Information Data Sheet

Category Military Airfields

Description

During WWII, there was an urgent need for an increasing number of military airfields in the UK. This requirement grew further as the war progressed, particularly after the arrival of American troops in 1942. Airfields were constructed for a variety of purposes, including training, as fighter and bomber stations, and for maintenance units (MUs).

Many former airfield sites have not been significantly redeveloped in the post-WWII period. As such, a number of potential sources of UXO relating to former airfield activity still remain. The types of UXO that may be present depends on the operational history of the airfield. Almost all military airfields had a similar set of features, including ordnance storage and disposal areas, alongside offensive and defensive weapons.

WWII airfield

Pipe Mines: Pipe mines were laid beneath critical infrastructure such as runways and designed to be detonated in the event of an invasion to prevent enemy use of the airfield. Airfields that were most likely to have been equipped with pipe mines were those considered vulnerable to invasion, particularly along the South and East Coast. Airfields further inland, and those built after the main threat of German invasion had passed, are unlikely to have had pipe mines installed.

Whilst the majority of the pipe mines at airfields were removed at the end of WWII, it is known that some were left in situ or were not detected during post-WWII clearance operations. Pipe mines are periodically found during development at former airfields.

Bomb and Munitions Stores: These were typically constructed in a remote area of an airfield, linked to the perimeter track by a service road. Bomb stores often contained a combination of both practice and live ordnance, in addition to components such as fuzes, detonators and gaines.

Munitions stores also often held close combat ordnance (such as grenades and mortars) and small arms ammunition for airfield defence.

Whilst the bomb stores at airfields were typically subjected to ordnance clearance operations during decommissioning, the sophistication and thoroughness of the clearance was often insufficient to ensure confidence that most of the potential UXO were removed. Incidents of ordnance burial and the accidental spillage of smaller munitions components in the vicinity of the bomb stores is known to have occurred, although such disposal usually occurred in designated areas away from the storage area.

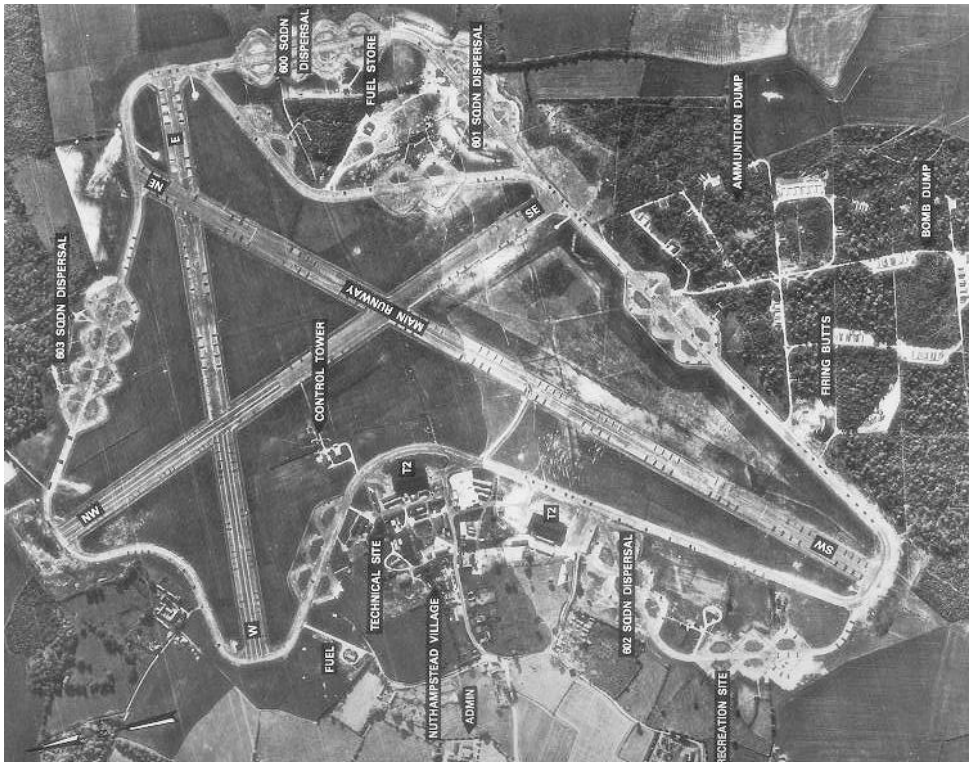
Machine Gun Test Butts: On an airfield, the butts were a designated area where aircraft tested their guns. The butts were often located at the end of access runways or dispersals and incorporated a mound of Made Ground, sand or soil into which firing took place. Whilst machine gun rounds were typically tested at the butts, some aircraft fired cannon shells into the butts.

Small Arms Ranges: Small arms ranges (such as rifle ranges) and close combat ranges (such as mortar and grenade ranges) were provided for training the troops involved in ground defence of the airfield. (See the small arms ranges information sheet for further information on these sites).

Munitions Disposal Areas: For any operational military airfield, an ordnance disposal facility is required. During wartime, this typically took the form of a burning or burial pit and commonly took place in areas around the perimeter of an airfield, away from aircraft operations and buildings.

The most likely disposal operations at airfields during WWII involved the burial or burning of aircraft ammunition and close combat munitions related to airfield defence. Larger munitions, such as bombs, were usually returned to regional ordnance depots, for reuse or for disposal. It is known, however, that the buried disposal of HE bombs occurred at some airfields and UXBs relating to such practices are occasionally found.

Aircraft Breaking: Specialist Maintenance Units (MU) were responsible for the modification, maintenance and repair of damaged aircraft. Those aircraft considered beyond all repair were stripped of useful and salvageable parts and disposed of in a pit or 'aircraft graveyard', usually in areas around the perimeter of an airfield. Waste from aircraft disposal should be considered hazardous. It contains a range of conventional contaminants and potentially radioactive materials (such as radium from luminescent dials).



WWII American airfield in the UK