

# **THE BUILDING OF BASSINGBOURN R.A.F. STATION**

**Written by Kathleen L. Dodkin (Formerly Kay Wake) 1982**

In the late 1930's the threat of war was not taken very seriously by the average British citizen. Admittedly, there were disturbing rumbles in Germany but nothing would come of it. The lessons of the Great War had been learned and the upstart Nazi would have more sense than to engineer another conflict.

The only impact of the R.A.F. base being built at Bassingbourn in 1937 was that it provided welcome employment and boosted sales in the local shops. Certainly, when I joined the firm of John Laing & Sons at Bassingbourn in 1937, I knew immediately that I was going to enjoy the job, and the prospect of war had never entered my mind.

Maurice Laing, (now Sir), and the son of John Laing, engaged me as his secretary. He was in charge of the project, although then only in his twenties, but more powerful cars and, when possible, he would take off to spend a weekend competing in hill-climbing contests. As a boss he was kind and considerate, but remote, and taking dictation from him was a remarkable experience. He had a radio built into his desk, and his dictation always coincided with "Radio Theatre". He would stride up and down, consuming large numbers of oranges, while dictating, and I soon found that I was listening to the play and my shorthand was going automatically. When I came to transcribe, the contents of the letters were quite new to me, and thus I learned the art of doing two things at once.

When I arrived on this site, the only buildings standing were the four hangers, which had been erected by a specialist firm. There were no trees and our office was a wooden hut opposite the present Sick Quarters. It housed, in addition to Maurice Laing and myself, the Works Manager, Bill Haughan, the Quantity Surveyor, John Crowther, the Accountant, John Robinson, all North Countrymen, and a young apprentice Surveyor, Kenneth. This brilliant and attractive young man was completely besotted by airplanes and was only prevented from volunteering for the R.A.F. when he reached the age of eighteen by the bribe of a car from his parents. Later, after call-ups, he was killed when returning from a raid.

Another character was a lad from Melbourne, known as Horace, who was the general messenger boy and dogsbody. He was never without his pork-pie hat and in the early days was the butt of all jokers on the site, being sent to the stores for such items as rungless ladder, or a box of rubber nails. However, he soon caught on and was a great favorite all around.

Other members of the organization was Des Mullins, always to be seen carrying a theodolite, Reg, the checker, who had his work cut out for lorry drivers signing in loads, who then went out by the North End gate, returning again at the Main Entrance in due course, with a so-called new load. Reg, however, soon became wise to this ploy. The chief Foreman Bricklayer was a Geordie, and ruled his men with an iron rod, and could produce a M.T. block overnight. Yet another unusual employee was the driver of the mechanical digger, a machine somewhat rare in those days. He could neither read nor wrote and signed for his wages with a cross, yet he had been to America and elsewhere with his digger and was the highest wage earner on the payroll.

Most of the laborers were Irishmen, but there was a larger Canadian who was best avoided on a Saturday when in his cups. Altogether, we were a happy crew and it was very pleasant to be the only girl amongst hundreds of men.

The workers were housed in wooden huts, reminiscent of the Wild West bunkhouses. Every Friday

night buses were laid on to take the Londoners home, unless an emergency arose. This was not usual, due to the composition of the ground. At one time, somewhere in the dark ages, the land had been heavily forested. When it became treeless, the soil was consequently very fertile and ideal for pastures. At the turn of the century, it was found to be rich in fossil content and a large industry grew up in the area in the excavation of coprolite, which was utilized as fertilizer. My Mother remembered well the swampy and unstable, and the contractors found great difficulty in putting in foundation. The Sick Quarters, in particular, were a problem, incorporating, as it did, an underground air-raid shelter and the building began to sink before the first row of bricks was out of the ground.

Due to the boggy nature of the ground, a constant mist hangs over the site, not noticeable on ground level, except in foggy weather, but sufficient to hide the base from the air, this being one of the reasons for the choice in this piece of land.

In the interests of camouflage, there was a great deal of experimentation in the mixture of black colors to be used, and the Resident Engineer, Reginald Silk, would make trips in a light aircraft to inspect the buildings from above. A perfectionist, whose arrival had everyone on his toes, had the partially built officers' Mess pulled down twice before he would pass it as successfully camouflaged.

The roads were a further problem and tons of cement and shuttering had to be laid down at considerable depth, the navies, on their ubiquitous Wellingtons, often working in several feet of water. At that time, the runways were grass and when planes landed. Great fountains of water poured over them. The Blenheims could cope with this but not the heavier bombers and new runways had to be built, again with difficulty.

Our office was cozy and warm, even during a heavy fall of snow which stopped all work for a few days, and during which we assumed ourselves with snowball fights. One of my jobs was to make the office tea and I would boil my little kettle in the great kiln of the Italian terrazzo tile layer, which stood near by. Beneath our hut was a family of wild cats, which I fed daily, especially when kittens came along, but the mothers were fierce and would not allow anyone to approach their fortress.

One of my less interesting jobs was the typing of the lists of quantities- every item, which went into each building. No wonder I still feel a proprietary interest in the camp, having dealt with every brick and every nail. It is very difficult, when looking at the base today, to realize that, at time, it was completely bare of trees, especially in the spring, when it is a mass of plum blossoms.

Some of the buildings were fascinating as they grew particularly the Control Tower, and the great water tower. On one occasion a heavy iron trap door fell on the leg of one of the employees and for some time, he was treated in Royston hospital, where he was delighted to receive visits from my family.

It was not until Chamberlain's return from Munich that we began to see war as a possibility, but during 1939, we received air-raid instructions. We were told to get off the base immediately the siren sounded. Thus, when this happened, immediately after the outbreak of war, we forsook all and fled across the fields to Whaddon, where we all met up, exhausted and thirsty, in the pub. At the all clear, those who have cars took us all back, only to be refused entry because we had not our infantry cards with us.

By now everything was speeded up to get the base completed and operational, and it is remarkable to record that the entire project was carried out in just over two years. Industrial disputes were unheard of, and any argument was quickly settled by a strong-minded implacable foreman. The men took tremendous pride in their work and only the best materials were used.

Bassingbourn R.A.F. station was fortunate in receiving only one attack during the war, which says something for the choice of site and its camouflage. As it was, the only damage was the destruction of a Barrack Block by a jettisoned German bomb, which killed, tragically, a dear friend.

I was sad to say my goodbye to my friends when the contract was finished, and little did I think that I would be returning to work there with the American Red Cross later in the war, but that is another story.

- - - - -

**THE ABOVE STORY IS THE PROPERTY OF THE AUTHOR AND MAY NOT BE REPRODUCED WITHOUT THE AUTHOR'S CONSENT**

**[www.91stbombgroup.com](http://www.91stbombgroup.com)**