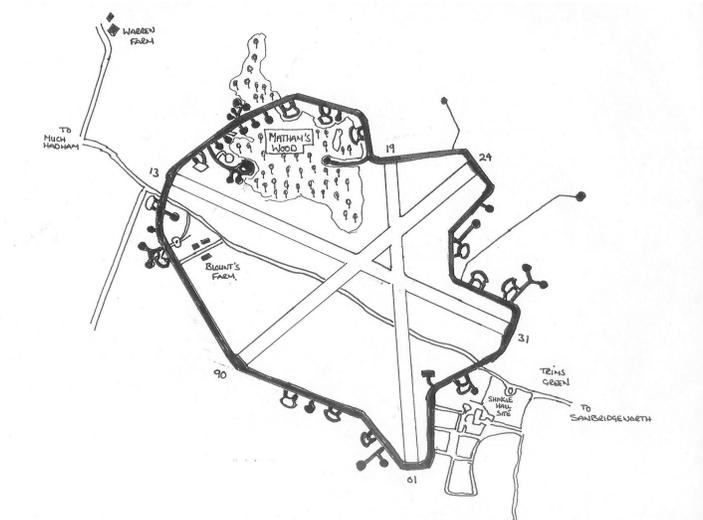
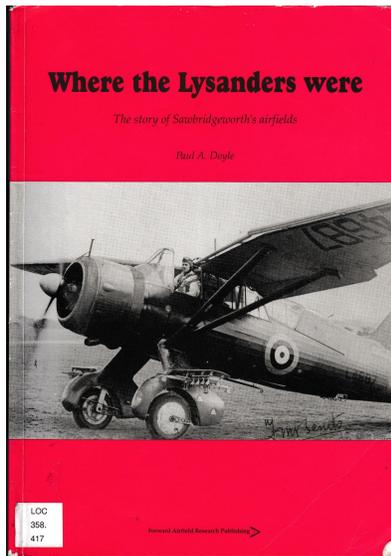


Camp High Wych



Even today, 75 years after the end of the Second World War, most locals will know that there once was an airfield in our part of East Hertfordshire. It was situated near Blounts Farm, Allens Green, Matham's Wood and Trimms Green and was known as RAF Sawbridgeworth. See the above map. Mustangs, Spitfires and Lysanders flew from there. For those who want to know more I can recommend the excellent 'Where the Lysanders were' by Paul E. Doyle, published in 1995 and now out of print but available at local libraries, Sawbridgeworth Library amongst them. Second-hand copies are also available here and there. The cover of this book is reproduced above.

From September 1946 until the summer of 1959 a community of homeless people was housed at the former airfield. It was known as 'Camp High Wych', the huts, the Drome or the Parsonage Estate. Hundreds of people lived there at some time or another. On 30 September nine families moved into the WAAF site of the former airfield, which was on the part of the airfield which fell within High Wych Parish. WAAF, by the way, stands for Women's Auxiliary Air Force. The families gained entry by simply removing the Air Ministry padlocks. Of course, this did not remain secret. On 12 October 1946, the *Herts and Essex Observer* reported on it. The authorities also became aware. Over time more families arrived.

The housing situation in 1945 and 1946 was indeed appalling, particularly for young couples who had married during or shortly after the war, with the husbands often having been away fighting in various foreign parts. Empty houses had to be requisitioned with recalcitrant owners often trying their best to prevent this. The building of council houses only started very slowly.

From the minutes of the Sawbridgeworth Urban District Council (SUDC) of 29 October 1946 we learn that a petition had been received from people who made their homes at the airfield. The Clerk had been in touch with the Ministry of Health and the site had been visited. It was decided that the 'squatters' should be told that matters were now being considered by the MOH and no further action would be taken until a full report has been received. The possibility of management of the site was considered. It is strange to note, perhaps, that, whilst a large part of the airfield was within the boundaries of High Wych Parish, High Wych Parish Council did not discuss the matter at any time. It seems that the MOH, together with the RAF, and Braughing Rural District Council (BRDC), decided that SUDC should act as agent and handle affairs, oversee sanitary conditions, see to the upkeep of the buildings and charge rent. Indeed, over the months and years that followed there were a number of mentions of the site in the minutes of various SUDC committees. On 26 November 1946 the MOH authorised SUDC to carry out the conversion of some huts. An architect, Mr. Lacoste, was to be in charge. On 31 December 1946, the Clerk read out a letter from the MOH and gave a general report. On 28 January 1947, a Mrs. Alexander of West Road asked to hold 'semi religious services' twice a week at the picket post. SUDC agreed and wanted to charge 1/- per week in rent. On 28 February 1947, an MOH representative discussed health and sanitary conditions at the camp with Dr. Hailey. On 31 March 1947, SUDC announced plans to install more lavatories and even a phone box.

Elsan toilets were supplied and a limited water supply installed. BRDC paid for installing mains water and electricity to the occupied buildings. A weekly rent was set so the residents of the camp could really no longer be considered 'squatters'. By late June 1947 the number of residents stood at 87. The RAF let it be known that they did not object to their buildings being used for private accommodation. Still more families arrived. By August 1947 the number of residents stood at 131. Things got confusing when the Air Ministry announced that they intended to charge for water and electricity. Both that Ministry and the MOH, in fact, insisted on having ultimate control. But they did agree with BRDC that SUDC should manage the camp until it was possible to rehouse the occupants. Meanwhile, promised improvements took a long while to be realised. Residents naturally did not appreciate this very much and conflicts arose over unpaid rent.

The above gives the impression of a fairly regulated situation. But perhaps that was not the case. Brian Buckley, whose parents, Sid and Doris, came to the camp in late 1947 or early 1948 claims that no rent was in fact paid in those early days. Things were pretty wild! Brian was 10 when he came to the camp with his parents, older brother Tony and younger brother Paul. Father Sid, who came from Norfolk, was a cowman at Morris's farm but his family's accommodation at Trimms Green was insufficient. Brian remembers how his dad created a separate bedroom by making partitions from cardboard. Others used curtains or blankets to give themselves more privacy. Roofing felt was used for flooring to protect residents from the cold concrete. Yes, it could be very cold, with icicles often forming inside the huts. Nevertheless, it wasn't all doom and gloom; fun was had as well. Brian remembers the church get-togethers, which Mrs Alexander organised. She even invited the girls to parties in her garden! Later on, a social club was started with dances and even film shows, organised by Mr. Denis, the manager of Sawbridgeworth Cinema. After a while, though, those were stopped by the police. Mr Lawson made some lovely murals. Brian's sister Kay (now named Beddall) was born at the camp in 1950. The Buckley family was eventually rehoused

in 1952 and moved to Lawrence Avenue in Sawbridgeworth. Daily routines became established, including deliveries of milk and coal. The coal was used in pot-bellied stoves left there by the RAF. Once the supply of wood stripped from the doors and fittings on other huts had run out, that was of course necessary. One funny story regaled by Paul Doyle in his book concerns a young married couple, who, having returned from the registry office where they had been married in the morning were surprised in bed in the afternoon by the coal man. Birthday parties were organised, babies were of course born, most of those were delivered by Nurse Cohen, the fondly remembered district nurse. Children went to school, some of them to Allens Green.

SUDC carried on its involvement. Tenants were rehoused in new council estates and new tenants were considered. It is claimed, however, as some accommodation became vacant, others moved in illegally. On 24 August 1948 it was decided that the camp would now officially be known as 'the Parsonage Estate'. Improvements and alterations continued to be discussed, such as lighting. In March 1949, a plan was launched to convert the former hospital into four flats. Walter Lawrence was engaged to do the work. One tenant, however, refused to leave until he was rehoused. £1400 was spent on waterproofing the Nissen and asbestos huts. In July, the MOH informed SUDC they did not want to spend any more money on the camp. The tenants had already raised money amongst themselves to start a social club and a children's playground. The 'Parsonage Estate and Braughing vigilance committee' became the tenants' representative body.

Steve and Adrienne Burford lived at the camp too. Adrienne (now named Wilson) moved there in 1950 at the age of 18 months when her brother was just two months old. Their parents were Denis and Iris. Denis (from Manuden) had served in Palestine, married Iris upon his return but did not find suitable accommodation, so came to the camp. A younger brother, Steve, was in fact born at the camp in September 1950. His birth certificate lists the address as being 9 Communal Site High Wych. The family was rehoused in 1954 and moved to Elizabeth Road in Bishop's Stortford. A year later a sister arrived: Patricia. She was not delivered by the nurse. Adrienne tells us 'that Nurse Cohen had in fact called early afternoon to check on my mother and decided that she had time to go home to get her tea, before the baby arrived. However, my sister decided that she wasn't going to wait until the nurse's return and, with no means of contacting her, my father had to step in and play midwife himself. Mother and baby all well when Nurse Cohen returned. I should imagine that my father was not the only amateur midwife during the years of the camp's existence!'

Reading Paul Doyle's book, it looks as if the camp, the huts, the drome or whatever the settlement was called, did not carry on much beyond 1949. In fact, it carried on until 1959 and Sawbridgeworth Town Council continued its involvement. And whilst the camp may very well have been discussed at council meetings, there is next to no mention of it in the minutes. It is possible the Town Clerk was very much left to get on with things on his own, allocating places at the camp and offering alternative accommodation.

Teresa Pavely (nee Ellis) was born in 1955 at 'the huts' in Parsonage Lane. It was February and the snow was thick on the ground as John, her dad, walked to the phone box to call District Nurse Cohen. Upon their marriage on 23 June 1952, Teresa's mum and dad, Margaret and John, had lived with Margaret's granny at Trimm's Green/Rook End on the outskirts of Allens Green near the Chase. They had to move out, as the farmer would not let them share the same tied cottage. Luckily(?) they were given accommodation at the camp by the authorities at SUDC. They must have been one of the last people to be allocated accommodation at the camp, as by 1953 SUDC

had announced they would not accept any more tenants. John Ellis was a bus driver working for Eastern National Bus Garage in Bishop's Stortford at the time. Margaret Ellis told her daughter how some large families had two huts, one to live in and one to sleep in; they paid the rent from the family allowance. Every now and then a greengrocer would call with his horse and cart. Things were changing though; by 1955 a demolition programme was well under way, with the worst-equipped huts being taken down first and people moved to slightly better huts. This also happened to John and Margaret. However, at the end of that year, when Teresa was nine months old, the family was rehoused in a council house at Kecksy's in Sawbridgeworth.



Pictured above: Margaret Ellis in front of her hut with baby Teresa in 1955.

The Wilson family lived at the camp for longer than most. Jim, whose proper name was in fact Alfred, had served in the Royal Artillery during WW2 and, after demobilisation, came back to live in Bishop's Stortford. He worked as a coal man with a firm called Bennet's. Olive Walker lived in Trimm's Green with her parents. During the war, she had worked in Chelmsford at Marconi's, making radios for the military. Jim and Olive met at a dance and got married in 1947, after which they came to live at number 5 East Side Camp. In 1949, their son, Robert, was born.

Times were hard at the camp. Thanks however, to his wartime military driving licence father Jim got a job as a long-distance lorry driver. As a result, he sometimes brought home some 'treats' that were often shared with neighbours at the camp. In 1953, at the coronation of the Queen, the people at the camp organised a big party. One year later, sadly, young Robert fell ill and subsequently died. He is buried in Sawbridgeworth Cemetery.

On 25 February 1955, a second son, Terry, was born. As we have already seen above, this was during a particularly harsh winter with lots of snow about. Nurse Cohen had to struggle to get through but got there just in time. There was a nice fire in the bedroom to welcome the new arrival. Terry remembers being told about Mr. Neil's farm which was just at the camp's entrance. Mr. Neil sold eggs at the door, as he had loads of chickens. Some of these sometimes vanished and turned up at the camp residents' dinner table. Needs must! Jim Wilson also kept pigs, which were fattened up for pork and butchered by uncle Ron Cracknell, who also lived at the camp. Terry does not remember much from his first four years, but does recall a shop at the bottom of Spellbrook Lane that sold most things, and can remember sitting on the counter looking at all the sweets.

The years went by. Next door to the Wilsons lived the Brace family with their son John, who became a good friend of Terry. John was born only three months after Terry; they grew up together and became good friends. John never had a driving licence and in later life biked everywhere. Tragically, he was killed while cycling to work one morning in December 2009, which upset Terry greatly.

It should be noted that the hut in which both Terry Wilson and Johnny Brace were born is still standing. If you go into Parsonage Lane from Cambridge Road, go past the Play Barn on the left. At the junction with Spellbrook Lane, Mr. Neil's farm was on the right and the old hut is then on the left. There's a business there now: Pro Laminates, a fibre glass supplier, whose address is given as 'the Billet', obviously referring to its wartime use by RAF people.



● Five miles from Harlow New Town II families and three elderly people are living in these conditions. This is part of High Wych Camp, which squatters settled on after the war. Now it is to be closed down. Three families and three people living on their own are still not assured of alternative accommodation.



The Wilson family were eventually rehoused on the newly-built High Wych Broadfield Estate. They moved into their new council house on 10 April 1959. Terry remembers that date so well as the family always kept the front page of that day's *Daily Mirror* as a memento.

Also above is a picture from the *Harlow Gazette* of 27 February 1959. The *Gazette* interviewed two families who were then still living at the camp, and who had been on the Braughing housing list for ten years: the Richards family and the Higgins family. The Higgins family had two children. Marjorie Higgins told the *Gazette* reporter how, in desperation, she had written off to the Queen and to the then MP, Derek Walker Smith. Buckingham Palace passed her letter to the Housing Ministry. Walker Smith expressed confidence that Braughing RDC was doing its best.



High Wych camp power supply disconnected

AS units of accommodation at High Wych camp have been vacated by licensees rehoused by Braughing Rural Council the electricity supply has been disconnected. This has been done because of the danger that trespassers, particularly young children, might not realise that cables running through empty premises were alive.

This procedure was reported to the Council at their meeting last Thursday by the Housing Estate Management Committee. But, the report continued, in two instances recently this had not been possible because to do so would have meant disconnecting the supply from units still occupied. The committee recommended, however, and the Council approved, that the supply should be disconnected and the people concerned told to make other arrangements for artificial light. In point of fact it will affect only three families, and the Council are trying to clear the camp as soon as possible.

On the left, Marjorie Higgins pictured in the Harlow Gazette of 27 February 1959. in the centre and on the right an article from the Herts and Essex Observer of 12 June 1959. It looks as if electricity was cut off whilst people were still living at the camp.

Trying to get personal stories 60-70 years on from the time of the camp proved difficult. Most of the original inhabitants are now dead, their children have dispersed, and many have only vague memories of their time there. Quite a few do still live locally, however. Research has also proven difficult, as I was not able to visit the archive as often as I had wished. It is, therefore, quite possible this article will soon need a rewrite. So, if you have corrections or additional information to offer, do contact me. Today, there is not much that reminds casual passers-by of where the camp was. A Google Maps screenshot, on the left below, shows Parsonage Lane, the road from Allens Green towards Blounts Farm. The picture on the right shows the



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memo
rial.



The two main published sources for this article were Paul Doyle's 'Where the Lysanders were' and an article from the *Harlow Gazette* from 1959. Other sources were: Brian Buckley, Ena Haugham, Teresa Pavely, Hayley Erica Bird, Mark Kempthorne, Michael Prior, Steve Prior, Janet van de Bilt Adrienne Wilson, Terry Wilson, www.wikipedia.org, www.ancestry.co.uk, and County Archives, aka HALS. Help with this continuing series will be very much appreciated. Phone me on 01279725468 or e-mail me at theo@vandebilt.co.uk with suggestions, corrections or ideas for future projects.