

## Chapter 11

# Bottesford and its Airfield during the War Years, 1939-1945

With an airfield, railway junction, and petrol storage depot, Bottesford was fortunate not to have suffered more from enemy air attack. The airfield was bombed during the construction stage, and later some bombs fell at the end of Barkestone Lane. There was an unexploded bomb in the school playing field in July 1940. Fortunately the village suffered no direct hits. Gerald Norris recalls black-out shutters and curtains being made in 1940, and Sid Robinson, working as a locomotive fireman, remembers that when operating trains at night, tarpaulins were placed over the engine driver's cab to hide the glow of the fire.

A bomb shelter was built at the school in July 1940, with battery operated lighting, and electric heating was installed in July 1942. Stirrup pumps were issued and a school fire drill was practiced. Window netting was applied to the school windows in 1940, and black-out curtains in 1941.

The ARP assembly room was in Queen Street in the building which is now Sid Culpin's greengrocery shop, and the Home Guard HQ was in the building to the rear of the Bull Inn. At the height of its activities members of the ARP covered a four hour shift on two nights per week. Everyone remembers gas masks, and those little pieces of filter which children could remove to use as blotting paper. Gas masks were regularly examined at school. Bill Burrows was a "runner" for the air-raid wardens during the early days of the war, as there were very few telephones. He joined the Home Guard at the age of 16, and later the Royal Navy. The Home Guard was usually recruited from older men, from the British Legion, but as farming was a "reserved occupation" younger men were available in Bottesford. They were armed with pitchforks at first, but later rifles were issued, although without bullets. Training was on Sunday mornings, finishing up outside the Red Lion. One source maintains that some Home Guard equipment, which was not in regular use, was loaned out to local farmers. There was a scramble to retrieve these items when inspections were made from time to time.

### The British Legion

The Royal British Legion was formed in 1919 for veterans returning from the First World War. The Bottesford branch had its club house in Albert Street, where the Scout centre is today, a long wooden hut with a snooker table, dart boards and bar. At one end was "the Snug" with a wood burning stove, where members

*Lowering the flag, Armistice Day, 1930s.  
By kind permission, G.Waudby.*



## Chapter 11

### **Bottesford Second World War Memorial, St Mary's**

1939 - To the glory of God -  
1945

*And in grateful and loving memory of those from this Parish who gave their lives for King and Country and Freedom in the Second World War*



Royal Navy - **Philip Brewster,**  
**F. Bertram Turner**

Sherwood Rangers - **Frederick K. Bend**

Royal Lincolnshire Regiment - **Herbert Canham**

Royal Leicestershire Regiment - **Walter Jesson**

Gloucestershire Regiment - **Ian L. Mould**

Royal Air Force - **Colin Reeves**

Royal Warwickshire Regiment - **Richard E. Walford**

*"Their name liveth evermore"*

could play dominoes and cards. There was also a skittle alley at the rear of the premises. At one time a field gun captured during WWI was sited in front of the club, but was later transferred to Rectory Lane near Greaves' cycle shop, and was finally cut up for scrap to aid the war effort in 1940.

In the 1920s and 30s, on Armistice Sunday, the members of the British Legion would assemble in Queen Street to march to St Mary's Church in Bottesford. The Village War Memorial is situated inside the church. This was a solemn occasion and the Duke of Rutland would take the salute at the Market Cross. The church bells would be muffled, and the hymn "O Valiant Hearts" was usually sung at this service of remembrance.

### ***In the 1940s***

To increase food production during time of war, pasture land was ploughed up for arable crops, including some school land. Members of the Women's Land Army were drafted in to help local farmers. Even city girls joined in, and after training were soon busy milking cows and swilling out the yard before breakfast. Edna Taylor recalls hard work and long hours out in the fields in all



*Mrs Edna Taylor, when she was a Land Army girl.* ETA

## Chapter 11

weathers, working with horses to bring in the harvest. They wore overalls and heavy boots, but for social occasions corduroy breeches, aertex shirt, tie, overcoat, and the characteristic slouch hat were worn. In 2008 the government recognised their contribution to the war effort by giving the survivors the equivalent of a campaign medal. School children also helped in the fields at times of harvest.



*An Italian Prisoner of War, near Bottesford. BLHS*

Prisoners of War, mostly Italians, housed on the camp at Allington also worked on farms in the Bottesford area. Many had lost their uniforms and were issued with British service great coats and boots to counteract the hard winter weather. A 17 year old youth would go to escort them to and from work each day. Like all family men with time on their hands, the POW's turned to making models and toys for local children.

In September, 1939, a class of 30 children of elementary school age from a school in Sheffield, with their teacher, were billeted with village families as evacuees. Seventeen 'voluntary' evacuees from London, Nottingham and Manchester also applied to the school at this time. All three Chapels in the village were used as class rooms and dinner rooms for these extra children. The school meals service was extended to local children in March 1942. Thus there were more children to teach, but fewer teachers, as some including the headmaster were called up for military service.

Rationing affected everybody as the amount of food, clothing, and sweets were strictly controlled. Two ounces of butter per person per week did not go far, despite cookery demonstrations. Allotments, pigsties, and pigeon lofts were regularly in use to supplement the food ration, and chickens were reared in back gardens. Clothing was also rationed and clothing coupons had to be given up with each purchase. Dress making, alterations, darning and sewing were useful skills during the war, especially when making costumes for children's parties. Shoes were also scarce and many fathers undertook family shoe repairs at home, cutting out soles from pieces of leather and even heels if rubber ones could not be bought. "Heelball", applied with a tool heated in the fire, made the job waterproof. Bottesford still did not have a mains water supply during the war years. Night soil was collected by cart each week -



*Mr Reg Barke, feeding his poultry at the rear of the Coffee House, Bottesford, during the war. BSI*

## Chapter 11

“Shut the windows Mum, the dilly cart is coming !” - and street lighting was severely limited by black-out restrictions. A shortage of fuel meant that bus services were curtailed, and in 1944 even buses from London were lent to operating companies in the East Midlands. Some ran through Bottesford still in their London Transport livery.

During the war Beryl Smith (née Carter) lived at The Bull. Her mother and older sister Jean helped her grandfather, Herbert Goodson, the licensee,

and occasionally Fred Carter, Beryl’s father, would be able to come home on leave. Beryl recalls that from time to time the pub had to close early as it was running out of beer. RAF personnel and American servicemen would visit Bottesford for a drink and some time away from the airfield. Cycling was a particularly relaxing occupation for them. Beryl remembers the efforts made to supplement the war time rationing. Her grandfather shot rabbits, pheasants, hares and partridges. Two pigs were kept in one of the stables. They were fed on “pig potatoes”, similar to those now called ‘salad’ potatoes, cooked in huge pans on the stove. Grandfather also had an allotment where he grew potatoes, leeks, cabbages etc, and fruit was gathered from trees in “The Shrubby”, now part of Bowbridge Gardens. Surplus fruit could be ‘bottled’ to preserve it for consumption later in the year.

The war created a shortage of labour and some women from Bottesford would travel to Grantham to work in factories and for the railway. This was a very significant change of role for many of them. A number of voluntary schemes helped the war effort ranging from saving waste paper to providing comforts for British prisoners of war.

### No 17 Fuel Depot - RASC

At the west end of the village was an army petrol storage depot, adjacent to the railway junction. The Royal Army Service Corps had their own railway sidings with a head shunt running along the curve of the railway line to Orston Lane, where the guardroom was situated. A narrow gauge railway also served the site. In one raid, bombs aimed at the dump damaged the South Junction signal box. At the depot petrol and diesel, delivered in bulk, were



*Mr Fred Carter and daughter Jean, at the rear of The Bull, Bottesford, during the war. BSM*



*The RASC depot huts., Orston Lane. BLHS*

## Chapter 11

transferred into 'jerry cans' for onward distribution to the troops. The depot had storage tanks, vehicle maintenance workshops, barrack blocks for over 100 service men, a cinema and NAAFI canteen. The remains of barrack blocks can still be seen in Orston Lane. Sewage from this accommodation drained into the Rundle ditch nearby, and was periodically flushed away by diverting water from the Devon at Easthorpe, via Granary Lane, through the High Street culvert, and then up into Orston Lane. This eventually reached the Devon near Staunton.

### Airfield Construction

RAF Bottesford, known locally as Normanton airfield, opened in 1941, and was at that time the only heavy bomber station in Leicestershire. The operational squadrons based at Bottesford took part in some of the most difficult bomber raids of the war. Airmen from Commonwealth countries and the USA used the base for training and bombing operations. It was eventually closed to flying in June 1947, and today is the site of a busy Trading Estate with cars and vans stored on the runways.

The site was surveyed in early 1940, and Wimpey Douglas & Co commenced construction in November that year, laying concrete runways to cater for heavy aircraft. The main runway was 50 yards wide and nearly 2,000 yards long, with two others at 1,500 yards long crossing it to form a triangular layout. Thirty six dispersal pans, and eventually ten hangars were built. The main gate was on the road north of Normanton, with a Direction Finding Station near the Three Shires Bush. A high frequency transmitting station was located off Sewstern Lane. An ordnance storage depot for bombs was in Moss Plantation, south-east of the airfield, and another nearer to Normanton. The fuel store was to the east near Rowe Farm. The firing butts were situated across the road at Normanton, with level crossing type gates installed so that the road could still be used by civilians. A searchlight group was also established at Normanton.

The base, which proved very muddy in wet weather, could accommodate nearly 2,400 airmen and 460 airwomen. The technical and living quarters were on the north eastern side of the airfield, near to Long Bennington. Comfort was not a major consideration and some of the cold wooden huts let in the rain. Personnel were issued with bicycles as the facilities were well spread out, but these soon became clogged with mud on wet winter days.

At the same time, mock airfields (Q sites) were constructed at Foston, Belvoir, and Tithby to decoy raiders. These were never attacked by the Luftwaffe, who it is believed used their lighting as navigation aids. They were closed in 1942. The glow of the

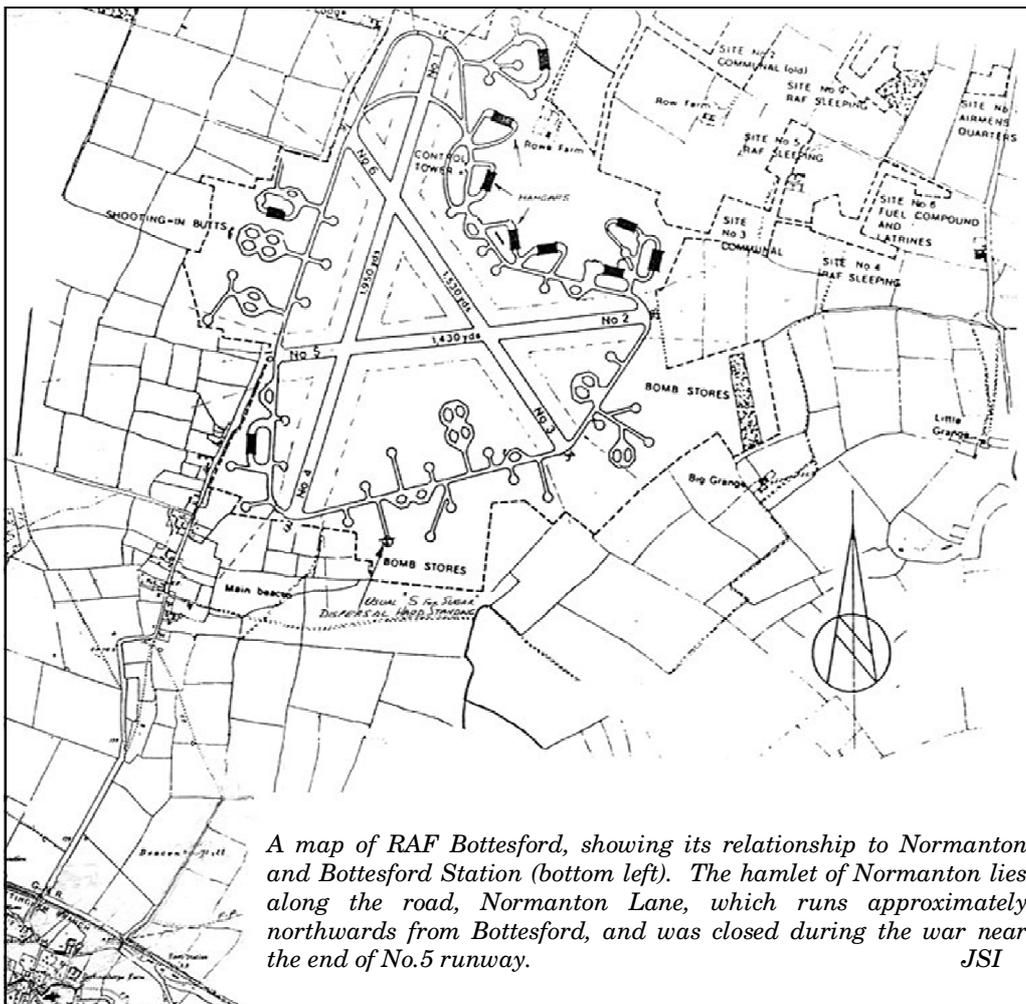


*An Avro Manchester bomber in the open at RAF Bottesford during snowy winter conditions. BLHS*

## Chapter 11



*A modern photograph of the airfield as seen from Beacon Hill. Rows of motor cars stand on the old runways awaiting delivery.* NFO



*A map of RAF Bottesford, showing its relationship to Normanton and Bottesford Station (bottom left). The hamlet of Normanton lies along the road, Normanton Lane, which runs approximately northwards from Bottesford, and was closed during the war near the end of No.5 runway.* JSI

## Chapter 11



*Lancaster bombers departing from RAF Bottesford pass over St Mary's spire. Watercolour painted by local artist R.E.White (shown by permission of Mrs. A. Kapellar). API*

fires from burning straw etc. could sometimes be seen from Bottesford. A mobile beacon was used at Bottesford to flash the letters AQ in morse code to guide planes returning from night raids.

St Mary's Church spire was in line with the main runway. Red warning lights were lit on the Steeple from a switch on the gable wall of " Providence Cottage" operated by a dispatch rider when aircraft were returning at night. Many crews were happy to see this light as they returned from a long and dangerous mission. Crippled aircraft would sometimes attempt to land on a flat area close to the Clay Pigeon shooting range on Orston Lane, if they could not reach the airfield.

The Royal Observer Corps had a lookout post for enemy aircraft on Beacon Hill. A nuclear fall-out monitoring shelter was built there in the 1950's. Gerald Norris recalls as a boy, riding his bike with friends up onto the hill to watch the Lancasters taking off, and being 'shooed away' by RAF personnel.

### **Bomber Operations**

The airfield opened on September 10<sup>th</sup>, 1941. A Vickers Wellington bomber on a training flight was the first aircraft to land soon after. No 207 Squadron, with a proud history going back to 1918, was the first operational squadron at

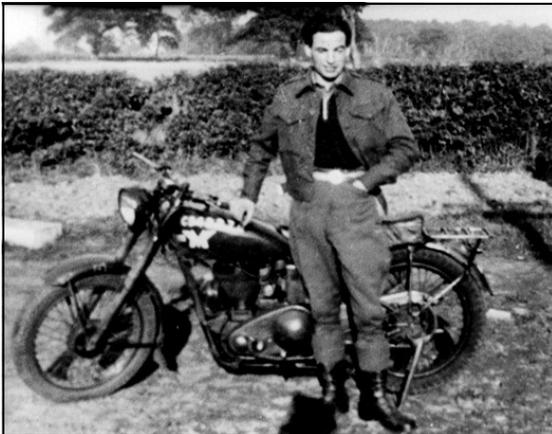
## Chapter 11

Bottesford, equipped with the Avro Manchester twin-engined bomber. Another unit equipped with the Airspeed Oxford arrived in October 1941 to train pilots in Beam Approach flying, and remained until 1944.

The Manchesters, armed with ten 500 pound bombs, participated in daylight raids on the docks at the French port of Lorient and on industrial targets in Germany. Battleships in harbour at Brest were another target, together with mine laying sorties ('gardening') off the Dutch coast. The Manchester was prone to hydraulic and engine problems which sometimes reduced its flying ceiling and caused crews to abort their missions. One flyer is reputed to have taken his overcoat with him on missions in case he became a POW! Accidents and forced landings were a feature of life. On one occasion a Manchester suffered engine failure at low level, then the other engine failed. The pilot attempted a forced landing but the rear fuselage and tail were ripped off on contact with the ground. The rest of the plane careered onwards and came to rest in Fiskerton lake, much to the alarm of the anglers conducting a peaceful fishing competition. The crew escaped with only cuts and bruises, though one was badly concussed.

Engineers often visited Bottesford to study the difficulties experienced with the Manchester. One aircraft was test flown for them with a simulated full bomb load. Surprisingly it easily attained 17,000 feet but the pilot then noticed that the engine cowlings were coming loose. The flying instruments showed no problem but the pilot decided to return to Bottesford, and on his approach saw one of the engines moving up and down on its mounts. Overheating had almost melted the mounts, but the plane landed before disaster struck.

After March 1942, 207 Squadron was re-equipped with the Avro



*Dick Robinson, dispatch rider.*

*RRO*

Lancaster powered by four Rolls Royce Merlin engines. By late April crews were operational on the new aircraft, forming part of the first "One thousand bomber raid" in May 1942. The squadron now included many aircrew from Commonwealth countries such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Night bombing continued with mounting losses and accidents. Some casualties were buried in St Mary's churchyard at Bottesford, and others at Long Bennington. In April 1942 a Lancaster crash landed and exploded near Normanton Lodge, blowing away part of the building's roof. Flight Sergeant McCarthy's

crew survived, but sadly were shot down and killed on the German border three months later. In July 1942, 207 Squadron dropped 317 tons of bombs.

Accidents affected civilians as well as service personnel. Dick Robinson, aged 14 in 1940, went to work for a coal merchant in the Bottesford goods yard. Together with a lorry, he was "leased out" to the airfield, delivering bombs from Bottesford Station. There were so many bombs at one time that they were left lying at the roadside. There was an explosion on the airfield and Dick, then only

## Chapter 11

16, was badly burned. He was immersed in water to counteract his injury and taken to Newark Hospital, but after considerable treatment it was a year before he could work properly again. Dick re-enlisted and was employed as a motorbike despatch rider.

The runways were deteriorating so in September, 1942, 207 Squadron transferred to Langar. No. 90 Squadron arrived in November, flying the Short Stirling, but moved on to Ridgewell in December. The adjutant of this squadron was billeted with the village butcher in Bottesford High Street. Throughout the war the brave young men on



*Graves of eight airmen in Bottesford churchyard:  
Flight-Lieut R.J.Hannan, DFC, RAF, 25th Nov 1942, 25.  
Sgt P.J.Thompson, RAF, 25th Nov.1942; Sgt H.Curson,  
RAF, 6th Aug 1942, 23; Sgt W.D.Fordwych, RAF, 19th  
Aug 1942, 21; Sgt B.L.McK.Jenkin, RNZAF, 25th Nov  
1942, 24; Sgt J.C.Murphy, RAAF, 19th Aug 1942, 27;  
Sgt A.Roberts, RAF, 25th Nov 1942, 21; Flight Sgt  
J.L.B.Lee, RAF, 26th Nov 1942, 29. API*

*Lancaster R5868, "S for Sugar", a famous aeroplane, now preserved at RAF Hendon Museum.  
By permission of the Royal Air Force Museum, London.*



## Chapter 11

operations were welcomed by individuals and families in Bottesford and Muston, some to worship at Chapel or Church and others just to sit quietly in their homes to read and relax. The Methodist Chapel on the Green was extensively used as a canteen in the evenings, with singing, billiards, and home cooking when supplies were available. One flyer, Harry North, became a regular preacher at the Chapel. He asked a friend to take a service for him one day as he was assigned to operations, and tragically his plane failed to return from the raid.

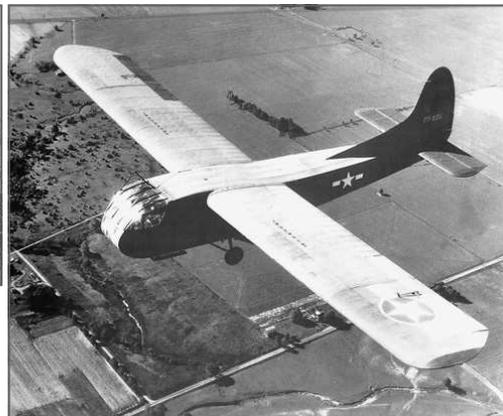
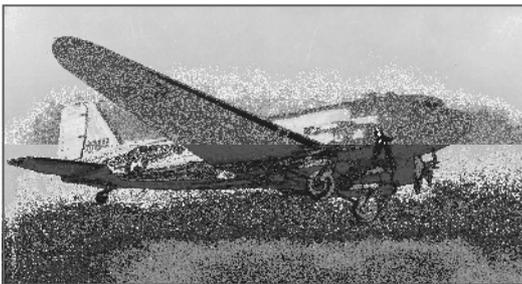
No 467 Squadron, Royal Australian Air Force, flying Lancasters, took up residence in November 1942, attacking industrial targets in Germany and U Boat pens along the French coast. In 1943, they took part in long range “shuttle” raids whose target might be the Italian port of La Spezia, or munitions factories on Lake Constance, before flying on to land in North Africa. They would then attack other targets on their return trip, and bring back fruit, vegetables and wine bought locally before they took off.

The American Air Force was considering the possibility of night time raids at this time. A number of B24 Liberators flew in during the Spring as visitors and some American aircrew even flew on operations in the Lancasters.

As 1943 progressed enemy night fighter patrols became increasingly effective. No. 467 Squadron were included in the attack on Peenemunde in August 1943, a target on the Baltic coast where weapons such as the V2 rocket were being developed. Australians from Bottesford were in the final wave, by which time the night fighters had concentrated their numbers. In all, 596 aircraft took part, of which 40 were lost. One particular Lancaster, R5868, “S for Sugar”, had an exceptional war record. It was transferred to Bottesford after undertaking 68 operations and went on to complete 137 missions. It can now be seen in the RAF museum at Hendon. No 467 Squadron was transferred to Waddington in November, 1943, after an intensive period lasting a year and costing many lives from Wing Commanders to Sergeant Pilots.

### An American Base

Earlier in 1943, Airspeed Horsa gliders had been stored at Bottesford. Allied air forces planning the D-Day invasion were preparing to drop paratroops and supplies behind enemy lines and land troops from gliders. The 436<sup>th</sup> Troop Carrier Group (TCG) of the 9<sup>th</sup> US Army Air Force arrived in January, 1944, with



*A Douglas C47 Skytrain (above) and Waco CG-4A Military Glider (right). Images from Wikimedia Commons, 2009.*

## Chapter 11

sixty Douglas C47 transport planes similar to the Dakota. Sixty Waco assault gliders were delivered by rail to be assembled from packing cases. One of these cases eventually became a cricket pavilion at Staunton Harold. The airfield was re-designated as Army Air Force Station 481 (or 480 – sources disagree).

Considerable training took place to prepare for transfer to southern England and the D-Day invasion. Local people remember watching, amazed, as the retrieval from the ground of empty troop gliders was practiced. The operation was to catch the glider (and its worried pilot) by a hook on an elastic rope pulled by an airborne C47, snatching the glider into the air. More Americans moved in. The 400<sup>th</sup> TCG undertook training in formation flying, glider and parachute dropping techniques, to prepare for “Operation Overlord”. In the railway sidings, thousands of tons of supplies and crated gliders were unloaded. Even after the war many bombs, now no longer required, were delivered for storage at the airfield.

The American servicemen explored the area by bicycle and made friends in Bottesford. They were particularly generous towards village children with chocolate and chewing gum. There is an unconfirmed story that the Stocks were ‘liberated’ one night, but then miraculously returned a few days later! Some Americans found Bottesford a place of cold incessant rain, so much so that even stored parachutes were showing signs of mildew. There was never enough fuel for the stoves and airmen would chop down small trees to burn. Frank Ehrmann, who returned in September 1987 for a visit, recalled his five month posting as a “cold mudhole”. He and his comrades ‘liberated’ coke and wood to keep their Nissen huts warm, but they still had to take cold showers in February. Water had to be carried in by the bucket for washing, and the toilet facilities were primitive. In Frank’s view the food was sloppily cooked and unappetizing – powdered egg and fried spam. British tea was too strong for the American taste, the coffee too weak. The base PX store was a significant source of “extras” and a welcome factor in maintaining morale. Even so, the Americans began to understand the shortages and difficulties experienced by ordinary British people in the fourth year of the war.

### Bomber Training



*Bristol Beaufigther.  
Image from Wikimedia Commons, 2009.*

In July, 1944, the airfield was handed back to Bomber Command. Buildings whose doors and floorboards had been burnt as winter fuel were re-furbished. The Air Station was now ready to act as a bomber training base. Thirty six Lancasters of a ‘Heavy Conversion Unit’ flew in to train crews. It was the first unit to prepare pilots on Lancasters alone for all their ‘heavy’ training, which reduced the training period by two months. The planes included many different types of Lancasters, powered

## Chapter 11

by several variants of the Rolls Royce Merlin, and even some rare Bristol Hercules engines: the spares problems created by this diversity were horrendous. Night flying, 'circuits and bumps' and other training tasks contributed to a high accident rate. Fighter affiliation exercises brought Hawker Hurricanes, and later Supermarine Spitfires and Bristol Beaufighters, to Bottesford. On the night of March 20<sup>th</sup>, 1945, a lone Junkers Ju 88 raided the airfield, dropping several bombs in a low pass over the runways and buildings, and attempting to fire cannon shells into a train standing at Bottesford station, but with little success.

In April, 1945, Bottesford was downgraded to be a sub-station for training purposes. Its last flying accident was on July 13<sup>th</sup>, when a Wellington on a night flying exercise suffered engine failure and was diverted to Bottesford. The second engine also failed as it approached the runway but all seven crewmen scrambled to safety before fire broke out in the wreckage.

### After the War

Later in 1945, RAF Bottesford became a relief landing ground, but was closed to flying in June 1947. Equipment disposal and maintenance continued and sites such as Bottesford were required for the storage of unused bombs and ammunition awaiting disposal. The site was finally closed down in March, 1960.

As a 'tail-piece', a function was held in Bottesford on May 9<sup>th</sup>, 1995, to commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the end of World War 2. The Parish Council entertained a large group of visiting Australian airmen from the 467/463 Squadron's Association. Over 150 attended the Village Hall for refreshments and an illustrated talk by the author Vincent Holyoak. The party toured the airfield site and a memorial tree was planted by Mr Peter Fitt, a former radio operator on Lancaster ED 541 POA, near the Control Tower, which is now the administrative centre for the trading estate. A second tree was planted in Bottesford's churchyard, by the graves of British, Australian and New Zealand airmen.

So the war ended, and many of those involved came home to Bottesford and civilian life, but of course things would never be the same as in the 1930's. Rationing continued and many items were still in short supply. Although they did not know it, the villagers were about to experience the cold hard winter of 1947, which put a further strain on the resources at their disposal.



*Guests at the Australian airmen's 50-years re-union at RAF Bottesford in 1995. JSI*