

RAF Southam

With the outbreak of the Second World War, there was a huge increase in the number of personnel joining the Royal Air Force and a consequent increase in the number of stations from which flying operations could be carried out. One of these stations was RAF Southam.

The Royal Air Force arrives

In 1940 a triangular shaped area of grassland in Southam Fields between the Welsh Road and the Daventry Road (map ref 430615) was requisitioned for use as a Relief Landing Ground (RLG) by the Tiger Moth aircraft operated from Ansty near Coventry.



*Group of ATC Cadets ** in flying helmets at RAF Southam c.1943*

These RLG's were set up to relieve pressure on the flying circuit of the parent airfield. The Southam airfield was laid out with four grassed landing strips between 500

and 600 yards in length and became part of Flying Training Command controlled by No 9 Elementary Flying Training School. The purpose of the ETS was to assess and grade new pilots and ensure they had the required ability and potential to be sent overseas to finish their training under the Commonwealth Air Training Scheme. All of the students came

from essential occupations such as draughtsmen, toolmakers, police officers and the like, if they failed the course they would be sent back to their former jobs in 'civvy street'



*The station flying instructors * with a large scale model aircraft at Southam in 1943*

Flying begins

The exact date of the first use of Southam for flying is not recorded but local people suggested that 'circuits and bumps' has started by the summer of 1940. Initially the Ansty Tiger Moths were

flown over to Southam each day by the instructors, the students would probably come over by road to practice take-offs and landings. By 1941 a number of Laing and Nissen huts had been built on the site along with six Blister hangars to house the aircraft. Maintenance facilities were subsequently provided along with flight offices, mess rooms and domestic billets to accommodate 70 ground personnel



Sgt Ken Moore (Instructor) in a Tiger Moth 86 over Southam c.1943

and storage tanks for 4,000 gallons of aviation fuel. A rather unusual feature of RAF Southam was a combined Officers' and Sergeants' Mess. Once these new facilities were fully operational they



Photos taken by Alan Griffin at Holt Farm in 1990 as a record of the few station buildings that were then still standing

saved much time as the aircraft could then be kept at Southam and made available for flying in the morning whilst being serviced during the rest of the day. During the mid-war period a number of night flying hours were added to the syllabus and for this a paraffin lamp flare path was lit on a few days each month. Flying at Southam then became a round-the-clock operation. Navigational aids in the spartan Tiger Moth bi-plane were rudimentary and students who became disorientated during night flying were advised to look out for the canal as a route back to the airfield. During daylight hours the huge palls of white smoke rising from Kayes' cement works and the Napton Brickworks chimneys were unmistakable landmarks for pilots unsure of where their landing ground was.



Sgt Ken Moore - white smoke in background was from Southam cement works chimney

Aircraft accidents

As with all flying training establishments, from time to time there were accidents involving aircraft. Apart from the Ansty Tiger Moths, Avro Tutor and Airspeed Oxford aircraft of 2 Central Flying School, Church Lawford also used Southam on a regular basis. The most serious incident was recorded in June 1941 when Tutor K3244 collided with another Tutor K3306 whilst landing. Although both aircraft were written off the crews escaped without injury. In July 1943 a Wellesbourne based Wellington HF812 of 22 OTU crash landed at Southam after engine failure. Fortunately, the crew were unhurt. The station log records a number of crashes on both take-off and landing and in the winter of 1943 one of the Southam aircraft was blown away in a gale and damaged beyond repair.

There is a marvellous story which my father recounted to me many years ago about one of Southam's best-known characters Thomas (Tommy) White. Tom was the Bandmaster of the Southam Town Band and a stonemason by trade. He operated from a large shed on one of the allotments in Daventry Road opposite the airfield. Tommy was in his workshop one morning when there was a most almighty crashing sound. After making a rapid exit, Tom was more than surprised to discover that one of the airfield's Tiger Moths had landed on the roof of his workshop and the pilot and his instructor were rather sheepishly clambering back onto *terra firma*. Tom's one regret was that his lunchtime sandwiches appeared to be covered in dust and would be inedible. The station log book has a number of entries for various dates 'overshot & crashed'; 'crashed on landing'; 'crashed on take-off' but we will never know who dropped in unexpectedly on Tommy that morning ruining his cheese sandwiches.



The Spitfire was an unusual and rare visitor to RAF Southam since Southam was a basic flying training establishment but this one pictured here, a Supermarine Spitfire V, was photographed in 1942 whilst on a pre-delivery flight to an RAF Fighter Squadron and had probably landed for re-fueling.

Station closure

Flying continued at Southam for many months with the trainee pilots making endless 'circuits and bumps.' By 1944 there was a slow decline in the need for new pilots and on 21 March 1944 all flying ceased at Southam, and Ansty, their parent station and No 9 EFTS closed down. The Southam site was subsequently used by a number of RAF Airfield Construction Units as a storage facility for plant and equipment required for use in Normandy after the 'D day' landings. On 18 December 1944 it was transferred to the Ministry of Works.



*Some of the local ladies *** who cooked and served meals in the station Mess in 1943*

For a period in the 1950's a former RAF Squadron Leader Waller lived on the airfield site and flew his own Tiger Moth from the airfield. If anyone has information about this period any information would be very welcome. Some of the former airfield buildings were photographed by the writer in the 1990's but the current status of these is not known.

Alan Griffin December 2016

Additional Photo Information

- * Left to Right - Sgt Moore, Sgt Hendy, Sgt McMillan, Flt Sgt Clayton, Sgt Perkins, Flt O Wreford, Sgt Allen, Sgt King, Sgt Mann, Sgt Jenkins, Sgt Jackson, Flt Lt Rodgers
- ** Local Men - Air Training Corps Cadets - Bill Bourne (Sergeant), Bill Gascoigne, Allan Shaw, Louis Rathbone and Ken Williams
- *** Local Ladies - Left to right: Iris King (cook), Emma (Mog) Pittom, ?Iris Askew and Barbara Timms

Sources

Correspondence with former RAF Southam instructors & pupils C W Rogers, Kenneth B Moore and J R Aldridge

Mark Evans, Midland Aircraft Recovery Group

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