This Book is respectfully dedicated to all personnel who served at Royal Air Force Henlow, past and present.


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This photo was taken in the late 1920’s and shows the Station before the major redevelopment of the southern side.

(RAF Henlow Archives)
Military activity on the site of RAF Henlow pre-dates the formation of the Royal Air Force, to the Summer of 1917 when the Royal Flying Corps purchased 226 acres of farmland - the site from which we still operate aircraft today. 90 years on, and as its 50th Station Commander, I am delighted to be able to celebrate RAF Henlow’s contribution not only to the RAF, but to the wider Defence community.

As this comprehensive collection of first-hand accounts, official records and pictures show, Henlow has supported operations throughout its history. It has also been the foundation for many engineering specialists, most notably Sir Frank Whittle, the ‘father’ of the jet engine.

As we approach the 90th anniversary of the formation of the Royal Air Force, it is entirely fitting to consider the role that RAF Henlow has played as one of only 7 stations to have remained in continuous service throughout that time. This book pays tribute to the bravery, ingenuity and foresight of our forebears, whilst highlighting the range of capabilities that we employ currently in direct support of the contemporary RAF and Defence at large.
The civil and ecclesiastical parish of Henlow, of which Royal Air Force Henlow forms the southern boundary, is mentioned in the Domesday (Doomsday) Book of the eleventh century. It was then known as Haneslau and was one of the parishes in the Clifton Hundred which consisted of Arlesey, Campton, Chicksands, Clifton, Henlow, Holwell, Meppershall, Shillington, Standon and Stotfold. The old spelling of Haneslau had by 1282 become Haenne Hlaw, which can loosely be translated as “Chicken Hill or Fowles’ Hill”: the derivation of the name is not clear. The hill might have been the slight rise in the centre of Henlow village on which the church stands, but any connection with chickens or fowls is lost in the midst of time. Fourteenth century documents refer to “Henlowe” and by the late fifteenth century, the final ‘e’ had disappeared.

A wide range of crafts were practised around Henlow in the Middle Ages. There were families who did shearing, a small brickworks (The Brickle), and by around 1560 there was a colony of bowstring-makers. In 1603 an outbreak of plague wiped out many of the villagers, but by the eighteenth century Henlow had grown again and had its own millwright, woolcomber, carrier, rope-maker, and even a paper-maker. In 1802 the village began to be served by the Ivel Navigation, a canal between Biggleswade and Shefford. The cut and locks, now overgrown and silted up, can still be seen at Clifton.

Perhaps the most well known feature of the district is its association with John Bunyan, who lived and worked at Elstow. Many stories are told of his travels around the district, preaching in the villages and at secret meeting places in the woods. Legends have arisen associating some of the local landmarks with incidents in Pilgrim’s Progress. One story tells of Bunyan getting stuck in a bog near the “Bird in Hand”. It is thought that this bog and surrounding area could subsequently have become Henlow Airfield.
Top Left: The Canteen circa 1920s. This was located on the southern side of the camp.
(RAF Henlow Archives)

Middle Left: Men’s Quarters circa 1920s. They had no washing facilities; wash rooms were located nearby and all hot water had to be collected from the cookhouse.
(RAF Henlow Archives)

Bottom Left: Airmen’s Dining Room circa 1920s. This was located on the southern side of the camp.
(RAF Henlow Archives)

Bottom: Section Huts circa 1920s. Located on the southern side of the camp, this view is looking north down the main road towards the aircraft hangars.
(RAF Henlow Archives)

The First World War

At the end of 1916, with the war showing few signs of ending, the then Commanding Officer of the Royal Flying Corps in France, Major-General Trenchard, convinced the Air Board of a need to train more men in the rapid repair of aircraft and aero engines. In order to satisfy this need, the War Office created the post of Inspector of Repair Depots, and instructions were issued for additional depots to be created where required. The depots, solely for the RFC, were to be raised within the existing Army Command structure, and Henlow was selected as the site of the ‘Eastern Area Depot’.

The Army authorities made an initial purchase of 226 acres of farmland in the summer of 1917. The area was probably chosen because it was flat, free from watercourses, and relatively uninhabited. Good communications were available, a railway line ran along the camp’s west boundary, and Luton was a near and convenient source for the supply of industrial goods.

A local resident, although only 10 years old at the time remembered the scene in 1917: “Large wheat fields were newly harvested, when a sizeable civilian workforce of Irish labourers in the employ of McAlpine Thorpe arrived. My father was a building contractor on the station at this time and used a horse and cart for his business. Foundations were quickly constructed and buildings took shape, and from a sea of mud emerged Henlow Camp”.

The Royal Air Force was only 6 weeks old when Lieutenant Colonel Robert Francis Stapleton-Cotton and a party of 40
airmen arrived from RAF Farnborough at the small railway station on 10th May 1918. The Lieutenant Colonel was to become the first Commanding Officer of Royal Air Force Henlow in August 1918. Although still under construction, the Depot had achieved a limited output of Bristol Fighters and de Havilland aircraft.

10th May 1918 the Station Operational Record Book (ORB) states:

‘A draft of approximately 40 airmen of various trades came from Farnborough under the command of Lt Col Stapleton-Cotton to form the depot. The men were of various trades. In the first few months the men were engaged in making shop equipment, trestles and benches in whatever workshops they visited, for the camp was still in the hands of the builders. (McAlpine Thorpe), who employed many Irishmen, who were almost foreigners, in speech, habits etc, and were housed in wooden huts where 194 shed now is.’

Much of the station was still under construction when the Royal Flying Corps formally became the Royal Air Force on 1st April 1918. In the original and first list of RAF stations for April 1918, Henlow counts among only 7 other stations which remain open as Royal Air Force stations today: - Halton, Leuchars, Northolt, Uxbridge, Waddington, Wittering and Wyton.
Furthermore only one other station, Cranwell (formerly HMS Daedalus) gained a place in the RAF station listings in May 1918.

In October 1918, about 100 American servicemen of various trades arrived to work at the Depot. Their stay was short and they were drafted away soon after the Armistice. Building and workshops had gradually grown and more people were posted in, until by this time, even without the Americans, there were 3,000 working here, including 300 WAAF employed on fabric work and clerical duties. Output had reached 15 aircraft per month; however, the war soon ended and the works dwindled. RAF Henlow, like many stations, suddenly faced massive demobilisation of the Armed Forces. The Station was only a few months old and, with its construction barely complete, it seemed an obvious candidate for closure. Despite this, unlike Waddington and Wittering, both of which were closed for periods starting in 1919, Henlow survived. Time has shown that Henlow was only at the beginning of a period of continuous service, which has lasted, so far, for over 80 years.

Between the Wars

As part of the demobilisation much of the equipment stored or constructed at Henlow was scrapped. A local resident recalls, as a boy, stripping brass screws from the airframes.

“Aircraft were selling at 10 shillings (50p) for a small plane and double this for a bomber. The bare airframe was purchased and regrettably these fine machines, constructed by craftsmen, were dismantled, and the high quality varnished wood was used in building chicken houses and hayracks. Later the aircraft that were left were burnt and buried”.

A number of Australian Air Force personnel spent some months at Henlow. During this period they packed aircraft for shipment to Australia. One local villager recalled the activity:

“I was only 9 years old but I remember my mother and father having to provide accommodation for Australian airmen because there was not enough at the camp for the hundreds of servicemen working there”.

On 1st April 1919, when the RAF was only 1 year old, about 100 airmen who were awaiting demobilisation were involved in a mutiny. Dissatisfaction arose because of an increase in
working hours resulting from the introduction of ‘Summer Time’. Loyal airmen and NCOs rounded up the mutineers whilst the remainder of the Depot was sent on a route march. Fifty-six people were tried by Courts-Martial and severe jail sentences awarded.

On the 16th March 1920, the name of the unit was changed from ‘Eastern Area Depot’ to the ‘Inland Area Aircraft Depot’, the workshops were reorganised and technical records started. Its task was to assemble aircraft for the UK exclusively. On 10th February 1920, a further 161 acres of grassland were bought from a Mr R M Murdoch to be used as an aerodrome for air testing machines.

Technical records from 1921 show that the reorganised workshops were now producing 15 engines and 10 aircraft a month for the Inland area. Earlier in the year, the Station Commander, Group Captain Burdett, had founded the Astra Athletic Club. To become a member, airmen had to have represented the station at sport. In September, 500 reservists were recalled to Henlow to assist during a general strike, and many were tasked with preparing an athletics track for the RAF Championships and for the use of the elite Astra Club members.

Other station amenities were starting at this time - the Henlow ‘Voluntary Band’ was one of the first in the RAF, and musicians were obtained from all trades, even if they could not play a note. Another recreational facility was the station bus, which could be hired for private functions.

The first recorded crash of a RAF Henlow based aircraft was on 3rd December 1921, when a Vickers Vimy carrying a pilot and one passenger crashed onto Henlow village. One of the first on the scene remembered: “The pilot was only slightly hurt when the aircraft, a Vickers Vimy, crashed on Henlow village. The fitter, Corporal Lawrence, who was flying as a passenger was killed”. A plaque recording his death is mounted on the wall of the Station Church.
An excellent example of the busy workshops at Henlow. Here two Westland Wapitis serial J9855 and K2255 are being worked on.

(RAF Henlow Archives)
Above: A superb photograph of the Officers’ of the Inland Area Aircraft Depot, RAF Henlow, taken during September 1924.
(RAF Henlow archives)

Around the same time the “Pickle Factory” was erected. There are several theories surrounding its name. The first is that it should have been built at RAF Hendon but someone got in a pickle (or pickled) and it was built on the wrong site, or secondly that it was originally designed as a pickle factory and should have gone to Northampton. However, the most likely explanation was that it was constructed as a facility where wood for propellers and airframes were soaked (or ‘pickled’) in huge tanks. Whatever its origins, the building continued to be used until 1990 when it was demolished. The name ‘The Pickle Factory’ lives on but it is now applied to the All ranks NAFFI club.

During the 1920s and 1930s RAF Henlow was producing aircraft and engines each month for the RAF. Many types of aircraft passed though the workshops and hangers such as -

Avro 504K & Ns
Armstrong Whitworth Siskin
Bristol Fighter, Bulldog
Blackburn Dart, Shark
Fairey Fawn, Flycatcher, IIIF, Firefly, Gordon
Gloster Gamecock, Gauntlet, Gladiator, Grebe
de Havilland DH9
Hawker Hart, Tomtit, Gamecock, Woodcock, Horsley
Sopwith Snipe
Vickers Vimy, Virginia
Westland Wapiti
Supermarine Walrus
to name but a few.

In 1924, a particularly memorable task carried out in 187 shed (still in daily use as a stores hangar) was the modification to a Handley Page Hinaidi and the installation of a public address system. The aircraft was to be used for broadcasting to dissident tribesmen in the colonies. The aircraft was to be used for broadcasting to dissident tribesmen in the colonies. During flight tests of the aircraft in the local area, villagers are reported to have been terrified by a voice from behind the clouds reciting the ghost scene from Macbeth.

Above: The Handley Page Hinaidi serial J9301 coded ‘Z’; this was based at RAF Upper Heyford. This aircraft terrified the villagers of the local area after masquerading as the ghost from Macbeth!
(RAF Henlow Archives)
In July 1924, Henlow was selected as the permanent home of the School of Aeronautical Engineering. Although variously renamed, this course functioned almost to the 1970s. In those days, students of the Officers’ Engineering Course, who were nearly all ex-wartime pilots, spent two years learning basic engineering theory and the management of workshops. Squadron Leader Bailey and his staff of four were founding the forerunner of the RAF Technical College. Outstanding students on the course were sent to Cambridge University to read for a degree.

Between 1925 and 1926 the control of Henlow passed to No 21 Group, following the establishment of several new fighter squadrons, and in April 1926 it was renamed as the Home Aircraft Depot (HAD). At Henlow, these changes meant that No 23 and 43 Squadrons arrived in July equipped with Sopwith 7F1 Snipes and Grebes. In the April of the next year, both Squadrons were re-equipped with the Gloster Gamecock.

On one occasion, fitters spent many hours in 187 Shed modifying and testing a No 23 Sqn Snipe. One fitter recalled the aircraft being flown by Flt Lt (later Air Marshal) ‘Batchey’ Atcherley in extended periods of inverted flight. They worked on the problems of making the aircraft and engine fit for an attempt at the world record time for inverted flying. The Snipe was often flown upside down to Hitchin and back. Unfortunately, the project never got to the stage of making an attempt on the record, mainly because the whole venture had never received official approval.

On 20th September 1925 the Parachute Test Unit, was established at Henlow.

In 1912 the first non-rigid British airship was flown, but development was slow, and it was not until October 1929 that handling parties consisting of approximately 150 airmen of all trades were formed at Henlow to help manoeuvre the R100 at Howden and R101 at Cardington. On 26 April 1930 Henlow airmen were moving the R100 from its mooring mast to the hangar when they were treated to a view of the Graf Zeppelin which landed on a visit to Cardington. The parties were kept fairly busy for a year, but on 1 Oct 1930, it was Henlow’s airmen that pulled the R-101 from its Cardington Hangar for its fatal flight over France, on its maiden voyage to India, when all but 6 of the 54 passengers were killed. Those killed included Lord Thomson, Secretary of State for Air, and Air Vice-Marshall Sir Sefton Brancker, Director of Civil Aviation. A week later, on 11 October 1930, 800 Henlow airmen took part in the funeral procession through Bedford to RAF Cardington.

By the 1930s, Henlow was one of the RAF’s four largest stations, together with Halton, Cranwell and Uxbridge.
Above: On the 11th October 1930, 800 Airmen from Henlow took part in a 3 hour funeral procession for the 48 people killed in the crash of the Airship R101. (RAF Henlow Archives)

The following extract comes from the Station Operational Record Book of No 13 MU:

7.10.30. Work stopped at HAD for preparing party for funeral of R101. 800 officers and airmen employed and 76 vehicles. Funeral party proceed to Bedford St Johns Station.

Detail as follows:

- Escort party: 200 airmen, 10 Officers under Wg Cdr Cooke.
- Band: under Sgt Ingram.
- Firing party: under Sgt Angel.
- 6 trumpeters: from RAF Halton and 6 from RAF Henlow.
- Bearer party for 48 coffins: Flt Lt Pendavies, Flt Lt Foden, 288 airmen.
- Wreath party: Flt Lt Stafford, 50 airmen.
- Special wreath party: Flt Lt Young, 52 airmen.
- Transport officials: under Lao Leask, Flt Lt Vernon, Flt Lt De St Legel, 20 airmen.

The procession marched from Bedford St Johns Street Station to Cardington for the funeral. Time taken 1400 hrs to 1700 hrs. Funeral very successfully carried out. The CO received many congratulations. Guard sent to cemetery on Sunday to assist police in keeping the graveyard clear.
Accommodation standards were not generally high, without any hot water, except that fetched from the cookhouse in tin bowls. In addition, the outside washrooms and toilets were regularly frozen up in winter and good sanitation was almost impossible. The weekly pay parade for an airman was around 5 shillings (25p) per day plus a small family allowance. The ration allowance was 5s 3d. (26p) per week, or alternatively, meat and bread twice a week, and 2 bags of sugar and tea once every week. A Community Ration Allowance of 12 shillings (60p) a month was also available.

In August 1932, a Flying Officer Frank Whittle arrived to attend the Officers’ Engineering Course which he completed in 18 months instead of the usual 2 years, obtaining an aggregate of 98% in his examination. On promotion to Flight Lieutenant, and while in charge of the engine test bays, he continued his experimental work on a jet engine, which had first occurred to him in 1928, even though his ideas had been rejected by the MOD. He left Henlow in 1934 for a course at Cambridge University and on 12 April 1937 he test ran a jet engine for the first time. Later this engine was to power the Gloster-Whittle E28/39, the first British jet-engined aircraft. Looking back on his success, Air Commodore Sir Frank Whittle remembered his days at Henlow fondly and praised the Officers’ Engineering Course as being the foundation of his engineering experience.

In 1935, the Home Aircraft Depot, at Henlow was transferred to Technical Training Command. However, Henlow’s dual role remained the same: training skilled engineers, and equipping operational squadrons with the latest aircraft. On the training side, three wings (No 1, 2 and 3) were introduced, responsible for Flight Rigger, Flight Mechanic and Fitter ‘I’ training respectively. (A Fitter ‘I’ had the skills to carry out all the servicing tasks on an aircraft). On the operational side, No 64 Squadron formed here in 1936 with Demons and No 80 Squadron re-formed here in 1937 with Gauntlets and Gladiators. Also in 1937, a Motor Transport Training School was added, the Messing Course moved from RAF Halton and a sub-depot of the RAF Recruiting service at Uxbridge was formed. So, by 1938 RAF Henlow had a strength of 5,500 personnel with more than half of these under training. In order to provide accommodation for the large increase in the establishment, immediate plans were laid for a hutted camp to be built at the north west corner of the Station, and for a hutted school for the Fitter ‘I’ course to be located adjacent to the main road between Henlow Camp and Henlow Village. It is interesting to read an Air Ministry directive around this time outlining policy for the training of a number of direct entrant officers who had varying degrees of engineering experience in civil life “to be initiated into the general demeanour, bearing, and duties of RAF Officers…. ” The RAF Officer Cadet Training Unit was to arrive here over 25 years later.

An unusual unit also formed at Henlow on 31st March 1937 was the ‘Pilotless Aircraft Section’, the Queen Bee Flight, so named after the de Havilland Queen Bee, a radio controlled target aircraft similar to the Tiger Moth but made of spruce and plywood. Trials on the aircraft continued until 1943 when it came into service as a target for live gunnery practice.
Above: Station Headquarters, building 143 circa 1935. This is the building to the right of the Station’s Hawker Hunter Gate Guardian. Notice today how the trees and shrubs have grown up around the front of the building.
(RAF Henlow Archives)

Left: Sick Quarters circa 1935. Still the station Medical Centre today.
(RAF Henlow Archives)

Below Left: The Officers’ Mess circa 1935.
(RAF Henlow Archives)

Bottom Left: The Guard Room as it was circa 1935. Today it still serves the same purpose but the right hand end is now a Post Office.
(RAF Henlow Archives)

Bottom Right: The Pickle Factory circa 1935. To the left of the photo can be seen the Hitchin to Bedford branch line. The Station had its own narrow gauge railway which can also be seen in this photo.
(RAF Henlow Archives)
Above: Hangar 188 circa 1935 (this hangar now houses the Station Gymnasium). In the foreground can be seen a pair of DH.60M Moths. (RAF Henlow Archives)

Right: Newly erected Married Quarters circa 1935. This view of Burnet Avenue is still unchanged today. (RAF Henlow Archives)

Below Right: This picture shows Building 127 and 128, Engineering Shops circa 1935. The picture was taken from behind building 143, Station Headquarters, looking north towards the airfield. These buildings currently house the RAF Centre of Aviation Medicine. (RAF Henlow Archives)

Bottom Left: General View of the Airfield buildings circa 1935. (RAF Henlow Archives)

Bottom Right: A view looking down the main road towards the airfield. Building 121, currently Station HQ, is on the extreme right (with veranda). (RAF Henlow Archives)
RAF Henlow has had a long association with parachute testing. From the early days of Research and Development into parachute safety to the development of specialist equipment for the Special Operations Executive and Special Forces Units. Testing is still undertaken here at Henlow, not by the RAF, but by Irvin Aerospace of Letchworth who undertake tests in direct support of the Armed Forces. Irvins established themselves at Letchworth due to the proximity of RAF Henlow.

On 20th September 1925 the Parachute Test Unit (PTU), which was a detachment from the Air Ministry, was established at Henlow. The Parachute Training Section from RAF Northolt joined PTU on 20th October 1926 to form the Parachutist Flight, this name however does not appear to have been adopted and the unit was still known as the PTU. The PTU operated its own Vickers Vimy aircraft and was responsible for packing, testing and repairing parachutes and equipping squadrons with them. The unit earned distinction for outstanding work in connection with flight safety. However, in the pursuit of flight safety, live drops had to be carried out from the Vimys involving a parachutist clinging to a wing strut during takeoffs. The parachutist would then stream his parachute and allow himself to be pulled off the wing by the partly deployed ‘chute.

(Stories tell of one ‘volunteer’ whom, having streamed his parachute, was not quick enough in letting go of the strut. He arrived sometime later on the ground still clutching it!) The parachutists were all volunteers who received no extra pay.

Displays of simultaneous pull-off parachute descents from Vickers Vimy and later Vickers Virginia aircraft from Henlow were made during annual appearances at the famous Hendon Air Pageants. The simultaneous jumps required good timing and many of the parachutists would tie a handkerchief to the rip-cord handle and hold the other end between their teeth, this eliminated any possibility of fumbling when the moment came to stream, and enabled the handle to be retained: a replacement handle cost the volunteer parachutist 1s. 9d. (8p).

On 9th March 1927 tragedy struck when Corporal Arthur East jumped from an aircraft over RAF Biggin Hill from a height of 2,200 feet and carried out a delayed drop of over 5,000 feet in an attempt to beat the world “delayed drop” record of 4,300 feet then held by the Americans. It had been the intention to land in a valley, but unfortunately, he drifted over high ground and with his chute only half deployed he was killed instantly. Two days later LAC Dobbs, nicknamed ‘Brainy’ because of his many eccentric flying experiments, was using a balloon to jump over low hedges and trees when he hit 11,000 volt electricity conductors carrying electricity from Willesden to Hendon and was also killed. It is said that his ghost still haunts the Station and on cold and windy nights it can be heard walking through the hangars. It was also ‘Brainy’, who used to tie his dog to a suitable harness and miniature parachute, then drop the animal from the roof to study the parachute’s behaviour.
Above: An earlier photograph of the Parachute Test Unit (PTU) taken during rehearsals for a flying display during 1929. The aircraft are Vickers Vimy bombers serials J7704, J7702 and J7447. Notice the Pickle Factory below them. (Bedfordshire & Luton Archives & Records Services)

“The testing was done using an old Vickers Virginia and airmen were encouraged to participate (i.e., jump). I volunteered and was scheduled for my turn on a windy day when the ‘Giny’ actually landed going backwards (i.e., windspeed was greater than its landing speed), needless to say flying was suspended for that day and I was told to report the following week. (It did nothing for my morale) however everything went OK. Even in those days we were too expensive to lose!”

Alfred Heath, No 2(Training)Wing 1939.

Despite the odd accident, the Unit continued to provide an extremely valuable service for many more years. During World War II the PTU operated Vickers Virginias, Whitleys, Dakotas and later on Halifaxes were used to test and produce equipment. In addition, during this time, the PTU had come under increasing pressure to provide equipment, aircraft and instructors to train thousands of troops urgently required for the war effort. Late in 1940 the establishment was increased to 140 men and 130 women working in the repair and packing sections servicing over 200 parachutes each week. Eight volunteer instructors were sent to start training the Army at RAF Ringway (now Manchester Airport), for their landings in Italy, and later at Normandy and Arnhem. This unit went on to become No 1 Parachute Training School (1 PTS). A sub-unit of the PTU called the Special Parachute Equipment Section was opened in 1940 to deal with the dropping of supplies and men into occupied Europe for the Special Operations Executive and later the Special Air Service. Special techniques were developed and taught to Allied agents in secret training establishments. Everything from a miniature radio to printing machinery, pigeons, weapons and explosives were packed into special containers designed to be dropped at night to the waiting men and women of the French Resistance.

During September 1943 the PTU undertook a special fit for 161 Squadron based at nearby RAF Tempsford. Flying Officer Pym was dispatched to Henlow for fitting and on 29th September 1943 he undertook his first parachute drop from a static line at 600ft. This was not just a first for Flying Officer Pym, but also for the RAF as Pym was in fact a ‘Fox Terrier cross’ that flew operational sorties with 161 Sqn.
More specialised tasks given to the units by the Ministry of Aircraft Production included the manufacture of experimental equipment and the modification of aircraft. One such top secret task in March 1943 was undertaken on a Whitley IV aircraft to fit it with a ‘pick-up’ device on the end of a line. This equipment was to enable the aircraft, whilst in flight, to pick up personnel from the ground. The Unit was praised by the Ministry for its high standards of production and ingenuity when devising or modifying pieces of equipment. Each month saw it struggling to increase production, to such an extent that it was common for Sunday church services to be held in the workshops to avoid men having to leave their benches.

After WWII the PTU continued operations until it moved to RAF Cardington and then Farnborough where it faded into history.

During the 1950s, it was thought that Henlow’s grass strip with its ‘Sommerfield Tracking’ was unsuitable for larger aircraft such as the Hastings. Today this ‘rough strip’ has proved of benefit to the RAF as Hercules aircraft can be seen in the sky practicing ‘rough field’ approach and landings.

These figures were taken from the Operational Record Book of PTU and are typical of the work undertaken from month to month.

<table>
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<th>Month</th>
<th>Description</th>
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| July 1951 | 87 Experimental Drops were made involving 35 sorties with 31 hrs and 20 mins flying time.  
Henlow 82 Drop Tests  
Imber Range 4 Drop Tests (High Altitude trials)  
Netheravon 1 drop Test |
| Oct 1951 | High Altitude drops were carried out at Fighledean |
| Sept 1951 | Flying  
A total of 110 experimental drop tests were made during the month involving 21 sorties with 16 hours 30 mins flying.  
A further 38 sorties involving 24 hours 05 mins were flown in testing, communication and practice flights.  
Total flying effort for the month: 59 sorties with 40 hrs and 35 mins. |
Above: The various forms are internal demand and issue vouchers. The one on top issued blankets to the living out airmen at the 1936 Hendon Air Pageant. (RAF Henlow Archives)

Below: RAF Certificate awarded to personnel on completion of a parachute servicing course. Also note the airman has completed one “Pull Off” descent. (RAF Museum Hendon)
"The following April, a flight of three Vickers Virginia bombers arrived at Henlow to practice for a parachute demonstration to be given at the forthcoming RAF Display at Hendon. Each aircraft was to carry two parachutists, and the Flight Commander called for six volunteers from among the students. Anxious to relieve the tedium of life with the engineering course, I at once volunteered.

Dropping in to the Hendon Display by parachute seemed as good a way of getting there as any other, and in any case at the previous year’s Display I had arrived by glider, flying one of three gliders towed over for a demonstration. The Flight Commander took me to the airfield and showed me the big Virginia biplane, which was fitted with a small platform on each lower wing, just behind the outer wing strut. He explained that I would stand on this little platform before take-off and hang on to the strut during flight. He would give me a hand signal from the cockpit, upon which I was to catch hold of my parachute release handle and pull it. No other instruction or drill was offered, except advice that I should wear rubber-soled shoes in case my feet should slip off the platform during flight.

Shortly afterwards, dressed in my flying overalls and wearing a standard RAF seat-type parachute, I climbed on to the little platform and held on to the inter-plane strut. As the great plane taxied out over the grass airfield, the wing swayed up and down alarmingly with me hanging on grimly with both arms around the strut. After take-off the ride became steadier, but I felt very lonely standing out there on the wing completely exposed to the blast of the air stream. The pilot made a circuit of the airfield, and at a height of only 400 feet, gave me the hand signal. I nervously released one arm from the strut, caught hold of the parachute release handle and pulled. Nothing seemed to happen for a while, then suddenly I received an enormous jerk as the parachute opened out behind me and pulled me sharply off the wing. I found myself swinging backwards and forwards like a pendulum, suspended from the parachute, and I had no idea how to stop this swinging. After a short while I hit the ground hard on a down swing and felt something snap in my leg.

When I tried to get up I saw that my left foot was pointing backwards, and so promptly decided to lie down again. The airfield ambulance collected me and as it was passing the hangar, I saw an anxious face peering at me through the window. This was the next volunteer waiting to go up for his parachute jump, who had witnessed my accident.

The rest of the practice jumps went off successfully, although the dropping height was increased to 800 feet in order to give the parachutists time to stop their swinging. In the actual demonstration at the RAF Display, the Flight Commander misjudged his distance, and dropped all six parachutists into the car park.”

Gp Capt E Mole BSc FRAeS

Below: This photograph shows the Henlow Team at the Hendon Air Pageant in 1936. (RAF Henlow archives)
Above: Aircraft of PTU 29th February 1952 outside Hanger 190 awaiting a visit by the Minister for Air. Dakota serial KJ881, Prentice VR189, 2 Tiger Moths, Anson & Halifax RT936. (R Richardson Collection)

Left: Jim, Jock, Richardson, Ivor, Jone & Herrinshaw enjoy a welcome break. (R Richardson Collection)

Below Left: The men of Parachute Test Unit 1953. (R Richardson Collection)

Bottom Left & Right: Halifax serial RT936. Halifax RT936 was struck of charge on 21.4.53 after a parachute strop wrapped around the tail strut during a test drop and on landing the strop failed to castor causing the strut to collapse and drag along the runway. (R Richardson Collection)
Above: Men of PTU with a Beverley C1 serial XB259 1959. The PTU hangar was located well away from the rest of the station, this was because of the covert nature of the tasks undertaken during WWII. (RAF Henlow Archives)

Right: `Supporters` of PTU April 1953. (R Richardson Collection)

Below Right: Another successful test is completed now to recover the parachute and its canister. (R Richardson Collection)

Bottom: `A` & `B` Flights parade infront of their Beverley C1 serial XB259 & Hastings C1 serial TG568 1959. (RAF Henlow Archives)
RAF Henlow 1943. Photo taken by No 1 Camouflage Unit.
(Bedfordshire & Luton Archives & Records Services)
Throughout the 1930s, policy in the RAF was one of expansion and reorganisation in preparation for what became an inevitable conflict with Hitler’s Germany. In March 1937 a young man named Pattle arrived to join 80 Squadron flying Gauntlets and Gladiators, before it moved to its war base in Ismalia. By September 1938, all personnel were recalled from leave as the three services went on full alert. Pilot Officer Pattle, who practised his combat manoeuvres in the skies over Bedfordshire, was probably the highest scoring RAF fighter pilot of the war. In 1941 he was credited with 34 enemy aircraft destroyed but the surviving members of his squadron claim that he was responsible for 43. Regrettably, he was killed in action and the Squadron records were destroyed.

As European tension rose, plans called for Henlow to revert to being a repair depot, and consequently, No 2 and 3 Wings moved to RAF St Athan in late 1938, as the Home Aircraft Depot became No 13 Maintenance Unit, and No 1 Wing moved to RAF Halton in April 1939. No 2 Mobilisation Pool was also formed at Henlow to allow an increased repair role. No.13 MU was responsible for repairing, modifying and assembling front line aircraft throughout the war.

During the war years, Henlow became one of the largest RAF Maintenance Units in the country and made an invaluable contribution to the war effort.

**Station strength October 1939:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Officers</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substation Officers</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sisters</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WO</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F/Sgt. &amp; Sgt.</td>
<td>232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cpls &amp; ACs</td>
<td>3056</td>
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<tr>
<td>Naval</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civilian</td>
<td>539</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>4232</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By June 1944 this had almost doubled. No 13 MU alone employed over 5,000 personnel, and the Training School had nearly 3,000 students. To cope with these numbers, three satellite camps were in use: one erected on the north-west side of the Station in 1939, a second 2 miles north-west of the Station close to Meppershall Water Works, and a third by Clifton village on the North boundary of the Station. The Station had its fair share of VIP and Royal visits during the war. In addition many foreign visitors including personnel from ‘The Car and Foundry Company’ from Canada, who produced the Hurricane, arrived at Henlow to study British engineering methods. Wg Cdr Whittle, whilst working for the Ministry of Aircraft Production, visited in April 1942 with Mr Peasgood

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**Above:** Personnel of 52 Squad ‘I’ Flight, Megiddo Block 1939 here at Henlow. *(RAF Henlow Archives)*
of Power Jets Ltd. to explore the possibility of No 13 MU undertaking machine work in connection with the production of the newly developed jet engine. The unit worked 24 hours a day in a cycle of overhauls, modifications and the repair of many types of aircraft. Hampdens, Whitleys, Hudsons (first to be produced), followed by Hurricanes, Blenheims, Halifaxes, Lancasters, Mosquitoes, Spitfires, Typhoons and Tempests. Throughout these years the output of aircraft and engines from Henlow set new records. In some months over 100 aircraft would be processed and flown to their operational bases and from September 1940 until October 1943, a total of 1,004 Canadian built Hurricanes. Prior to assembly in the ‘Pickle Factory’ these aircraft were stored on the parade ground. These were then tested, modified and flown before being sent to front line units.

During September 1940, Henlow took delivery of its first Canadian built Hurricane. These Hurricanes were built in Canada by the Canadian Car & Foundry Ltd. at their Fort William Works in Ontario. The company had been tasked to produce Hurricanes in November 1938 following the flight of its first aircraft, serial No P5170 on the 10th January 1940 at Bishop’s Field, Fort William by Victor John (Shantry) Halton. The first batch of 40 were shipped to Britain between March and August. In total 1,077 were shipped with only 10 being lost during shipping. Of the 1,077 shipped 1,004 passed through Henlow to be assembled, modified and flight tested before being dispatched to front line units.

Throughout 1941 Henlow personnel were trained for Exercise ‘QUICK FORCE’. These were parties of fitters, between 50 and 150 in number, detached for duties on board Royal Navy aircraft carriers. They were employed at the port of embarkation dismantling Hurricanes, ready for shipment to the beleaguered island of Malta. Between 20 and 30 of each party would then sail with the carrier and re-build the aircraft before they were flown off the deck from a position 300 miles west of the island. The last of these Quick Force parties were on board the ill-fated HMS Ark Royal when it was making for Malta. Whilst covering the passage of the two older carriers, HMS Furious and Argus, the Ark Royal was torpedoed by a U-boat on 13th November 1941 and sank the next day. (U502 fired a 3-torpedo spread against the Ark Royal and observed a hit. U81 fired a 4-torpedo spread against Ark Royals’ escorts. In reality U81 hit the Ark Royal with one torpedo at 1541GMT on the 13th November, the Ark Royal sank 25 miles from Gibraltar at 0613 GMT on the 14th). Seven of the survivors returned to Henlow on 22nd November before proceeding on special leave.

Enemy action against Henlow was limited. The first recorded air raid over Henlow took place on the 6th September 1939 at 0730. When the air raid sirens were sounded personnel took to
the protection of air raid shelters and the all clear was sounded at 0950. No enemy action was reported. The first actual raid took place on 11th September 1940 between 1446 and 1513 when 10 bombs were dropped from a single aircraft 200 yards north of the huddled camp. Little damage was done on this occasion and the guards on the main gate opened fire with rifles.

During the war only one attack ever caused fatalities. This was on 2th September 1940, when a twin engined aircraft approached from the NE at 3,000ft dropping 8 bombs, which fell on the tarmac between sheds 188 and 189 damaging several aircraft. One bomb fell on two houses outside the station on Station Road, Lower Stondon, these were demolished killing several occupants. In all 6 servicemen were killed.

On Sunday 10th December 1944 at approximately 1900hrs, a V1 approached the Station from east-north-east direction, flying at 50 - 70 feet. It crashed with the engine still running in a ploughed field 80 yards from the southern perimeter of the Camp, causing blast damage to the Officers’ Mess, WAAF Officers’ Mess and two Officers’ Married quarters.

10th January 1945 a V2 fell just under a mile away from the Station in the direction of Arlesey and Henlow Railway Station.

The lack of German air raids on Henlow was surprising since No.13 MU as an equipment and repair depot was attractive to the enemy especially since there were obvious physical features such as chimney stacks and a railway to guide the enemy aircraft. Threats to bomb Henlow were broadcast by Lord Haw Haw, but the area was rumoured instead to be a turning point for enemy aircraft heading for London. One alternative story was that British Intelligence had bluffed the Germans into believing that Henlow was being used as a prisoner of war camp. But whatever the reason Henlow escaped intact to continue to support Fighter and Bomber Commands throughout the war.

It is a proud part of our history that Henlow contributed, albeit indirectly, to the Battle of Britain, repairing Hurricanes that were damaged during the Battle. During this period, the Station carried out up to 20 ‘fly-in’ repairs a week, carried out while the pilots waited. Additionally 12 major aircraft repairs were completed weekly. The record for changing both mainplanes, fitting eight guns and loading with ammunition was 1 hour and 55 minutes. At Henlow the conversion of

These extracts from No 13MU ORB.
“I was an instrument repairer in 110 Shed. There are very few photographs because of security and of course unable to buy films”

Elizabeth C Gilcheest, WAAF RAF Henlow 1940 - 1944.

“We called it Stalag Luft 13 - it was 13MU in those days - a grim place”

Denis Pavey, Cpl, Engine Fitter 13 MU, RAF Henlow 1943/44.

“Near the end of the course, all the entry members were schooled in aircraft engine running. We used Spitfires that had the wing tips removed.

One sunny afternoon we were taking turns in starting and running the Spitfires. The tails of the aircraft were placed nearest the road that runs past the 'Airman' pub. Some of the lads noticed a horse-drawn cart, piled with hay, slowly approaching the point where the aircraft were parked. The unsuspecting hay-cart driver and the airman sitting in a Spitfire cockpit were going to be the victims of a prank. When the passing cart was aligned with the tail of the aircraft, one of the watching airmen shouted to the airman in the cockpit to run the engine at full power. The slipstream created by the propellor blew all of the hay from the cart and startled the horse and driver. The horse raced down the road with the driver leaning back on the reins, trying to restrain the horse. Much hilarity was generated. However, the last laugh was on us as we were ordered to collect up the hay and apologise to the driver”

Terence Crowley, Flight Mechanic (E), No 109 Fitter II (E) Course, RAF Henlow 1947.

21st October 1940 RAF Henlow entered its own ‘Battle of Britain’ -

‘On landing after a test flight on a Hurricane P/O Blackford was told that bombs had just been dropped in the direction of Shefford; he immediately took off in the Hurricane. About twenty minutes later (at 11.55 hrs) he saw a Dornier aircraft about a mile North of the aerodrome.

The Dornier was then at about 3,000ft, proceeding in a westerly direction and climbing. P/O Blackford was at about 1,500ft and he immediately gave chase. When at about 4,500ft and ten miles west of the aerodrome he had closed to about 200 yards and opened fire. He closed to about 30 yards, expended his ammunition in three bursts in a stern attack and broke away, the Dornier disappearing into the clouds which were 10/10th at about 3,000ft. He saw smoke coming from the starboard and from the way the rear gunner’s gun suddenly ceased firing and turned upwards, it is thought that the rear gunner must have been hit.

P/O Blackford fired a total of 2080 rounds. The two middle guns on the starboard side jammed owing to cross feeds after each had fired 50 rounds. P/O Blackford’s Hurricane was hit three times in the starboard main plane. A Home Office yellow warning had been received at 11:21 hrs and a red at 11:33 hrs. The camp siren was sounded on sighting the Dornier at 11:52 hrs. The “All Clear” was sounded on the camp by trumpets at 12:16 hrs and Home Office Air Raid white was received at 12:34 hrs. ‘

This is the only combat record for RAF Henlow during WWII.

‘27th March 1941 P/O Blackford was admitted to Henlow Hospital suffering from serious facial injuries and shock as the result of crashing on force landing while testing a Hurricane’.
Above: Tail fin of a Halifax illustrates the modification work undertaken by 13 MU fitting parties. This Halifax, Mk VI serial RG872 coded ‘J-F’, actually belonged to 13 MU and was photographed during the RAF ‘At Home’ Day on the 13th September 1946. (Inset: Pre-modification tail fins (RAF Henlow Archives)).

Bedfordshire & Luton Archives & Records Services

Henlow was also involved in aircraft modifications and, to facilitate this fitting parties were sent to operational squadrons to perform these tasks.

FROM HQ BOMBER COMMAND
TO NO 13 MU COPY TO HQ NO 43 GROUP
DATE 10th APRIL 1944
REF BC/44920/ENG.3

HALIFAX AIRCRAFT INCORPORATION OF MODIFICATION 814 (SQUARE FINS AND RUDDERS).

The retrospective incorporation of modification 814 now having been completed in approximately 500 Halifax aircraft in this command, it is desired to express appreciation for the extremely efficient way in which the fitting programme has been executed by the working party.

At the commencement of the work there were considerable difficulties in arranging for the supply of the new fins and rudders direct from the sub contractors to the various stations concerned, and for the prompt return of the unmodified rudders to several different factories so that they could be rebuilt for issue to the modification party.

It was apparent that a quick turnover could only be achieved by leaving these arrangements to the Warrant Officer IC party, and it is considered that the success of the programme is largely due to the initiative of Warrant Officer Cockerline. This warrant officer organised the work most efficiently, and his efforts were appreciated by all the units which he visited.

In addition to fulfilling the programme laid down by this headquarters, Warrant Officer Cockerline, on his own initiative, traced all unmodified aircraft allotted to stations in this command subsequent to the modification of all aircraft by his party. The result was that all these stray aircraft were modified under the arrangements made directly to Warrant Officer Cockerline, thereby saving this headquarters a considerable amount of additional work. It is requested that his excellent work be suitably commended.

These days it is a great pleasure to find someone putting himself to considerable trouble to help another command.

Memo taken from No 13MU ORB.
Browning guns from Mark II to Mark II* was undertaken, the Mark II* giving an increased rate of fire. On average, 300 of these guns were converted each week at Henlow between May and November 1940. In total Henlow undertook repairs to some 740 Hurricanes, more than any other single unit.

Other types of work were also undertaken. This included repairs and modifications to gun turrets for the following aircraft:

- Blenheim
- Bombay
- Botha
- Hudson
- Beaufort
- Whitley
- Lerwick
- Defiant
- Oxford
- Harrow
- Demon
- Hampden
- Manchester
- Stirling
- Sunderland
- Anson
- Wellington

What follows is a report found in the No 13MU ORB.

“Battle of Britain” period 1 5 40 to 20 11 40.

Aircraft for Fighter Command

Hurricane Ia (Merlin III engine) armament 8 browning guns.

“During the above period No.13 MU put back into service for Fighter Command some 371 Hurricane IА aircraft, 48 of these were new airframes received from Canada which required column 7 and 9 equipment to bring them up to operational standard and many “embodiment loan” parts and other essential parts which Canada had been unable to supply and fit. These airframes had to be erected and have Merlin III engines, guns etc. installed and tested.

173 of these Hurricanes received major repairs at No.13 MU, which were a result of crashes or aircraft that had been very badly shot up during air combat and were beyond a quick minor repair. They were however, turned out to operational standard in from 14 to 21 days.

The remaining 150 Hurricane aircraft were received by air either direct from squadrons and in some cases from air combat for repair after being damaged by enemy action during air combat. In this case, a special arrangement had been agreed between Headquarters, Fighter Command and Headquarters, No.43 Group, which allowed operational fighter squadrons to fly aircraft damaged by enemy action in air combat direct to Henlow without previous warning or any allotment action with instructions that No.13 MU, Henlow was to carry out immediate repairs and that if these could be completed within 12 hours, then the pilot should wait for the aircraft and return with it to his Squadron.

In cases where it was found that the repair would exceed 12 hours, the pilot was in many cases supplied by Henlow with another aircraft belonging to his squadron, the repair of which had already been completed, so that a “shuttle repair service” was maintained with the squadron.

The damage to these aircraft consisted mainly of numerous bullet and cannon shell holes in the planes, fuselage struts, longerons etc. Fuel tanks and various parts of the engine and propeller. Badly shot up main planes and tail units were exchanged for similar units which had been taken off previous aircraft and had already been repaired in the plane repair section, so that a pool of repaired parts was created ready for fitting to incoming aircraft. Similarly a small pool of spare Merlin III engines and propellers was created.

Although it is, at this late date, difficult to cite actual names of individuals, on quite a number of occasions pilots “dropped in” at Henlow with their damaged Hurricane straight from aerial combat with the enemy and impatiently waited for Henlow to repair their aircraft, so that they could return to their fighter squadron to be ready for the next “scramble”, keen not to miss any action. Henlow were able in a number of cases to comply with their impatient wishes and in one case had an aircraft ready in one hour 55 minutes, having changed both main planes and installed and loaded a new set of eight guns. There were similar cases although I believe the 1 hour and 55 minutes held the record. Engines were frequently changed in under 8 hours including one or two main planes or tail units.

However, Henlow are forced to admit defeat in the case of one pilot who landed in a damaged hurricane. The technical ground staff found that both main planes, centre section, two longerons and most of the tail plane were badly shot up and would have to be changed. The pilot hopefully asked, “should I wait for it?” The sad news had to be broken to him that Henlow could work most miracles, but not this one and he was sent off in another aircraft.

The effect of all this activity on the morale of the ground staff and the test pilots was very great. Although the airmen were already working from 0730 hours to 2000 hours, those who were in the middle of a repair at “cease work” refused to knock off and would continue until 2300 or 2400 until OC ARS had to practically order them off the job to allow another shift to continue the work.”
Large scale work was also undertaken to modify Typhoons (strengthening tail sections) and Mosquito Mk.XX (Canadian built). Interestingly in December a request for “Messerschmitt Flap Gears 2” was received and actioned (maybe Goering had heard of Henlow’s good name!)

On the 6th February 1942 the machine shop began to produce turbine blades for de Havillands, order no E.A. 05592. The initial order was for 86 blades and increased to average 400 blades per month by the end of 1942. This then led to the production of burner casings and extensions. This was probably for the development work being carried out on jet turbine engine technology.

The Station’s strength rose to 7,000 including a number of Poles, Belgians and Greeks, besides Army and 815 WAAF personnel. A large hospital was established here which served units as far away as Honington, Mildenhall and Wyton. To meet ever increasing demands, and the requirement to train more RAF technicians in the art of aircraft repair, the old Training Wing was reorganised and renamed No 14 School of Technical Training. The role of the RAF School of Aeronautical Engineering remained similar to that which it carried out pre-war, but officers transferred from other branches were soon outnumbered by commissioned civilians and from ex-airmen commissioned for the duration of the war. Training of technical officers continued throughout the war but the course was reduced in both content and depth.

A Henlow landmark erected during this period and commissioned on the 8th July 1944 was the Air Traffic Control Tower. This was made from Hurricane packing cases and is still in use today.

On a lighter note, in June 1944, the Station Voluntary Band was supplemented by the Drum and Trumpet WAAF Voluntary Band, which went on to form the nucleus of the WAAF Central Band at Uxbridge after the war. Off-duty volunteers who helped to provide entertainment included Flight Lieutenant Arthur Howard (the Station Entertainments Officer), Frank Muir and David Lodge. Dances were a regular feature, as were the acclaimed Variety Evenings, which took place in the combined station gymnasium and church using stage scenery and costumes loaned by the Elstree film studios. Arthur Howard contributed much to station entertainments at this time, and his efforts attracted guests such as Petula Clark, Ronald Franco and Hattie Jacques. His contribution and that of all the other entertainers helped maintain morale during such a difficult period.

After the war, emphasis on aircraft production declined and a new role was developed for Henlow. In September 1946 it was decided to set up a radio equipment calibration centre at Henlow and, despite orders in August 1947 to disband No 13 MU, it was not long before crates of equipment were despatched all over the world again, as the Signals Development Unit (SDU) moved to Henlow in stages from West Drayton between 1947 and 1948. It was mainly concerned with the servicing, modification, manufacture and installation of communications equipment. In addition the Radio Calibration Centre was formed. Many of the old 13 MU facilities were used to manufacture and pack the new equipment and teams were sent out world-wide to help install new equipment. In 1948/49 the emphasis of the unit moved away from development work and on 1st January 1950 it was renamed the Radio Engineering Unit (REU). Responsible for installing ground radio and telecommunications equipment throughout the RAF, it supplied, repaired and calibrated a vast range of radio equipment at home and overseas.
The two postgrams shown above are for the collection of two Hurricanes to No 13 MU for repair in early May 1949. The one in the foreground is from 56 Sqn serial N2522 at RAF North Weald and behind is a 242 Sqn example serial L1572 at RAF Church Fenton.

Unfortunately the fate of these two aircraft was not good. Less than a year later on the 2nd of April 1941, N2522 ‘Stalled off’ a steeply banked right hand turn and crashed into the ground at Meggam’s Knowe, south of Linhope village, Cheviot near Amble - Northumberland. The pilot P/O Martin Walter Rivers, Service No 62015 who was aged 24 from York was killed.

L1572 was written off on the 2nd July 1943 after crash landing at Detling following an engine fire.

(RAF Henlow archives)
“We worked in 194 shed (The Pickle Factory) assembling Hurricanes on a track system. The fuselages and main planes came in huge packing crates from Canada and were stored on the Square. After assembly and flight test they were flown to RAF Wilmslow, Cheshire, for dispatch, I believe to Russia”

Wilf Hopley, Fitter 2E No 13 MU, 1941/42

“On August Bank Holiday Monday 1941, a detachment of twenty two airmen from 13 MU, mainly fitters, (Airframe & Engine) and armourers set out on destination unknown, we joined a train on the camp station, two carriages were reserved for us and our equipment, at Hitchin our carriages were coupled to a main line train, next day we found ourselves at RAF Abbotsinch, Scotland. We still did not have a clue as to what our mission was going to be.

After a few days a squadron of Hurricanes were flown in by Canadian Volunteer Reserve pilots, we then had to dismantle the wings, put them on low-loader with the rest of the aircraft, transport the squadron down to Greenock where part of the Home Fleet were anchored and put the aircraft on to the aircraft carrier HMS Argus. The King & Queen (now the Queen Mother) visited some of the naval ships, there was many rumours as to our destination but after about a week when all the aircraft were securely lashed down in the ships hangar we weighed anchor and put out to sea, when we woke up next morning, we found ourselves in Scapa Flow, we were far from being alone, there were many other naval ships there and the rumours were really buzzing through the mess decks.

After a few days lazing around on the ship, the fleet ships complement was paraded on the flight deck, the First Sea Lord of the Admiralty came on board and gave us a rousing speech but no hint as to our destination, a few days later we were out to sea again, the ship’s Captain delivered his orders over the tannoy and disclosed our destination, Russia, Murmansk, to be precise. Now, most of our detachment were young men just out of our teen’s, to us this was a great adventure and a great honour to have been picked for this mission. We were fortunate to be covered by a sea mist for most of the voyage, when we reached Murmansk, the mist cleared, the aircraft were flown off to their new home by in my opinion the bravest pilots I have known, the Argus’s flight deck’s length was not meant for modern aircraft. Incidentally, the squadron was the first of the eight gun Hurricanes and the extra weight made the take off more difficult.

Mission accomplished we were soon on our way home but our adventure was not completed, we were supposed to refuel on Spitzbergen but the oil tanks had be blown up and the population evacuated to Russia and Norway I think, we then sailed on to in Iceland where the Cruisers and Destroyers who were protecting us were glad to get refueled and fresh supplies. After a few days stand down it was back to the North Sea and home, our only casualty was my mate Ted Duke, he got his ankle crushed on the lighter taking us on a 2 hour shore leave on the island of Flotta in Scapa Flow.

I am in receipt of the Russian Commemorative medal granted to those who assisted in their war effort. I left RAF Henlow at the beginning of March 1942, thinking I was going on another mission, no, I was on a draft to India and the Burma Campaign. I returned to England on December 25th 1945. I married my sweetheart Sylvia, who I met on December 20th 1940 at a dance on Henlow Camp, we will soon be celebrating our fifty third wedding anniversary. Henlow Camp is special to us both”

David Geekie, LAC, Fitter No 13 MU, RAF Henlow 1941. (Written on the 13 October 1998)
Above: This amusing letter regarding a Pegasus Mk. XVIII engine No S.8808/185318F shows that some people obviously believed in miracles.

Left: The above mentioned engine!
(Both RAF Henlow Archives)

“In those days a train used to run from the camp on a Friday to London, returning on the Sunday night. One incident on the train to London was on the high viaduct between Welwyn North and Welwyn Garden City, we passed a ‘Doodle Bug’ travelling north about 200 yards to the west of the line and about the same altitude! The train was going flat out with the whistle going like mad, perhaps the driver thought he could scare it away. We later heard the ‘Doodle Bug’ landed in a field with no damage to life or property”

Denis Pavey, Cpl, Engine Fitter 13 MU, RAF Henlow 1943/44.
Above: With German troops only 60 miles from Paris, this message was sent to infuse patriotism and enthusiasm to all, from the Air Officer Commanding, Maintenance Command, Royal Air Force. (RAF Henlow Archives)

Right: An early Mobile Instrument Landing System (ILS) at RAF Henlow during the 1940s. (RAF Henlow Archives)
These excellent photographs show the Engineering Workshops of 14 School of Technical Training (SoTT) taken by Sqn Ldr Stowe during April 1946, this is very much as they would have appeared during the war years. Note the blackboards, they contain training notes and words of wisdom!

“If you value your crop keep an eye on the - prop!”
“Fools step out where angels fear to tread”
“Watch those cowlings!”
“Look before you sign (F700)”

Above: This photo shows a Junkers Jumo engine from a Messerschmitt Me262, and a descendant of Frank Whittle’s engine a Rolls-Royce Welland W2B/23.
(RAF Henlow Archives)

Left: This photograph show various propellers set out in one of the hutted camp workshops.
(RAF Henlow Archives)

Below Left: In the foreground of this photo are two radial engines used for training purposes.
(RAF Henlow Archives)

Below Right: A general view of one of the Hutted Camp classrooms.
(RAF Henlow Archives)
Chapter 4

THE ROYAL AIR FORCE TECHNICAL COLLEGE

On 15th August 1947 the School of Aeronautical Engineering became the Royal Air Force Technical College. The increasing complexity of modern aircraft and weapons systems made necessary a highly specialised and intensive technical training for the officers who were to be responsible for them. It was fitting that Henlow, so long the hub of engineering skills and training, should be selected as the home of the new College. The first 18 months for the College were devoted to short courses for engineering officers and the first cadets did not arrive until 1949, when 30 officer cadets were selected for No 1 Entry. After one year of study, one third of these were chosen for University courses, while the rest stayed at Henlow to complete the remaining 3 years of their course. The growth of the College strained the already over crowded accommodation blocks but the situation was eased slightly by the move of No 14 Technical Training School to RAF Kirkham. The Recruit Training School made a brief foray to Henlow from Cardington but it soon returned due to lack of accommodation. Additional MQs were built in the 1950s and extensions were added to the then No 1 and No 2 Officers’ Mess completely transforming the look of the station.

Shortly after the arrival of the Technical College at RAF Henlow, the Commanding Officer decided to use the ground in the region of the Stanpit House, on the north-west boundary of the Station, as a pig farm and so provide a welcome supply of fresh meat. An officer was appointed to take charge and before long his resourcefulness had created a worthwhile and going concern. With a loan from station non-public funds, he built and ran a fine example of factory farming and in the first year of business profits in excess of £1000 were realised. However, the forthcoming occupation of Stanpit House by the AOC RAF Technical College forced a closure of the business and in July 1952 a cheque for £2,342 was paid into non-public funds and the account finally closed.

In 1953 the first cadet entry graduated, and the Minerva Society, named after the Roman goddess of wisdom, was formed for ex-cadets. During the course cadets were encouraged to undergo basic pilot training as well as general service training. The College now consisted of the College Headquarters, Basic Studies Wing, Mechanical Engineering, Electrical Engineering and Weapons System Engineering Wings, and a Cadet Wing which dealt with the officer and general service training of cadets. It also ran courses on guided weapons, advanced specialisations and post graduate studies.
However, in 1961 the Secretary of State for Air announced the merger of the RAF Technical College and the RAF College at Cranwell in order to bring together the two main branches of the RAF, the flying and technical branches, so that the officers of each would clearly understand the responsibilities of the other. An obvious moment to begin this merger was in the training stage in a career and so in December 1965 the Technical College moved to Cranwell to form a single RAF College.

The OCTU Years

The RAF Officer Cadet Training Unit (OCTU), which arrived from Feltwell in 1966, was responsible for the initial training of over 60% of the newly commissioned officers entering service with the RAF. It had been set up at RAF Millom, Cumberland, in 1952, later moving to Jurby, Isle of Man, and then Feltwell in 1963. Its commitments included RAF and WRAF officers for all ground branches, and also airmen aircrew who were to be commissioned in the GD Branch. Unlike Cranwell and the Aircrew Officers’ Training School at Church Fenton, the OCTU did not combine specialist professional training with officer training; it provided only the basic training common to all RAF and WRAF officers. Only on successful completion of the course did newly-commissioned officers undergo specialised professional training at other units before taking up their first appointments.

The OCTU provided 3 types of course: a one-month course for newly-commissioned entrants to the Medical, Dental and Chaplains’ Branches, the Princess Mary’s Royal Air Force Nursing Service, and to re-entrant officers; an OCTU Preparatory Course of 2 months duration provided for young men and women between the ages of 17½ and 22 years, who had no professional qualifications, to prepare them for entry to the OCTU Main Course, which lasted 4 months.

The OCTU Main Course took men and women from the Preparatory Course, and entrants direct from civilian life, from
within the Service and from Commonwealth Air Forces. The direct entrants had either to be over 22 years old or to have suitable civilian professional qualifications; they included graduates, teachers, engineers, members of professional institutions, master mariners and individuals from a wide range of other civil occupations. Service entrants varied in rank from aircraftman to warrant officer, in age from 21 to 45, representing most trades. Both men and women from these wide ranges of experience and age all received the same training.

The OCTU was responsible to what was then HQ Training Command. The Commandant was a group captain who was also Officer Commanding RAF Henlow. There were 2 wings in the OCTU: Training Wing and Administrative Wing. The Administrative Wing also provided support for the REU and other lodger units at RAF Henlow. The Training Wing was commanded by a wing commander Chief Instructor. His staff consisted of a Senior Education Officer, a Senior Ground Defence Officer, a Senior WRAF Training Officer, and a Training Control Section. There were 5 Training Squadrons: Blue, Green, Red and Yellow Squadrons, which were responsible for the OCTU Main Course, and Black Squadron, which was responsible for the other 2 types of courses. The squadron commanders came from any branch of the Service.

A new OCTU Main Course began each month, formed into a squadron of 6 flights, 5 RAF flights and one WRAF flight; each flight contained 11 or 12 officer cadets each. The flight commanders, like the squadron commanders, came from any branch. In addition, the squadron had an officer and an NCO of the RAF Regt, an education officer and a warrant officer. The squadron directing staff remained with the officer cadets throughout the course. The course laid emphasis on Leadership and Discipline, Organisation and Administration, Customs and Etiquette of the Service, Air Force Law, Physical Training and Nuclear Biological Chemical warfare. It provided an adequate background knowledge of the structure and history of the Royal Air Force, the role of the WRAF, welfare, and
the organisation of games and sports. It also introduced the officer cadets to public speaking and committee work, Service writing and office organisation, the maintenance of non-public accounts and elementary equipment procedures.

The training took place not only in the lecture room but also in the training theatre, on the range, in the office-simulator building, and at an eight-day camp in Norfolk. Those that measured up to the stringent standards set took their place in the Passing Out Parade at the end of the course. At this ceremony, the Reviewing Officer presented the Sword of Honour to the RAF cadet with the most outstanding leadership qualities on the course. This sword was once the personal sword of Air Chief Marshal Sir Leslie Hollinghurst, who was commissioned into the RAF on 1st April 1918, and was first presented 5 days before his retirement on Dec 22, 1952, to the first OCTU course at RAF Millom. The Reviewing Officer also presented a Sash of Merit to the WRAF cadet with the most outstanding leadership qualities. The first OCTU course to graduate at RAF Henlow was No 189 Course Blue Squadron on 26th August 1966 and was reviewed by the last AOC of the RAF Technical College.

It was said of the newly-commissioned cadets from the OCTU that they moved on to their professional training with
the confidence of the OCTU Directing Staff that they would uphold the motto of the OCTU: “Majora Tento” - “I Aim at Greater Things”.

On 30th April 1970 OCTU cadets formed part of the parade when the Mayor of Bedford presented the Officer Commanding RAF Henlow with the Deed conferring the Freedom of Entry to the town. On this occasion the Queen’s Colour for the Royal Air Force paraded through the streets of Bedford with No 4 RAF Regional Band leading 3 squadrons from RAF Henlow bearing rifles with fixed bayonets. The last Station Commander of RAF Henlow graduated with No 247 Course, Green Squadron on 22 July 1971.

During the mid 1970s, the task of the Officer Cadet Training Unit was increased: OCTU became responsible for 80% of initial officer training. However, in 1977 it was decided that the initial training of officers would be better served from a single-gate method of entry and OCTU left Henlow on 24th April 1980. Since then, all officer training whether for graduates, non-graduates, serving airmen and for specialists such as doctors, dentists, nurses and padres, has taken place at the Royal Air Force College Cranwell. During the OCTU’s time at Henlow, a conservative estimate gives the total number of officers trained to be in excess of 10,000.

616 Volunteer Gliding School

No 616 Gliding School was formed at RAF Henlow in 1958 to provide gliding training and experience for local ATC and CCF cadets. The Air Cadets Headquarters (Central and East) was formed in January 1969 at RAF Oakington and moved to RAF Henlow in December 1974.
Above: 616 Volunteer Gliding School (VGS) was formed in 1958 and is still in residence today. Here a Kirby Cadet Mk III serial XN245 is caught prior to launch from RAF Henlow.
(Peter Kirk Collection ©)

Left: Kirby Cadet Mk III XN245 successfully launched on another sortie.
(Peter Kirk Collection ©)

Below Left: An aerial view of Henlow from 2500 ft during 1963. Note the Lincoln Bomber and Canberra in the centre of the photo near the hangars.
(Peter Kirk Collection ©)

Below Right: The workhorse. This V8 winch was used to launch the gliders.
(Peter Kirk Collection ©)
Above: PTU Blackburn Beverley C.1 interrupts a gliding course during 1963.
(Peter Kirk Collection ©)

Right: The photographer caught photographing a fellow photographer,
photographing him!
(Peter Kirk Collection ©)

Below: Another aerial view. This time at low level over “The Pickle factory” during 1962. Notice the Bellman hangars and the Hutted Camp to the top right of the photo.
(Peter Kirk Collection ©)
In May 1976 the Officers’ Command School moved to RAF Henlow from RAF Ternhill, formally opening on 4 June 1976. It was principally responsible for the first in a pattern of Command and Staff Training, namely the Officers’ Command Course (the OCC). The OCC was followed up by an Individual Staff Studies (ISS) correspondence course, and later, on promotion to squadron leader, the Basic Staff Course (BSC), which also moved to RAF Henlow from the Royal Air Force Staff College Bracknell in May 1997. On 1st April 1998, Command and Staff Training became Tri-Service and was renamed Intermediate Level Command and Staff Training (ILCST). Training was restructured, starting with a correspondence course: ISS1, followed by the Junior Officer’s Command Course (JOCC), followed by another correspondence course, ISS2. The aim of the JOCC was to improve the operational efficiency of the Service by developing a Junior Officers’ effectiveness for early executive appointments. The JOCC also organised the Senior Officers’ Administrative Study Period, which briefed senior officers on the current administrative and legal procedures appropriate to their posts, and a Station Executives Wives’ Seminar. Also as part of the ILCST reorganisation, BSC became the Intermediate Command & Staff Course (ICSC), aiming to improve the operational effectiveness of the Service by preparing squadron leaders for command and staff appointments appropriate to their rank. The OCS and ICSC moved to Shrivenham from Henlow during 2000 to join the Joint Services Command and Staff College.

Civilian Technical Training School

In May 1980, the Civilian Technical Training School (CTTS) was created to provide high quality civilian trainees and apprentices with training appropriate to equip them to work within the highly specialised environments at Henlow. The school officially opened with a class of 6 students who began their training as civilian technicians in the fields of radio, radar and test equipment. The course, for young men and women between 16 and 21, consisted of 6 months at Bedford College followed by a year of theory and practical study at the training school. From September 1980 apprentice training courses began, which needed slightly higher entrance requirements, with courses lasting four years. Two years of the course were at college, one year involved familiarisation with work at a particular unit on station, and the last year was one of more specialised training on a topic of the student’s choice. The CTTS role ended at Henlow in 2005 with its closure.
During the early part of 1979, a decision was made to use RAF West Drayton to house contestants for the 198 Olympic games. The Signals Development Unit (SDU) was to move out, and its new home was to be Henlow. The SDU moved to Henlow in stages between 1947 and 1948. The move started ironically, with the transfer of the Typex maintenance and repair section on 19th August 1947 and by the evening of 21st August the section was fully operational. One member of the unit did manage to get back to West Drayton. This was AC Higgins who represented Great Britain in the 440 yards relay during the Olympic Games.

The work of the SDU at Henlow was concerned mainly with the servicing, modification, manufacture and installation of communications equipment. This included the construction of radio vehicles and other associated equipment. Much of the original workshop facilities were used to full advantage. The old foundry was employed in casting wheels and numerous other accessories. The paint and plating shops were retained, and the carpenters’ shop in shed 10 was employed in the design and construction of packing cases to fit the newly manufactured radio equipment. The equipment, once packed, was then despatched to units throughout the world, where Henlow fitting parties would install it.

A local resident recalled:
“Shortly after the Signals Development Unit arrived it began to employ a number of civilian technicians. We were asked to undergo Trade Tests and I was lucky enough to pass. I can remember clearly one of the first signals orders I worked on, No 157/7. This was concerned with the manufacture of diversity racks, which were designed for use in ocean weather ships as part of the communication equipment. Ten years later I was thrilled to see one of those very same pieces of equipment in operation during a visit to the weather station at Dunstable”.

“All of the Typex coding machines used for RAF ground communications were being processed at Henlow, but this work was then classified so we never really got to know much about it. Early type navigation beacons were constructed at Henlow, all of them built by modifying obsolete equipment salvaged from the war”.

“The initial supply of spares was very poor and we improvised much of the time. We had a salvage store which stripped unserviceable equipment and the parts they could salvage were identified and stored. When the situation arose that the normal channels of supply could not provide a part immediately the salvage store invariably produced it”.

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Above: Main Gate showing the REU in residence circa 1970s.
(RAF Henlow Archives)
Prior to the move of the SDU to Henlow a Radio Frequency Crystal Re-processing Unit had been formed as part of No 13 MU. The forerunner of the unit was Thermal Syndicate Ltd of Workington which had manufactured crystal units and components throughout the war. When the company closed in September 1946, a service unit was formed to continue the work and civilian instructors and some operatives moved to Henlow. WAAF personnel were trained and eventually most of the original staff returned to Cumbria. The Officer Commanding the unit, Mr Johnson, remained in post until his death in 1974. The unit became part of the SDU in 1948, and was now re-named the Crystal Engineering Flight. During the Falklands war the Flight worked 24 hours a day for many weeks to provide batches of unique frequency crystals for all three services. Due to an inability to keep up with the rapidly changing technologies the flight was finally closed in August 1988 after 40 years of excellent service.

The role of the SDU changed to servicing, modification, manufacture and installation during the late 1940’s and in January 1950 was renamed the Radio Engineering Unit (REU). There then followed a steady expansion of engineering activity at Henlow, and in 1955 the Radio Warfare Engineering Flight was formed to develop radio countermeasures equipment. However, in 1957 plans to build a new REU headquarters were quashed because of doubts about the long-term location of the unit. In 1959 it was decided that the REU would stay in its current location. The proposal to build a new HQ building was resurrected together with a plan to locate No 1 Test Equipment Calibration Centre and the Crystal Re-Processing Flight into new temperature controlled accommodation. Fate intervened again and various economy measures resulted in the postponement of the rebuilding programme. Consequently the REU continued to occupy many of the original 1920s buildings. In the mid 1960s trials took place at Henlow of a
tactical radar system and the responsibility for its overhaul was subsequently given to the REU. As a result, the Tactical Radar Servicing Section was set up taking on the responsibility for overhauling all tactical radars. In addition, the REU provided a Public Address service to the UK and RAF Germany.

Following a formal inspection of REU by Air Vice-Marshal H Durkin, Air Officer Commanding No 90 (Signals) in June 1972 concern was raised over the Electronic Calibration Centre (ECC) and Calibration Development Squadron (CDS) being located within supply wing. Accordingly, he called for proposals from OC REU to reorganise ECC and CDS into a separate organisation. In the ensuing two years much thought and discussion concluded with the decision to form the Test Equipment Wing (TEW).

TEW became operational on Monday 28th October 1974, occupying buildings 105, 108 and 110, with a strength of 159 personnel including 18 servicemen. The wing consisted of Measurement Development Squadron (MDS), Calibration Repair Squadron (CRS), Test Equipment Support Flight (TESF), and the Computer Assisted Manually Operated Test Equipment Recalibration (CAMOTER) project. In June 1993, TEW moved to its new parent unit at RAF Sealand. During the early 1990s they were calibrating approximately 40,000 items each year of which 25% required supportive repair.

The REU years also saw the end of the railway service to Henlow, on the Bedford to Hitchin line, which had served the camp from 1917, transporting its first Commanding Officer on 10th May 1918, until June 1960. The actual line had been in operation by the Midland Railway Company since 8th May 1857 as a main line for trains between Leicester and London to compete with other routes to London operated by rival companies. However, due to congestion at King’s Cross, the Henlow line was superseded by the Bedford to St Pancras line from 1868 onwards until the upsurge once again in usage of the line when Henlow became a repair depot in 1918. At the beginning of World War II the line ferried newly-kitted reservists to France and increased activity on the unit meant that over 150 tons of parcels per day were shunted in and out of Henlow due to the repair and manufacture of aircraft. In addition to the regular track, a narrow gauge Decauville Internal Railway system was built to move engines and other heavy equipment around the technical site. Trucks were shunted from shed to shed on the elaborate system, which also contained turntables. In the post war period rising costs, declining passenger and freight numbers marked a rundown in the railway services. In
1962, it was decided that the line would be severed at Shefford and the line finally closed on 24th December 1964.

Also in the 1960s, a number of pre-WWII aircraft were flown into Henlow for preservation on behalf of the RAF Museum. This could be the reason why, in September 1964 the film “Those Magnificent Men in their Flying Machines” was filmed at the Station, using aircraft from the Shuttleworth Collection, such as the Bristol Boxkite Replica. A number of Station personnel also donned period costumes and appeared as extras. In September of the following year the BBC came to Henlow to film a production called “Pilots and Planes” and in April 1968 the skies over Henlow came alive as Spitfires, Hurricanes, Messerschmitts and Stukas assembled for the film “Battle of Britain”.

A type of aircraft never flown at Henlow, the English Electric P1A WG760 (the forerunner to the Lightning), spent some time on static display at the side of the parade square in the 1960s; the aircraft had been used for flight trials at Boscombe Down. During a flight on 4th August 1952 it became the first conventional aircraft to exceed the speed of sound without either diving, employing reheat, or rockets. No unusual effects were noted and an instrument error left the pilot unaware of his achievement until flight data recordings were analysed some days later.

The Falklands crisis received much media publicity especially when at the end of March 1982 it was decided to send a military task force to attempt to recapture the Islands. This was also a time of great activity at Henlow in support of the conflict and, to co-ordinate the efforts of the REU, a Task Management Squadron was formed. One urgent task was the provision of secure speech systems for use in the UK and at Ascension Island. These were manufactured by the REU whose other tasks included modification kits for Puma and Chinook helicopters. The provision of radar and radio communications for Port Stanley Airfield was a major task, which included the Station providing and supplying various different radar types. Many radio links for HF, VHF and UHF were assembled with their associated control units, aerials and masts. Some 20 Station personnel were airlifted out to install the radio links.

During its time at RAF Henlow, the REU was the largest unit based on the Station with a working floor area of about half a million square feet.
RAFSEE also operates in support of NATO Peace Keeping Operations and the United Nations around the world.

Above: A site survey for a temporary radar for NATO KFOR (Kosovo Forces) at Pristina Airport, Kosovo during 1999. In the background can be seen a landing Belgian Army Augusta A.109HA.
(DEI - SNS Branch)

Right: Communications support to UNSCOM (United Nations Special Commission) Inspectors in Iraq.
(DEI - IS Branch)

Below Right: Communications support to NATO SFOR (Stabilisation Force) in Bosnia.
(DEI - Plans)

RAF Signals Engineering Establishment

The roots of the Royal Air Force Signals Engineering Establishment (RAFSEE) are to be found in three Signals Groups which formed during the second World War: No 26 Group in Bomber Command, with world wide responsibilities for communications and airfield facilities, No 60 Group in Fighter Command, which was concerned with ground radar; No 100 Group in Bomber Command and also No 80 Wing which both specialised in Radio Counter Measures (RCM), air and ground respectively. By the end of the war most of these functions were combined to form No 90 Group. In 1958 the Group was given command status, but this was removed and subsumed within the newly formed Strike Command, in a rationalization of resources, in 1969. In 1973 the title was changed to the Royal Air Force Support Command Signals Headquarters (RAFSCSHQ).
On 16th June 1980 a detachment from the RAFSCSHQ, which was then at Benson, was formed at Henlow, consisting of 11 civilians and technical personnel. The detachment steadily increased in strength during 1981, and in 1982 split to form two new units: RAF Support Command Signals Staff (RAFSCSS), and the RAF Signals Engineering Establishment (RAFSEE). This brought together signals engineering design, programme management elements of RAFSCSHQ, manufacturing, supply, and installation facilities of the REU. Further re-organization in the 1980s also brought under the command of RAFSEE the Electronic Warfare & Avionics Unit, which was then located at RAF Wyton, but has since moved to RAF Waddington.

The primary responsibilities of the RAFSCSS were the implementation of MOD signals policy and management of deep servicing of communications and electronic equipment. RAFSCSS was also responsible for the control of the Ground Radio Servicing Centre (GRSC), which was then at RAF North Luffenham, but has since moved to RAF Sealand.

The Exhibition Production Flight (EPF) moved to Henlow from Hendon in 1983, and was responsible for the design, manufacture, installation and maintenance of all recruiting displays for the RAF at national and local exhibitions throughout the UK. The flight comprised civilian design staff, mis-employed RAF tradesmen with artistic talent, carpenters, electricians and metalworkers. The EPF left Henlow in 1992 on being contractorised.

In 1990/1991, the Gulf Crisis was not only one of Britain’s few major military campaigns since the Second World War, but was probably the first conflict in which electronics played such a vital part. During the conflict there were great efforts made by the Allies to gather electronic intelligence by the use of satellites and the E-3A (AWACS) aircraft for subsequent processing at the GCHQ at Cheltenham and Fort Meade in the USA.

As the centre of excellence for communications engineering in the RAF, Henlow was committed to a key role in providing those facilities for the operation. Early work focused on tuning all available communications facilities towards the area of operation. As forces began to deploy to their areas of operation, essential work was performed in providing secure voice, telegraphic and high resolution facsimile communications. As the deployment continued, a wide base of optical communications facilities was established.

Considerable support was received from British industry, who successfully met exceptionally tight deadlines by speeding through specific trailing of new equipment and its installation. Just prior to the ground war beginning, servicemen from Henlow were deployed to within a few miles of the front line to set up and maintain a mobile ground station for a direct satellite link between the British ground forces and the UK. Those personnel who remained at Henlow were working hard to design, manufacture and transport items of equipment to the war zone in support of the forces already there.

In addition to land based communications, Henlow was involved in several airborne secure communications projects and the provision of enhanced radar facilities in theatre. Henlow personnel also assisted the Services Sound and Vision Corporation (SSVC) in establishing High Frequency broadcasting facilities in Cyprus for the transmission of British Service Broadcasting into the Gulf region.
An excellent example of the support provided by RAFSEE to other services occurred when the Royal Navy (RN) had problems with the satellite communications equipment fitted to the aircraft carrier HMS Illustrious (R06). A small team was put together at short notice; two staff flew out to the ship which was serving in the Persian Gulf at the time, while the other assisted from the UK. The RAFSEE team, in conjunction with RN engineers from Portsmouth, managed to restore communications within a few days, despite experiencing a severe storm shortly after they arrived on board.

Here an 801 Naval Air Sqn Sea Harrier F/A.2 sits on the deck as a Sea King HAS.6 approaches the carrier to land.

(Crown Copyright © HMS Illustrious Photographic Section)
Throughout the conflict, and afterwards, personnel from RAF Henlow performed to the highest standards and in recognition many were presented with awards in the Queen’s Honours Lists, including several British Empire Medals.

In 1991, the Special Signals Unit at Woolwich combined with the REU to form the RAFSEE Production Division. From this time, RAFSEE became part of the Maintenance Group Defence Agency. During this time, Administrative Wing also became part of RAFSEE, resulting in the title of the entire station becoming RAFSEE Henlow. In 1994, RAFCSS moved to Brampton, and on 22nd November RAFSEE was successfully launched as a Defence Agency in its own right within the Communications, Information Systems and Support Services (CSS) Group of Royal Air Force Headquarters Logistics Command. RAFSEE was an Agency, headed by an Air Commodore as its Chief Executive, in what was known as the Support Units Group within Logistics Command. In 1999, RAFSEE was renamed the Directorate of Engineering and Interoperability (DEI). It lost its Agency status as it became part of the Defence Communication Services Agency (DCSA) within the Defence Logistics Organisation (DLO). DEI’s mission is to deliver and sustain interoperable communication and information services and to enable timely, assured and secured access to information worldwide in order to provide UK Defence with an information edge.

Radio Introduction Unit

In June 1992, the Radio Introduction Unit (RIU) moved to Henlow from RAF Benson where it joined with the RIU attachment already at Henlow and a detachment from the Royal Signals and Radar Establishment at Malvern. During the Second World War an organization known as Post Design Services (PDS) was formed at the Telecommunications Research Establishment, Malvern, to provide a direct link between the designers of electronic equipment in the laboratories and the Service users in the field. The organization was manned by civilian scientists and serving officers and worked predominantly in the fields of airborne radar and ground control interception. In 1946, PDS was disbanded and its successor, the Radio Introduction Branch (RIB), was formed at RAF Medmenham. In 1952, the RIB was renamed the Radio Introduction Unit and became responsible for the introduction into service of all approach aids, airborne tail warning, Doppler navigation, weapon aiming and airborne interception for aircraft such as the Brigand, Javelin, Meteor, Valetta and Venom.

By 1965, the Unit had an establishment of 56 officers with 12 detachments, some located as far afield as Texas and Baltimore. However, the 1970s defence cuts led to a series of manpower reductions until, in 1976, the RIU subsumed the Radio Technical Publications Squadron.

In 1999 RIU became part of the RAFSEE organisation and was renamed the Consultancy Group (CG). The CG advise on the selection of Communications-Electronic equipment, and monitor the design, development, and introduction of such equipment into service.
Joint Arms Control Implementation Group

Joint Arms Control Implementation Group (JACIG), the UK’s military Arms Control Verification Centre, has been based at RAF Henlow since May 1996. The Group’s role is to implement a variety of international arms control treaties and related agreements, which the UK has signed since the end of the Cold War. All these agreements seek to enhance security and promote confidence and openness in military matters amongst nations. Some of the treaties aim to remove or lower holdings of major war fighting equipments, whilst the Open Skies Treaty gives access to former adversaries’ air space and allows us to take aerial photography. However, the overall effect of all the agreements is to reduce the risk of future major conflict in Europe.

JACIG does not make the UK Arms Control policy. This is decided between the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence; JACIG provides the people on the ground to put policy into practice.

JACIG undertakes a variety of different missions; both in the United Kingdom and in Central and Eastern Europe and the countries of the former Soviet Union, in order to implement 4 major arms control treaties and agreements (Conventional Forces Europe (CFE), Vienna Document 99, Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and Open Skies). Essentially, JACIG has three main tasks:

- To carry out inspections of foreign military organizations on their own territory.
- To escort incoming inspections of UK Forces garrisoned at home and overseas.
- To prepare UK Forces to receive such inspections.
JACIG is a unique organisation within the UK military, not only in the nature of the role, but also in that it is the only MOD Central Staffs unit which trains together and deploys regularly on overseas missions.

Headquarters Provost Marshal (RAF) and No1 (Specialist) Police Wing

Headquarters Provost Marshal (RAF) (HQ PM(RAF)) moved to RAF Henlow in November 1998, under the title of Headquarters RAF Provost & Security Services (HQ RAF P&SS), from RAF Rudloe Manor where it had been located since 1975. On 1 April 2005 the specialist policing and security functions were reorganised to configure for crisis and adapt for peace, rebrigading as the new HQ PM(RAF) and an operational wing - No1 (Specialist) Police Wing (SPW). The Unit is commanded by a Group Captain of the Provost specialisation and exercises command and control over all HQ PM(RAF) and SPW personnel. The Headquarters is responsible for all RAF Policing Policy and Standards. SPW is a High Readiness unit, established to conduct high and intermediate-level provost and security activities in support of wider Force Protection (FP) and Defensive Information Operations (DIO). When

Left: Deployed Operations convoy. (HQ PM (RAF) & SPW)

Below: Forensic Science. (HQ PM (RAF) & SPW)
Right: RAF Police teeth arm capability. (HQ PM (RAF) & SPW)

Below: Deployed Operations local liaison. (HQ PM (RAF) & SPW)
not on deployed operations its Main Effort is the limiting of vulnerabilities of material, information and personnel, delivered through policing and security functions, so that commanders retain the freedom of action necessary to deliver military capability. SPW is organised into capability-based sqns, reflecting the skill sets of those Specialist Elements, as follows: RAF Special Investigations Branch (RAF SIB); Counter Intelligence Sqn (CI Sqn); and Security Services Sqn (Sy Servs Sqn). OC SPW, Operations Support (Ops Spt) staff and Sy Servs Sqn are based at RAF Henlow. RAF SIB and CI Sqn have HQ elements and specialist spt staff at RAF Henlow with SIB Flt HQs and CI Flts dispersed at RAF Halton, RAF Cranwell, HMS Caledonia and Rheindahlen (RESG). The RAF Equal Opportunities Inquiry Team (EOIT) is based at RAF Innsworth. Capabilities include the Defence Flying Complaints Investigation Team, responsible for investigating all complaints made to the MOD regarding breaches of flying discipline by any military aircraft; Investigations Support Flight, which provides a specialist Crime Scene Investigation Examination laboratory and a Computer Forensic Examination laboratory; a Force Intelligence Bureau; Sy Servs Sqn has a remit for conducting specialist counter sabotage surveys of RAF assets worldwide; and Ops Spt personnel are assigned to a tri-Service Police 24-hour operations room, based at Southwick Park, which acts as a focal point for RAF Police enquiries worldwide. Tasking and co-ordination is provided by a small element of Ops Spt staff within the Wg HQ.

RAF Centre of Aviation Medicine

RAF Centre of Aviation Medicine (RAF CAM) was founded on 1 December 1998 from the amalgamation of the School of Aviation Medicine at Farnborough and the Aviation Medicine Training Centre at RAF North Luffenham. RAF CAM expanded in 2000 when the RAF Medical Board moved from the Station Medical Centre at Henlow to the RAF CAM site and came under the command and control of RAF CAM. In June 2000 the RAF Institute of Health moved from RAF Halton to RAF CAM.

RAF CAM currently consists of 4 Wings:
- Aviation Medicine Wg
- Occupational and Environmental Medicine Wg
- Engineering Wg
- Admin Support Wg

The various component sections of these 4 Wings is set out below.

Above: Close Protection.
(HQ PM (RAF) & SPW)

Above: The various component sections of the 4 Wings within CAM.
(RAF CAM)
Above: Evaluation and testing of new aircrew clothing and equipment and evaluation
of mid life upgrades is carried out by RAF CAM Aircrew Equipment and Integration
Group and Biodynamics Department (AEIG).

These mannequins display the clothing worn by various RAF pilots.

b. SEPECAT Jaguar pilot.
c. Eurofighter Typhoon pilot.
d. HS Nimrod Aircrew.
e. Typical Helicopter pilot.
f. Typical Helicopter crewman.
g. Sea King Rescue Helicopter Winchman.

(RAF CAM)

Right: RAF CAM Hawk T Mk1.

The Aviation Medicine Flight of the Royal Air Force Centre of Aviation Medicine
operates two Hawk T Mark 1 aircraft. The Flight is established to provide operational
and clinical support to the Royal Air Force. In its operational support role, the Flight
carries out assessments of aircrew life support systems before their introduction into
service. Any modifications to in-service aircrew life support systems are also evaluated
by the Aviation Medicine Flight before being cleared for use. The primary clinical
support role of the Aviation Medicine Flight is to provide an aircrew motion sickness
desensitisation programme.

Hawk XX162 was built by British Aerospace at Dunsfold in 1976 as a pre-production
Hawk T Mark 1, from where it was delivered to Royal Air Force Valley. It served at
Royal Air Force Stations Valley, Kemble and Abingdon, including a brief spell with the
Red Arrows aerobatics display team. In 1992 the aircraft was transferred to the Institute
of Aviation Medicine at Farnborough. In 1994 the Royal Air Force School of Aviation
Medicine was formed from the disbanded Institute of Aviation Medicine and the aircraft
was relocated to MOD Boscombe Down, where it remains today. In 1998 the School
of Aviation Medicine merged with the Aviation Medicine Training Centre to form the
Centre of Aviation Medicine at Royal Air Force Henlow.

(RAF CAM Archive)
Within Aviation Medicine Wg is included the evaluation and testing of new aircrew clothing and equipment, modification of equipment and the evaluation of mid-life upgrades; accident investigation, which involves medical aspects of aircrew injuries and the evaluation of aircrew survival aids, ejection seats, parachutes, helmets and aircrew clothing. The training section teaches aviation medicine topics to both aircrew and medical officers, while the aviation physiology section carries out operationally focused research, some of which is carried out in conjunction with King’s College, London. The aviation medicine flight is based at Boscombe Down, where 2 Hawk aircraft are equipped for medical support and specialist training of aircrew; this flight also carries out operational research and development of specialist aircrew equipment. The Aviation Medicine Wg has a uniformed forensic pathologist and an aviation psychologist on its staff and also carries out CBRN training for aircrew under the aegis of a RAF Regiment officer.

The Occupational and Environmental Medicine Wg incorporates occupational medicine, environmental health and occupational hygiene, and is the site of the Regional Occupational Medicine Department. It also includes the Noise and Vibration Division and the dangerous Engineering Substances Advisory Team. The RAF Medical Board is within this Wg and is responsible for approving and effecting both temporary and permanent changes to all RAF personnel medical employment standards.

The Engineering Wg is responsible for the equipment used within RAF CAM, which includes 4 hypobaric chambers, one hyperbaric chamber, 2 Spatial Disorientation Simulator Trainers, a night vision laboratory and other specialist equipment. The Wg is also responsible for the Medical and Dental Servicing Section, which looks after all equipment in RAF Medical and Dental Centres throughout the UK.

The Admin Support Wg includes an administrative team, a budget cell and a well staffed modern medical library.

Logistic Applications Integrated Project Team (LAIPT)

The LA IPT was formed on 1 Apr 01, by drawing together the three single service Logistic Information System organisations then in existence. With its HQ at DE&S Andover, the IPT has detached formations at many locations throughout the UK. The IPT’s element at RAF Henlow consists of around 50 Service and civilian staff who work closely with IBM to sustain the RAF’s Logistic Information Technology System (LITS) that provides an essential engineering and asset management capability for front line units and contractors.

BOWTAG (Jt)
Bowman Training and Advisory Group (Joint)

The key enabler for Land Digitization is BOWMAN communications system. BOWMAN will provide secure tactical combat communications for Land and littoral operations. It replaces the CLANSMAN Combat Net Radio (CNR) system with a secure digital voice and data communications service, including positional awareness capability. Digitization is described as:

An initiative that seeks to exploit the opportunities offered by digital technology in order to improve tempo, survivability and lethality.

The application of digital technology to deliver operational benefits to the Land Component within a Joint and Multinational environment.

The creation of winning tempo in the conduct of operations by the development of decision superiority.
The BOWMAN Training and Advisory Group (Joint) (BOWTAG(Jt)) is a Tri-Service Team, formed on the 19 April 2004, as a component part of the Command and Control Development Centre in Warminster Garrison. BOWTAG (Jt), together with BOWTAG (South), located in Bulford, BOWTAG (Germany), located in Paderborn and BOWTAG (North), located in Catterick, will provide Eight BOWMAN Training and Advisory Teams (BOWTATs) to complement the CBT-based conversion training provided by the contractor. This will be achieved by delivering effective, hand-on training and sound advise across all arms and services on the operation and management of the BOWMAN Communications System.

**Tactical Provost Sqn**

The Tactical Provost Sqn (TPS) provides the RAFP with its very high readiness policing capability. TPS was established initially to provide Lines of Communication Policing (LoCP), but now concentrates on providing a core of highly trained policemen to undertake general police duties and provide deployed operating base security. Additional tasks include the provision of worldwide Air Transport Security (ATSy) support and the ability to respond to unforeseen events, such as deploying personnel to assist in providing aid to areas hit by natural disaster and in non-combatant evacuation operations.

TPS also has the capability of providing specialist support with All Arms Search Teams, Close Protection Operatives and provides assistance in the Nuclear Accident Response Organisation.
Above: Security of high-ranking personnel is undertaken by TPS Close Protection Operatives pictured here on duty in Basra.

(TPS)

Below: TPS providing security to the DOB at Basra.

(TPS)
Airfield Operations Support Installation Design

The Airfield Operations Support Installation Design (AOS ID) Branch was formed on 1 April 2006 when the Airfield Support Branch, formerly an integral part of the DCSA AD Eng Ops, joined the Airfield Operations Support IPT based at RAF Brampton. The AOS IPT was part of the DG Log (Strike) organisation within DLO. On 1 April 2007, following the merger of the DLO & DPA organisations to form Defence Equipment & Support (DE&S) the IPT subsequently moved into the DE&S DG ISTAR cluster.

The AOS ID Branch provides an electro-mechanical design and fault finding capability at both system, equipment and installation level. It supports the IPT across its full portfolio of equipments in the airfield/defence radar, airfield navigational aids and ground to air communications systems environment. The Branch has a service/civilian complement of approximately 90 staff who are able to deploy in support of Operations to establish an airhead or defence radar capability. Staff also participate in Flight Trials to ensure equipment meets stringent Flight Safety criteria. It is expected the Branch will continue to provide an enduring capability for this legacy equipment until the middle of the next decade.

The Branch serves both the AOS and the Air Defence Ground Based Sensors (ADGBS) IPT also based at RAF Brampton who are its main customers, however, the mechanical expertise in antenna support structures and radome construction is also utilised by the wider MOD. In the near future it is expected that the AOS and ADGBS IPTs will merge to form the Air Defence Air Traffic Services (ADATS) IPT.

Engineering Operations

After a transitional stage of several years, Engineering Operations which originally formed part of DEI became part of the Directorate of Operations in 2007, within Information Systems and Services which itself comes under the wider banner of the Defence Equipment and Support Agency. Eng Ops mission is to:

Design, Project Manage and Implement ISS solutions for the MOD and OGDs where commercial provision is not viable or cost effective

Enhance Defence capability on deployed operations and at fixed installations at home and abroad.

Configuration Management

Similar to Eng Ops, CM Branch was once part of DEI, but now belongs to the Directorate of the Chief Technology Officer, which also falls under the banner of the Defence Equipment and Support agency. Its mission is to ensure that effective configuration management is provided for MOD Communications Systems Infrastructures and it does so via two avenues of delegation:

As the Defence Coordinating Installation Design Authority, providing policy, advice and guidance and assurance functions for the physical and environmental aspects of all fixed Defence Communications-Electronics infrastructures.

As the Radio Site Protection authority, undertaking radio site clearance and safeguarding activities for all UK airfields, radars and other key military radio installations.

CM currently employs 36 personnel at Henlow, plus a team of 8 at Blandford.
Above: Synergy mobile undergoing trials at Oakhanger.
(Eng Ops)

Below: Laying cables in Theatre (Basrah).
(Eng Ops)
Chapter 7
AIR DAYS AT HENLOW

Throughout its history Henlow has opened its doors to the public. Since the early Empire Air Days in the 1930’s through to the Battle of Britain ‘At Home’ Days during the aftermath of WWII. Henlow has seen many and varied aircraft. This chapter gives an overview of those events through the years.

Above: Empire Air Day 1934. In the foreground are two Vickers Virginia’s of the Parachute Test Unit.
(The Shuttleworth Collection)

Above: This photo was taken during an Empire Air Day. “An enemy raid of two bombers is reported approaching the aerodrome. A flight of three fighters is sent up to intercept them. Having sighted the enemy, the fighters attack and bring down the bombers, the crews of the latter escaping by parachutes”. Here a PTU Vickers Virginia acts as the enemy.
(Bedfordshire & Luton Archives & Records Services)
Above: Empire Air Day 1937. The view from the airfield looking across the flight line. The aircraft shown are: de Havilland Tiger Moth, Handley Page Heyford, Hawker Hart trainer, Avro Anson I, Boulton Paul Overstrand of 101 Sqn. RAF Bicester, Saro Cloud of 48 Sqn. RAF Manston, Fairey Swordfish, Blackburn Shark and a rare Blackburn Monoplane from RAF Cardington (Top left of the group).
(RAF Henlow Archives)

Above: The rare Blackburn Monoplane wearing its civilian registration G-ABKV '14' prior to receiving its RAF serial number and markings.
(The Shuttleworth Collection)

Left: The Official Programme from the 1937 Air Day.
(RAF Museum)
Above: Gloster Meteor serial EE273 seen at the 'At Home' day on the 13th September 1945. In the background outside 'The Pickle Factory' can be seen two de Havilland Mosquitoes.
(Bedfordshire & Luton Archives & Records Services)

Above: An impressive static line-up at the Battle of Britain 'At Home' day on the 22nd September 1947. Aircraft seen here include No 13 MU Halifax III RG871/31-D, Gloster Meteor 5839M (Maintenance number) and Lancaster ME531/6334M.
(Bedfordshire & Luton Archives & Records Services)
(Bedfordshire & Luton Archives & Records Services)

(RAF Henlow Archives)
Above: This classic aircraft, a Saunders Roe SR.53 serial XD145, was built in the 1950s to carry out research into the use of rocket engines in future fighters. This photo shows the SR.53 on display at an Open Day circa 1970s. This was one of the many aircraft stored at one time with the RAF Reserve Collection in ‘The Pickle factory’, before its move to RAF Cardington. This aircraft now resides with the superb ‘Research & Development Collection’ within the RAF Museum at RAF Cosford.

(Chris Dunn Collection)
Top: WRAF of the REU RAF Henlow September 1956.
REU No.7 Christmas Island Radio Fitting Party.
(RAF Henlow Collection)

(RAF Henlow Collection)
Chapter 8
THE HISTORY OF THE STATION CREST

The RAF Henlow Station Badge depicts a dragon repairing a castle with the motto “Labor Arma Ministrat” or “Hard Work Provides Arms” and has been the centre of many discussions as to its origins. Apparently, it pre-dates the Royal Air Force and was unofficially adopted in 1918 from the insignia of the Royal Engineers who were responsible for building No 5 Eastern Area Depot at Henlow. This unit had served in China at the time of the Second Boxer Rebellion and so the dragon is Chinese and not Welsh! The dragon is repairing the broken tower, a reference to the Station’s original role of maintaining and repairing aircraft from the Western Front in World War I. The badge was transferred between units as Henlow was renamed over the years and was officially revived as the Station Badge in 1968.
Chapter 9
COMMANDING OFFICERS AT RAF HENLOW

1918  Lieutenant Colonel R F Stapleton-Cotton
1918  Lieutenant Colonel Kennedy
1919  Lieutenant Colonel Measures
1919  Wing Commander Bettington
1920  Group Captain Burdett
1922  Group Captain T D Bourke
1925  Group Captain C R S Bradley OBE
1928  Group Captain A V Bettington
1931  Group Captain W C Hicks AFC
1932  Group Captain V O Rees
1935  Group Captain J McCrae MBE
1939  Group Captain T C Thomson
1940  Group Captain A Corbett-Wilson
1940  Group Captain C E H Allen
1943  Group Captain J H Powle
1943  Air Commodore E J D Townsend
1946  Air Commodore H E Forrow
1947  Group Captain W H Husbands
1948  Group Captain R F Fletcher
1950  Group Captain W R Worstall OBE
1952  Group Captain A A F Hickman OBE
1954  Group Captain W S Reed
1957  Group Captain D W Smythe
1959  Group Captain W K Le May CBE
1961  Group Captain C A Ball
1962  Group Captain J A R Reid
1963  Group Captain W A Griffiths DFC
1963  Group Captain E Cook DFC
1965  Wing Commander J B Lewis
1966  Group Captain R F Harman DFC AFC
1966  Group Captain N F Curtis OBE
1969  Group Captain R F Hitchcock MBE AFC
1971  Group Captain A W Ringer MVO AFC AMBIM
1973  Group Captain R G Churcher DSO MVO DFC
1974  Group Captain A G L Hutchinson
1977  Group Captain R J Hutchings
1979  Group Captain M J Rayson MVO
1980  Group Captain A S Godwin
1983  Group Captain B J Hunter OBE ADC
1985  Group Captain R A Gill MSc Bsc
1987  Group Captain B C McCandless MSc BSc CEng MIEE RAF
1989  Group Captain P C Ayee CEng MRAes RAF
1991  Air Commodore P J Miller BSc CEng MRAes RAF
1994  Air Commodore P C Ayee CBE CEng MRAes RAF
1996  Air Commodore G Jones MBE BSc CEng MIEE RAF
1999  Air Commodore C M Davison BSc CEng FIEE MIMgt RAF
1999  Wing Commander G E P Pattenden LLB FCIS RAF
2000  Group Captain M T Doel OBE MA Bed RAF
2003  Group Captain R Paterson OBE BSc PGCE RAF
2004  Group Captain N P Beet OBE MA BA RAF
2007  Group Captain G J Bruce MBE MA FCIPD RAF
This is the story of Henlow’s inception, from the early days of parachute testing, through the dark days of World War II to the cutting edge of communications and aviation medicine today.