

☞ Finmere During the Second World War ☞

This book has been written and edited as Britain remembers the horrors and sacrifice of the Second World War. It is sixty years since the remarkable rescue of men retreating at Dunkirk and the Battle of Britain. Only a few villagers now remember those years; their memories tell of a village where danger, hardship and poverty was endured with a strengthened community spirit.

During the Second World War, prisoners were held at Shalstone Camp (at the Water Stratford A422 crossroads). Many laboured at Finmere Grounds. Some prisoners remained after the war. On Easter Monday, 1949, former prisoner Joseph Thoenes married Betty Radford, daughter of Zaccheus Radford of Finmere Garage, at St Michael's Church.

The Evacuees from Edmonton

After the outbreak of war, it became a priority to move children from the vulnerable southeast, especially from London. An unprecedented evacuation began and the first wave of evacuees arrived in September 1939; 1,900 were settled in the Ploughley District but we have no record of any being billeted in Finmere.

This was the period of 'phoney war,' an uneasy peace in northwest Europe while Hitler's troops attacked Poland. Many refugees began to drift back to London. In April 1940, German troops invaded Norway and in May they marched on Belgium, Holland and France. After the evacuation of British troops from Dunkirk between 26 May and 4 June 1940, the stage was set for the Battle of Britain. After Dunkirk, the second wave of evacuees was mobilised. On Sunday afternoon, 15 June 1940, 800 evacuees arrived at the Great Western Railway station in Bicester (now Bicester North).

The Ploughley contingent of about 600 were marshalled at Mr Kelley's stables in Buckingham Road, and from there conveyed by bus and coach to the billets allocated to them in surrounding villages. On Tuesday, a further 800 evacuees arrived at Bicester, and all but 50 were distributed in the rural areas... Thus Ploughley received few short of a their quota of 1,850 children. (Bicester Advertiser, 23 June 1945)

The roll of Finmere school was just fifteen children in November 1939. That number, however, was soon to be doubled by evacuees. On 4 March 1940, a Mr Woods called at the school about the refugees but it was not until June that any were admitted.

Ena Davis remembers evacuees from Edmonton being billeted in Finmere House. Two evacuees lived with the Hitchcock family at a cottage, now demolished, beside the church. Evacuees were also billeted in seven cottages in the village on the south side of Fulwell Road.

In 1941, the Medical Officer of Health for Oxford, Dr G. C. Williams, noted that the health of children evacuated from London to Oxfordshire had improved. He suggested that, after the war, it might be a good thing to have official billeting and to evacuate children from the big cities to the country for their health.

19 June 1940. School closed owing to evacuation.

21 June 1940. School reopened today, 30 evacuated children being enrolled. (School log book)

'Evacuee teacher,' Miss Ventura, who lived with the Misses Logan, two sisters who lived in the Rectory (now the Old Rectory), supported the teacher, Bethel Hardy. She was succeeded by Miss Cudmore in 1940.

Food was scarce and the children were often ill. Measles and impetigo were frequent afflictions. Blackouts were put in place over the windows in October 1942 and Miss Logan visited to inspect the children's gas masks from March 1943. Nevertheless, school business continued much as usual. Extra holidays compensated for the shortage of men to work in the fields. In 1943, the school closed from 30 July to 23 August for the summer holidays and for a fortnight from 24 September for the potato harvest.

In 1945, the war was at last over and the evacuees were able to return home.

8 & 9 March 1945. The school was closed for two days owing to VE day and the day following.

25 June 1945. Terence Pirie and Harry Challis are returning to their London homes this week. There are now 26 on the roll and no official refugees in the school.

There remained a few 'unofficial' refugees who had arrived to stay with relatives or friends.

19 February 1946. Peter and Fred Manners have returned to London. 18 on roll.

Memories of a Village at War

In 1995, Ian Hudson interviewed Fred Tew, Mildred Tredwell, Ena Davis and Nellie Jones to record their memories for Finmere's VE Day celebrations.

Fred Tew

Fred was called up and had to attend a medical in Bedford. He stood in the cubicle number five when the commanding officer called out 'Hide,' Fred misheard him and came out and signed Hide's medical report. The commanding officer was not amused when Fred explained that he had heard someone shout 'five.' He was later told that he was not fit enough to join the forces, and yet to this day he has never had an injection or been to hospital.

As the war developed, Fred secured employment in the construction of Finmere aerodrome during the early 1940s. Upon completion, the aerodrome was officially opened by Squadron Leader Hull, who later became Fred's next door neighbour. With the construction of the aerodrome complete, Fred was unemployed, until a conversation with the Squadron Leader led to an offer of civilian employment as a boiler stoker. Before taking up his duties, Fred was medically examined by two RAF doctors who found him to be fitter than many of their own officers. This put his mind to rest, having not understood why he failed his medical.

Fred remembers wartime activity on the aerodrome. When the Germans were raiding other airfields, it was common to see 40–50 aircraft at Finmere. These included Spitfires, Hurricanes, Wellingtons and Mosquitos. Fred was also involved in clearing trees in a wood at Shelswell Park to store new aircraft awaiting their duty. When the land had been cleared, it was covered with cinders, which from the air gave the impression of treetops once the grass had germinated. The village also benefited from the services of the Home Guard—based in the Saddle Room of the Kings Head—a fire fighter and Air Raid Wardens.

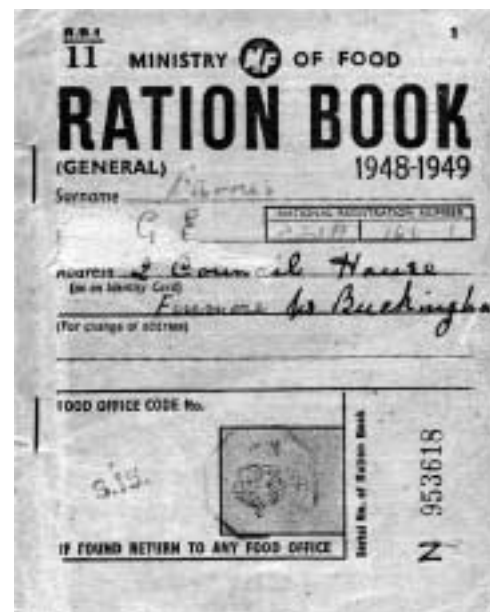
On the day it was announced that the war in Europe was over, celebrations began in earnest at the aerodrome, but before the celebrations got too excited, Fred left for home. He was greeted by the sight of the village being decked out in bunting and flags, and villagers enjoying spontaneous parties.

Mildred Tredwell and Ena Davis

In wartime, rationing provided only meagre quantities of food. Everyone grew their own vegetables, supporting the campaign to 'Dig for Victory.' Most people also kept poultry and their own pig—what was not eaten was salted down. The roads were not cluttered up with cars or lorries; villagers walked, cycled or drove in a pony and trap.

Milk was transported around the village in large churns by pony and float, and measured into jugs or basins at each door. Children enjoyed a ride on the float, especially the evacuees who came from Edmonton, London. Many of these took up residence here after the War.

Finmere's air-raid wardens were strict about the blackout but there were still many stray bombs. At 9.30 pm on Valentines Day 1940, three bombs were dropped at the top of the village. One exploded on the hard court at Little Tingewick House; another landed on the greenhouse but did not explode. The third landed in Mere Lane and exploded twenty-four hours later. Charlie Andrew and Tommy Paxton paraded and warned residents about the unexploded bomb. Shortly afterwards, two bombs were dropped at the other end of the village on Lepper's farm (Tile House Farm on Fulwell Road).



Post-war ration book

Food rationing began in 1940 and ended when meat rationing ended in 1954.

VE Day was celebrated with an enormous bonfire at the Cross Tree. Alf Lepper Senior kept piling on branches, so eventually all the wires above were burnt, cutting the telephone and electricity.

Nellie Jones

Nellie's memories of peace in Europe being announced also include the bonfire lit on the village green. The fire burnt so fiercely that it set light to the telephone wires. Children were presented with commemorative mugs. Celebrations lasted through the night with everyone having a 'whale of a time' at the street parties. Nellie remembers that families were closer knit in the war years and more sociable. Villagers would place their gramophones near their front doors and sit in groups, listening to whatever could be heard. Her late husband, Arthur, and Mr. Cox and his brothers, were members of the Finmere Home Guard. Despite what is portrayed in 'Dads Army' on the BBC, the men of Finmere were provided with ammunition and tin hats that were kept in the stables at the Kings Head. Whenever Arthur was called for duty either Mr. Cox or one of his brothers would ensure that Nellie had company.

When walking a very young Alan Jones in his pram, Nellie recalls memories of seeing German bomber planes flying over Finmere and launching their incendiary bombs on their target, Coventry. When out on these walks, she had to wear a gas mask, as did baby Alan. Apparently it was not comfortable for him to wear, as his complete body was encapsulated and she had to supply oxygen into his mask. When the mask was removed, Alan's face was blue.

Nellie's husband Arthur was employed on Mr Tredwell's farm, which sent one hundred fowls a day to London from Finmere station. When war broke out Arthur was called up along with other men from the village, including the late George Davis, Bert Horwood and Bill Deathe. As a result, Nellie either had to surrender her farming accommodation or take five young women of the Land Army into her home. Bringing up a young family Nellie had little choice but to move out and into another property. The young women of the Land Army were employed to manage a large piggery, which supplied many areas of the country with meat rations. The Jones family moved to their present house in the early 1940s, before the back door had even been fitted, when the weekly rent was 16s 5d.

Although German bombers frequently attacked the village, Nellie does not recall any serious damage being inflicted. Nellie's aunt was hospitalised in Buckingham, where she would walk to visit her, passing through Tingewick which at that time had, amongst other things, two bake houses, two butchers and five public houses.

The Women's Land Army was formed in 1939 to free men farm workers for war duty. It was a vital part of Britain's drive to be self-sufficient in food. Little Tingewick House was a Land Army Hostel during the Second World War and the Red Lion became a meeting place for Land Army Women and airmen.

1940 2000
16s 5d £24

One of Nellie's final employers before the war ended was Squadron Leader Hull, whose house still stands today at the bottom of Captain's Lane. There she cleaned the silverware and when the Squadron Leader's wife asked how much she owed, Nellie replied '£1 please' to which the reply came 'don't be so silly'—away went the lady to fetch her purse and to Nellie's surprise she was given £10.

RAF Finmere

Before 1938, the skies in the triangle with Bicester, Banbury and Buckingham at its corners were comparatively free of military aircraft. With the advent of the Second World War in September 1939, that was about to change.

In 1941, there was an abundance of new airfields within or close to that triangle; nearly all were Operational Training Units (OTUs). The OTUs job was to transform airmen into battle-ready aircrew for Bomber Command's war machine. Some airfields remain and many travellers have paused to view the long evacuated, disintegrating sites, their decaying steel and concrete now hidden by the time-encroaching woodland and brambles. These mysterious sites conjure up images of bombers, droning into the night on missions over enemy territory, never to return, or so badly damaged they return on a 'wing and a prayer.'

Aerodromes in or near the triangle include Upper Heyford, Weston-on-the-Green, Bicester, Mixbury Landing Ground (Shelswell), Barton Abbey (Hopcroft's Holt), Turweston, Hinton-in-the-Hedges, Great Horwood, Silverstone, Croughton, Barford St John, Enstone and RAF Finmere.

Relics of Finmere's former operational status are still evident. The most recognisable are the short span of main east/west runway (10/28) and two aircraft maintenance hangars, both in good repair. The most poignant reminder is the dilapidated control tower; a very sorry sight situated in the middle of the aerodrome.

Training at Finmere

But what of its past? To find the answer, we go back to RAF Bicester, 6 km (4 miles) south of Finmere. Bicester RAF camp was established in 1916. By April 1940, it was home for a newly formed 13 OTU operating Bristol Blenheim Mk 1 & Mk 1V twin engine medium bombers, following the amalgamation of No. 104 & No. 108 squadrons. The new OTU was created to supply aircrew, following crippling losses sustained by Blenheim squadrons during early action assisting British Expeditionary Forces during the French campaign before Dunkirk. Unfortunately, RAF Bicester had one major problem that could not be easily overcome—it was an all grass airfield and proved unserviceable during wet winter periods.

1940	2000
£10	£225

Tony O'Gorman, the author of our text on Finmere Airfield, remembers life in this area as a boy:

Living as we did, 3 miles west of RAF Finmere, at the 'Pump' house Juniper Hill, I'm proud to say that I can remember seeing the Finmere training sorties first hand. As the low flying aircraft swept across the open farmland surrounding our house, known as 'Larkrise', the urge to flatten one's self to the ground was ever present; be they Blenheim, Boston, Mitchell or Mosquito: something never to be forgotten.

The two surviving hangars house Countrywide (formerly MSF) and Dalgety. The bracketed numbers refer to the magnetic compass heading of the runway; vital information for landing approaches.

Later the concrete surfaces were modified. Pete Reeve, now living at Fritwell and then 15–16 years old, recalls

In 1942–3, I worked for the contractors, Audbry Watson Ltd. We were contracted at Finmere to coat the main runways with wood chipping—something like match sticks. They were rolled into hot tar, ending up in a layer, about a quarter of an inch [6mm] thick. My job was to sweep surplus chips up for further use, using an old sweeping lorry. They were super soft to walk on and saved aircraft tyre life no end. I liked working at Finmere, I was paid 6d per hour, the cookhouse dinners were smashing and cost 3d.

1942	2000
6d	£1

Also, two exciting new American bombers were due to come into service and would replace the ageing Blenheims: the Douglas Boston and, later, the North American Mitchell. Both were fast twin engine medium bombers. They were wholly unsuitable for grass airfields because of their tricycle undercarriage and weight. They had a nose wheel instead of tail wheel, the later being a feature of nearly all British aircraft during the Second World War. Their fully loaded weight was nearly double that of the 14,500 pound (6,500 kg) Blenheim bomber.

A building programme of satellite airfields became a top priority to relieve the pressure of aircrew training on the premier stations. At Finmere, the first priority was runway lay out. This differed from most wartime airfields, in that all three concrete runways radiate from the northern tip of the 'drome' (where the Finmere Sunday Market is held). The airfield configuration was almost 'shoe-horned' into an area surrounded by the local roadways. The Tingewick to Newton Purcell by-road was closed at the airfield for the duration of the war.

Apart from the runway layout, the rest of the airfield was similar to other satellite airfields, except for the position of the control tower, which was close to the end of all three runways. Such was the urgency of training that by late 1941 and even before the contractors had finished their work the aircraft of 13 OTU Bicester were using the newly constructed runways.

By the end of July 1942, when the airfield was declared officially operational, residents of Finmere and Little Tingewick had grown accustomed to the sight and sound of Blenheim Mk I planes, their short Perspex noses, and Blenheim Mk IV planes, with long perspex noses, taking off and landing over their homes. An area once festooned with wild life, ponds, ditches, and cattle grazing pastures was now forbidden territory to locals who were warned to 'KEEP OUT.'

Quiet rarely prevailed. Aircraft movement only ceased when the planes were grounded due to very bad weather, on which occasions their eerie form was just discernable through the gloom, while anchored to their hard standing pans, twenty-seven of which were scattered around the airfield perimeter track, or taxi-way.

Despite Finmere being classified as a satellite of RAF Bicester, it soon assumed a much greater role because of its ability to cater for heavier and faster aircraft. Thanks to its concrete runways, it became an important source of pilot training for 2 Group Bomber Command, especially with its Drem electric runway lighting essential for night exercises. RAF Bicester still used 'goose neck flares,' which were rather like watering cans stuffed full of oily rag, the flame coming out of the spout.

Blenheim bombers were withdrawn from operations with Bomber Command by August 1942 but training continued at Finmere using both marks of aircraft: with No 307 Ferry Training Unit, (FTU) formed at RAF Bicester in late 1942, later moving to Finmere in 1943. Their task was to ferry aircraft to northwest Africa. The move also assisted Blenheim crews to convert to the new Bostons and Havocs.

Occasional fighter aircraft frequented Finmere, including the famous Spitfire and Tempest. They were from the Fighter Affiliation Flight at RAF Bicester, which trained bomber crews in retaliation and avoidance of enemy fighters; training that proved invaluable over the battle zone.

Of 7,781 de Havilland Mosquitos built throughout the UK, Canada and Australia between 1941 and 1950, not one flying example exists today. Known as the 'Wooden Wonder' its versatility was unique and, besides photo reconnaissance, it provided the fastest and most potent operational twin engine fighter-bomber of its era. 13 OTU at RAF Finmere was due to receive them by mid 1943 but they did not come into use until January 1944.

By March 1945, the end of the war in Europe was in sight, but the war in the Far East seemed destined to continue. Finmere had become a 'hot-bed' for Mosquito aircrew training with almost fifty aircraft available, turning out thirty trained crews per month for the Far East. The war was hastened to an end by the detonation of two atom bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki on 6 and 9 August 1945. Already, by July 1945, the runways of RAF Finmere had fallen silent.

After the war, Finmere airfield became a storage area for 38 Group (Transport Command). Amongst other equipment stored were many tons of surplus ammunition.

Air Crashes

David Saunders, Commanding Officer of Mixbury Landing Grounds (MLG), lived in Finmere village for a while, after marrying a local girl in 1943. David recalls:

I was posted to Shelswell Park in April 1941 and stayed until 1944. Although not directly involved with Finmere Drome, which was only two miles off our eastern runway, we did at times receive aircraft from there in severe trouble.

He recalls two accidents in particular. One fine summer evening a crashing Blenheim had scraped across a nearby field; for about 1000 yards (900m) and then crumpled up. The crew of three were Canadians stationed at Finmere; all were killed. David was distressed by the trail of debris, which included

Leslie Valentine, now living in Hethe, recalls:

In 1943, I was a sergeant pilot stationed at RAF Bicester with 13 OTU. We had converted from the Bristol Blenheim Mk IVs, to the Boston Mk III, a wonderful aircraft. Although not billeted at RAF Finmere, all of our flying training was based from there.

Training consisted mainly of low level formation flying, daylight low level attacks, and formation daylight bombing practice on the bombing range at nearby Otmoor. We were 'bombed up' at Finmere—nearly always with ten pound (4.5 kg) practice bombs. That left a trail of white smoke to identify accuracy. Our operational height varied from fifty feet (15m) above the ground level to 10,000 feet (3000m). The practice bombs were stored in bomb dumps situated at the Barton Hartshorne end of the 'drome', where remains can still be seen.



Leslie Valentine at Finmere Airfield in 1995

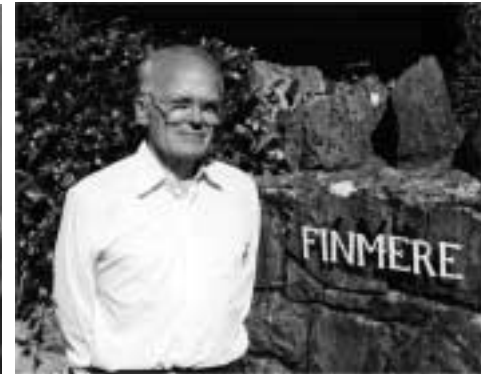
The four engine Handley Page Halifax bomber and the twin engine De Havilland Mosquito were used for electronic jamming exercises from Finmere.

Mosquito aircraft made many low level attacks during the Second World War. One of the most famous is the Amiens prison raid in February 1944, during which the walls of the prison, holding many Resistance prisoners, were burst open by accurate bombing. The raid was carried out in blinding snow at a height of just 10 feet; evidence, if any were needed, of the importance of the low level training provided by units like the 13 OTU.

Eight thousand airmen lost their lives in training accidents during the Second World War. The last plane to crash onto Finmere airfield (close to Barton Hartshorn) was an USAF electronic jamming EF-111A, from RAF Upper Heyford, in April 1992.

personal letters and a wristwatch ticking away, its strap still fastened. He also remembers the speed with which peace and tranquillity returned to the countryside, broken only by the song of the skylark.

The second crash was similar, with the Blenheim finally hitting a tree. The pilot and observer in the front were so badly injured they died later. The only words the pilot could say in broken English were to ask if the gunner was all right. He was and had survived by crouching in the wing well. They were Free French, stationed at Finmere.



David Saunders during the war and in 1994

David Saunders now lives in Banwell, Avon; his house, aptly, named 'Finmere.'

RAF Finmere at Play

Life at the airfield was not all work without play. Betty Baker (nee Musker) recalls her time at RAF Finmere where she was a Leading Aircraft Woman (LACW) in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF).

I came there via RAF Bicester in 1944. I had been trained for aerial photographic reconnaissance analysis at RAF Farnborough. Our unit covered all aspects of aerial photography, which meant that part of my job was to load the F24 and K20 cameras into the Mitchell & Boston bombers. I found this very difficult, they were large and heavy, my height of only 4 feet 10 inches (1.5m), approx, never helped either. I also taught aircrew how to interpret the results of their aerial work.

All the same, Finmere for me still holds many happy memories. Because prior to service life, I had been a full time musician at concert level, on both the Grand piano and piano accordion; so I soon became a member of a concert quartet; we toured around the area, Buckingham, Finmere, Upper Heyford, Brackley, in fact all over the place, besides entertaining at the 'drome' as well.

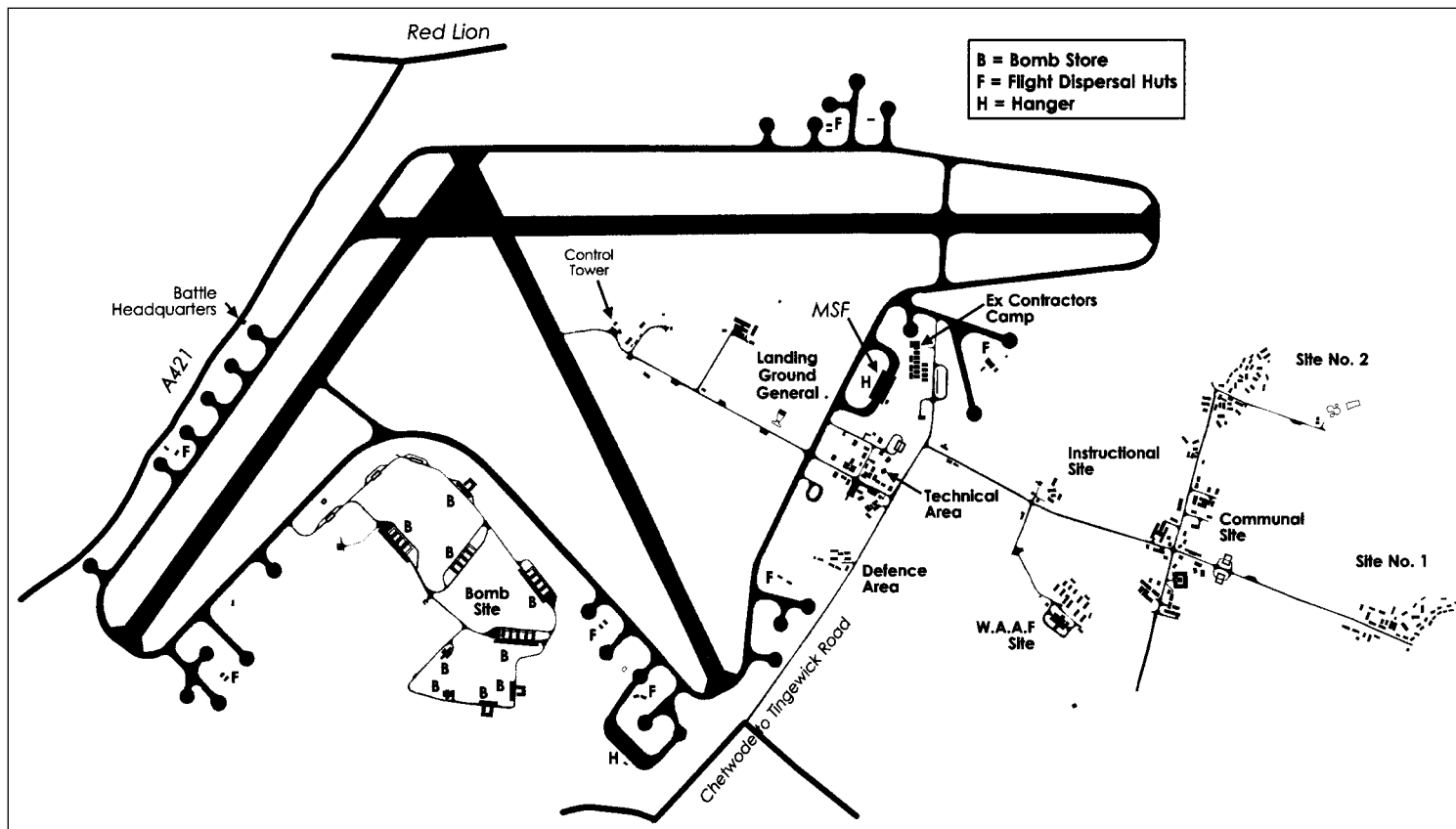
Betty's days at Finmere, are still treasured in her memories, while there she became engaged to a Dutch Air Gunner instructor on the Mitchell bombers (Chief Petty Officer, Henk Harsevoort). Their off duty hours were spent together cycling or walking to explore the local countryside, often going to the cinema in Buckingham.

Having returned to his squadron (320 Dutch) at Dunsfold (RAF) 2nd Tactical Air Force, Henk continued active duty. Their engagement was brought to a tragic end just 3 months before the end of the war when Henk was killed in an air collision fifteen minutes into a bombing mission

The unpredictable future that surrounds people's lives during prolonged warfare will always make for a more closely knit social community. RAF Finmere was no exception, and with such a wealth of multinationals at the airfield it is not a surprise that recreational activity ran rife. Besides the British, there were Canadians, Australians, New Zealanders, South Africans, Free French, Dutch, Poles, Czechs and a few Americans. The station's football and cricket teams regularly beat local teams, unsurprising since most village and town men were away at war. Service personnel would also pack local pubs and village dances. Finmere village was not an exception, a piano or a wind up gramophone being the only musical requirement.



Betty Baker during the war. Betty Baker at Finmere Airfield in 1995.



Finmere Airfield based on Air Ministry plan of June 1945