

# RAF Elmswell: Update on a Lost Aerodrome

By Peter McGee and Graham Mack

*In 2014 we embarked upon a project to discover any evidence of a WWI aerodrome long since buried beneath a WWII airfield used by the US Eighth Army Air Force. Our preliminary research findings were published in the Winter 2015 edition of the Journal (Vol 46/4). In the 28 months since we wrote the article, we have secured HLF funding to support the project, and gathered considerably more information and material on the original aerodrome and the principal resident unit during the period 1917 – 1919, 75(HD) Squadron RFC, (later 75 Squadron RAF). In this brief update we outline the progress made, and make a plea for information.*

## ARCHAEOLOGY

With the considerable assistance of Suffolk Archaeology Field Unit (SAFU) and Suffolk Archaeology CIC (SACIC), we have had the features of the rediscovered WWI foundations accurately plotted by GPS and conducted a geophysical survey of part of the site to ascertain the likely footprint of the second twin aeroplane shed that was constructed in c.1918. We have been able to overlay the 1918 site plan onto Google Earth images of the site to obtain an accurate map of the original aerodrome buildings in relation to the present day topography.

Unfortunately a considerable part of the original site is inaccessible due to modern development. There are still some areas that may be explored however. A few .303” cartridge shells have been found dating from 1915 to 1918. A few other contemporary finds include an accumulator (lead/acid battery) and some small glass bottles that once contained distinctly Edwardian concoctions! We have also discovered there was a portable light railway on the site, consisting of 1300 yards of track and 18 waggons. It is most likely this portable railway was used for construction work.

Overall we conclude that this was a substantial military installation constructed to meet a new dimension in warfare.

Its role was part of a ‘barrage line’ approximately 30 miles inland to deploy aircraft at night to meet enemy air raids originating from out over the North Sea. The site continued to be developed after the Armistice in 1918, but was finally closed in May 1919.

More digging is planned for the summer, which will be guided by the excellent data provided by SAFU and SACIC.

## SEARCHING THROUGH THE ARCHIVES

At the time of writing we have identified 92 officers, 93 NCOs and men, and a member of the WRAF, connected with No 75 Squadron during the period 1916 to 1919. This information has been collated from the usual sources – The National Archives, Kew (principally AIR 10, AIR 76 and AIR 79); RAF Museum Hendon Archives; Royal Aero Club Trust archives; and a few excellent secondary sources including *The Air Defence of Britain 1914-1918* (Cole & Chessman), and *The Sky Their Battlefield II* (Henshaw). We have also enjoyed support from Cross & Cockade International members. A few new names were found in contemporary newspaper reports. Access to private papers and photographs kindly provided by descendants of 75 Squadron personnel has proved most informative.

*This image combines the GPS Data and the Geophysics survey to show the 1918 site plan overlaid onto the present day site. The grey triangle on the left is the result of the geophysical survey that indicates possible ‘features’ underground where the second hangar was located. The remains of the WWII runways are evident beneath and beside the modern agricultural buildings.*

*: John Rainer (SAFU)*

