

HISTORY OF LASHAM AIRFIELD

Airfield History

The village and airfield is now usually known as "Lash-am" but until recent times most locals called it "Lass-ham". The village dates back to the eleventh century when it was "Esseham", becoming "Lessham" shortly after.

The airfield was built by Irish labourers and Italian prisoners of war. Its construction destroyed much of the avenue of beech trees that had been planted by George Purefoy Jervoise of Herriard Park in 1809, to commemorate the Jubilee of George III (in 1810). A painting was made of The Avenue by Thomas Hennell. It is one of about 1500 paintings made by a large number of artists early in the war as part of Recording Britain project funded by the Pilgrim Trust. The painting of the avenue is now in the Victoria & Albert Museum. A print is in the clubhouse bar.

The airfield was completed in 1942. Several different types of aircraft were based at Lasham during World War Two including: Hawker Typhoon, De Havilland Mosquito, B-25 Mitchell, Supermarine Spitfire and North American P-51 Mustang. The squadrons based at Lasham were:

- * No. 412 Squadron RCAF
- * No. 181 Squadron RAF
- * No. 602 (City of Glasgow) Squadron RAF
- * No. 182 Squadron RAF
- * No. 183 Squadron RAF
- * No. 320 (Netherlands) Squadron RAF
- * No. 305 (Polish) Squadron RAF
- * No. 613 (City of Manchester) Squadron RAF
- * No. 107 Squadron RAF

One of the most famous operations was by 613 Squadron. On 14 April 1944 six Mosquitos led by Wing Commander Bateson bombed the Central Records Registry of the Gestapo in The Hague from a height of 50 feet. The accuracy was such that there were few civilian casualties nearby.

The airfield ceased to be an operational RAF station in 1948, though General Aircraft Ltd continued testing military gliders. A memorial at the entrance was dedicated on 14 September 2006 to those served at Lasham between 1942 and 1948.

In 1950 the Army Gliding Club was re-established by Major Tony Deane-Drummond, then an instructor at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst. It operated at Odiham Airfield, but after two accidents the Commandant of Sandhurst ordered the club to suspend operations. In early 1951 the commandant ordered Major Deane-Drummond to restart the club at Lasham.

The club originally occupied one of the hangars now used by ATC. In the meantime the Surrey Gliding Club and Imperial College Gliding Club were both seeking a new home because Redhill airfield had many other users. Other places were considered but Lasham was chosen on the basis of where members lived. Lasham was chosen by a majority of one. The other locations in Windsor Great Park and Chipping Ongar would, in retrospect, have been disasters. The Surrey club and Imperial College moved to Lasham in August 1951.

Auto-tows and winches were initially used. Aero-towing began in February 1954 with a Tiger Moth. Eventually all wire launches were done by auto-tow, until 1988 when winching was re-introduced and replaced auto-towing. Lasham Gliding Society was established in 1959 and later signed a long lease on the airfield from the Ministry of Defence. The Defence Research Establishment later maintained a satellite station at Lasham but the dishes, one enclosed in a

large white dome, have now been removed. Most the buildings from the World War Two have now also been demolished, except for the large hangars.

Lasham Gliding Society is now one of the largest gliding clubs in the world. Over 220 gliders are based at the airfield. The airfield is in constant use throughout the year and regularly hosts national and regional gliding championships. In 1999 Lasham Gliding Society (LGS) completed the purchase from the Ministry of Defence of the freehold to the airfield, making the final payment in 2001. It now owns all of the land within the fenced and gated area as well as the fields that form the undershoot area at each end of the main runway. The Society lets part of the land to an aircraft maintenance company (ATC Lasham). This company uses the main runway several times a week to bring in airliners for overhauls and is the largest employer in the area. Surplus land and buildings is let to local farmers and businesses.

More information is recorded in a book called *A Glider Pilot Bold* by Wally Kahn which is on sale in the Lasham office. There is also a display in the corridor of the clubhouse of wartime photographs and documentation.