

## Part 2: The Airfield

### 1 Finding RAF Sawbridgeworth in the War Paintings of Eric Ravilious: Notes following the talk for the SLHS on 28 January 2021 *RAF Sawbridgeworth and Eric Ravilious: An Airfield from a War Artist's Point of View*

Elizabeth Waugh

For those who would like to use the talk as a stepping stone to walks in the area or further explorations of their own, I offer some of the information I discovered in preparing the talk.

I will begin by giving the list of written sources I used, for the most part enabled by the help of people lending me books that are not readily available at this time.

***Books: These books are excellent reads as well as good sources of information.***

Doyle, Paul A. *Where the Lysanders Were*, North Weald Essex, 1995. A comprehensive book about the 'magnificent men and their flying machines', fully detailed and carefully completed. It falls into the tradition of literature about warfare that began with Homer's *Iliad*, lots of heroic detail about machines and equipment as well as personnel and organization.

Powers, Alan. *Eric Ravilious, Artist and Designer*. Lund Humphries, Surrey. 2013.

Powers, Alan. *Eric Ravilious, Imagined Realities*. Imperial War Museum. 2003.

Ullman, Anne [Ravilious' daughter], editor. *Ravilious at War The complete work of Eric Ravilious, September 1939 – September 1942*. The Fleece Press, Upper Denby, 2002

### Finding the Airfield

I started my research by first finding the airfield, then by walking it, again with help. To do that I drove down Parsonage Lane from Sawbridgeworth toward Perry Green about 2 miles until arriving at a pillbox familiar from having passed it many times. I learned that this seemingly random block marked the perimeter of the airfield. Postcode CM21 0LX

On the Much Hadham road is a type 24 Pillbox with the remains of the road barrier placed next to it. This point marked the boundary of the airfield.



There is a Memorial off Parsonage Lane down a side road in Trim's Green.

Memorial: Off the main road on a side track in Trim's Green at the side of Shingle Hall Farm, there is a well-kept, well designed memorial to the RAF airmen who have lost their lives flying from this base.

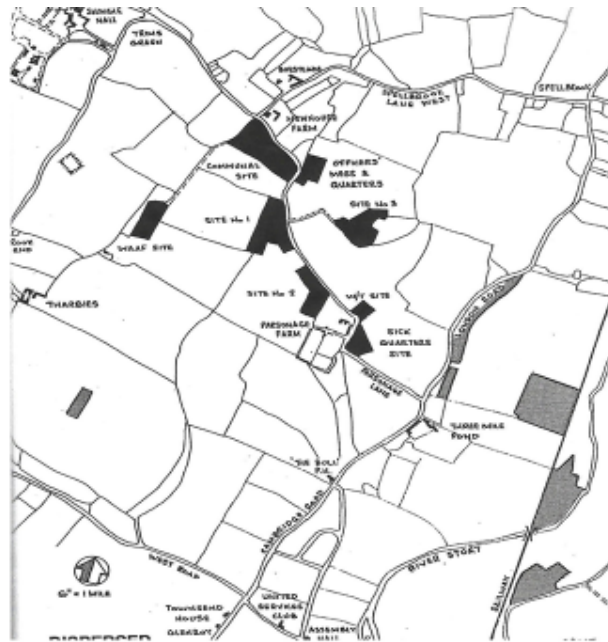


First used during WWI and known as Matham's Wood, from 1916-1918 this airfield became a night landing ground for 39 Squadron of the Royal Flying Corps, in those years engaged in defending London against high altitude German bombers and airships. After 1918, the landing strips were removed and the area became farmland again.



Shingle Hall Farm was the technical site of the airfield where essential maintenance was carried out. It was here that the Watch Office, T2 Hangar, stores, armoury and many other buildings were situated. Other associated buildings constructed at the time included sleep shelters, pillboxes, ammunition stores, Blister hangars, operations rooms, barracks and a watch office. Concealed shelters were also placed in Matham's Wood

**As 'dispersed' sites, RAF** Sawbridgeworth came into the town as well. Great Hyde Hall became Squadron Headquarters and Townsend House on the Cambridge Rd, now housing a dental practice, was used for accounts and equipment section records. See other locations below.



While walking the airfield we came across some concealed underground headquarters.

### Designation as a National Monument

In 2004 the airfield became a Scheduled Monument, no.1020978, which includes eight separate positions for protection: *'Surviving structures will often be given coherence and context by surviving lengths of perimeter track and the concrete dispersal pads. In addition, some types of defence structure are rare survivals nationally, and all examples of Pickett- Hamilton forts, fighter pens and their associated sleep shelters, gun positions and Battle Headquarters closely associated with defence structures, are of national importance'*.



Eric Ravilious was appointed through the War Artists Provision to a position at RAF Sawbridgeworth in 1942. The purpose was to find artists who might be 'entrusted' with recording war – partly aiming officially to raise morale and to commemorate action for those at home and abroad. A less public purpose was to safeguard artists by recruiting them for more valid war work than battlefield duty. More than three hundred artists eventually served. Six of Ravilious' paintings of RAF Sawbridgeworth are in the Imperial War Museum.

## Eric Ravilious, artist and family man

Born in 1903, he studied at the Royal College of Art with, among others, Paul Nash, a prominent WWI artist. After his studies he earned a living as an artist in a variety of media: book engraving, designs for pottery, mural painting as well as watercolour painting. Living in Essex at the time, he became employed from 1940 in the War Artists Scheme until 1942, with the rank of captain in the Royal Marines. Having been sent to various locations, he eventually came to RAF Sawbridgeworth for a placement of several months from early May 1942, in part because his artist wife, Tirzah Garwood, at home in Shalford near Braintree, Essex, was ill and caring for two young children and a new baby. He wanted and needed to be close.



**Eric Ravilious, *The Operations Room Sawbridgeworth, 1942*. IWM acquired this painting in 2020 with support from the Art Fund.**



It is likely that the Operations room was at Shingle Hall where the greater number of technical facilities were. There is the feeling of space and light in this open structure with the high angled ceiling and large windows. The colours are bright, as if the sunlight is streaming in. Maybe the season played a part as Ravilious was there only

in the summer months but the colours used for the basic decoration were light, deliberately so it is said, to raise the men's spirits.

**See below:**

**Eric Ravillious, *Runway Perspective, RAF Sawbridgeworth, 1942* IWM Collection**

Sawbridgeworth residents can pinpoint exactly where this is. If you stand on the field today just where the two small figures are to the right as if watching these Spitfires in flight, you see the block of green, the trees of Matham's Wood, on the left and the cluster of buildings with the spire of Thorley Church straight ahead. The planes are heading off Runway 24.

And to locate further:

**Google Earth Map, October, 2020** with outline of RAF Sawbridgeworth superimposed. (image, A. Waugh)

[http://www.wartime-airfields.com/raf-sawbridgeworth-airfield-site.](http://www.wartime-airfields.com/raf-sawbridgeworth-airfield-site)





Can anyone locate this? Or the following? I haven't been able to. Please send in your suggestions.

*Ack Ack Post Sawbridgeworth, Eric Ravillious, 1942*

*The Ack Ack Post* as Ravillious names his painting, or anti-aircraft gun, is sited on the north-east edge of the field – the wooded patch of dark green is again to the left. There, maybe on the same battle-ready day, are men on the alert, the machine gun in position, with binoculars scanning the distance where the planes are flying for threats. Their helmets are camouflaged with field green and gold. The post is in a pit and as the Heritage description notes it as unique.



## Spigot Mortar Position



*'Around the outer edge of the perimeter track there are some other remains of the airfield's defences. A rare find in an airfield is a spigot mortar position. Spigot mortars were usually a home guard weapon. It may be that because the local home guard were involved with the defence of the airfield, that it is the sole reason why such a position can be found on the site. The Blacker Bombard was a 29mm anti-tank mortar and usually mounted on a circular plinth made from concrete. The mortar itself was fixed on a stainless steel spigot and this is how it derived its name. Sawbridgeworths example was mounted not on a concrete plinth, but in a pit. The pit exists today on the edge of a field close to the perimeter track.....'*

<http://www.wartime-airfields.com/raf-sawbridgeworth-airfield-site.html>

To look at all of Ravilious' paintings of RAF Sawbridgeworth in the Imperial War Museum collection, see [www.iwm.org.uk](http://www.iwm.org.uk)

### **2- Comments and useful reading on airfields sent in by Ray Hankin, Chairman East Hertfordshire Aviation Society**

*One of Ray's comments could stand as a comment on all study of history: 'Inevitably, three different sources will contain conflicting information...'*

The book I had with me was *Northern Home Counties in The Military Airfields of Britain* series, published by The Crowood Press in 2007. Of the three books that I have containing varying degrees of detail about the airfield, I brought that one with me because unlike the two others, it has an illustration of the three runway layout, as it existed in 1944. Conversely, the two others contain much more about the airfield's history and what went on there during WW2.

The two other titles that I have are:

*Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire Airfields in the Second World War*, part of a series published by Countryside Books in 1999, that devotes more than 11 pages to the airfield with a lot of data on the squadrons that operated there, and *Action Stations Revisited No. 2*, published by Crecy Published in 2004 that is equally authoritative but in a more condensed fashion.

You should find second hand copies for sale of all of them on eBay or one of the recognised aviation booksellers, of which the best is probably The Aviation Bookshop of Tunbridge Wells.

Inevitably, three different sources will contain conflicting information. When you mentioned SOE operations from Sawbridgeworth I was slightly sceptical, wondering



if someone had drawn the wrong conclusion from the fact that the dominant type operated during Sawbridgeworth's relatively short career was the Lysander, inextricably linked with spy taxi missions into France. Remember, the Lysander was conceived as a type for Army co-operation operations and that was a role in which Sawbridgeworth as an airfield was rooted.

However, when revisiting the *Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire Airfields* volume, I came across the following when referring to the re-equipping of No 2 Sqn with the Mk III Lysander:

".....the squadron began training pilots for No 419 Flight, which had been formed in August 1940 as the operational arm of the Special Operations Executive (SOE). This Flight had been established to land and pick up agents operating in occupied France. It is thought that.....the first such flight (was made) on 3 September 1940 to deliver an agent to a field near Tours in France, although official records show the first clandestine operation taking place about a month or so later (19th/20<sup>th</sup> October)."

There is then a description of the type of secret training that pilots selected to fly such missions underwent at Sawbridgeworth, concluding: The Flight was renumbered No 1419 in March 1941, and became No 138 (SD) Sqn (SD = Special Duties) in late August. It would ultimately operate from Tempsford....." That is the airfield, to the east of the A1 road and just north of Biggleswade, that I mentioned and from where the majority of SOE flights were operated.

Perhaps curiously, there is no mention about Sawbridgeworth being initially the airfield at which pilots involved in SOE operations were trained in either of the two other books.

Ray Hankin  
Chairman  
East Hertfordshire Aviation Society