



RAF Old Sarum, A Short History

by Tim Cornish

When Old Sarum Aerodrome, later RAF Old Sarum, was originally constructed it was known as Ford Farm Aerodrome, taking the name from the nearby farmstead in the village of Ford.

The first inhabitants on the aerodrome site were Lt Charles Carrington Gardner, Sgt Maj Arthur Deeley and 25 enlisted ranks of 99 Squadron Royal Flying Corps - then stationed at Yatesbury - pitching their bell tents on the eastern grassland in the shadow of the Iron Age hillfort. By early September, members of the No.123 Company, Canadian Forestry Corps had moved in to prepare the site for the construction of hangars, hutted accommodation and workshops, employing German POW's and Chinese labourers to assist in the building of the aerodrome.

By the spring of 1918, three squadrons of aircraft were now based at Old Sarum, 98, 99, 103 Squadron, who later left for deployment overseas, along with the formation of 11 Training Depot Station, which took on the role of training aircrew for the newly-created Royal Air Force. Sadly, not all personnel would survive the war, with over 20 airmen being killed in flying-related activities at the aerodrome before the Armistice, a large number of those buried within the cemeteries surrounding Old Sarum.

The inter-war period at Old Sarum generated a great expansion in the station's facilities and function. The School of Army Co-operation, having formed at Stonehenge in 1920, moved to Old Sarum in January 1921 to lead the training of RAF and Army personnel in how each respective force would liaise with each other in times of conflict and peace. 16 (Army Co-operation) Squadron formed at Old Sarum in 1924, to support the activities of the School and they would maintain a constant presence at the station for the whole of the inter-war period.

Hundreds of reservists flowed into Old Sarum on the outbreak of war in 1939, with 16 (AC) Squadron preparing itself for overseas deployment, having been the first squadron to equip with Westland Lysanders a year prior. An Army Co-operation Pool was formed at Old Sarum to teach aircrew army liaison tactics, with the numbers of aircraft at the station dramatically increasing to over 50 based aircraft within a few weeks.



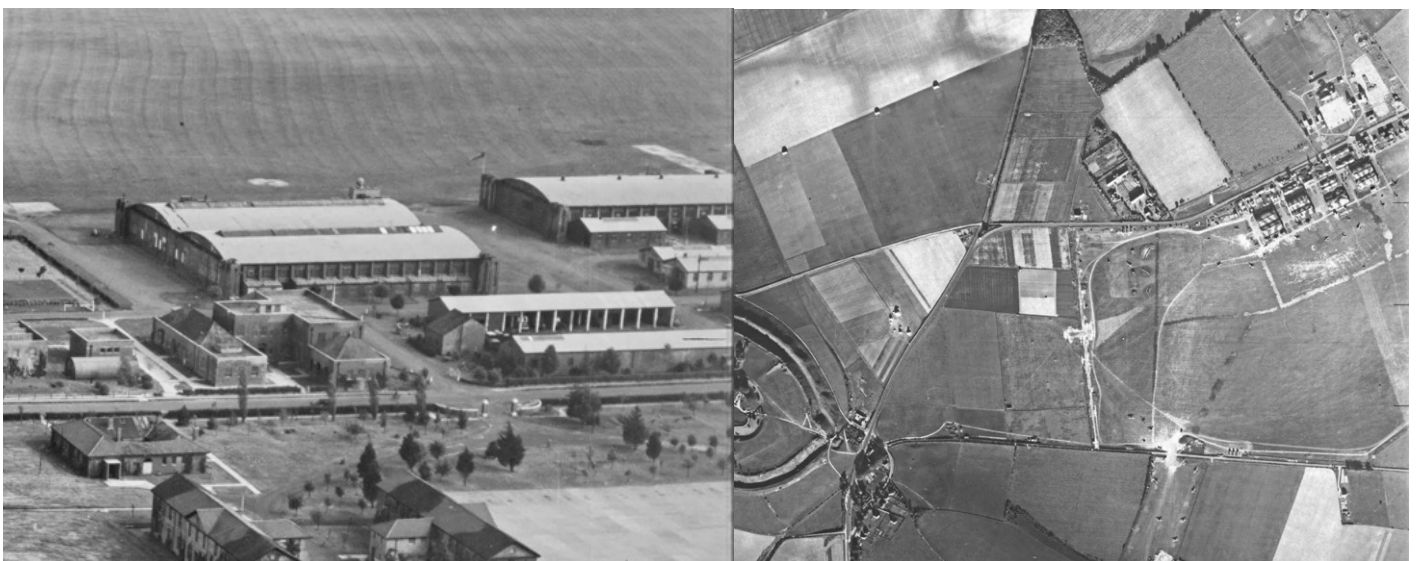
Old Sarum 1914 LEFT, Old Sarum 1941 (English Heritage) RIGHT

16 (AC) Squadron left Old Sarum for RAF Hawkinge in February 1940 after 16 years of service at the station, and would serve overseas supporting the British Expeditionary Force, despite great losses of both personnel and aircraft against German forces during the Battle of France. That same month, 110 Squadron Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) arrived at Old Sarum, the RCAF's first overseas base in their history to that point, which would lead to a whole myriad of nationalities converging at the station for flying tuition or instructional courses; Polish, French, Canadian and American personnel would be posted to the station throughout the duration of the war.

August 1941 heralded the creation of the Air Observation Post squadrons at Old Sarum, in total nine squadrons of small, defenceless Taylorcraft Auster aircraft flown by aircrew from Royal Artillery would be formed at the station up to 1943. These Royal Artillery pilots went through training at Old Sarum before deployment overseas to support the British Army's guns in the field, often flying at tree-top height against enemy aircraft and ground fire to provide reconnaissance on enemy positions.

The British Army's Parachute Squadron, Royal Armoured Corps had utilised RAF Old Sarum as it's HQ for a number of years during the Cold War however the Squadron was disbanded at the station in 1976, with the Joint Helicopter and Trials Development Unit also disbanding the same year. This theme was soon followed towards the end of 1978 and early 1979 when the Joint Warfare Establishment formally closed along with RAF Old Sarum as a military establishment, with the courses being run at the station transferring to National Defence College, Latimer. The military presence to this day is not lost, however, as the original Station HQ has been habited by B (Royal Wilts Yeomanry) Squadron, Royal Wessex Yeomanry since 1983.

Civil aviation now became the mainstay of Old Sarum's future, with the Edgley Optica, manufactured by Edgley Aircraft Ltd, were produced at the aerodrome from 1981. While orders came in from worldwide for the slow-flying aerial survey aircraft, a 1986 Optica crash and hangar fire in 1987 further crippled the company's chances and by 1990, the re-named company known as Brooklands Aerospace, went into liquidation. This did, however, not stop private aircraft being flown from the site, as the Wiltshire Aero Club was flying to 1991 until it became the Old Sarum Flying Club in 1992.



Old Sarum Airfield, 1948

The Boscombe Down Aviation Collection relocated from MoD Boscombe Down in June 2012, occupying one of the original 1917-built hangars. The BDAC tells the story of flight & flight testing in the local area, attracting visitors not just locally but internationally, too. Despite the cessation of private flying at the airfield in 2019, commercial flying still continues under GoSkydive, bringing joy to many people who still come to visit and enjoy flying-related activities at Old Sarum.

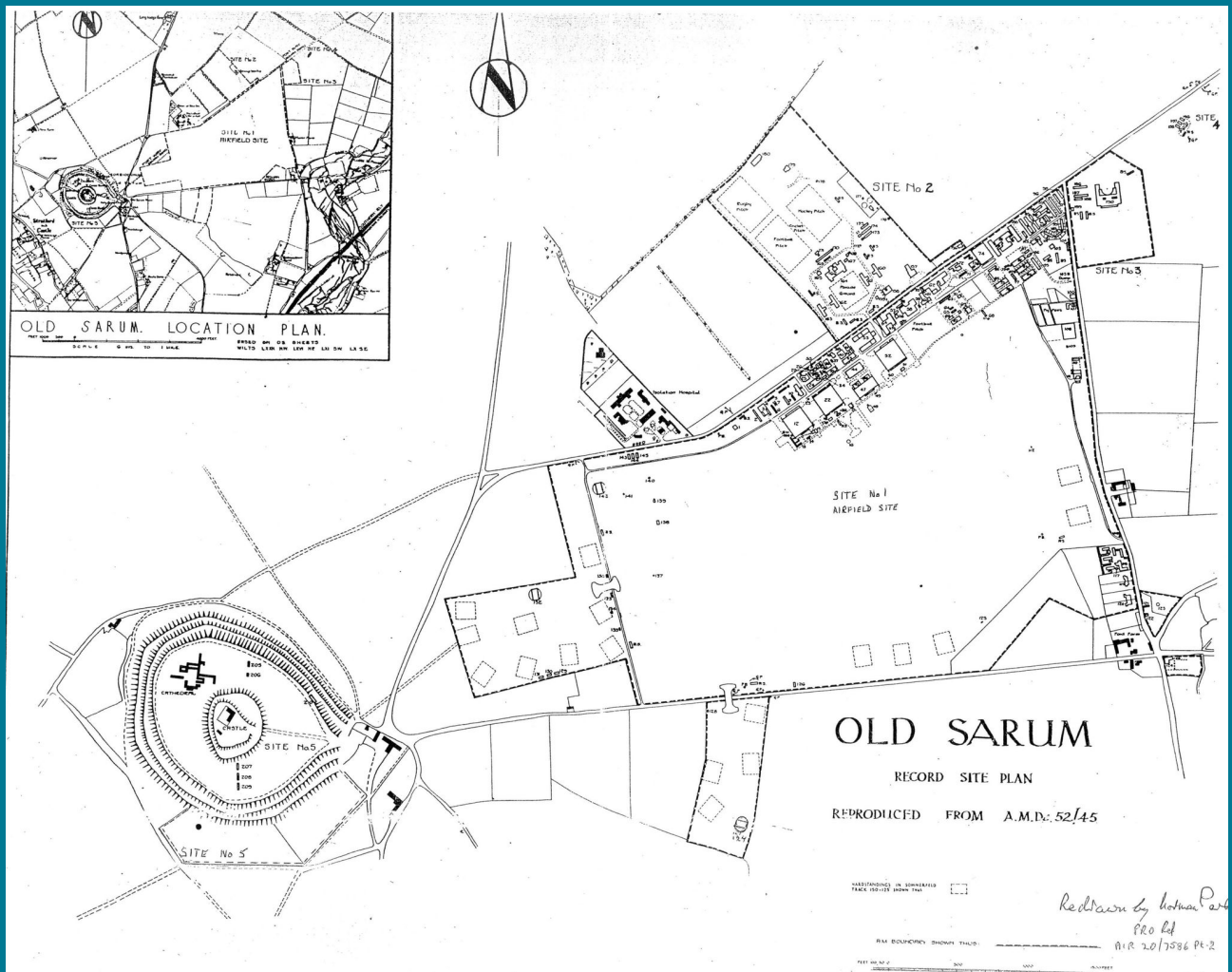
It is no doubt that RAF Old Sarum's heritage is unique and the varied institutions, squadrons and commercial companies that made use of the aerodrome site in their own interesting and different way only further ensured this unique survivor of a relatively-intact First World War aerodrome survived to the 21st century.



Susie Bridge beside Auster MS968, the aircraft flown by her father, Lt. Col. Dickie Thrush of No. 653 Air Observation Post Squadron, throughout Operation Overlord and the campaign in Northwest Europe up to the German surrender in spring 1945.



Above: The Royal Flying Corps Collection on display at the Boscombe Down Aviation Collection (BDAC), located in Hangar 1 at Old Sarum Airfield, Old Sarum, SP4 6DZ



A site plan of Old Sarum drawn in 1945



Members of "The Squippers" demonstrating wartime parachute-packing techniques during the D-Day commemorations at the Boscombe Down Aviation Collection (BDAC).

