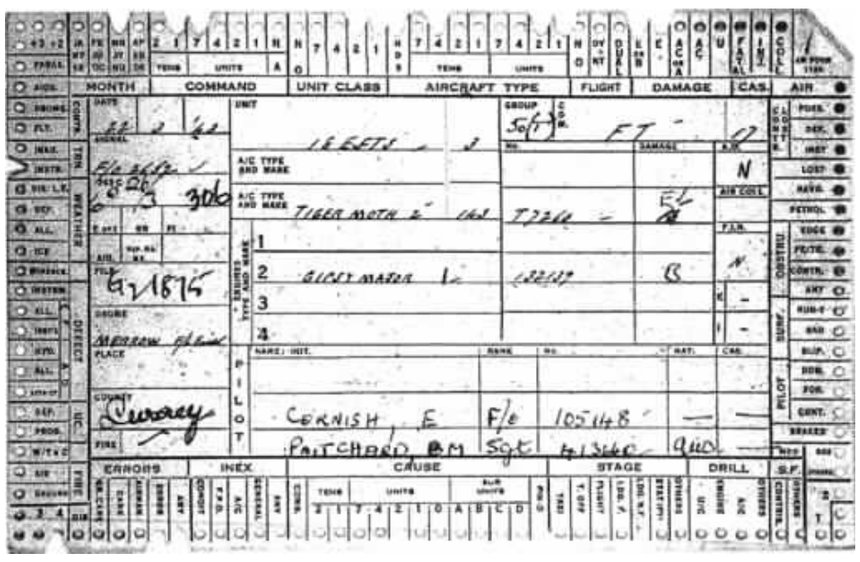
The report recommended that the "courageous action of certain individuals in attempting and finally succeeding in dragging the pilot clear of the burning aircraft should in some way (be) officially recognised".

At present it has not been possible to find the award of any decoration, although the RAF may have written to the people concerned thanking them for their efforts.

I would like to acknowledge and thank especially Brian Colling sand Julian Temple for their contributions and Karen Robinson for help in composing the text.

■ If you have any information about witness accounts of the 1941 Spitfire crash at Slyfield Green, or any other wartime aviation activities in the Guildford area, plus location and types of search lights and AA guns, conatct Frank Phillipson via David Rose on 01483 508920.

Part of an aerial photograph taken by the RAF on November 5, 1946, showing the Merrow Downs landing strip. White Lane can been seen at the top of the photo. The complete photo was reproduced with permission of the National Monuments Record of English Heritage on the archives page in the Surrey Advertiser *on February 16, 2007, as part of the story about the Merrow Downs PoW camp and Tyting Farm spy base.*



The RAF aircraft accident card of the Tiger Moth that crashed at the Merrow Downs landing ground on March 22, 1943. Reproduced with permission of the RAF Museum.

In January 1941, a Bristol Blenheim Mk I made a forced landing at Merrow Down. The Blenheim pictured is a later Mk IV. Photo by Colin Work, AirTeamImages.com

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