

Former RAF Coltishall Timeline

Prehistoric and Roman

Given the positioning of the airfield above the confluence of the River Bure and its tributaries it may be expected that the airfield would contain evidence of prehistoric activity. Two possible ring ditches – possible Bronze Age burial mounds - were recorded within the airfield, although these are far from certain.

Later prehistoric and Roman

Cropmarks in the arable land around the airfield indicate extensive later prehistoric and/or Roman co-axial field systems, enclosures and major boundaries, some of which are likely to continue into the airfield itself. There is evidence of a Roman settlement to the south. The line of a major Roman road, running from Denver on the fen edge to a Roman town at Brampton and then on to Wayford Bridge, Smallburgh, passes through the north side of the airfield.

Medieval and later

Faint cropmarks on the airfield appear to represent fields associated with the former farmstead of Batley Green and the linear common or moor “Scottow Moor” as shown on the 1st Edition Ordnance Survey map (1889-1891). This feature may have been incorporated into the designed landscape around Scottow Hall.

1938 Plans for an airfield were announced, to be built on a large flat potato field.

1939 “Expansion Period” Standard Function airfield built as a bomber base. There were plans for six hangars (although one was destroyed during construction and the sixth never built), a perimeter track and grass flying field. Initially called “Scottow”, it was later called “Coltishall” after the second-nearest railway station. Buxton was closer, but that might have been confused with Buxton in Derbyshire.

1940 Change of plan to fighter station, opened June 1940. Supermarine Spitfires arrived first and Hawker Hurricanes soon after.

In early July Douglas Bader, then 30 years old and with artificial legs, was given command of 242 Squadron at Coltishall, a unit made up mainly of Canadian pilots. With morale low and discipline lax, Bader’s mission was to bring 242 back to a good operational standard.

On 10th July, a Coltishall Spitfire made the first “kill” of the Battle of Britain.

On 19th August an enemy raider bombed and strafed Hangar No 3. Three local men working there were killed.

15th September is known as Battle of Britain Day. During the Battle, Coltishall squadrons were mainly in support roles and defending coastal convoys.

WAAFs were recruited to work in the Operations Room at Coltishall, but were soon relocated to an Operations Room at Stratton Strawless Hall.

1941 A satellite airfield opened at Matlaske, and dummy airfields or “decoy” sites at Beeston St Lawrence and Suffield.

255 Squadron formed the first permanent night fighter squadron, armed with Bristol Beaufighters

RAF Neatishead opens; a brand new Air Defence station / Ground Control Intercept station from where Fighter Controllers, backed up by a wide range of support staff, could direct RAF fighters, day or night, to attack enemy aircraft from Germany as they launched raids against Military and Industrial targets in Norfolk as well as against the City of Norwich itself.

1943. A second satellite airfield opened at Ludham.

On 28th January Coltishall is visited by King George VI and Queen Elizabeth.

1941 to 1994. Air Sea Rescue, originally with Supermarine Walrus amphibious bi-planes, Avro Ansons and Westland Lysanders. From the 1950s, these duties were performed by a succession of helicopters.

1944 Two of the three grass runways reinforced with Sommerfield Track (steel matting)..

1945-47 The site was briefly handed over to the Free Polish Air Force

1945 On 8th May, Victory in Europe Day marked the end of the Second World War in Europe. By the end of hostilities, Coltishall had destroyed 207 enemy aircraft, with 48 probables and more than 100 damaged.

1947. A night fighter station, with de Havilland Mosquito aircraft.

1948 -1991. The Cold War. A sustained state of political and military tension between powers in the Western Bloc, dominated by the United States with NATO among its allies, and powers in the Eastern Bloc, dominated by the Soviet Union along with the Warsaw Pact.

1950 Main runway realigned and rebuilt as an asphalt runway

1950 First jet aircraft, de Havilland Vampires, stationed at Coltishall

1951 Mosquitoes replaced by de Havilland Venom and Gloster Meteor night fighters.

1956-1957 The runways and taxiways strengthened and extended. Two groups of blast walls built and a missile storage area to the east, for Firestreak air-to-air missiles.

1956 – 1994. Two air sea rescue squadrons, flying Westland Sycamore, Whirlwind, Wessex and Sea King helicopters.

1957-1964 Gloster Javelins stationed at Coltishall

RAF Coltishall was designated a "V-Bomber dispersal airfield", whereby V-bombers (the British nuclear deterrent) - the Avro Vulcan, Handley Page Victor and Vickers Valiant - could use Coltishall in the event of their home station being damaged by enemy action.

1958 Civil disobedience at RAF Pickenham aimed at preventing construction of a base for Thor intermediate range ballistic missiles. Several protestors spent Christmas in police cells.

1959 – 1974 English Electric Lightnings. At the peak there were 42 Lightnings on the base.

1961. The Berlin Wall is built to divide West Berlin and East Germany and as a symbolic boundary between democracy and Communism during the Cold War.

1962. Cuban Missile Crisis. A 14-day confrontation between the Soviet Union and Cuba on one side, and the United States on the other. It is generally regarded as the moment in which the Cold War came closest to turning into a nuclear conflict and mutual assured destruction (or MAD).

1963 – 1976. The Historic Aircraft Flight / Battle of Britain Memorial Flight based at Coltishall.

1964 Coltishall ceases to be a front line fighter station, and becomes 226OCU – a training squadron for Lightning pilots.

1967 RAF Coltishall is granted the Freedom of the City of Norwich.

1968 16 Coltishall Lightnings flew in a diamond formation on Battle of Britain Day.

Early 1970s. “Yarnold shelters” built to counter terrorist attacks. One can be seen by the base entrance.

1972 The runways repaired and resurfaced

1974 The Lightnings depart and the “Jaguar Era” starts with the arrival of Sepecat Jaguars.

1980. The government issues the booklet *Protect and Survive* (50p) with instructions on what to do in the face of a nuclear threat. Followed in 1981 by booklets on how to build fallout shelters.

Early 1980s .The main runway is resurfaced.

1982. Sea King helicopters deployed during the Falklands War.

Coltishall identified as a site for the deployment of Bloodhound anti-aircraft missiles, although they were never stationed there.

1983 Six Coltishall airmen killed in a coach crash in Germany.

1987. Concorde lands at Coltishall.

1985-87. In the Soviet Union, political and economic reforms (*glasnost* meaning “listen” and a policy of increased openness and transparency and *perestroika*, meaning “restructuring” or “rebuilding”) initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev, General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. In due course these led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the revolutions of 1989 in Eastern Europe and the end of the Cold War.

- 1989.** The fall of the Berlin Wall, on 9th November.
- 1990** Coltishall Jaguars deployed in the 1st Gulf War in “Operation Granby”, arriving within a few days of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait on August 2.
- 1992** The base is “saved from closure” during defence budget cuts.
- 1993.** Jaguars deployed in Yugoslavia during the Bosnian War.
- 1997.** The main runway resurfaced.
- 2005.** At this time the base employs around 1600 service personnel with 1400 dependents and 200 civilians.
- 2006** The based is closed on 30 November, after 66 years of continuous service and becomes “Ministry of Defence Coltishall” under the control of Defence Estates.
- 2007** The Jaguar “gate guardian” is relocated to County Hall in Norwich.
- 2009** The site passes to the Ministry of Justice and HMP Bure is established.
- 2010.** The Memorial Garden is dedicated.
- 2012** The site is bought by Norfolk County Council.

Further reading

www.heritage.norfolk.gov.uk (online Norfolk Historic Environment Record)

www.historic-maps.norfolk.gov.uk (old maps and aerial photographs)

http://www.norfolk.gov.uk/Business/Raf_coltishall/index.htm (Norfolk County Council website, online resources and reports)

Maguire, R.C. 2013, *The former RAF Coltishall: Statement of Heritage Significance*

Horlock, S., 2013, *Former RAF Coltishall and its Environs; Results of an aerial photographic assessment and mapping project* (Norfolk Air Photo Interpretation Team)

Cocroft, W. and Cole, S., 2007, *RAF Coltishall, Norfolk – a Photographic Characterisation* (English Heritage)

Jennings, M., 2007, *Royal Air Force Coltishall, Fighter Station, A Station History* (Cowbit)

Lawrence, D.J. and Jennings, M., 2005, *Royal Air Force Coltishall 65th Anniversary*

<http://www.uea.ac.uk/history/cold-war-anglia/home> (UEA Cold War Anglia Project)

<http://www.spiritofcoltishall.com/> (Spirit of Coltishall Association website)

<http://www.radarmuseum.co.uk/> (Radar Museum (Neatishead) website).

<http://www.cnam.co.uk/> (City of Norwich Aviation Museum website)