

SITUATED slap bang in the middle of rural Norfolk, West Raynham must be one of the most isolated RAF stations in England. I was posted there as an 18 year-old sprog, fresh out of training, in early 1973 and look back on the experience with fondness. As with most places in East Anglia, it was a long journey getting there, changing trains at Doncaster, Peterborough and Ely before being picked up at Kings Lynn for another hour's drive to the Camp. At that time there were two Canberra squadrons operating out of West Raynham, 85 and 100, and we had the Bloodhound Support Unit which occupied a site on the far side of the airfield as well as one of the hangars. During flying hours we had a seven man crew on duty, manning an ACRT, Mk 7 and two DP1As with monitors fitted for the missile site. We also had a brand new Mk8 which we brought on the line for heavy-lift movements when missiles were flown out to Germany, or for Royal Flights, as Sandringham is close by. When the airfield closed we went down to a crew of two SACs and a Fire Piquet, which usually involved hours playing cribbage, especially as we were always short of manpower and often spent 80+ hours on duty. Buses ran two days a week; Kings Lynn on Saturdays and Fakenham on Thursdays, to fit in with their respective market days. However, the pubs were open all day on market day so it wasn't all bad.

Though not one of the most famous airfields used by the RAF, West Raynham has a rich history. It was constructed in 1939 and like most in the East of England was used as a Bomber Command base during war. In 1946 it became a fighter station and was home to several formations flying Meteors, Vampires, Venoms, Hunters and Javelins.

The Day We Lost 6 Aircraft. On 8 February 1956 eight Hunter F1s departed RAF West Raynham at 10:50 to carry out an exercise at 45,000 feet in the local area. Due to the expected bad weather later in the day, the aircraft were scheduled to return to West Raynham overhead by 11:15. By 11:00 the weather at West Raynham had deteriorated with poor visibility, and the aircraft were told to divert to nearby RAF Marham for a visual approach.

The visibility suddenly reduced but due to the close proximity of the aircraft to each other it was not possible to complete ground controlled approaches. In the following confusion and with only 10 minutes of fuel remaining, only two aircraft landed successfully.

- WT629 descended to 600 feet , but, unable to see the ground, he climbed away to 4,000 feet (1,200 m) and ejected with the aircraft crashing into a field 2 miles northwest of Swaffham.
- WT639 descended to 600 feet, but, unable to see the ground, he climbed away. The pilot ejected when the engine flamed out. The aircraft crashed into a forest 2½ miles southwest of Swaffham.
- WW633 descended to 500 feet, but, unable to see the ground, he climbed away. The pilot ejected when the engine flamed out. The aircraft crashed into a field 3½ miles northwest of Swaffham.
- WW639 descended to 250 feet, but, unable to see the ground, he climbed away. The pilot ejected when fuel was exhausted. The aircraft crashed 3 miles south of Swaffham.
- WW635 crashed 4½ miles northwest of Swaffham, pilot killed.
- WW603 belly-landed following engine flame-out just east of the airfield, pilot unhurt.



Hunter over West Raynham – note old crash bays facing the main runway

Kestrel Trials. On 15 October 1964, the Tri-partite Evaluation Squadron (TES) was formed at RAF West Raynham, staffed by a diverse mix of military test pilots from Britain, the United States and West Germany. The personnel comprising the squadron were highly experienced pilots; prior to flying the Kestrel, each received a week's ground training at Bristol's in-house facility and a week's ground instruction at Dunsfold prior to a three-hour flight conversion instructed by Bill Bedford. The purpose of the squadron was to evaluate the suitability of V/STOL aircraft for field operations, compare competing styles and methods of taking off/landing, develop normal flight operating procedures, perform instrument flight assessments, conduct night flight operations, and explore jet-borne manoeuvring throughout the Kestrel's flight envelope. The trials proved a great success leading to the introduction of the Harrier into RAF service later that decade. One of the most innovative designs in aviation history.



Kestrels on the flight line at West Raynham

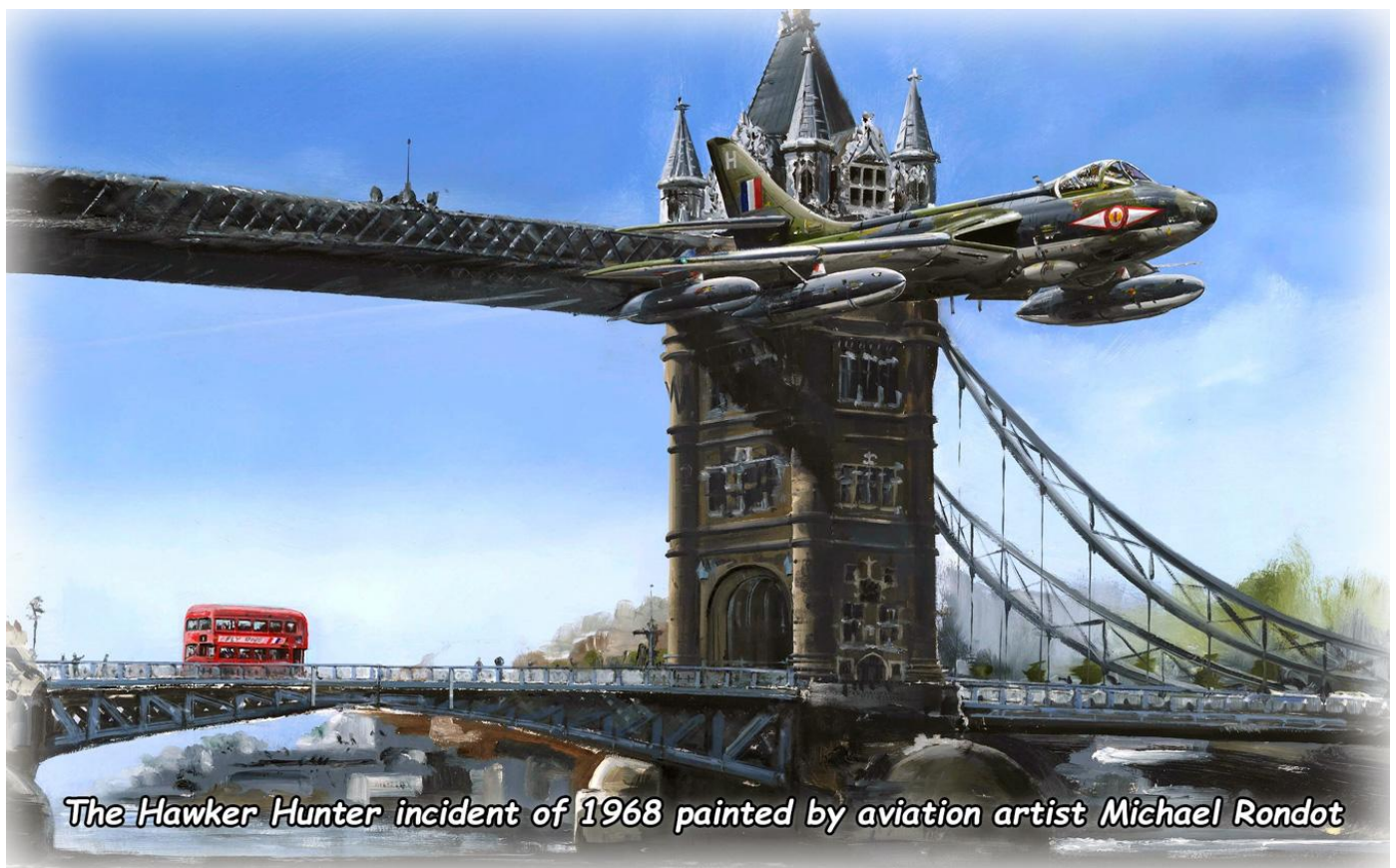
Tower Bridge Incident. On 4 April 1968 No1 Fighter Squadron had just returned from a busy exercise in Gibraltar to their base at RAF West Raynham and had then been sent to RAF Tangmere in Sussex to provide a flypast for a station event. Whilst on the ground and chatting with RAF personnel and their

families, Flt Lt Pollock was horrified to realise that most didn't even appear to know that the RAF's 50th anniversary was being marked.

The next morning, as he prepared to depart with the rest of 1 Squadron for the home base, he decided that he'd do something to focus attention on the Royal Air Force and its 50th anniversary. He'd obviously need a map to safely navigate his way to his chosen target and found just the man in flight ops. Wobbles aside, Alan was strapped into his Hawker Hunter jet ready for the flight home. However, shortly after take-off, he used Morse Code to let the other three aircraft know that he'd lost visual contact with them and would make his own way back. It was at this point that he set a new course for the very centre of London and the Houses of Parliament. By this stage, Alan was flying the Hunter so low that people looking out of the sixth-floor windows at the Ministry of Defence building had to look down, not up, to see it! A quick wing-waggle by way of a salute over the RAF memorial near Whitehall, and it was time to head back down the Thames and home. The jet passed low and fast over Hungerford, Waterloo and Blackfriars bridges, and then Alan looked up and saw the majestic site of Tower Bridge ahead. At the speed he was flying, he only had seconds to decide whether or not to fly between the car deck and upper span. He decided to fly straight through it!

After a quick beat up of the airbases at Wattisham, Lakenhall and Mildenhall, it was time to land back at RAF West Raynham to face the music...

The top brass weren't exactly overjoyed at Alan's efforts but also weren't too sure what to do with him. It was Alan's own suggestion that maybe they ought to start by arresting him, which they promptly did.



In the aftermath, Alan received hundreds of letters of support from the public, his fellow RAF colleagues and even a barrel of beer from the British Overseas Airways Corporation (BOAC) airline, the predecessor of British Airways. He was eventually given a medical discharge from the RAF instead of a court-martial, possibly to prevent him having the opportunity to publicly explain that his actions were due to cuts to the Air Force and the lack of RAF 50th celebrations. He then went on to a successful business career and remains one of only five people to fly under Tower Bridge and the only one to ever do it in a jet - a number which is highly unlikely to ever increase.

West Raynham Ghosts. West Raynham may also be remembered as one of the most haunted camps, the following being some examples of sightings:

- In the Officer's Mess there are reports of a ghost that date back to the 80's and 90's. The ghost is believed to be a Polish pilot, who was shot down during World War 2, his ghost has been seen in the dining room, walking towards the kitchen and through walls. The ghost is most often seen in room number 7 in the Officer's Mess this room is icy cold all year round. The ghost was seen by an American Officers wife staying at the Mess while doing laundry, the ghost past through her and then through the wall to room 7.
- In the armoury there are reports of a shadowy figure being seen hanging from the rafters in the social club section of the area adjacent to the main building. This is believed to be the spirit of a mechanic who committed suicide.
- The chapel is home to a particularly nasty and angry ghost, it is often described as a black shadow. The entity has been known to chase after visitors who have sneaked on to the base. It has been suggested that this is the spirit of someone who was murdered on the base.
- It has been reported by ghost hunters that the bathroom in the guard's building can suddenly become very cold dropping in temperature by up to 10 degrees. The sounds of footsteps have been heard in the building.
- The control room and the nearby fire station have had reports of ghosts and paranormal activity. It is said that a particularly active poltergeist is present in the control room with witnesses having objects thrown at them. Mysterious lights have been seen in the fire station at night.
- It is said that the base headquarters at RAF West Raynham are the centre of a dark presence. Security guards do not visit this area alone because of the numerous sightings of a dark figure, walking the corridors.
- In the sergeant's mess visitors have reported feeling the presence of a ghostly figure. A green coloured ghost has been seen in the bar area of the mess. The bar area and boiler room have both been reported as sites of paranormal activity via social networking sites.
- It is widely believed that the hanger building is haunted Hanger 3, in particular, is rumored to have been the scene of a secret military experiment that may have made use of British psychics during the war.
- The hospital houses a number of decontamination stages. Visitors to the building have reportedly heard screams or felt intense pain whilst visiting these areas.

Flying came to an end in 1976, when 100 Sqn departed for Marham with their Canberras, and 85 Sqn disbanded as a flying Squadron before reforming as a Bloodhound surface-to-air (SAM) missile unit taking over the Bloodhound Support Unit site. The camp was also occupied by the RAF Regiment as base for Rapier SAM squadrons and associated training before being closed in 1994. However, the story doesn't end there; the main reason for starting this item was to highlight the work done by Jon and Shell Booty following their purchase of the Control Tower and Fire Section in 2016. Although written in the third party, the following is Jon's own account of their adventurous project:

Jon and Shell purchased the tower in November 2016, following a lengthy planning and conveyancing process, made difficult due to the building being grade 2 listed and still under the terms of an MOD overage. The main motivations for buying the building were saving an obviously uncared for historical military building, the fantastic art deco design features, providing a new challenge in life, and obviously, somewhere unique to live. Their plans were to initially have their home within the tower, and later down the line, see if the building can earn its keep into their retirement.

Jon's parents served in the RAF and were stationed in West Raynham, living in AMQs in 1978/9 when Jon was 9. Jon later went on to join the Army, much to his parent's disappointment!

Shell has grown up in the local area and has gained an appreciation of the local aviation history as well as a love for the architecture of the Expansion Period stations which are prevalent in East Anglia. Jon and Shell have always realised that this was a place which held many fond memories for those who served here. They have always encouraged former servicemen to get in touch and visit to share the history of the station.

In order to engage in this heritage outreach, Jon and Shell created a Facebook page for the tower which became an instant success and has been a godsend for recruiting helpers and visitors to the site. The page currently has 780 likes and 826 people following it. The building had deteriorated into an awful state since being vacated by the RAF in 1994. It had been badly vandalised and suffered from many structural problems due to the neglect. The Fire Section had been used as a workshop and again was uncared for with all the windows boarded up. No water was available to the building, all the electrics, leadwork and plumbing had been stolen, rain poured in everywhere, and less than 20% of the glass remained intact.

That was 2½ years ago. Since then, through sheer determination and financial acrobatics, Jon and Shell have managed to do the following:

- Rebuild Local Control
- Strip out the entire building of 30 plus tonnes of rotten drylining, asbestos, wood, spalled concrete and steel
- Reglaze and refurbish all windows
- Wash the exterior of the building
- Replace all external doors
- Recover the roofs
- Recast the balcony
- Replace rainwater goods,
- Restore power to the building,
- Drill a borehole for water and clean out all drains
- Restore the grass landscape and restore the signal square and day mark,
- Repair the crash bay doors and repaint the interior of the fire section,
- Issue the section an HCB Angus domestic truck and dummy fireman

.. and finally work a full time job each!

The crash bays have been the venue of several RAF West Raynham Association reunions and the tower is visited by the local ATC Squadron. The venue is due to be opened up for tours as part of Heritage Open Days in September. It will be a long time until the building is fit to call habitable, however, so Jon and Shell live at the tower whilst they renovate it. Getting to know former ATC and Fire Section staff and knowing how much support they give, really encourages the couple and the task of putting the place back together is always a pleasure. They have asked us to pass on their appreciation to all those RAF&DFSA members who follow their progress and give their support. The doors are always open to you all. The crash bays should still look familiar to those who served there, having been repainted in the same colours. However, Lazy Way is no more, the airfield has been covered by a solar farm and both the dartboard and volleyball net have gone!



HCB Angus Domestic in front of refurbished Crash Bays



For those on Facebook, make sure you check out, like and follow the West Raynham Control Tower Page and above all please contact Jon and Shell via the Tower's Facebook Page to arrange a visit if you are passing. Alternatively ring or text Jon on 07707 292906, but remember they aren't a business and have to fit everything around full-time jobs. You won't be disappointed.

Dave Kirk

Mem No 414



Aerial shot of camp during 100 & 85 Sqn Canberra days. Note BHSU at the far side of the runway