

The Airfield Trail



Harrington ▲

Even now the Harrington airfield seems well hidden, but in 1944 it was highly classified location. Home to the 8th Air Force Special Operations Group, the 'Carpenters', Harrington was the departure point for many secret agents.

Unlike the majority of wartime airfields, which were built by the British for USAAF use, Harrington was constructed by American engineers and handed over to the RAF at the end of 1943. However, the RAF remained for only a few months and in April 1944, it became home to the 801st (later changed to 492nd) Bomb Group.

Flying all black B24 Liberators, this unit undertook the task of supporting resistance groups in France, the low countries and Scandinavia. This role was later extended to the dropping of 'Joos', the code name given to secret agents parachuted into enemy occupied territory. At other times they would transport a 'Jedburgh' team, which usually comprised a British or American officer, a local national fluent in the language of the particular country, and a radio operator.

The aircraft, which flew under the general direction of The Office of Strategic Services (OSS), were specially modified for low level night missions.

Chelveston ▲

Opening in August 1942, Chelveston airfield was used by the RAF for gunnery training and target towing. However, after extensions to the runways were completed, (using rubble from bomb damaged London) the improved airfield was handed over to the USAAF in May 1942.

Initially the base was home to the Douglas Dakotas of the 60th Troop Carrier Group and when they departed in August 1942, they were followed by the B17 Flying Fortresses of the 301st Bomb Group. They left Chelveston for North Africa after three months and were replaced by the famous 305th 'Can Do' Bomb Group, led by one of the finest commanding officers in the USAAF – Colonel Curtis LeMay. The 305th went on to fly 335 daylight combat missions from Chelveston and devised some of the best formation defensive techniques, which later became standard procedure. This bomb group led the punishing raid on Schweinfurt in October 1944, which resulted in very heavy losses of men and machines. After the

Podington ▲

Better known these days as Santa Pod, the venue for American style drag racing, the airfield began life in 1941. Together with many other East Anglian airfields, Podington was handed over to the USAAF and from mid 1942 began a build up of men and equipment.

Various American aircraft and squadrons operated briefly from Podington during the following 12 months, including the famous 100th Bomb Group 'The Bloody Hundredth' before it moved to its permanent base at Thorpe Abotts, Norfolk. In September 1943 the B17s of the 92nd Bomb Group moved in and remained until 1945. It was at Podington during this period that the 'chin turret' which distinguished the B17G from earlier models, was designed.

In May 1944 Podington airfield was the scene of a major accident involving the head on collision of two B17s, each loaded with a 6,000lb bomb load.

Kimbolton ▲

The quiet country town of Kimbolton lies adjacent to the ex home of the 8th Air Force, 379th Bomb Group. Under the leadership of Colonel Maurice Preston, this was one of the most daring, courageous and successful units in the American air arm. In recognition of the skill of the 379th aircress, they became the only unit to be given the 8th Air Force Grand Slam Award, which included:

- **Best bombing results**
- **Greatest bomb tonnage**
- **Largest number of aircraft attacking**
- **Lowest losses of aircraft**
- **Lowest 'abort' rate**

The 8th Air Force left Harrington in 1945 and the base was unused for several years. However, in the early 1960s three launching pads were constructed and Harrington became an RAF Thor missile site. All military activity has now ceased.

A striking memorial, dedicated in 1987, depicting a Liberator taking off in front of the Foxhall Cottages is located on one of the former dispersals alongside the Harrington to Lampport road.

A fascinating museum now occupies the old Operations Building at Harrington, with photographs, exhibits and unique film footage describing the missions from this most secret airbase. This museum is at Sunnyside Farm, off the Lampport road at Harrington. In addition to the Carpetbagger Aviation Museum, the Northamptonshire Aviation Society also have a museum on the site. Open every weekend and Bank Holiday during the period Easter to the end of October from 10.00am to 5.00pm, it is recommended that you allow at least two and a half hours for your visit. Admission charges are £2 per adult and £1 for children 5 to 15 years old.

Further details may be obtained from the Bedford Tourist Information Centre or direct on 01604 686008.

war LeMay went on to become Chief of Air Staff.

The 8th Air Force became highly skilled in daylight precision bombing, but in July 1943 a Chelveston squadron was chosen to train for night operations alongside RAF Bomber Command. Eventually, because of the intensive training and aircraft modifications needed, night bombing by the USAAF was abandoned, but Chelveston crews did complete 8 bombing and 126 leaflet night missions. Some 168 Chelveston aircraft were lost at a cost of over 780 men killed. The Group was awarded two Distinguished Unit Citations, and the highest US military decoration, the Medal of Honor, was awarded to two aircress.

Little of the wartime airfield remains, but a memorial tablet to the men of the 305th Bomb Group can be seen on the wall of the St. John the Baptist Church in Chelveston-cum-Caldecott.

The resulting explosion killed 21 airmen.

A small number of B17s from Podington were adapted to carry an experimental 4,500lb rocket bomb. Each aircraft carried two bombs, one under each wing, and launched them against the concrete shelters used by the German navy. They achieved considerable success.

A memorial to the 92 Bomb Group can be seen on the road leading directly to the airfield and the veterans association have paid for the restoration of the local church organ. This church also contains a memorial and the propeller blade from a B17.

Some of the main runway has been retained for use by the drag racers and the original control tower is in excellent condition, having been turned into a private residence.

With over 6000 personnel assigned to the Kimbolton airfield, its B17s, with their 'K' insignia, became a key element in the United States air offensive, with 330 combat missions being flown between May 1943 and May 1945.

The Kimbolton airfield was unique in having two control towers, one built by the RAF and a later one by the USAAF. Now known as the Stow Longa Trading Estate, some of the old airfield buildings remain and although the site has reverted to agriculture, the lines of the old main runway are still visible from the Kimbolton to Stow Longa road. Close by the entrance to the trading estate is a fine memorial dedicated to those who lost their lives whilst serving at Kimbolton.

Other places of interest

- Bedford Japanese Language School
- Duxford Imperial War Museum
- Bletchley Park Government Code & Cypher Schools

- RAF Chicksands Priory Listening Station
- Cardington Barrage Balloon manufacture & training
- RAF Henlow Parachute Training School

- RAF Tempsford
- Tempsford Hall SOE/OSS House
- Woburn Abbey Political Warfare Executive

- Woburn Sands Propaganda Warfare Station
- Aspley Guise Propaganda Warfare Station
- Pavenham 8th Air Force Command

- Milton Earnest Hall SOE/OSS House
- RAF Cranfield

Molesworth ▲

The Molesworth airbase is still in active service with the United States Air Force. The B17 Flying Fortresses of the 303rd Bomb Group have long gone, but a fine memorial to their war time achievements stands at the entrance to the present day site.

After a brief stay by the RAF and the Royal Australian Air Force, the base was handed over to the USAAF in May 1942. The first to arrive was the 15th Bomb Squadron, flying the twin engined B26 Douglas Havoc. A few weeks later the 303rd Bomb Group, sometimes known as 'Hell's Angels' moved in and remained until the end of the European War. During its three years at Molesworth, the group completed 364 combat missions, a record for any bomb group in the 8th Air Force.

Together with other US bases, Molesworth had a number of morale boosting concerts and in July 1943 played host to the comedian Bob Hope and vocalist Francis Langford.

In 1945 the airfield was handed back to the RAF who remained until 1951 when, once again, it became an operational USAF unit. Flying finally ceased in 1954. Between 1986 and early 1989 the base also played host to the 303rd Tactica Missile Wing and has since remained in service as a military storage and communications unit.

Access to the site as a whole is not permitted, but the impressive memorial to the Molesworth aircress can be visited at the entrance to the present base.

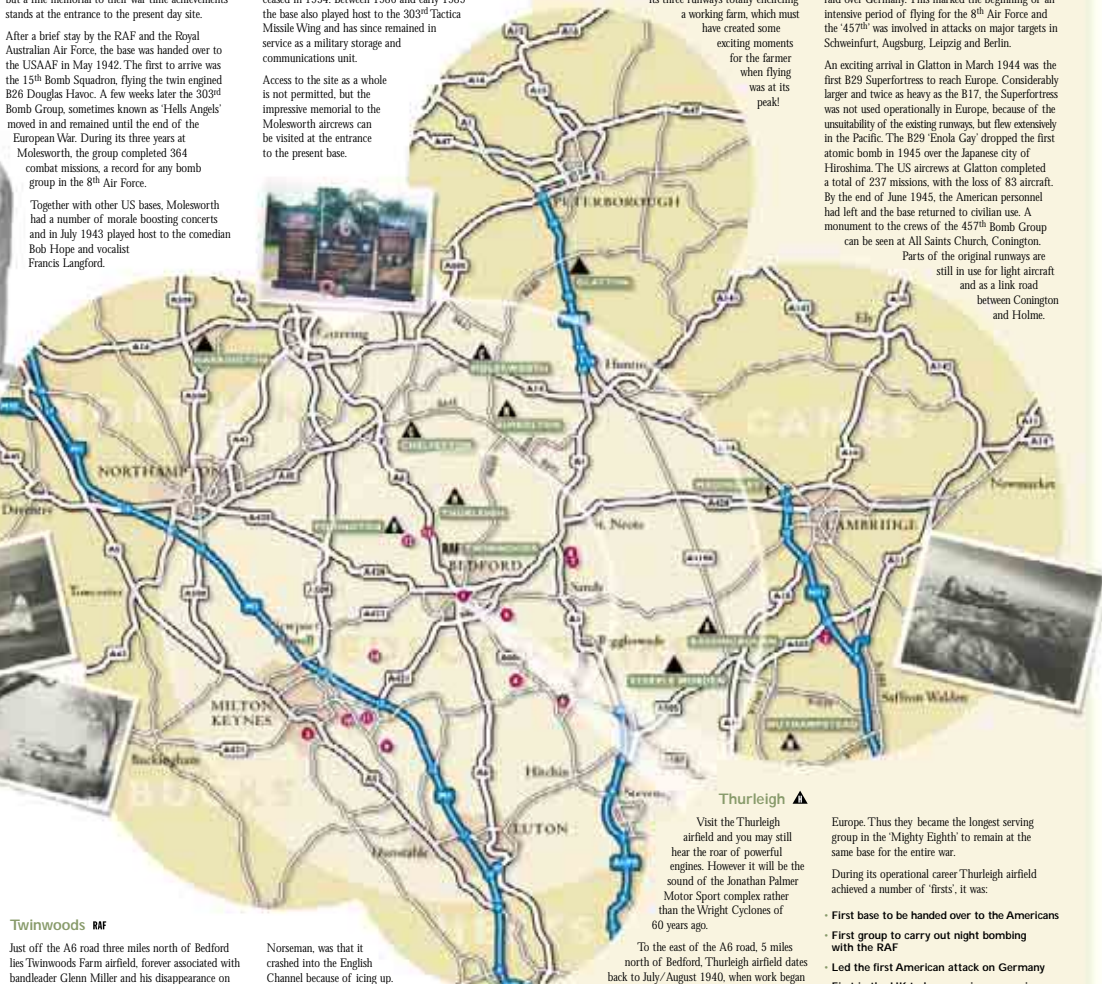
Glatten ▲

Now known as Peterborough Business Airfield, the old World War II Glatten airbase was built by American engineers during 1943. Glatten was unique in having its three runways totally encircling a working farm, which must have created some exciting moments for the farmer when flying was at its peak!

The first B17's of the 457th Bomb Group began to arrive at the new airfield in January 1944 and by the third week in February commenced operations with a raid over Germany. This marked the beginning of an intensive period of flying for the 8th Air Force and the 457th was involved in attacks on major targets in Schweinfurt, Augsburg, Leipzig and Berlin.

An exciting arrival in Glatten in March 1944 was the first B29 Superfortress to reach Europe. Considerably larger and twice as heavy as the B17, the Superfortress was not used operationally in Europe, because of the unsuitability of the existing runways, but flew extensively in the Pacific. The B29 'Enola Gay' dropped the first atomic bomb in 1945 over the Japanese city of Hiroshima. The US aircress at Glatten completed a total of 237 missions, with the loss of 83 aircraft. By the end of June 1945, the American personnel had left and the base returned to civilian use. A monument to the crews of the 457th Bomb Group can be seen at All Saints Church, Conington.

Parts of the original runways are still in use for light aircraft and as a link road between Conington and Holme.



Twinwoods RAF

Just off the A6 road three miles north of Bedford lies Twinwoods Farm airfield, forever associated with bandleader Glenn Miller and his disappearance on the 15th December 1944.

Starting out as a relief airfield for nearby Cranfield, Twinwoods was refurbished and became operational from April 1942. For the next three years it was home to the Beautifiers of the RAF 51st Operational Training Unit.

At nearby Milton Ernest Hall the American 8th Air Force had set up a headquarters for its Service Command and the Twinwoods airfield became the natural base for communications flights.

On the 15th December the Glenn Miller Orchestra was to commence a 6 weeks tour of USAAF bases and hospitals on the continent and it was from Milton Ernest Hall that Glenn Miller arranged his flight to Paris in a single engined C64 Norseman. The official enquiry into the disappearance of the

Norseman, was that it crashed into the English Channel because of icing up. Since then many theories have emerged regarding the 'real' circumstances of Glenn Miller's death.

Despite his tragic loss, the music of Glenn Miller has lived on and concerts by modern bands playing his 1940s arrangements still draw large crowds.

The original Twinwoods airfield control tower has survived and has been turned into a memorial and museum to the legend of Glenn Miller. One of the world's largest collections of Miller wartime photographs, along with other interesting memorabilia is on display. The museum is open at weekends and Bank Holidays and from time to time big band events are staged at the nearby Twinwoods Arena. For further information about the museum and Arena contact the Bedford Tourist Information Centre or telephone direct on 01234 824773.

Thurleigh ▲

Visit the Thurleigh airfield and you may still hear the roar of powerful engines. However it will be the sound of the Jonathan Palmer Motor Sport complex rather than the Wright Cyclones of 60 years ago.

To the east of the A6 road, 5 miles north of Bedford, Thurleigh airfield dates back to July/August 1940, when work began to build a Bomber Command base as part of the massive nationwide aerodrome building programme. An RAF party arrived in July 1941 to open this far from complete airfield and they were followed by a major influx of personnel in early 1942, when the RAF 160 Squadron was re-formed. Their stay was brief, they left for the Middle East in early February. At about the same time No.18 Operational Training Unit arrived with its Wellington bombers and Polish crews, they left in early June. The airfield was then subject to a considerable expansion of facilities to accommodate the arrival of the United States 8th Air Force. In September 1942 the 306th Bombardment Group arrived with their B17s. Early October saw the first of 341 missions over occupied Europe, their final mission being in mid April 1945. The Group remained at Thurleigh until December of the same year to carry out an aerial photographic survey of

Europe. Thus they became the longest serving group in the 'Mighty Eighth' to remain at the same base for the entire war.

During its operational career Thurleigh airfield achieved a number of 'firsts', it was:

- **First base to be handed over to the Americans**
- **First group to carry out night bombing with the RAF**
- **Led the first American attack on Germany**
- **First in the UK to have an airman receive the Congressional Medal of Honor**
- **First Glenn Miller concert at a UK base**

In the early 1950s the airfield became part of the Royal Aircraft Establishment used for the testing of a wide range of Civil and Military aircraft and equipment. It was finally closed for flying in the mid 1990s.

A surprising amount of the original railway remains and a fascinating museum has been established, commemorating the activities of those who served in the 306th Bomb Group and also giving a snapshot of what life was really like in wartime Bedfordshire. Details of museum visiting times may be obtained from the Bedford Tourist Information Centre, telephone 01234 215226.

Madingley †

The Cambridge American Cemetery at Madingley was constructed on behalf of the American Battle Monuments Commission in 1956. The cemetery and memorial are dedicated to the lives of the US service personnel who perished while serving in the UK during World War II. Situated approximately 3 miles west of Cambridge on the A1303 road, this imposing memorial covers some 472 acres.

At the entrance is the Visitors Building and a flagpole 72 high, the base of which is inscribed with the quotation:

'to you from falling heavens we throw the torch – be yours to hold it high'

Running parallel with the A1303 are the Tablets of the Missing, a limestone wall extending some 472 feet from the Visitors Building to the Memorial

Steeple Morden ▲

Situated just three miles from Bassingbourn, the airfield at Steeple Morden was constructed in 1940 and intended initially as a satellite base. However, as the war progressed the need for bases to house the new USAAF squadrons became urgent and in 1943 the Steeple Morden airbase was allocated to the 355th Fighter Group with their P47 Thunderbolts.



Bassingbourn ▲

Anyone who has seen the original 1943 documentary film 'Memphis Belle' will have an impression of daily life for a B17 aircress flying out of Bassingbourn. The 'Memphis Belle' was one of several aircraft to complete the normal 25 missions and was subsequently selected to tour the United States and help stimulate the purchase of War Bonds. The machine was later restored to form part of a static display and can be seen in Memphis, Tennessee.

Unlike many bases that were occupied by the USAAF, Bassingbourn was constructed in the 1930s as part of the RAF expansion programme. Built alongside what was the Roman 'Ermine Street' (A14 now B1198) the airfield was opened in May 1938 and for the next few years became home to many RAF squadrons, its primary role being the training of aircress on the Bristol Blenheim and later Vickers Wellington bomber.

In October 1942 the first US personnel arrived in the shape of the 91st Bomb Group with some 32 B17 Flying Fortresses. The Group was to remain at Bassingbourn until the end of the European War. Known as 'The Ragged Irregulars', the 91st was both

Nuthampstead ▲

The words 'Hell from Heaven' are carved into the impressive marble memorial to the members of the 398th Bomb Group, 8th USAAF, situated by 'The Woodman Inn' in Nuthampstead.

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The 55th Fighter Group left Nuthampstead in April 1944 and was replaced by the B17 Flying Fortresses

Building. The wall is inscribed with the names of 5,126 United States personnel who died, or went missing, on active service. One of the names listed is that of Alton Glenn Miller the famous bandleader.

At the western end of the wall is the Memorial Building, which is divided into a chapel and a museum showing the progress of the war between 1942 and 1945.

The 3,811 headstones in the cemetery are arranged in a fan of seven curved rows, all set within carefully maintained lawns.

The cemetery is open daily between 8.00am and 6.00pm, April to September (8.00am to 5.00pm October to March) and limited parking is available outside the main entrance.

After around six months the Thunderbolts were replaced by the new P51 Mustang, a machine capable of escorting the bomber groups all the way to the target and with a performance equal or even superior to enemy propeller driven fighter aircraft.

The 355th Fighter Group became one of the most formidable units in the 8th Air Force, with some 800 enemy aircraft claimed as destroyed by air combat or ground strafing.

The USAAF left the airfield at the end of the European war and in 1946 it reverted to agricultural use. Little now remains of the wartime airbase, but an impressive memorial, featuring a P51 propeller mounted on a stone monument has been erected by the road running alongside the old airfield.

a colourful and a courageous unit, being awarded two Presidential Unit Citations after heavy losses in raids over enemy territory. In August 1943, whilst leading the 8th Air Force attack on the ball bearing plants at Schweinfurt the Group's losses were so severe that it did not regain full operational strength for some time. One B17G of the 91st, 'Nine-O-Nine' set an 8th Air Force record by completing 140 combat missions.

At the end of hostilities the airfield was returned to the RAF, who used it for important international duties and aircress training. The English Electric Canberra Bomber was the last aircraft to be based at Bassingbourn before it closed. It was then taken over by the Queen's Division of the British Army and in 1996 became a depot of the Army Training Regiment. Today, Bassingbourn is still a very active the basic military skills common to all armed services.

Most of the wartime buildings remain and the old Control Tower contains an excellent museum. This can be visited by prior appointment by contacting the Bedford Tourist Information Centre, or direct on 01359 221151/01223 356314.

of the 398th Bomb Group. This unit, one of the last to be formed within the 8th Air Force was equipped with the latest 'G' version of the Fortress, distinguished by a machine gun turret beneath the nose of the aircraft.

Operations commenced in May 1944 and quickly became intense as the allied forces prepared for 'D' day. By October 1944 the 398th Bomb Group had completed 100 missions. A raid on the Skoda plant in Czechoslovakia in April 1945 was their last operation.

During June 1945 Nuthampstead was vacated by the American forces and the airfield was returned to the RAF. It finally closed in 1959.