

The site of RAF Sawbridgeworth: from fourteenth-century manor to twentieth-century airfield

Introduction

Along Parsonage Lane, running between Sawbridgeworth and Much Hadham, is an acreage of land that includes Matham's Wood. From early times it was good agricultural and hunting land. From the fourteenth century it was held as part of the Manors of Shingle Hall and Mathams (see Anne Rowe's work below). The traces of its historical past can be found on the ground as well as in names such as Shingle Hall and Blounts Farms and Matham's Wood, that are still in use. In more recent times, during WWII it was the site of an extensive airfield. That use has left more visible rubble and concrete roads. As Memorial Day approaches, the site has attracted attention for its military past and from the fact that the newly rediscovered watercolour painter, Eric Ravilious, was assigned there as a war artist for six months from May to August, 1942.

Recently, groups have been walking there, with the permission of the landowner, to see for themselves what can be found and understood of RAF Sawbridgeworth. People with different kinds of information shared their thoughts to try to make out the past in what remains in the present. After the walk they have sent in thoughts which we are posting for anyone interested to read. Each section can be accessed separately. Dip in!

We will continue to add to this collection so if you have any material of interest to all, please send in to lizwaugh@yahoo.com

Contents

Part 1: General Background

Article by Theo van de Bilt from his series *High Wych History*, 40: Matham's Wood:
http://vandebilt.co.uk/attachments/link_article_HWH_40_mathams_wood.pdf

See below.

Part 2: The Airfield

Article by Elizabeth Waugh introducing the airfield.

Comments and useful books from Ray Hankin of the East Herts Aviation Society.

Part 3: Eric Ravilious

An article on Eric Ravilious as war artist from *Aeroplane Monthly*, October 2022, sent in by Guy Thomas is interesting to read but unfortunately too unwieldy to download to SLHS website. Consult the magazine itself.

Eric Ravilious - Drawn To War was voted BEST DOCUMENTARY FILM at the 2022 LA Femme International Film Festival. Margy Kinmonth received the Award during yesterday evening's Awards Ceremony, beamed live from Los Angeles.

Part 4: Medieval and Tudor History of the airfield site.

Excerpts from Anne Rowe's books: *Medieval Parks of Hertfordshire*, 2009 and *Tudor & Early Stuart Parks of Hertfordshire*, 2019.

High Wych History – 40 – Mathams wood

an article by Theo van de Bilt

Have any of you ever looked up High Wych on Wikipedia? If you have, then you will have read that “a moated site is all that remains of the medieval residence of Mathams”. Mathams Wood lies some 600 metres North East of Blounts Farm, Allens Green. William Page's Victorian County History of Hertfordshire tells us that: “*the manors of Shingle Hall alias Shingey and Mathams seem to have been originally two separate properties which became amalgamated in the hands of the Matham family, from whom the second manor took its name. They were evidently formed by subinfeudation (subletting) from the Mandeville manor, and were held of the honour of Mandeville*”. The de Mandeville Dynasty was founded by Geoffrey, 1st Earl of Essex, a notorious cohort of William the Conqueror. William granted Geoffrey large estates, primarily in Essex, and Hertfordshire, but in other counties as well.



Mathams Wood as shown on Google Earth Effigy of Geoffrey de Mandeville's tomb at Temple Church, London

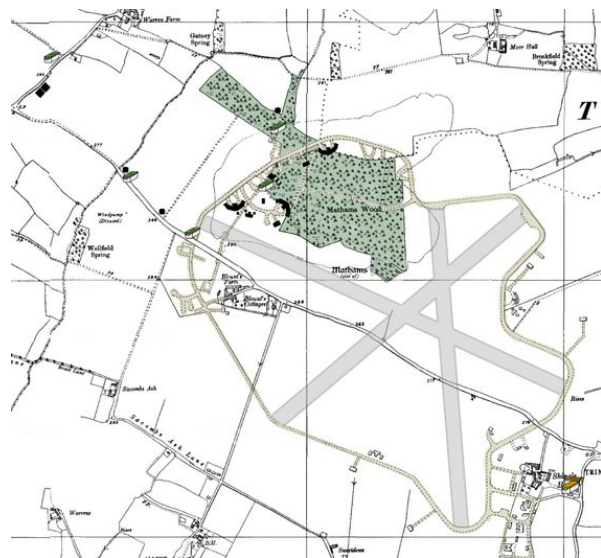
John de Matham and subsequently Geoffrey de Matham are mentioned in the Assize Rolls of 1248 and 1249. The family then held the property well into the 17th c., when it was sold along

with the Sayesbury and Pishiobury manors. On the the 1839 tithe map it is recorded as being owned by Rowland Alston (of Alston Oak!). By 1861 it was owned by John Prout a famous agriculturalist, entrepreneur and author, who was based at Blounts Farm. John Prout will be discussed in a later article.

Those who know the area remember it for the wartime airfield there. This was first used during the First World War as a Night Landing ground for No. 39 (Home Defence) Squadron which was based at North Weald in Essex. Originally named Mathams Wood ALG (Advanced Landing Ground) it was used until November 1918 when it reverted to agriculture. Between the wars, the 31 acre site was occasionally used by a glider club. In 1937 however it returned to military use and expanded to 43 acres.

When after the French capitulation in May 1940, many RAF squadrons returned home the search was on for areas which could provide a home base for Fighter and Light Bomber units. These were often equipped with the high wing Westland Lysander aircraft. II(AC) Squadron was one such unit. It originally landed at the aerodrome in Hatfield, but the de Havilland aircraft company was not happy with the squadrons aircraft parked there; they thought it would attract enemy aircraft to the important aircraft factory on the site. So it was decided to take the aircraft to nearby Mathams Wood ALG, which then became their home for the next four years. The facility became known as RAF Sawbridgeworth although it in fact straddles the border between High Wych / Allens Green parish and Sawbridgeworth.

There is plenty of information to be found on the RAF's activities in our area so I will not add to what others have already done. For those who want to know more I can recommend "Where the Lysanders Were, the Story of Sawbridgeworth's Airfields" by Paul Doyle.

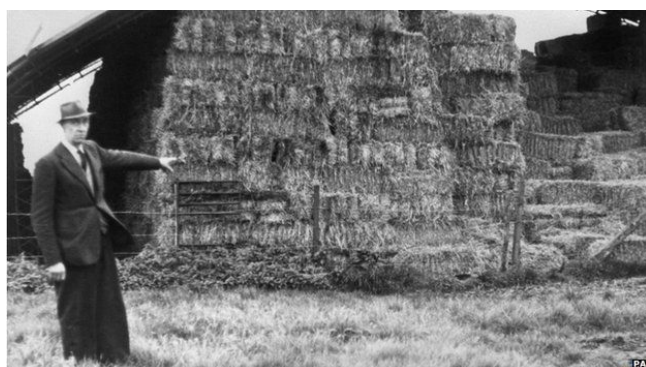


Rowland Alston 1782- 1865 Mathams Wood within the perimeters of the old Allens Green airfield

After the war it was intended for the area to return to farming. However, before the military had properly vacated the field, nine families of squatters moved in. They gained access to the huts by simply removing the air ministry padlocks. The complex then became known as "High Wych Camp". The influx did of course cause some irritation but the authorities did recognize the genuine needs of the campers. The Ministry of Health, Braughing Rural District Council and Sawbridgeworth Council eventually collaborated in providing mains water and electricity to the occupied buildings which were defined as "temporary accommodation" By November 1948 the number of "campers" had increased to 131. Over the next few years alternative accommodation was found for the people involved

Finally there is another important reason why Mathams Wood may stick in the imagination of many: Harry Roberts. Roberts was a notorious criminal who in 1966 was involved in a shootout following an armed robbery in East Acton. Roberts shot two policemen and one of his accomplices shot another before they got away. For 96 days he then avoided capture. Using his military experience he first hid out in Epping Forest, then in Mathams Wood. Finally he was captured by a Stevenage traffic

policeman by the name of Peter Smith who found him hiding amongst bales of straw near a barn at Blounts Farm. According to some locals he had been there for a while and even been drinking in the Queens Head in Allens Green. Roberts was jailed for life and actually served 48 years only having been released in 2014.



From left to right: Harry, Roberts, Peter Smith his capturer and William Morris pointing near the straw bales amongst the cop killer had been hiding.

Today Mathams Wood is still there of course. Some people find it “creepy”. Some dog walkers claim their animals do not like going there! Meanwhile, very little remains of what once was RAF Sawbridgeworth. The outline of the old perimeter road is still visible and of course there is the **RAF Sawbridgeworth memorial**. **Landowner David Morris kindly allowed this to be erected** at the entrance to Shingle Hall farm in front of the old guardhouse, now in use as an industrial unit: an ideal site. The unveiling took place on 14th May 2006 and was attended by a number of veterans, local luminaries and some 250 members of the public



14th May 2006 David Morris unveils the Sawbridgeworth RAF monument.

Sources for this article were: David Morris, William Page's Victorian County History, wartime-airfields.com, the Comet, the Herts and Essex Observer, the Hertfordshire Airfields Memorial Group website, Murderpedia, Wikipedia, Ancestry.co.uk and as always county archives aka HALS. Do not forget: the High Wych History Project needs your personal contributions, memories, stories and photographs as well as your criticism, be it positive or negative. Get in touch!! Contact me at: theo@vanderbilt.co.uk or phone me at 01279 725468. You can also check my blog at <http://vanderbilt.co.uk/history/>