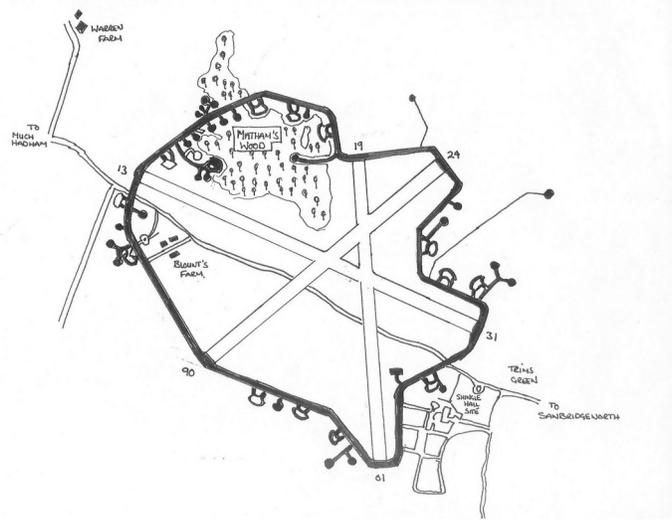
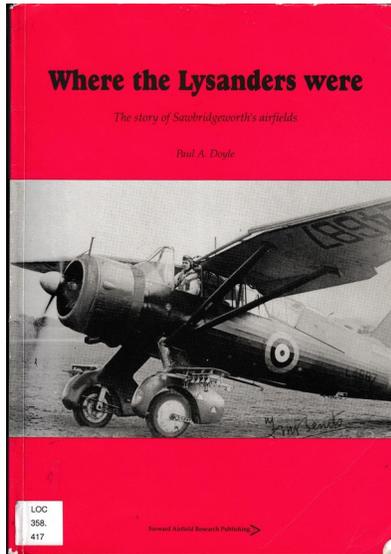


# High Wych History – 74 - part 1 - Camp High Wych



Even today, 75 years after the end of the Second World War, most locals will know that there once was an airfield in our part of East Hertfordshire. It was situated near Blounts Farm, Allens Green, Matham's Wood and Trimms Green and was known as RAF Sawbridgeworth. See the above map. Mustangs, Spitfires and Lysanders flew from there. For those who want to know more I can recommend the excellent 'Where the Lysanders were' by Paul E. Doyle, published in 1995 and now out of print but available at local libraries, Sawbridgeworth Library amongst them. Second hand copies are also available here and there. The cover of this book is reproduced above.

From September 1946 until the summer of 1959 a community of homeless people was housed at the former airfield. It was known as 'Camp High Wych', the huts, the Drome or the Parsonage Estate. Hundreds of people lived there at some time or another. On 30 September nine families moved into the WAAF site of the former airfield which was on the part of the airfield which fell within High Wych Parish. WAAF by the way stands for Women's Auxiliary Air Force. The families gained entry by simply removing the Air Ministry padlocks. Of course this did not remain secret. On 12-10-1946 the Herts and Essex Observer reported on it. The authorities also became aware. Over time more families arrived.

The housing situation in 1945 1946 was indeed appalling, particularly for young couples who had married during or shortly after the war with the husbands often having been away fighting in various foreign parts. Empty houses had to be requisitioned with recalcitrant owners often trying their best to prevent this. The building of council houses only started very slowly.

From the minutes of Sawbridgeworth Urban District Council (SUDC) of 29 October 1946 we learn that a petition had been received from people who made their homes at the airfield. The Clerk had been in touch with the Ministry of Health and the site had been visited. It was decided the 'squatters' should be told that matters were now being considered by the MOH and no further action would be taken until a full report has been received. The possibility of management of the site was considered. It is strange to notice perhaps that whilst a large part of the airfield was within the boundaries of High Wych Parish. High Wych Parish Council did not discuss the matter at any time. It seems that the MOH together with the RAF, and Braughing Rural District Council (BRDC) decided that SUDC should act as agent and handle affairs, oversee sanitary conditions, see to the upkeep of the buildings and charge rent. Indeed over the months and years that followed there were a number of mentions in the minutes of various SUDC committees. On 26 November 1946 the MOH authorised SUDC to carry out conversion of some huts. An architect, Mr. Lacoste was to be in charge. On 31-12-1946 the clerk read out a letter from the MOH and gave a general report. On 28-1-1947 a Mrs. Alexander of West Road asked to hold 'semi religious services' twice a week at the picket post. SUDC agreed and wanted to charge 1/- per week in rent. On 28-2-1947 a MOH representative discussed health and sanitary conditions at the camp with Dr. Hailey. On 31-3-1947 SUDC announced plans to install more lavatories and even a phone box.

Elsan toilets were supplied and a limited water supply installed. BRDC paid for installing mains water and electricity to the occupied buildings. A weekly rent was set so the residents of the camp could really no longer be considered 'squatters'. By late June 1947 the number of residents stood at 87. The RAF let it be known they did not object to their buildings being used for private accommodation. Still more families arrived. By August 1947 the number of residents stood at 131. Things got confusing when the Air Ministry announced they intended to charge for water and electricity. Both that Ministry and the MOH in fact insisted on having ultimate control. But they did agree with BRDC that SUDC manage the camp until it was possible to rehouse the occupants. Meanwhile promised improvements took a long while to be realised. Residents naturally did not appreciate this very much and conflicts arose over unpaid rent.

The above gives the impression of a fairly regulated situation. But perhaps that was not the case. Brian Buckley whose parents, Sid and Doris came to the camp in late '47 or early 48 claims that no rent was in fact paid in those early days. Things were in fact pretty wild! Brian was 10 when he came to the camp with his parents, older brother Tony and younger brother Paul. Father Sid who came from Norfolk and was a cowman at Morris's farm but his family's accommodation at Trimms Green was insufficient. Brian remembers how his dad created a separate bedroom by making partitions from cardboard. Others used curtains or blankets to give themselves more privacy. Roofing felt was used for flooring to protect residents from the cold concrete. Yes, it could be very cold with icicles often forming inside the huts. Nevertheless it wasn't all doom and gloom; fun was had as well. Brian remembers the church get togethers which Mrs Alexander organised. She even invited the girls to parties in her garden! Later on a social club was started with dances and even film shows organised by Mr. Denis the manager of Sawbridgeworth Cinema. After a while though those were stopped by the police. Mr Lawson made some lovely murals. Brian's sister Kay (now named Beddall) was born at the camp in 1950 The Buckley family was eventually rehoused in 1952 and moved to Lawrence Avenue Sawbridgeworth.

Daily routines became established including deliveries of milk and coal. The coal was used in pot bellied stoves left there by the RAF. Once the supply of wood stripped from the doors and fittings on other huts had run out that was of course necessary. One funny story regaled by Paul Doyle in his book concerns a young married couple who having returned from the registry office where they had been married in the morning were surprised in bed in the afternoon by the coal man. Birthday parties were organised, babies were of course born, most of those were delivered by Nurse Cohen the fondly remembered district nurse. Children went to school, some of those to Allens Green.

SUDC carried on its involvement. Tenants were rehoused in new council estates and new tenants were considered. It is claimed however that as some accommodation became vacant others moved in illegally. On 24-8-1948 it was decided the camp would now officially be known as 'the Parsonage Estate'. Improvements and alterations continued to be discussed such as lighting. In March 1949 a plan was launched to convert the former hospital into four flats. Walter Lawrence was engaged to do the work. One tenant however refused to leave until he was rehoused. £1400 was spent on waterproofing of Nissen and Asbestos huts. In July the MOH informed SUDC they did not want to spend any more money on the camp. The tenants themselves had already raised money amongst themselves to start a social club and a children's playground. The 'Parsonage Estate and Braughing vigilance committee' became the tenants' representative body.

Steve and Adrienne Burford lived at the camp too. Adrienne (now named Wilson) moved there in 1950 at the age of 18 months her brother was just 2 months old. Their parents were Denis and Iris. Denis (from Manuden) had served in Palestine, married Iris upon his return but did not find suitable accommodation so came to the camp. A younger brother, Steve, was in fact born at the camp in September 1950. His birth certificate lists the address as being 9 communal site High Wych. The family was rehoused in 1954 and moved to Elizabeth Road in Bishop's Stortford. A year later a sister arrived: Patricia. She was not delivered by the nurse. Adrienne tells us 'that Nurse Cohen had in fact called early afternoon to check on my mother and decided that she had time to go home to get her tea, before the baby arrived. However, my sister decided that she wasn't going to wait until the nurse's return and, with no means of contacting her, my father had to step in and play midwife himself. Mother and baby all well when Nurse Cohen returned. I should imagine that my father was not the only amateur midwife during the years of the camp's existence!'

Reading Paul Doyle's book it looks as if the camp, the huts, the drome or whatever the settlement was called did not carry on much beyond 1949. In fact it carried on until 1959. We should be able to tell you more in next month's instalment. Meanwhile if you have any stories or remarks to offer, please get in touch on [theo@vandebilt.co.uk](mailto:theo@vandebilt.co.uk) or 01279 725468.