

## **"RIVENHALL – THE HISTORY OF AN ESSEX AIRFIELD" POST WAR DEVELOPMENT**

*Note: This is extracted from the book "Rivenhall – The History of an Essex Airfield", written by B.A. Stait, in 1984 and published by Alan Sutton Publishing, Gloucester. The ISBN Number is 0 09509438 0 0. It is now out of print.*

With the end of hostilities the governments of the Western Powers were faced with the problem of what to do with the millions of displaced persons from all over Europe. The upheaval of vast numbers of Poles, Czechs and Slavs escaping from the fury of battle or enslavement by the Nazis had resulted in an enormous post-war problem. A decision was taken to group the various nationalities together in camps and in the local area this resulted in the disused buildings of Rivenhall being taken over and turned into "The Polish Camp". Polish Army personnel released from prison camps on the continent, arranged themselves into a strong community at Rivenhall where they were joined by their families and other Polish servicemen who were being demobilised from the armed forces.



The Aero Club shortly after completion in 1944. These buildings formed the Polish Camp site after the war.

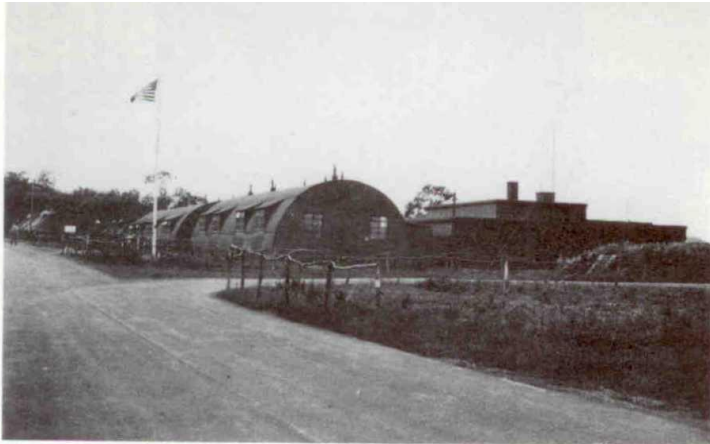
*Photo via C. de Coverley*



Trees and hedges show the passage of the years but the buildings remain much the same today.

*Photo B.A. Stait*

Over the years the Poles gradually became integrated into the East Anglian scene, marrying local girls and working alongside Essex workers in fields and factories. Some families emigrated to the Colonies with Government assistance and a number returned to Poland. By the mid 1950s the process of integration had been so successful that the need for the Polish Camp disappeared entirely and it was finally closed down.



The Stars and Stripes flies over the 397th H.Q. at Rivenhall. In the 1950's this became 'Wayfarers Camp', a home for the travellers of the road.

*Photo J. Snow*



Little external change is evident in this 1975 photograph.

*Photo B.A. Stait*

A bold social experiment took place in the early 1950s when the Essex County Council set up the Wayfarers' Hostel in the old station headquarters buildings at Rivenhall. This venture was intended to provide a semi-permanent base for the itinerant travellers in the area and appears to have operated successfully for about five to six years. Not much is known or written about concerning these years, but no doubt a future chronicler would find it an interesting subject for further research.

During this time the giant electronics firm of Marconi Ltd. had been looking around for a suitable site to expand their rapidly growing business in the field of communication systems. They first leased part of the airfield in 1956, gradually expanding over the years until by 1975 they had taken over all the old wartime buildings and the two hangars. The much vaunted "bush telegraph" system, used by the gentlemen of the road appears to have badly malfunctioned during this period, as many of them continued to turn up at the Wayfarers' Hostel long after it had been turned into a stores site by Marconi.

Rivenhall has occasionally been used since the Stirlings departed. Some time in the 1960s a Super Sabre F100 made an emergency landing on the only existing runway, fortunately it was the main one and still in fairly good condition. The pilot took off successfully later in the day.

The airfield's two short runways and the majority of the perimeter track and hard standings were broken up and used in the extensive road building programme which took place in the 1960s, and the land returned to agricultural use.



These wartime Nissen huts at the back of Sheepcote Farm are now used as a canteen for GEC Marconi workers. A 1975 photograph.

*Photo B.A. Stait*

The land which surrounded the airfield continued to be farmed by the various owners throughout the war with occasional help from the service personnel in their off duty moments. Manley Nelson was an instrument repair mechanic with the

599 R.S. and was a frequent visitor to Woodhouse Farm where his help was greatly appreciated by John Ambrose and his wife in the summer of 1944. The farm had been reduced from 270 to 50 acres by the building of the airfield. In 1980 when the author interviewed John Ambrose, he and his wife were just preparing to leave the farm which had been their home for fifty-five years. Still living with them was Florrie who had come to them in 1941 as a member of the Women's Land Army at the age of twenty two. The girls were another familiar sight in wartime Britain with their dark green sweaters, brown corduroy trousers and wide brimmed hats. Surely there cannot be many Land Army girls with a continuous service record of almost forty years! Manley Nelson now farms in Montana and, like farmers everywhere, complains at the price he gets for his wheat. He keeps in contact with friends in Kelvedon and still recalls the times he rode the tractor on Woodhouse Farm. Peter Baldock a navigator with 295 Sqdn. R.A.F., also helped at harvest times in 1945.

Scattered around the farm today are the rusting remains of wire mesh reinforcing matting, used originally for parking aircraft away from the concrete hard standing, now serving as useful fencing. Metal stands for servicing the aircraft and much other paraphernalia whose original purposes are obscure, are also still in evidence. Lying on a pile of rubbish and half covered with nettles, lies the metal post which once held aloft the windsock beside the control tower, long since

demolished. [Editor Note: In the early 1960's Marconi did consider purchase of the control tower for use as a demonstration facility (rather than Hut 28) but the distance from existing sensor sites was considered too great. It was later demolished].



A seven ton high speed tractor stands beside the control tower. On the right are the unfinished brick sheds which housed nitrogen and hydrogen bottles used for weather balloons. The tower was demolished in the 1960's.

Photo J. Snow

Anyone who had been stationed at Rivenhall would have great difficulty in locating the sleeping sites, mess halls or flight sheds, for in the majority of cases the smaller buildings have all been pulled down and in their place grow dense

undergrowth with an increasing rabbit population.

During the phenomenal summer of 1976 the



Type T2 hangar on the West side of the airfield, used for radar assembly and testing and much modified by GEC Marconi in the 1960's.

Photo GEC Marconi Ltd.

ponds and ditches surrounding the airfield became completely dried out, revealing for the first time for 30 years many interesting and potentially dangerous items. A team of Royal Engineers was called in to dispose of sonic much corroded smoke bombs, discovered by the author and

Ken Fisher. Less dangerous finds were parts of a Stirling undercarriage door and pieces of parachute dropping equipment.

Rivenhall is perhaps unique among East Anglian airfields in that many of wartime buildings have been preserved for use by the GEC-Marconi company Limited. How much longer it will serve to remind us of the sacrifices made by British and American aircrews who flew from its runways is a matter of conjecture. If ever the question of a third London airport is revived we may yet see Rivenhall reinstated on the list of possible sites, as it was at the time of the Maplin decision in the early 1970s.

In the meantime, there is an unusual memorial only discovered in the last few years. A visitor from the Royal Horticultural Society establishment at Wisley in Surrey, noticed some interesting plants near the hangar on the eastern side of the airfield. He identified several trees as a species known as Florida Oak and a large bush as a type of willow with straight stems used by the Navajo Indians to make arrow shafts.



Rivenhall today. Sheepcote Farm and T2 hangar in the late evening sun during the summer of 1982.

*Photo via C. de Coverley*

Neither the oak nor the willow is native to these shores and one can only speculate on their arrival in these foreign surroundings. In any event they provide us with a nice link with the wartime years when Rivenhall played its part in the great fight for freedom.