

OWSTON FERRY'S BEST KEPT SECRET?

Those of you born in Owston Ferry, or living here for years, may already know that during WWII our village was chosen as a decoy airfield site. However, we lived here for quite a few years before discovering this fact.

Attempts had been made during WWI to deceive the enemy by using decoy airfields and flare paths, to divert bombers and exaggerate the number of operational airfields in France.

In Oct 1939 the decision was taken to commence the construction of daytime decoys ("K" sites") for all satellite airfields and night time decoys ("Q" sites) for both permanent airfields and satellites.

The daytime decoy airfields consisted of tents and dummy aircraft; night decoys consisted of electrical lighting to represent airfield flarepaths.

As early as Oct 1938 government departments were asking companies to put in tenders for building dummy aircraft, stressing "utmost secrecy and no mention to the press or in advertisements".

A document dated 29th Jun 1939 shows tenders from two companies - and their prices for individual planes:

G & J Weir Ltd fighter £740; light bomber £860; heavy bomber £1830

J Gerrard & Sons fighter £105 3s; light bomber £116 5s; heavy bomber £377 4s

However, the document states these costs are too high and the cost of a dummy plane should not exceed £50.

At this point it is suggested that the film industry be asked to advise or even tender, as they have experience in such matters.

A letter from SR Jackson (late RAF), dated 15th Oct 1939, suggests using decoys overseas and he has drawn up full size decoys of Hurricanes & Spitfires with an estimate cost of £25-£30 each. He ends his letter with "Better for the enemy to waste a few thousand pounds of bombs on decoys than the real thing." The reply to this is dated 6th Nov 1939, from Department ZA, Harrogate which states they are interested in the proposals and will communicate with SR Jackson "when I reach London".

The dummy airfields were to be chosen "with a view to inviting attack, will be so sited as to minimise the difficulties involved in preventing the bombs from doing damage to ourselves."

Colonel Sir John Fisher Turner, Royal Engineers, was selected to head up the department tasked with providing dummy airfields to protect each

airfield in Britain. It masterminded Day Decoy Sites (K sites) and Night Decoys (Q sites). Much of the design and building of these sites and aircraft was supported by technicians from Sound City Films of Shepperton Studios. Apart from the decoy airfields, they also designed decoy military bases and entire towns. There were about 630 decoy sites in total, of which 230 were decoy airfields,

A memo of 27th Jan 1940 states a site is being looked for between Finningley & Kirton Lindsey for the dummy airfield.

By Feb 1942 Owston Ferry decoy site was in use (it is referred to as both K and Q at different dates); its parent airfield was RAF Finningley; and notes show by Nov 1943 it had been abandoned because it was not convincing enough and was too far inland.

The site reference is given as 53 30' 30"N; 0 48' 0"W. It came under Bomber Command and had Whitley aircraft. An article in the Axholme Herald in 1989 refers to the site as Melwood, as it stretched from Melwood down to Owston Ferry. *Copy of this article is in The Smithy.*

The article mentions Ernest Anguige & Ronnie Chipp as being two of the airmen based here. (*Ernest went on to marry Marjorie Fillingham, and Ronnie became Chair of The Isle of Axholme Rural District Council*). One of their main occupations was moving the 15-20 dummy aeroplanes from one position to another, to give the effect they had been out; sometimes taking them along the runway to leave wheel marks. The site was only bombed once; the crew were busy playing cards and didn't notice a thing - until someone came across a crater the next morning!

Prior to arriving at a Decoy site, crews were mainly sent to Shepperton on a two week course to learn the trade of deception, Although Ernest Anguige states he was stationed near Elstree, before arriving here; where the film "The Lion Has Wings" was being made. For the film they needed a number of imitation aircraft, so the studio carpenters had constructed some exact replicas, painted in RAF colours, with wooden frames covered with canvas.

Apart from the dummy aircraft, there were mock bomb dumps and fuel stores; large sheets of canvas were painted and laid on the ground to represent hangars.

One of the documents gives quite detailed information on Defence of K sites. Possible forms of attack may be from the air by high dive; or low

bombing, probably accompanied by machine gun fire; by some form of parachute attack; or by crash landing attack.

An attack from the air presupposes that the enemy have mistaken the site for an operational ground and the K site will then have achieved its main purpose. In the case of a high bombing attack ie over 2000 feet the detachment should take cover. Machine gun action against such an attack will cause no loss to the enemy, but may harm the local population. In the case of a low attack, machine gun fire should be opened on the enemy as at low heights aircraft may be disabled or brought down. Moreover at low level the enemy will probably recognise the K site for a dummy site and if they get back home will report this.

The instructions given to the crew emphasise that the aircraft must be recognised as enemy before fire is opened up.

Instructions for dealing with parachutists becomes more complicated: this may be the enemy or it may be our own pilots and crew having to bale out. The rule was given that if there are more than 6 parachutists together they should be assumed to be the enemy - unless it is clear that this is crew from 2 aircraft not just one! "It should be remembered that bullets fired in the air carry a long way and may endanger local inhabitants." So if less than 6 they should be identified first.

And finally: if the number of prisoners are considerable and the guard is small their hands can be tied behind their backs. Another old Army method is to cut of all their trouser buttons. A man cannot run away or attack if he has to hold up his trousers all the time.

Very little is left today of decoy sites as they were not built to last: however if you know where to look you will find the air raid shelter and control room/generator still left at our local site.

With thanks to Ron Thornton (who passed us this information) and Milan Petrovic (who visited the National Archives in 2014-2015).

Pat & Dave are involved with a project "Lost Landscape & Heritage Research" under the umbrella of Isle of Axholme & Hatfield Chase Landscape Partnership. We would welcome information and anecdotes from anyone with more information about any buildings in the area with a military legacy, particularly WWII. Many of the buildings now have different uses, or have been moved from their original site; and therefore may not be known about.