
We will remember them

With the wind in the right direction, Hensall residents may hear the hum of traffic from the nearby M62, a coast-to-coast road that aids the to-ing and fro-ing of modern life.

Seventy years ago, there was a different noise: the thunderous sound of heavy bombers, Wellingtons then Halifaxes, leaving Pollington Airfield on their hazardous missions to Europe during World War II. Officially known as 'RAF Snaith' (to avoid confusion with Pocklington), Pollington became operational in the summer of 1941. It was one of 41 airfields in Yorkshire and became the permanent home of 150 Squadron (1941-1942) and 51 Squadron (1942-1945).



Courtesy of Renee Ounsley

*Tour completed (7 July 43-18 March 44)
F/L A 'Ginger' Caygill and crew*



Courtesy of Renee Ounsley

Around 2,400 aircrew and support personnel were on the airfield in June 1944, from countries as far afield as Poland, Canada, the United States, Australia and New Zealand, as well as from the United Kingdom. Pollington village was small by comparison! Amid the travails of war and despite the dislocation from home, there was a strong desire for

the familiar pattern of life to continue. The King's Head, a much frequented 'watering hole' played an important part. So did the football team and the cinema — a popular place for local youngsters as well as service personnel.

However one tried to 'normalise' it, life was different. Keeping the planes airborne was a round-the-clock job, and once in the air they were not only subject to enemy fire, but the risk of engine failure compounded by the perils of ending up 'in the drink'.

With a crew of seven, losses mounted quickly. More than 18,000 aircrew died flying from Yorkshire's airfields, most of them in Bomber Command. Two hundred and five aircraft failed to return to Pollington and 892 airmen who flew in them (205 from 150 Squadron and 687 from 51 Squadron) lost their lives.



The Wellington

Today there is little left of the airfield or its original buildings. The M62 cuts through to the north. The shell of the sergeants' mess stands derelict. Commercial and industrial buildings are scattered throughout. Yet the spirit, camaraderie and the life-long memories of those who lived on the airfield are encapsulated in a small memorial garden, situated where the airfield's station headquarters once stood, just off the Heck — Snaith road.



Pollington Airfield Memorial Garden

The memorial garden attracts visitors from all over the world. It's an atmospheric place. Renee Ounsley, who taught at Hensall School during the 1960s, is secretary to the Memorial Garden Committee and recalls the times she saw aircraft pass overhead as a little girl: 'We used to stand in the cow pasture next to Cowick brewery and wave to them. Looking back, I think we were on a flight path.'

In her books, Renee tells the real-life stories of those who served at Pollington: some funny, others tragic. Everyone has a place: from the WAAF waitress who served 'Operation' meals at any time of night, to relatives visiting the memorial of loved ones. Her recent book tells of the Maori pilot, John Porokuro Patapu Pohe (known as Joey), who arrived in England in 1941 and came to the airfield in 1943.



On 22nd September 1943 Joey captained Halifax aircraft JN 901 that failed to return. The International Red Cross reported that he was a prisoner of war held at Stalag Luft 111, Sagan, southeast of Berlin. Here, the 'Great Escape' was being planned and on 24 March 1944, Joey was one of the chosen escapees. A total of 76 were recaptured and 50 were executed, including Joey. Years later, in 2007, Renee unexpectedly heard that Kawana, Joey's brother, was on his way to the garden and met him there with Mick and Isobel Hesp, who tend the site. Kawana was blind, but asked which way the runway ran. 'I turned him towards Heck station and told him to put his arm out diagonally,' said Renee. 'He asked if Joey would have taken off in this direction on that night and I told him it was. He shed a tear.' In 2010, Kawana returned with his extended family and, wearing traditional feathers, performed a Maori ceremony to lay Joey to rest and then take his spirit back to New Zealand.



Courtesy of Renee Ounsley

On 13 November the veterans will meet at Pollington Church to join others, country-wide, in acts of remembrance and prayers for peace. Afterwards, they will lay their wreaths in the garden and retire to the village Hall for lunch, where they will live again the days of their youth, recall their friendships and contemplate the cost.