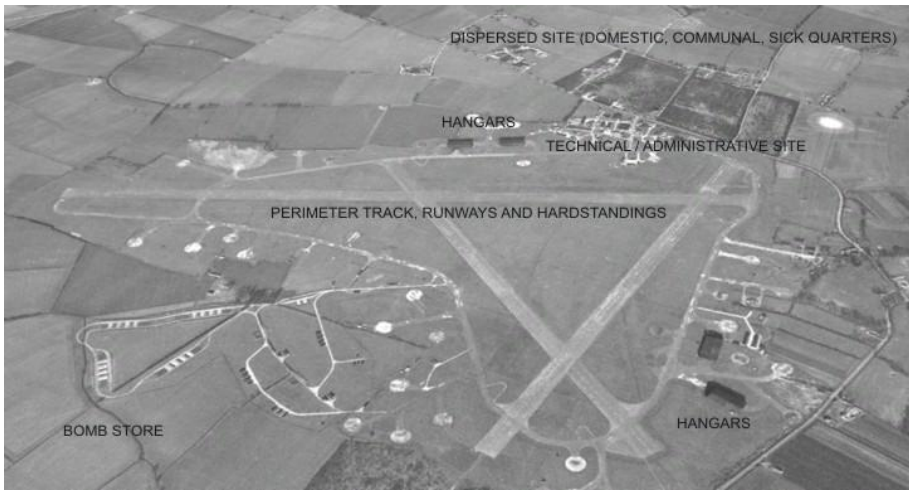
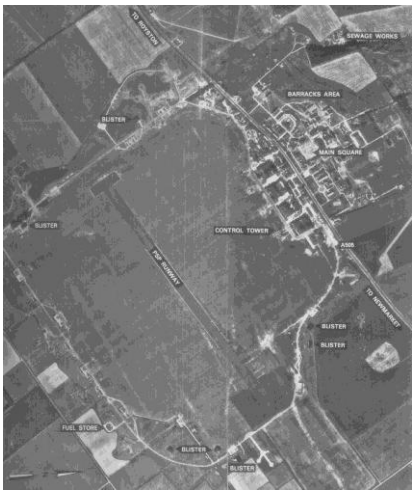
WORLD WAR TWO (WWII) MILITARY AIRFIELDS

In the 1930s, the threat of war with Germany resulted in a growing requirement for military airfields in the UK. Hundreds of airfields were built prior to and during WWII, and the need for airfields was further increased when American troops arrived in 1942. By the end of WWII there were over 440No. active military airfields in the UK.

Airfields were constructed for a variety of purposes, including as fighter and bomber stations, training airfields, testing airfields for factories, and for use by Maintenance Units (MUs). The intended use would often inform the airfield layout. These were relatively standardised, meaning many airfields had similar layouts and features.



A typical Class 'A' bomber airfield layout



A circular, single runway fighter airfield layout

Bomb and munitions stores at airfields would store combinations of practice and live ordnance, and components such as fuzes, detonators, and gaines. Munitions stores also often held Land Service Ammunition (LSA), such as grenades and mortars, and Small Arms Ammunition (SAA) for airfield defence or training exercises.

Small arms ranges were provided for training the troops involved in ground defence of the airfield. Ranges were typically only for use with live or blank SAA, though LSA may have been used on some larger ranges.

Test butts were designated areas for aircraft to test their guns, often near access tracks or dispersals. Whilst machine gun rounds were typically used at test butts, some aircraft fired 20mm cannon shells, which contain a High Explosive (HE) content, into the test butts.

Munitions disposal frequently occurred at operational military airfields, either in an official facility or in a burning or burial pit located away from aircraft operations and buildings. Disposal was typically for aircraft ammunition and LSA, although it is known that HE bombs were occasionally disposed of via burial at airfields.

Aircraft breaking typically took place at airfields occupied by specialist MUs, who were responsible for the modification, maintenance, and repair of damaged aircraft. Aircraft considered beyond repair were stripped of useful and salvageable parts and disposed of in pits or an 'aircraft graveyard' near the perimeter of the airfield.

Pipe mines were laid beneath critical infrastructure, such as runways, at airfields considered vulnerable to invasion, particularly along the South and East coast. They were designed to be detonated in the event of an invasion to prevent enemy use of the airfield. Whilst efforts were typically made to remove pipe mines, it is known that not all clearance operations were successful.

Hazard

On any military airfield, potential sources of UXO relating to former airfield activity may remain and UXO is still regularly found on former airfields. The type of UXO that may be present depends on the layout and features present at the airfields, and its operational history.

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