



## Artists and Airmen: Documenting Drawdown and Closure at RAF Coltishall (Norfolk)

*John Schofield with contributions by Angus Boulton, Wayne Cocroft, Steve Cole, Gair Dunlop, Tony Lee, Sefryn Penrose and Louise K Wilson*

It seems fitting that the vast scale of many 20th century defence sites, and the pace of technological and strategic changes, require new and evolving investigation methods. That is the case with RAF Coltishall (Norfolk) where English Heritage is creating a characterisation of the base that involves conventional photography, an historic landscape characterisation and, unusually for English Heritage, the involvement of three visual artists – Gair Dunlop, Louise K Wilson and Angus Boulton. This collegiate approach seems appropriate for documenting such a landscape over time, and capturing both process and place in a way that both engages the base's wider public and the service personnel who worked there.

In the lead up to the Second World War new airfields were spread across a countryside where horses remained the chief source of motive power. Contemporary concerns about the impact of the modern world on rural England led to advice on their architecture from the Royal Fine Arts Commission. Many of the buildings, especially in domestic areas, were brick finished in neo-Georgian style. Air photography allows us to see that airfields were carefully ordered landscapes, evident in their symmetrical layout, the careful zoning of activities, and roads with wide grass verges and ornamental trees. Covering many hundreds of acres aerodromes severed historic routes, as lanes were truncated, or conversely as at RAF Coltishall, roads were created to serve these new places. Post-war the airfield was adapted to accept jet aircraft and missiles, but it escaped the massive NATO sponsored reconstruction programmes of the 1970s and 1980s allowing it to remain true to the intentions of its 1930s architects. As a relatively small airfield it had a reputation as a particularly friendly and efficient station, with strong links with the local community.

Since the early 1990s, English Heritage has documented many defence sites after the withdrawal of the Services. They have often experienced these as derelict, lifeless places, with stripped buildings devoid of meaning after their personnel have left. Uniquely, in the months leading to the closure of RAF Coltishall, the RAF granted English Heritage unprecedented access to record the base's drawdown and closure.

The project set out to characterise the airfield's last operational months until closure in November 2006. To achieve a high level understanding of the aerodrome, a map based characterisation study has been commissioned, to analyse the development of the base and its changing spatial organisation, with the deployment of different types of aircraft and their evolving roles. Rather than slavishly recording the different building types, the stills photography sought to record the visual character of the base and its activities.

Overwhelmingly, most historic photography of airfields is heavily weighted to views of aircraft, either on hardstandings or more rarely in hangars. Airfields the size of Coltishall, are, however, communities of a few thousand people, whose task is to keep a relatively small number of aircraft ready for immediate deployment. The intention was also to record these rarely seen, sometimes mundane, everyday activities.

Working in the month before the last squadron flew out, we were able to document aircraft in their hangars and how these internal working spaces were organised. We were also able to photograph the air traffic controllers at work; when we returned a few months later the control tower had been stripped bare, leaving the empty spaces we usually encounter. Much of the airfield's work involved light engineering, including the assembly of the Jaguar's Rolls-Royce engines, engine testing, the servicing and repair of electronic components, paint shops and stores. More specialised tasks included the fitting and maintenance of flying clothing, much of which was specifically fitted to individual pilots. In other buildings aircraft brake-chutes and the pilots' emergency parachutes were inspected and packed. Other sections were devoted to missile storage and maintenance. To maintain the Jaguar force at maximum readiness, the pilots constantly trained for their combat roles. In a specially constructed building a large and elaborate model was constructed to simulate diverse missions and emergency procedures. More recently, a complex computer simulator has replaced this physical model.

An airfield is more than a working place; it is home for the personnel, but a community clearly ordered by rank. The oldest houses on the base date from the late 1930s and many still retain traces of wartime camouflage. The end of conscription and the reduction in the proportion of single personnel led to

enlargement of the housing estates, but without the symmetry of the original design. The allocation of housing was strictly zoned and allocated according to rank. Differentiation according to rank was most visible in the messes. The officers' mess had the appearance of a country club or country house, with elegant reception rooms used before mess functions or as sitting rooms. The sergeants' mess was arranged on a similar layout, but with less space devoted to reception. Both also contained accommodation for single personnel or temporary visitors. In contrast, the airmen's institute comprised two floors of large open rooms, in its latest phase laid out as a contemporary cafeteria and with a nightclub attached. With a requirement for many hundreds of meals per day in all three messes, catering was on a semi-industrial scale. For single non-commissioned personnel barrack accommodation was typical, but as social expectations have changed, their interiors have been modified to create single rooms.

Other aspects of the social life of the base included - the supermarket, a chapel with stained glass and embroideries with air force themes, the families centre, and a children's playground. During our investigations we also discovered many murals, including some on hangar doors painted after the First Gulf War (1990-1). Around 1970, in the cellar and former air raid shelter of the officers' mess, the Lightning squadron created a private drinking club, the Spitfire bar, decorated with playing card murals.

But it is our close collaboration with three sound and video artists, Angus Boulton, Gair Dunlop and Louise K Wilson, that sets this project apart from other work in this area. The involvement of the artists will bring a very particular dimension to this project, capturing in new and innovative ways some of the essential characteristics of the base (such as its auditory landscape), as well as the rituals and ceremonies associated with closure, and the administration and management required. Together with our characterisation map and the stills photography, these complimentary pieces of documentation will provide a lasting record of what RAF Coltishall was like, and what it meant to those that lived there and in the surrounding area.

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