

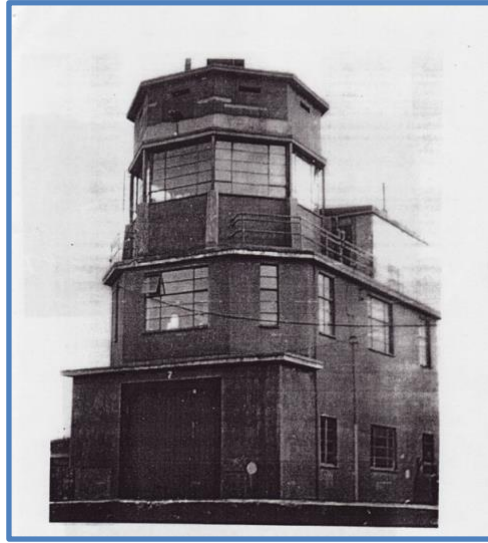
RAF Watchfield - The Airfield & Wireless Station

There is little to show that in the huge open area that is now partly occupied by the wind generators, there was once a lively airfield and an active RAF base. There is the odd clue still to be seen in some of the hedgerows and field entrances showing concrete bases and fence posts. On the Willington map of 1758, broadly speaking, the whole area between the Horse Common and the Cow Common was the airfield. Also broadly speaking, the alignment of the five wind generators that are present today was the direction of the main grass runway. It was just after the outbreak of World War II that Watchfield was considered for military use. The government had only a few years earlier in 1936, purchased the nearby Beckett estate for military use, this area today being the military academy.

It is not certain when or why the first aircraft landed at Watchfield but the A.J. Tricket Aircraft Development Company from London had two aircraft there in 1937. An Application for a Licence for Aerodrome was submitted to the Air Ministry for Watchfield to be named, Cub Airport. The Proprietor of the company was Anthony James Walter who had become the sole UK agent for the American Taylor that later became the aircraft known as Piper Cub. **(Below)** The airfield was granted a licence on 6th July 1939 for what had become known as Swindon (Watchfield) Aerodrome, and it stipulated the type of aircraft that might be used here for training purposes.



However, just two months later war was declared with Germany and there was an immediate cessation of all private and club flying throughout the UK imposed by the government. A very frustrated Mr Walter responded to the Air Ministry requesting permission to continue flying but it was declined. But things were to go from bad to worse for him when his airfield was requisitioned by the Air Ministry and extended in size. By July 1940 the airfield was known as RAF Watchfield and its main purpose was for the training of airmen. Below. Photos from RAF Watchfield circa 1940



The welcoming entrance to RAF Watchfield. (Squadron Leader G. M. Phillips, MBE.)



Documents in the National Archives (AIR29/615) show that No 3 Elementary Flying School moved from Hamble to Watchfield on 22 July 1940. The remainder of the aircraft were ferried to Watchfield on 22 July and in spite of the fact that no single building was completely ready for occupation, the school began operations on Monday 22 July 1940.

Other documents (AIR29/602) include details of the formation of the Blind Approach School, which would train air crews with a system of beacons on how to land aircraft with little visibility. This school was intended to form at Watchfield on 2 August 1940, but due to lack of equipment, it was postponed until 28 October 1940. The school was run as a Civilian operated unit, the operating company being Air Service Training Ltd (a subsidiary of the Hawker Siddeley Aircraft Co, Ltd). The commander of the school was Wing Commander H.F. Jenkins AFC and the Chief Flying Instructor was Flt Lieut E.H. Coleman.

Also, in addition to the Blind Approach School, an Elementary Flying Training School and Air Observer Navigation School were also operating from Watchfield Aerodrome and in the interests of safety, arrangements were made for the aircraft of these schools to be controlled from the Control Tower.

Among the notes within the logbooks of the Blind Approach School, some interesting snippets are to be found concerning the local area, especially weather conditions (AIR29/456). During the night of 19-20 January 1942, snow covered the runway to the depth of 8 inches. The log explained that it was necessary to clear the runway of snow to the length of 1200 yards by 75 yards width. They used 25 lorries and drivers from the Shrivenham Garrison together with a party of 200 men. During the afternoon of 20 January two Bunce type Snow Ploughs were received from the Makers (Bunces' of Ashbury) and one was fitted to a Fordson lorry. The snow was soon cleared.

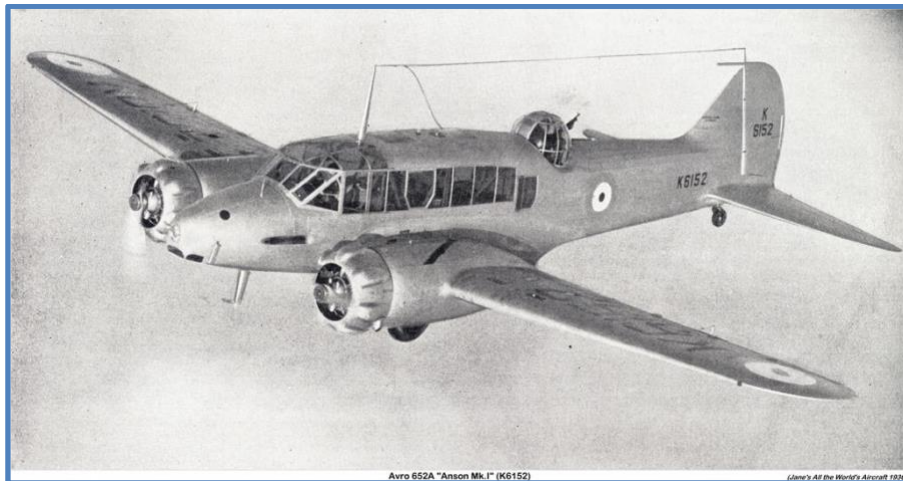
The operational records state the Beam (also called Blind) Approach School, was the first school in the RAF to undertake practical training in radio let-down procedure. The school grew in size. Original equipment used was Anson aircraft, but later changed to Oxfords and later still to both Oxfords and Harvards. Throughout the six years the school had been operating, just short of 100,000 hours have been flown in giving Beam Approach training, and approx 8,500 pupils had passed through.

The airfield at Watchfield was very much then a Training Airfield rather than a fighting field. There were no large weapons or ammunition dumps. Its role was to train the air and ground crews who would carry out fighting operations from other airfields. One of the most useful aerial activities taught here which proved so useful during that war was photography and reconnaissance. Thousands of men were trained in its use and consequently thousands of photos were taken of the area in and around Watchfield. The photo below is a good example.



The Air Base with its associated buildings can be seen bottom left of the photo
Courtesy of English Heritage (NMR) RAF photography.
Ref: RAF/106G/UK/1561. Frame 3353. 7th June 1946.

In April 1944 the Anson Detachment was formed that consisted of 50 Anson aircraft that could carry out light transport tasks, emergency freight, casualty evacuation. It was called the Anson Detachment so that its true purpose could not be recognized within the opening stages of Operation Overlord and the Normandy Landings, commonly known as the D-Day. Watchfield was chosen as the site was big enough to accommodate all the aircraft in one location along with all the personnel. **Below.** An Avro Anson and how RAF Watchfield may have looked at the preparations for Operation Overlord.



Avro 652A "Anson Mk. I" (K6152)

(Jane's All the World's Aircraft 1936)



Because most accidents and damage to aircraft occurred on landing in poor visibility, it was decided to form what was known as a '*Beam Approach School*.' Eventually there would be 40 or 50 of these schools but Watchfield was number 1. The system was based around a transmitter in a building that still stands today just off the Faringdon Road. Photo Below.



In the words of Flight Lieutenant Fred Guilmant, he described that, 'You had to be trained to ignore what the seat of your pants was telling you – the instruments were always right. Just do as you are told. Your life and the life of your crew depend upon you being calm and very collected in circumstances where you were fully entitled to be scared stiff.'

The photo above shows the building that housed the wireless equipment. Below shows the relationship to the runway two miles away, approx where the wind generators are today. In little or no visibility, the pilot picked up the signal in his headphones and was guided in. It took much training and very steady nerves.



The Instructors at Watchfield were the very best. There were times when the whole of the country was enveloped in thick fog and the only aircraft actually flying would be at Watchfield. Fred Guilmant said, '*the thicker the fog, the more our Instructor Pilots wanted to take off.*' The Beam Approach system was also used to train pilots for night landing which was to prove so valuable at airfields around the country through the war years.

The airfield at Watchfield was used as a base to teach military personnel many skills. More information and details are available on the Shrivenham Heritage Society Online Catalogue www.shrivenhamheritagesociety.co.uk

Before all traces of the Airfield were removed and the land handed back to the farmers, in August 1975 the government allowed the site to be used to host the '*Watchfield Free Festival*'. For a whole week the air was filled with rock music and thousands of festival-goers made a complete and utter mess of the site.



In March 2002 the late Flight Lieutenant, Fred Guilmant visited the site at Watchfield where he taught all those young airmen. It upset him to see that nothing remained and he was heard to ask that, "*Could not some small memorial be erected to show where we did our bit.*" The members of Shrivenham Heritage Society and many local people were determined to make his request happen.

On the 17th July 2019, many people gathered by the old camp gate to listen to a brief account of what had taken place at the airfield at Watchfield eighty years previously. Among the onlookers were military personnel, current and passed, and the members of the local Royal British Legion gave the whole occasion a pleasing air of dignity. Veteran Airman Alec Chambers, who had during his military career physically flown in and out of the airfield on active service, unveiled the Memorial Plaque. Passers-by may now read of where those brave men and women, '*Did their Bit.*'

