



Bawtry Heritage Group

Preserving our Past for the Future

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RAF BAWTRY

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RAF BAWTRY

Contents

	Page
The role of a RAF Group Headquarters	4
The facilities of RAF Bawtry	7
Structural changes to the Hall	10
Operations managed by No.1 Group	12
Operations during World War II	12
Operations during the Cold War	16
The RAF Meteorological Service	20
Living and working at RAF Bawtry	21
The RAF and the town	25
The closure of RAF Bawtry	28
Bawtry Hall after the RAF	31
Appendix – Aircraft and weapons operated by squadrons controlled by RAF Bawtry	32
Bibliography	37

The Ministry of Defence (MoD) acquired Bawtry Hall in 1939, on a long lease (buying it outright in 1953). After the fall of France army units evacuated from Dunkirk were sent to various area in England for reformation, reorganisation and retraining. One of the battalions of the Royal West Kent Regiment is believed to have been quartered at Bawtry Hall.¹ It is also said that an Army Ambulance Corps was stationed at the Hall, and a Special Constabulary Unit.²

In 1941 it was turned over to the Royal Air Force (RAF), to serve as Headquarters for No. 1 Group RAF Bomber Command. This function continued during and following the Second World War until in 1968 it transitioned into Headquarters No. 1 Group Strike Command. It also served as the centre of the RAF Meteorological Service. RAF Bawtry closed in 1984.



Fig 1 - RAF No. 1 Group's badge, depicting a black Panther's head. "Panther" was the Group's call sign in the early part of World War II.

¹ Rose, John – unpublished paper - *An Ordinary Special Place: An Outline History of Bawtry*, 2000

² Yorkshire Post & Leeds Intelligencer 4 Sep 1948

Bawtry Hall itself is a large redbrick house in two storeys with attics and cellars. Today it has about 7 acres of grounds, but the estate was much larger in RAF times. The Hall was built around 1785 by Pemberton Milnes, a prosperous wool-merchant from Wakefield, Yorkshire. It descended through the Milnes family for several generations before being sold to Major George Peake, a well-known amateur pilot, in 1905. It is a Grade II* listed building.



Fig 2 - A recent image of Bawtry Hall - front (east) elevation



Fig 3 - Bawtry Hall prior to RAF use - south elevation

THE ROLE OF A RAF GROUP HEADQUARTERS

Unlike typical RAF bases, RAF Bawtry did not feature runways or other aviation infrastructure. It functioned primarily as an administrative headquarters, for office and command purposes. It was the operational nerve centre for No.1 Group Bomber Command, and subsequently Strike Command, controlling the activities of the Group's constituent squadrons. This control function was certainly a strategic one, but also one of real-time raid management and co-ordination, emanating from the base's Operations Room.

The number of squadrons the Group governed varied throughout its tenure. At the start, there were as few as 10 squadrons, including three Polish and one Australian one, mostly based in Lincolnshire. These squadrons operated over 200 aircraft, predominantly heavy bombers. Later, the Group operated more than double that number of aircraft, in around 30 squadrons. As well as Lincolnshire, there were other bases in Yorkshire and Nottinghamshire.

The Bawtry headquarters facilitated intelligence integration from reconnaissance units, operational management and planning, communications, and logistics for sustained campaigns. Both the shape of bombing strategy and the conduct of individual raids were conducted there, the latter in real-time in the Operations Room.



Fig 4 - Target analysis at RAF Bawtry

The Operations Room would have had a large wall-mounted blackboard which showed all the squadrons participating in a raid, with their status indicated – “en-route”, “over target”, “landed” etc. – the types of aircraft being used, and their number. A board such as this is said to survive at Bawtry Hall, albeit hidden behind a modern partition wall.



Fig 5 - A typical World War II Operations Room

The room would also have had large scale maps showing the squadrons' bases, the route of the "bomber stream" to the target, and return routes. All this information would have been continuously updated in real-time, usually by Womens' Auxillary Air Force (WAAF) plotters. Senior Officers would be assigned to the Operations Room during raids to monitor their progress and, if necessary, to issue new instructions.

Briefing of senior officers about the significance of new and specialist equipment, and some training of practitioners, was also conducted at RAF Bawtry.

Ken Cook joined the RAF in 1941. He trained as a bomb aimer, and subsequently was a radar navigator and air bomber. After operational aircrew assignments he joined the headquarters at RAF Bawtry as Group radar navigation officer. He wrote³:

"My job was to oversee all the squadrons, all the Lancaster squadrons in 1 Group to ensure that the crews were properly trained in operating their radar equipment."

Some of the equipment used at Bawtry was highly sensitive. After the war, on 23rd June 1971, a former RAF Sergeant, Nicholas Prager, was jailed for 12 years for espionage. Whilst stationed at RAF Bawtry, in 1961, he had photographed and sketched some secret radio/radar equipment installed on the Vulcan bombers, and passed it to a contact in the Czech embassy.⁴

The conduct of air operations was always subject to weather conditions and meteorologists were routinely stationed at Group headquarters. In fact, the meteorology section briefly survived the closure of the other RAF operations at Bawtry in 1984 – see below.

All these functions needed staffing – and their nature meant that RAF Bawtry was top-heavy in terms of the proportion of officers to "other ranks". The latter were required for some operational roles, but mostly for "domestic" support services – administrative support, catering, "housekeeping", buildings and grounds maintenance, transport etc.. Some of the latter functions were also delivered by civilian employees and contractors.

The number of personnel at the base fluctuated over the years but, typically, there were around 50 officers, 150 "other ranks", and over 100 civilians, most of the latter being Bawtry residents.

Such a large number of personnel required housing. Single RAF staff were accommodated in the different ranks' messes – sometimes in communal

³ University of Lincoln International Bomber Command Digital Archive

⁴ Daily Mirror 24th Jun 1971

“barrack” blocks – and married officers in quarters built for that purpose. The sites for these were in what is now known as Green Park, and in the Martin Lane area, having a considerable impact upon the life of the town.

THE FACILITIES OF RAF BAWTRY

RAF Bawtry did not have its own airfield, its air transport needs being met by the nearby RAF airfield at Bircotes. That station was not formally part of No. 1 Group, but it operated a Communications Flight used by Bawtry personnel. Prior to the war, in a field a few hundred metres to the south of Bawtry Hall, a private grass aerodrome did exist. This was used by Harald Peake, son of Major George Peake, the then owner of the Hall. He was lucky to survive a crash on landing there in 1932 when his engine cut out⁵. (He subsequently joined the Auxillary Air Force in 1936, becoming its Director in 1938. He rose to the rank of Air Commodore, and was knighted in 1972.⁶) The “Warden” of the aerodrome lived in the Hall’s South Lodge⁷. The airfield closed in 1939⁸.

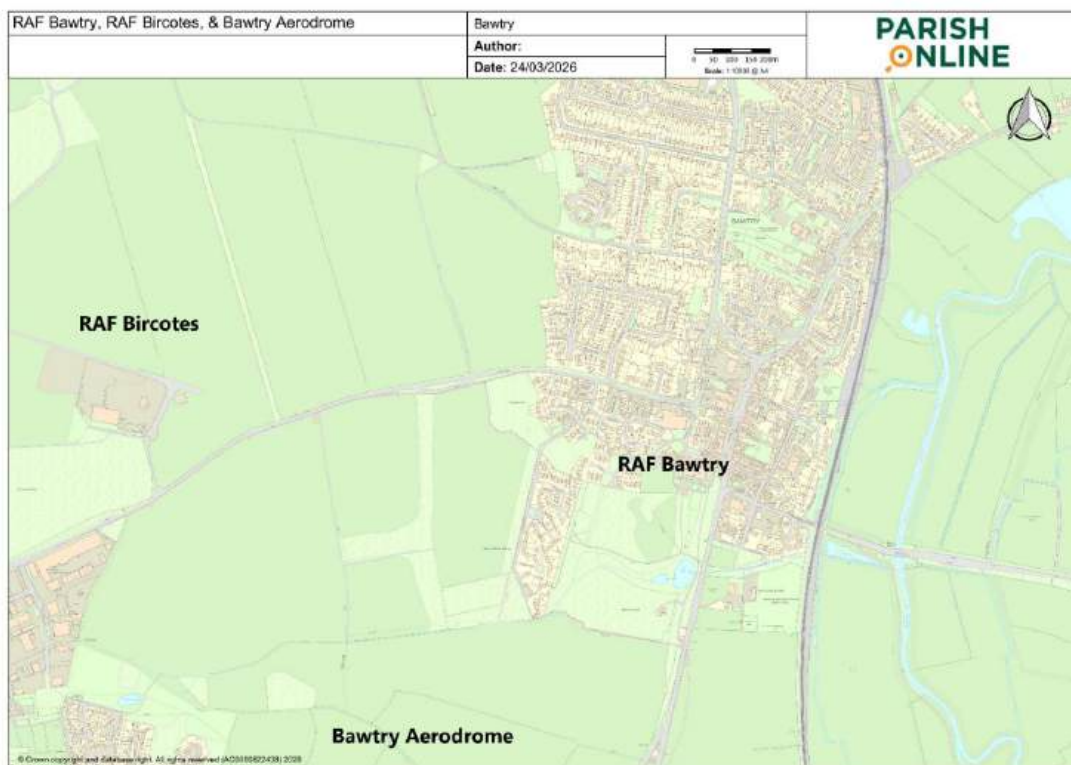


Fig 6 - Map showing RAF Bawtry, RAF Bircotes, and Bawtry Aerodrome

⁵ Leeds Mercury 5th Dec 1932

⁶ Website www.rafweb.org/Biographies/

⁷ Website www.ukairfieldguide.net.

⁸ Website www.abct.org.uk/airfields

RAF Bircotes was also a grass-strip airfield. When it first opened it was known as RAF Bawtry. Its station name was subsequently changed to Bircotes to avoid confusion when the headquarters of No. 1 Bomber Command was designated RAF Bawtry. RAF Bircotes closed in July 1948. It has now reverted to farm land, but there are some remains of a hangar there, as part of a modern warehousing facility.⁹

The Hall provided large rooms on the ground floor which were altered very little by the RAF, for use as large offices, meeting and briefing rooms, and the Officers' Mess. The billiard room was used as the operations centre. Upstairs, the spacious bedrooms were partitioned to create "a rabbit warren of small offices".¹⁰

Numerous new buildings were erected in the extensive grounds for a variety of purposes. Details of these works have not been found but it is likely that they were to provide "barracks" accommodation for single men and women,, married quarters (many of which survive today as part of the Green Park estate) an Airmens' Mess, the Sergeants' Mess, a social club known as the "the Panther Club", training rooms, workshops and stores. There were also bomb shelters for staff to use in the event of aerial attack, although it is not known whether these were cellars in the Hall or separate structures in the grounds.¹¹ The growth of the additions in the grounds is clearly evidenced by comparing the following maps.

⁹ Doncaster Civic Trust September 2017 Newsletter

¹⁰ Sheffield Morning Telegraph 8th Jan 1984

¹¹ Rose, John – unpublished paper - An Ordinary Special Place: An Outline History of Bawtry, 2000

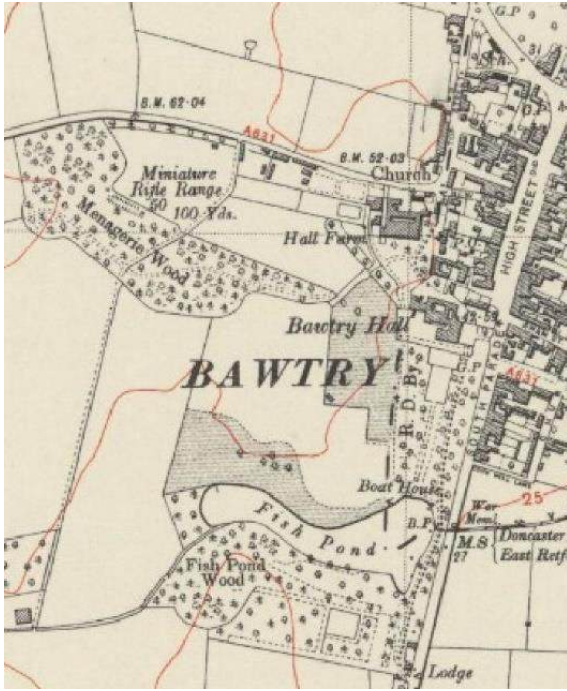


Fig 7 - The estate in 1938, prior to RAF use.

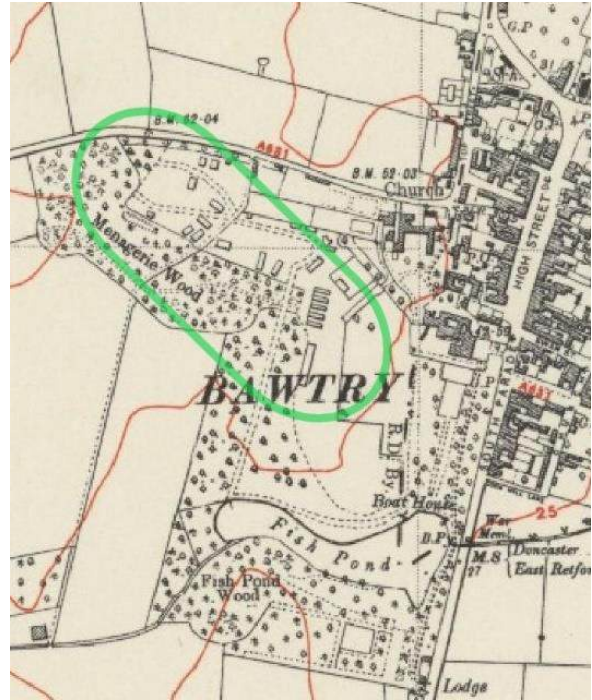


Fig 8 - The estate in 1948. Area of new buildings marked in green.



Fig 9 - The estate in 1961. Area of new buildings marked in green.



Fig 10 - The estate in 2026.

The 1948 map shows numerous buildings compared to 1938, which are marked in green. They include some quite large ones immediately to the west of the Hall, including what looks like a group of 5 barrack blocks. Further west, there is a scatter of smaller buildings. These may include

some officers' married quarters, which survive today in what is now known as the Green Park estate.

The 1961 map shows some of the larger buildings immediately to the west of the Hall had been extended, and there are two new buildings immediately adjacent to the north west corner of the Hall. Many of the smaller buildings further west had disappeared and been replaced by numerous new ones, two of which are very large.

The 2026 map shows that all the additional buildings constructed by the RAF, with the exception of some of the married quarters, have disappeared. Some of these demolitions probably occurred before the RAF vacated the premises and the estate was broken up and sold in 1987 to a number of property developers, followed by the Hall itself – then denuded of most of its land – in 1988. Green Park, the site of the RAF's married quarters was filled with numerous new build houses, and the land immediately adjacent to the Hall became the Pemberton Grove estate.

Elsewhere in the grounds it is said¹² that an anti-aircraft battery was installed. No evidence of this is offered, but it could be deemed likely given the importance of the headquarters and its vulnerability to aerial attack. In fact there are some quite large concrete platforms in one of the wooded areas of the estate that have no obvious explanation and could support the claim.

STRUCTURAL CHANGES TO THE HALL

As well as the multiplicity of new buildings in the grounds of Bawtry Hall, and some internal changes, the RAF also made a major structural change to the Hall itself. This was the construction, believed to have occurred in the 1950s¹³ of a two storey "Command Block" adjacent to the Operations Room (the ex-billiard room) on the south elevation of the Hall. This was fronted by a long single storey building.

This building remains, and constitutes a very significant disfigurement of the Hall's southern elevation, although in fairness its symmetry had already been compromised by new building undertaken by the Peake family after they acquired the Hall in 1905.

¹² McBroom, Freddie – paper on BHG website - "[Bawtry and its Military Connections](#)"

¹³ Doncaster Civic Trust September 2017 Newsletter



Fig 11 - The south elevation of Bawtry Hall prior to RAF use



Fig 12 - Bawtry Hall today, with its southern elevation disfigured by the Command Block constructed by the RAF

Other parts of the Hall were also extended, but most of these works were subsequently demolished.

In the grounds, the Hall's derelict south lodge, built in 1815, was renovated and converted into a two-bedroomed married quarter in 1975.¹⁴

OPERATIONS MANAGED BY NO. 1 GROUP BOMBER COMMAND

(Note – aircraft types and weapons referred to in the text are illustrated in an Appendix to this paper.)

Operations during World War II

After the fall of France No. 1 Group Bomber Command was withdrawn to the UK and initially reformed at Hucknall in Nottinghamshire in June 1940. On 20th July 1941 the Headquarters moved to Bawtry. The Operational Record Book of the Group notes for that first day:

"In spite of the new operations room, the ex-billiards room, being only half-completed, and communications being none too trustworthy, the first operations to be directed from Bawtry went very smoothly."¹⁵

Initially the Group relied upon Wellington bombers. These were vitally important aircraft in prosecuting the RAF's bombing campaign. They had tough geodesic construction and could survive extreme battle damage, but they lacked sufficient range, ceiling, and payload to reach key German targets. A further major weakness was the inability to hit targets with any degree of accuracy in bad weather or darkness. By 1942 however, improvements were in the offing with the gradual arrival of new aircraft with improved range, greater ceiling, better defensive armaments and above all, ability to carry more and bigger bomb loads. First came the four-engine Halifax and then the Lancaster; the latter was to become the backbone of the RAF's long range bomber force, including that of No. 1 Group's.

To minimise heavy losses caused by Luftwaffe fighters and anti-aircraft batteries, Bomber Command had moved to operating mostly in the hours of darkness. Even so, early operations faced high attrition rates exceeding 5% per sortie in 1941–1942.

In early 1942 the Group participated in attacks on the German capital ships Gneisenau, Scharnhorst and Prinz Eugen, then in French ports. The so-called "thousand bomber" raids occurred a little later, in May/June 1942. No. 1 Group contributed 156 Wellingtons to the first of these, on Koln, and was also involved in the raids, a few days later, on Essen and Bremen.

¹⁴ South Yorkshire Times 2nd Aug 1975

¹⁵ Rose, John – unpublished paper - [An Ordinary Special Place: An Outline History of Bawtry, 2000](#)

By late 1942 the Group had transitioned to predominantly four-engine heavy bombers which carried new equipment, including Gee and Oboe, which improved both navigation and bombing accuracy. Lancasters had become the RAF's most potent bomber.



Fig 13 - A Lancaster on a bombing run over Hamburg

No. 1 Group frequently hit different targets in Germany, France and northern Italy and performed minelaying operations along the Dutch and French coasts. It contributed significantly to various area bombing directives including the 1943 Battle of the Ruhr, where its squadrons delivered thousands of tons of ordnance against industrial targets. Towards the end of the war their raids focussed increasingly on Berlin.

An operation of a very different nature was mounted in April 1945. This was Operation Manna (named after the miraculous food described in the Bible) – to provide food to the Netherlands, which was still occupied by the German army. For a variety of war-related reasons, famine had set in. More than 20,000 had died, and nearly 3 million, mostly in the cities of the west – Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, and Utrecht – were at risk. At the

end of April the situation in these cities was becoming catastrophic. Germany's surrender was expected soon, and the Dutch obtained their agreement to asking the Allies for help. Negotiations between the Germans and the Allies swiftly followed. It was agreed allied aircraft would be used to drop food in certain designated areas, without molestation from the Germans, followed by road deliveries from the approaching Allied (largely Canadian) army. The first relief operation commenced on 29th April and was called Operation Manna. It was conducted with aircraft from Bomber Command Groups 1, 3 and 8, using British, Australian, Canadian, New Zealand and Polish squadrons. Over the next 9 days there were 3,186 Lancaster sorties and 147 Mosquito sorties. The bomb bays of the aircraft were loaded with food, which was dropped at slow speed from a few hundred feet. In this way, more than 7,000 tons of food were delivered.



Fig 14 - Operation Manna - food being loaded into the bomb bay of a Lancaster

"Manna" was followed by a similar USAAF operation which delivered another 4,000 tons, and the relief effort was concluded by the Canadian army delivering a final 9,000 tons by road. Throughout these efforts the agreed truce held, and the only allied casualties occurred as a result of accidents.



Fig 15 - Operation Manna - a Lancaster dropping food over the Netherlands

By the war's end, No. 1 Group's Lancasters accounted for about a quarter of the total sorties made by Bomber Command and the Group dropped a higher tonnage of bombs per aircraft than any other Group. The Poles of 300 (Masovian) Squadron dropped the largest tonnage (24,000) of any

Bomber Command squadron in the war. The sad corollary of maximising bomb loads was higher than average losses of crews and aircraft. Over 1,400 of the Group's aircraft, mainly Lancasters, were lost. "The human price was immense. Between 1939 and 1945 1 Group war losses totalled 8,547 aircrew In 1943 and 1944 the figures were staggering with losses of over 20 aircraft on individual raids."¹⁶



Fig 16 - Memorial plaque at Bawtry Hall

A memorial plaque, dedicated by 2008 (Bawtry) Air Cadets Squadron, at Bawtry Hall commemorates the No. 1 Group airmen who died during World War II.

Operations during the Cold War

Post-war, the headquarters managed re-equipment with Avro Lincolns for operations. Detachments of these aircraft were deployed to Malaya for use in British offensive operations against communist insurgents in the Malayan jungle during the 1948-1950 "Emergency" there.

There was a great leap forward in technology in the late 1940s and the 1950s, when the RAF started re-equipping to address growing Cold War

¹⁶ Wing Cdr Cresswell, Stewart – unpublished paper for Bawtry Heritage Group

tensions. No. 1 Group's Bawtry headquarters oversaw the adoption of jet-powered English Electric Canberra bombers for medium-range strike missions, with squadrons achieving operational readiness by 1951.

Subsequently the Group's functions expanded into operating the UK's strategic nuclear deterrent when it took control of squadrons of V-bombers and US-loaned Thor ballistic missiles.

The Valiant was the first V-bomber to be deployed in 1955, followed by the more capable Vulcan and Victor. The earliest Valiants were armed with fission nuclear weapons, but later variants, and the Vulcans and Victors that followed, carried the much more powerful thermo-nuclear weapons – i.e. hydrogen weapons, including the Blue Steel missiles. Their role was “deterrence” and this was demonstrated by the Vulcan and Victor squadrons adopting the QRA (Quick Reaction Alert) procedure whereby a portion of the force was required to be at constant (15 minute) “cockpit readiness” at the end of runways.

No.1 Group operated the Thor intermediate range ballistic missile between 1958 and August 1963, with ten squadrons each with three missiles being equipped with the weapon. 1 Group had two sets of five stations, centred respectively on RAF Hemswell and RAF Driffield. These missiles were ground launched American weapons which had thermo-nuclear warheads. They were controlled by US and UK personnel with “dual-key” technology – only the USAAF could arm the warheads, and only the RAF could launch the missiles.

Blue Steel, introduced in 1963, was a British air-launched, rocket-propelled nuclear armed standoff missile, built to arm the V-bomber force. It allowed the bomber to launch the missile against its target while still outside the range of surface-to-air missiles (SAMs). The missile proceeded to the target at speeds up to Mach 3, and would trigger within 100 m of the pre-defined target point. Blue Steel remained the primary British nuclear deterrent weapon until 1970, when the Royal Navy took over the UK's strategic nuclear capacity by deploying Polaris ballistic missiles from Resolution-class submarines.

On 30 April 1968, RAF Bomber Command merged with Fighter Command to form RAF Strike Command, integrating No. 1 Group into the new structure responsible for all offensive RAF operations. Bawtry Hall retained its role as No. 1 Group's operational headquarters within Strike Command, controlling much of the V-bomber force, supporting contingency planning for potential Warsaw Pact conflicts, coordinating exercises simulating nuclear strikes and conventional operations, and ensuring interoperability with NATO allies.

It will be evident that RAF Bawtry had substantial responsibility for the operation of part of the UK's nuclear deterrence throughout the Cold War. If a conflict with the Soviet Union and its allies occurred, this means Bawtry would have been a target in any nuclear exchange. A restricted memorandum written in August 1965 states:

"There is a continuing threat of enemy air attacks on targets in the UK. RAF Bawtry could be a target for a direct nuclear attack or could suffer fall-out after attacks on other targets."

The memorandum goes on to give detailed arrangements for contacts with the Civil Defence Unit based at Harworth, with the civilian police station at Rossington, and with other RAF units in the event of such attack. It then details who is to be billeted in each of the several shelters available, who is to take command, and gives a vast list of stores required to equip these shelters for 14 days. No provision is mentioned for the non-RAF townsfolk.¹⁷

RAF Bawtry's final operational activity was in the Falklands War of 1982. The bombing of the airfield at Stanley by Vulcan bombers from RAF Waddington during the Falklands War from April to June 1982 was coordinated from the Operations Room at Bawtry Hall.

The operation was known as "Black Buck" and involved the longest bombing sortie in history. A fleet of Vulcans from RAF Waddington and Victors (which by this time served as tankers) from RAF Marham were sent to RAF Wideawake, on Ascension Island in the South Atlantic. Briefly, Wideawake is said to have become the busiest airport in the world in terms of the number of daily movements. (In addition to Black Buck, it was also used by reconnaissance and transport aircraft.) The operation concerned a single Vulcan bombing the airfield at Stanley with conventional bombs. To enable the Vulcans to reach Stanley, and return to Ascension, a total of 12 Victors were required to refuel the aircraft. The mission was successful – a single 1000 lb. bomb cratered the runway. This prevented the Argentinian air force from using it for fast jets – but there is some debate as to whether that achievement justified the risks involved or the enormous resources deployed. A number of similar missions followed.

¹⁷ Rose, John – unpublished paper - [An Ordinary Special Place: An Outline History of Bawtry, 2000](#)



Fig 17 - Operation Black Buck - the crowded RAF Wideawake, where 12 Victor tankers can be seen in the background



Fig 18 - Operation Black Buck - the cratered runway at Stanley

The RAF Meteorological Service

Since 1936 Met Office staff were civilians employed by the Air Ministry (later on the MoD) although those working with the RAF received temporary commissions. No. 1 Group Headquarters had always had meteorologists to help with operations but in 1983 the station was redesignated as the central headquarters for the RAF Meteorological Service, centralising weather data processing (including radar imagery and satellite inputs), forecasting, and dissemination critical for air operations planning across the UK and in overseas deployments. Forecasts were disseminated to other RAF headquarters and to operational squadrons.



Copyright - Sheffield Daily Telegraph

Fig 19 - The forecast office at RAF Bawtry



Copyright - Sheffield Daily Telegraph

Fig 20 - The telex room at RAF Bawtry

The RAF was not, however, the only recipient of Bawtry's forecasts:

*"Customers of the weather centre include the armed forces, Government departments, public corporations, fishing fleets, the Press, television, radio and the public."*¹⁸

This was raised as an issue when it was announced that the base was to close.

LIVING AND WORKING AT RAF BAWTRY

Several WAAF personnel were stationed at Bawtry, where they mostly worked in administration, "domestic services", as drivers and in some technical jobs. A montage of images of those who lived in "Hut 7" in 1942 has survived.¹⁹ The photographs are annotated with their names: [indecipherable], Pat Garlick, Pamela Hiosell, Joan Shingler, Cissy Ward, Marion Hennessey, Joy Greenwell, Bessie Whitfield, [Pat] 'Little Dot', Betty Stead, and Muriel B Lord:



Fig 21 - The WAFs of Hut 7 at Bawtry Hall in 1942

¹⁸ Yorkshire Evening Post 12th Jul 1984

¹⁹ University of Lincoln International Bomber Command Digital Archive

The RAF personnel who lived and worked at Bawtry had different experiences; some liked it and others did not.

Hilary Robinson had volunteered to serve in the WAAF, as a driver. She was stationed at RAF Elsham Wolds but just after the end of the war she was transferred to Bawtry. She was interviewed for the University of Lincoln International Bomber Command Digital Archive:

Interviewer: So there was a sort of difference in atmosphere was there? Between Elsham Wolds and Bawtry. Was it to do with—?

HR: Oh Bawtry Hall was.

Interviewer: Bawtry yeah.

HR: Was the headquarters and it was all sort of, you know toffee nosed at Bawtry Hall [laughs]

Interviewer: Right. So uniform had to be had to be right. And drill and that sort of thing. Was it?

HR: Yes. I didn't like Bawtry Hall very much. And I couldn't get out there you see. Used, I found a war memorial which was quite a convenient place and I could climb over the railings and get out. Until one evening I unfortunately slipped somehow or other. Caught my hand on one of the spikes on this thing and sort of cut it right down there.

Kathryn Reid was a conscripted WAAF; a General Duties ACW (Aircraft Woman). She wrote about her first posting, which was to Bawtry. She said that, as a Yorkshire girl, she “didn't mind” going to Bawtry, but she was soon disappointed:

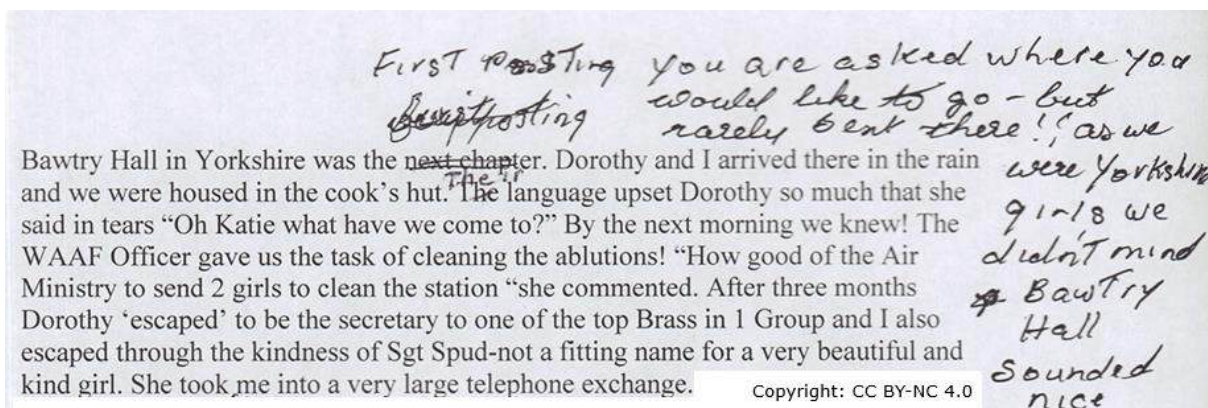


Fig 22 - account by ACW Kathryn Reid

She summed up her feelings about her work at Bawtry Hall in this poem²⁰:

Bawtry Bind

I'm one of the Airforce G.D's
I'm fighting a war if you please
Cleaning steps and floors on my knees
Everything smells musty
I swear I'm going rusty,
Sweeping and dusting,
While waiting remustering.

I'm one of the Air Force G.D's
Cleaning Ablutions and W.C's.
Brushing and scrubbing,
Polishing and mugging
It's such a frustration
To clean up the Station. -----
Won't someone, somewhere
Remuster me PLEASE.

Arguably, some of the discomfort experienced by "other ranks" was inevitable – as previously stated, because of its headquarters function, RAF Bawtry was top heavy with officers. Most of these were well educated (including significant numbers from public schools) and some came from "privileged" backgrounds. Most of the "other ranks" were conscripts, had left school at the age of 14, and were ordinary working people. There was some considerable social distance between these two groups. Many of the officers were very senior ones, such that even junior officers felt uneasy in their presence.

Given the fact that many aircrew were of commissioned rank, and most ground crew were "other ranks", it might be thought there was a similar dynamic on operational bases. It would appear, however, that an operational camaraderie often developed there, particularly between the aircrews and their ground crews. This sort of dynamic does not seem to have characterised Bawtry.

²⁰ Reid, Kathryn - "[Bawtry Bind](#)" – University of Lincoln International Bomber Command Digital Archive

Joyce Bell joined the WAAF in 1940. She served as a clerk in 1 Group Bomber Command at Bawtry where she met her husband. She said²¹:

"During the summer of 1941 I accompanied several officers and went to assess Bawtry Hall near Doncaster South Yorkshire with a view to moving No.1 Group there. It was deemed eminently suitable and the whole head quarters moved there after it was vacated by the Army. I worked in an office near the gatehouse at the side entrance of Harworth Road checking vehicles in and out, we were billeted in huts in a field near by and our commanding officer kept a donkey for his children in the area where our ablutions huts were cited, in the middle of the night in pitch black we would hear often the donkey bray and know that someone had bumped into him on their way to the facilities. Thursday nights were make do and mend nights we had to sit in and mend our clothes however we were allowed off camp occasionally I remember standing with three other WAAFs on Bawtry Road waiting for a bus to Doncaster to go to see a film at the cinema when a man driving a horsebox pulled up and asked if we would like a lift as he was on his way to Doncaster we gladly accepted his offer and with that he jumped out of the cab and went to the rear of the vehicle so to let the back door down, inside was a horse standing in a stall and we four girls jumped in beside the horse the driver dropped us off right outside the cinema where people were queuing the expression on their faces when the driver lowered that back door and four WAAFs jumped out was hilarious. I used to see Oliver each day for signing various documents and we started our courtship in September 1941."

Evidently Joyce was quite content to live and work at Bawtry, despite there "not being much to do", although there was a camp dance once a week. She went on to say that it was "not nice that the war was on" but her days there were happy ones, that everyone "enjoyed each other".

Common to many working environments, there was a marked differentiation between the staff of the headquarters and aircrew who were assigned there or who visited from time to time – i.e. a distance between those who manage and those who "do".

²¹ University of Lincoln International Bomber Command Digital Archive

Harold Yeoman was an officer who served as a pilot but was “grounded” from operational flying for medical reasons. He was moved to Bawtry as a supernumerary in administration. He wrote²²:

In that glorious summer they had decided that I could do some non-operational flying, so they posted me away from Group Headquarters at Bawtry Hall, where I'd been playing about with a bit of admin. work, a lot of cricket, and, between drinking sessions, flirting with a couple of W.A.A.F.s.

Bawtry had been very pleasant but it was distinctly stuffy after the Squadron. I was the only recently operational aircrew there and I always had the feeling that they were waiting uneasily and suspiciously for me to start swinging from the chandelier, or to come rushing up to someone very senior and snip his tie off at the knot. What really made it for me was the brief moment when I happened to look across the anteroom one day – where Group Captains and other wingless wonders were two a penny, with bags of fruit salad to be seen on their chests, though – I looked across and saw him standing there, quite quietly. It was “Babe” Learoyd, and he had only one medal ribbon, that of the Victoria Cross.

For many people, men and women, joining the armed forces was their first move from home and family. Doubtless some found this difficult, but others relished it. A source known only as “BG”, a member of the meteorology team, recalled²³ that, as a 19 year old, he was attached to Bawtry, which was “justly famous for its young ladies”. He said:

“They used to take me down to the pond at the bottom of the grounds. When I left after a few months I was 29!”.

THE RAF AND THE TOWN

The presence of the RAF base in Bawtry undoubtedly had a big impact upon the town and its inhabitants, not least because it provided dependable employment. As previously mentioned, more than 100 civilians were employed there, the vast majority of whom would have lived in the town. Bawtry’s population was probably around 2500 during the war, so this was a very considerable proportion of the working population. In terms of the base’s impact upon the town, there would also have been the substantial effect of around 200 service personnel moving in. Although the base would

²² Yeoman, Harold – “Loose on the Wind” – University of Lincoln International Bomber Command Digital Archive

²³ A Weather-Guesser’s Memories with the RAF – Professional Pilots Network <https://www.pprune.org>

have been self-reliant in some ways, these people would have used Bawtry's shops, public houses, cafes, and clubs.

There were several clubs and societies at the base, many of which invited Bawtry residents to participate. An RAF Wives' Club, called the "Panther" Club (named after the station's badge) organised activities jointly with Bawtry Wives' Club.²⁴ It also showed children's films, and held a New Year's Eve Dance. In fact, dances, to which Bawtry residents (and doubtlessly people from further afield) were invited were held regularly. Some were organised in the Officers' and the Sergeants' Messes, and there was a weekly "Camp Dance". In the years after the war, the Air Officer Commanding and the Officers' Mess held an Annual Ball:



Fig 23 - Invitation to RAF Bawtry's Annual Ball of 1953

In 1977, the RAF joined with several other local bodies on the Bawtry Queen's Silver Jubilee Committee to organise events for the celebrations planned for June of that year. These included a sponsored walk, children's sports, and discos. Ideas considered by the Committee were children's

²⁴ Retford, Gainsborough & Worksop Times 27 Ap 1979

fancy dress, decorated floats, Punch and Judy, a teddy bear stall, welly throwing, knobbly knees, a band and a barbecue.²⁵

RAF Bawtry hosted a wealth of activities, many of which were simply to benefit the town, as not all of them actually involved RAF personnel. Sports were very well represented. An RAF football team was described as a mainstay of the local Sunday Soccer League. The base also fielded a cricket team which participated in a local league, and they allowed Bawtry Cricket Club to play matches on their cricket ground.²⁶ In 1977, a US officer on exchange duties at the base formed the "Bawtry Slapsticks", a softball team comprised of RAF personnel and Bawtry women.²⁷ There was also a squash group, which competed in a local league. Athletics featured in the base's Annual Sports Day and Gala events²⁸ and in 1979 the RAF's Inter Section Athletics Championship and Fete was held at Bawtry²⁹, with the public invited to both events. Runners were entered in the annual St Leger half-marathon.

Even amateur dramatics took place at Bawtry Hall. In 1981, Bawtry Amateur Dramatics Society staged a show called "Perfectly Beastly" in the grounds, featuring music, poetry and prose.³⁰ They put on another show there the following year.³¹

In 1983 the RAF organised children's film shows in the Church Hall.³²

Garden fetes, with proceeds being donated to charity, were held regularly in the grounds of the Hall. Below is a notice from a newspaper in 1965³³:

²⁵ Retford, Gainsborough & Worksop Times 18 Mar 1977

²⁶ Retford, Gainsborough & Worksop Times 7 Jun 1968

²⁷ Retford, Gainsborough & Worksop Times 4 Nov 1977

²⁸ Retford, Gainsborough & Worksop Times 27 Aug 1976

²⁹ Retford, Gainsborough & Worksop Times 1 Sep 1978

³⁰ Retford, Gainsborough & Worksop Times 26 Jan 1981

³¹ Retford, Gainsborough & Worksop Times 2 Jul 1982

³² Retford, Gainsborough & Worksop Times 21 Jan 1983

³³ South Yorkshire Times and Mexborough & Swinton Times 24 Jul 1965



Fig 24 - Newspaper notice re garden fete at RAF Bawtry

A fete in 1966 featured the RAF's Pipe Band from RAF Finningley and the Finningley School of Equitation, children's pony and train rides, and numerous stalls and side shows. The charities which benefited from this included the Bawtry Darby and Joan Club and the Bawtry Darby and Joan Rest Centre.³⁴ (These clubs were established all over the country after the war by the Women's Voluntary Service to provide companionship, hot meals, and recreation for senior citizens.) A newspaper report about these fetes from 1967 said "All this is done voluntarily by officers and airmen."³⁵

In a similar vein, the RAF helped to fund a concert for senior citizens in the Church Hall in 1976. The "Bawtry Hall Players" presented "an evening of variety and humour"³⁶. A similar event had held in Austerfield earlier, in 1972, financed by the RAF Bawtry Charity Committee.³⁷

Another fete was held on Saturday 9th September 1967. "Those attending were entertained by the RAF No 1 Group Pipe Band, a mounted display by the West Riding Constabulary, a train ride around the grounds, and lots of sideshows and stalls."³⁸ Cabaret was added to the list of attractions at a fete in 1968.³⁹

³⁴ Retford, Gainsborough & Worksop Times 16 Sep 1966

³⁵ Ibid. 1 Sep 1967

³⁶ Retford, Gainsborough & Worksop Times 13 Feb 1976

³⁷ Ibid. 1 Dec 1972

³⁸ Ibid. 15 Sep 1967

³⁹ Ibid. 23 Aug 1968

Bazaars and jumble sales were another charitable money raising activity. One in 1972 was held in the hut loaned to the Scouts. There were stalls for handicrafts and cakes, a bottle stall, a white elephant stall, and jumble.⁴⁰

Fetes routinely raised around £600 for charity. Augmented by other activities, the total in 1987 was £1000⁴¹ - a very considerable sum 40 years ago – akin to almost £4000 today.

Another important source of these funds was a station Thrift Shop which sold household goods donated by service personnel. It was said to be very popular with locals.

Local church congregations were joined and supported by RAF prsonnel and their families. The base played a major part in Battle of Britain and Remembrance Day services, as well as routine ones. In the late 1960s, as part of the Harvest Festival celebrations, harvest suppers were held at the Airmen's Mess, with the proceeds going to the Parish Church Fabric Fund.⁴²

Unlike today, the public could access the Hall's extensive grounds. For instance, on Sunday 16th June 1946 the public were invited to visit as part of the National Gardens Scheme⁴³.

There was a long history of association of Scouts and Guides with Bawtry Hall. This started prior to the RAF taking over the Hall (the then owner, Major Peake, being a keen supporter of those organisations.⁴⁴). It would appear the Hall was used regularly by Scouts and Guides, and some newspaper reports have been found to confirm that. In 1935, "more than 60" Guides and Rangers from Rotherham camped at Bawtry Hall⁴⁵, and in 1939 a Scout troop from Ashbourne did the same⁴⁶.

A Scout troop in Bawtry was formally registered with the Scout Association in 1951, but it is not known whether it actually endured. There was certainly a troop in Bawtry by 1968. In that year a newspaper⁴⁷ reported that the Scout and Cub movement in Bawtry "after a lapse of several years has been reformed", suggesting there had been earlier scouting in the town. In a paper posted on Bawtry Heritage Group's website, Mick Maguire⁴⁸ recounts the history of scouting from 1968 in Bawtry. The registered address at that time was "RAF Bawtry". Brian Cox, the Scouts' District Commissioner, working with Bawtry enthusiasts, had achieved this and had

⁴⁰ Ibid. 17 Jul 1970 & 28 Jul 1972

⁴¹ South Yorkshire Times 29 Dec 1978

⁴² Retford, Gainsborough & Worksop Times 9 Sep 1966; 4 Aug 1967 & 20 Sep 1968

⁴³ Halifax Evening Courier 1^h Jun 1946

⁴⁴ Yorkshire Post & Leeds Intelligencer 12 Oct 1950

⁴⁵ Eckington, Woodhouse & Staveley Express 7 Sep 1935

⁴⁶ Ashbourne Telegraph 28 Jul 1939

⁴⁷ Retford, Gainsborough & Worksop Times 12 Ap 1968

⁴⁸ Maguire, Mick – paper on BHG website - [12th Doncaster \(Bawtry\) Scout Group 1967 to 1977](#)

negotiated with the RAF the use of a hut for Scout meetings in the base, rent free. This was on the condition that the troop kept "it clean and paint the interior regularly up to RAF standards" . Apparently the RAF did inspect the accommodation regularly to ensure the Scouts were keeping their side of the agreement.

Later newspaper reports describe multiple occurrences of the RAF allowing Cubs, Scouts and Guides to use their premises and grounds. Later in 1968, Bawtry Scouts and Cubs had a film show at the Hall, a camp fire, and a fishing match at the lake in the grounds.⁴⁹ In 1978, they held a cheese and wine evening.⁵⁰ Guides – 18 in number – were enrolled at the Hall the following year.⁵¹ In 1979, Cubs held a weekend camp in the grounds.⁵²

Shortly before the RAF vacated the Hall, the Scouts and a squadron of Air Cadets were assured that they should not worry about losing their quarters at the Hall.⁵³ This assurance is validated by a report, after closure of the base, that Bawtry Guides held a "cook out" in the woods at the rear of the Hall.⁵⁴

Local children used the station's nursery school and the RAF ran a successful youth club.

According to local Air Cadet Freddie Broom the RAF's contribution to Bawtry and the area had been recognised by the Borough of Doncaster as early as 1943, when the station was awarded the Freedom of the Borough.

THE CLOSURE OF RAF BAWTRY

On January 14th 1984, as part of the defence cuts, RAF Bawtry closed and the HQ of No. 1 Group was transferred to RAF Upavon in Wiltshire. The last Commanding Officer of RAF Bawtry was Air Vice Marshall D Parry-Evans, commanding squadrons of Buccaneers and Tornados, as well as signals, administration, training and engineering units.⁵⁵

The likelihood of the base being closed had been announced two years previously. The newspaper cutting below shows that this news was not well received by local Members of Parliament and Doncaster Borough Council. The two main concerns were the job losses – the Doncaster area having a high unemployment rate – and the loss of the Meteorological Service. The article does, however, also report that the Leader of Doncaster Council,

⁴⁹ Retford, Gainsborough & Worksop Times 13 Sep 1968

⁵⁰ Ibid. 29 Sep 1978

⁵¹ Ibid. 25 May 1979

⁵² Ibid. 31 Aug 1979

⁵³ Ibid. 30 Dec 1983

⁵⁴ Ibid. 13 Jul 1984

⁵⁵ Rose, John – unpublished paper - An Ordinary Special Place: An Outline History of Bawtry, 2000

although deeply concerned about job losses, "was not against the closure of the station because he regarded it as a target for nuclear attack."

Bawtry to lose Strike Command

RAF base shutdown

SERVICEMEN and civilians at RAF Bawtry, near Doncaster, were told yesterday the Government has been advised to close the base.

A working party which has been examining the responsibilities and compositions of the four groups in RAF Strike Command has recommended the number of groups should be reduced to three and RAF Bawtry should be closed.

The cost and operational effects of the proposal are being looked at and talks are to be held with trade unions and other interested parties.

Shocked

The news shocked local MPs who say Doncaster has a high level of unemployment and point out that Bawtry employs many civilian workers. Of the 250 personnel at the station, 78 are civilians.

Mr Mick Welsh, MP for Don Valley, said he hoped the Minister would look

Morning Telegraph Reporters

again at the proposal, and he would be writing to him to put the local case.

Whatever the outcome, said Mr Welsh, the Bawtry meteorological centre should stay, as a tremendous number of people depended on information from it.

"The news has come as a great surprise, and neither the Minister nor the working party has asked for an opinion from me or my colleagues as far as I am aware," he said.

Mr Harold Walker, MP for Doncaster, said: "I very much hope there is no question of the Met centre being closed. It is very important for a whole range of activities. I am deeply concerned that in Doncaster we could suffer further loss of jobs."

Bawtry's station commander, Squadron Leader Robert Payne, said: "I think the vast majority of airmen knew there was a working party looking into it but the reaction I think was one of shock on the civilian side."

He said he felt sorry for the civilians, who are employed in catering, labouring and administration. But he stressed no final decision had yet been taken.

Coun George Brumwell, leader of Doncaster Council, said he was deeply concerned about the prospect of the loss of civilian jobs, although he was not against the closure of the station because he regarded it as a target for nuclear attack.

'Teeth'

RAF Bawtry is the home of One Group, which takes in strike attack, known within the service as "The Teeth." It is suggested it should merge with 38 Group, which provides the Army's air support in the field.

One Group will be equipped with the Tornado. Currently it has Buccaneers and Vulcans that are due to be either faded out or transferred.

The 38 Group, with headquarters at Upavon in Wiltshire, controls the Harrier, Jaguar, Puma, Wessex and the heavy-lift Chinook.

Fig 25 - Sheffield Morning Telegraph 31st March 1982

The August 1982 edition of the magazine Yorkshire Life featured a four-page article "Bawtry and the Wind of Change" which looked at the effect of the closure of RAF Bawtry upon the town. It said Bawtry residents were concerned about "What will happen to Bawtry Hall and other buildings in use by the RAF?"; "What will be the effect of the move on shopkeepers and

the town generally, which has so often been grateful for the RAF boys' charitable efforts?"⁵⁶

Despite all this concern and opposition, the decision to close the base was confirmed. This was largely on economic grounds, with a projected saving to the MoD of £2 million per year.⁵⁷

Just a few days before the formal date of closure, the Sheffield Morning Telegraph reported⁵⁸ that "whilst many military bases were the scene of angry peace protests, the closure of RAF Bawtry left a cloud over the community." It said:

"Air force personnel stationed around magnificent Bawtry Hall have raised cash for local charities, organised nurseries and youth clubs, run a thrift shop and loaned their sports facilities to local soccer teams. The 400 staff at the base were very much a part of the town. Their departure will leave a large gap."

As part of the article, the newspaper published this photograph:



It had the caption "Flight Past – the deserted sentry post tells its own story as the RAF bids farewell to historic Bawtry."

Fig 26 - Empty sentry box at RAF Bawtry

⁵⁶ South Yorkshire Times 12th Aug 1983

⁵⁷ Rose, John – An Ordinary Special Place: An Outline History of Bawtry, 2000

⁵⁸ Sheffield Morning Telegraph 13th Jan 1984

BAWTRY HALL AFTER THE RAF

After closure the Hall was retained by the MoD though, and later that year and into 1985 it was used to accommodate almost 400 police officers who had been drafted in from outside the county because of the miners' strike, the South Yorkshire/Nottinghamshire border being a significant and recurring flash point in that dispute.

In March 1985 the Government's Property Services Agency submitted a planning application to Doncaster Borough Council, addressing a variety of different uses for the site – for industry, recreation, and housing. They wanted to "test the water"; to find out what would be regarded as the preferred use of the building. It was reported⁵⁹ that, in response to this application, Bawtry Town Council asked that at least part of the grounds be preserved for recreational use by the public.

In 1986, however, under instructions from the Thatcher Government to maximise capital receipts from unwanted government military sites, the Property Services Agency was told to sell Bawtry Hall and its grounds, but sadly with little or no respect for its heritage⁶⁰ and no right of public access.

The Estate was sold in June 1987 to the Welbeck Property Agency which then sold all the land adjacent to the Hall to various property developers and one year later sold the Hall itself, "now in a state of considerable disrepair and denuded of much of its land and grounds so that it comprised only 7 acres"⁶¹, to Action Partners Corporation, a Christian organisation, for use as a teaching and conference centre. Happily for Bawtry residents, the Action Partners Corporation not only allowed free access to the remaining grounds of the Hall, but positively encouraged it.

That use ended in 2013, and the following year it was sold for £1.6 million to Bawtry Hall Properties Ltd⁶². That company, owned by local businessmen, converted some of the upper floors into residential flats and some of the outbuildings became a centre for small businesses. The grounds were closed to the public shortly afterwards. The building is currently being used as a luxury wedding venue, working with the Crown Hotel in Bawtry.

⁵⁹ Sheffield Daily Telegraph 27th Mar 1985

⁶⁰ Doncaster Civic Trust Newsletter Sep 2017

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

Appendix – Aircraft and weapons operated by squadrons controlled by RAF Bawtry

The images below are of aircraft and weapons used at RAF bases which came under the jurisdiction of RAF Bawtry throughout the 40 years No. 1 Group had its headquarters there, plus at nearby RAF Bircotes.

During World War II most of the squadrons controlled by RAF Bawtry were equipped with bombers, directed at Germany and its continental allies. Initially these were predominantly Vickers Wellingtons, but the balance shifted to the much more capable Avro Lancasters. The nearest operational airfield, however, was at Bircotes. It was primarily used for training purposes, with a variety of aircraft types, and was not controlled by No. 1 Group. It did, however, host a Communications Flight, equipped with Westland Lysanders, which serviced senior officers based at Bawtry.

After the war, squadrons were re-equipped with Avro Lincolns, a development of the Lancaster, designed for the war against Japan. Surprisingly, these were briefly augmented by what in the UK were known as Washington B1s – which were Boeing “Superfortresses”. This was the aircraft type used by the USAAF for the bombing of Japan. Three No.1 Group squadrons were equipped with these machines.

In the late 1940s the English Electric Canberra was developed. Deployed in 1951, it was the UK’s first jet bomber, albeit also used for reconnaissance. As a medium bomber, it carried the Red Beard tactical atomic fission bomb.

In the 1950s numerous so-called “V-bombers” were introduced – initially the Valiant, and then the Vulcan and the Victor. These heavy bombers were specifically designed to carry the UK’s nuclear weapons to the Soviet Union and its allies in case the “Cold War” became “hot”. Initially these weapons were atom bombs, and subsequently thermo-nuclear (i.e. hydrogen) weapons, including the Avro Blue Steel stand-off missile. The V-bombers and these weapons are also illustrated below.

The most modern aircraft operated by No. 1 Group squadrons were the Blackburn Buccaneer and the Panavia Tornado. The former was originally a Fleet Air Arm aircraft but when the Royal Navy lost its last aircraft carrier the force was transferred to the RAF. The Panavia Tornado was jointly developed and manufactured by the UK, Germany and Italy. It had interdictor/strike, electronic warfare/reconnaissance, and air defence interceptor variants.

Finally, there is an illustration of the US built Douglas PGM-17 Thor, a ground launched ballistic missile with a range sufficient to reach the Soviet Union. Those deployed in the No. 1 Group area were centred upon RAF

Drifffield and RAF Hemswell, where a total of 10 squadrons, some operating from satellite airfields, each controlled three missiles.⁶³

World War II equipment



Miles Master - advanced trainer (Bircotes)



Miles Martinet – target tug (Bircotes)



Westland Lysander – co-operation, liaison, and clandestine missions (Bircotes)



Curtiss P40 Tomohawk – a US fighter-bomber, but used for reconnaissance by the RAF (Bircotes)



Avro Anson – multi-role, but primarily used for training (Bircotes)



Airspeed Oxford – training (Bircotes)

⁶³ Wikipedia



Avro Manchester – bomber



Vickers Wellington - bomber



De Havilland Mosquito – multi-role aircraft



Avro Lancaster - bomber

Immediate post-war equipment



Avro Lincoln B2 - bomber



Washington B1 – US Boeing "Superfortress" bomber

"Cold War" equipment



English Electric Canberra – a medium bomber/reconnaissance aircraft, with nuclear capability



Red Beard – atomic fission bomb carried by the Canberra



Douglas PGM-17 Thor – ground launched US ballistic missile with a thermonuclear warhead



Vickers Valiant – V-bomber, which carried nuclear weapons



Blue Danube – atomic fission bomb carried by the Valiant



Avro Vulcan – V-bomber, which carried nuclear weapons



Handley Page Victor – V-bomber, which carried nuclear weapons



Blackburn Buccaneer S2 – a strike aircraft with nuclear capability



Panavia Tornado – a multi-role strike aircraft with nuclear capability



Yellow Sun – thermo-nuclear bomb, carried by all the V-bombers



WE177 – thermo-nuclear bomb, carried by all the V-bombers, the Blackburn Buccaneer & the Panavia Tornado



Avro Blue Steel – stand-off missile with a thermo-nuclear warhead, carried by Vulcans and Victors

Bibliography

Books

No published works have been found which describe RAF Bawtry in any respect. There is an out-of-print title – Bases of Bomber Command Then and Now, by Roger A Freeman (2001) which may contain information about the base, but I have not been able to access it.

Unpublished papers

Doncaster Civic Trust – September 2017 Newsletter

Maguire, Mick - 12th Doncaster (Bawtry) Scout Group 1967 to 1977 – paper on Bawtry Heritage Group’s website
www.bawtryheritagegroup.co.uk

McBroom, Freddie – Bawtry and its Military Connections - paper on BHG website

Rose, John – An Ordinary Special Place: An Outline History of Bawtry, 2000 – unpublished paper but there is a link to it on the BHG website

Wing Cdr Cresswell, Stewart – unpublished paper submitted to BHG

Newspapers

Newspapers have been an invaluable source for the material in this paper. Those used are:

Ashbourne Telegraph

Eckington, Woodhouse & Staveley Express

Daily Mirror

Halifax Evening Courier

Leeds Mercury

Retford, Gainsborough & Worksop Times

Sheffield Daily Telegraph

Sheffield Morning Telegraph

South Yorkshire Times

South Yorkshire Times and Mexborough & Swinton Times

Yorkshire Evening Post

Yorkshire Post & Leeds Intelligencer

When referred to in the text, the date of publication of each newspaper article is noted.

Websites

Websites have also been an important source of information. Those used are:

<https://www.pprune.org> This is the website of "A Weather-Guesser's Memories with the RAF – Professional Pilots Network"

<https://ibccdigitalarchive.lincoln.ac.uk> This is the website of the University of Lincoln International Bomber Command Digital Archive. Much of the material in the section of this paper titled "Living and working at RAF Bawtry" is sourced from this site.

<https://www.rafweb.org/Biographies/>

<https://www.ukairfieldguide.net>

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