

Bovingdon - the post-war years

By John Puczynski



Aerial view of Bovingdon circa 1954 showing a wide range of RAF, USAF and civilian aircraft

Bovingdon, being close to London and various headquarters, had been in regular use as a transport hub for the USAAF throughout the war years. During September 1944 the USAAF precursor to the USAF Military Air Transport Service, Air Transport Command, moved its London terminal to Bovingdon. The aircraft of choice was the C-47 Dakota, operated by the 516th Tactical Carrier Group. The C-47 was to remain a feature of Bovingdon until the USAF relinquished use of the airfield in 1962. Customs and passenger facilities were put in place but parking was a problem until the end of the year when the US Navy showed an interest in developing Bovingdon and built two large aprons. These were the only major additions to the wartime airfield which, despite several expansion plans over the next 26 years, remained essentially in its original wartime guise throughout its life.

Large numbers of US personnel were repatriated back to the USA via Bovingdon and military and civilian VIPs were regular visitors as the rebuilding of Europe began. At one stage 16 flights a day were being scheduled to Orly. Other routes covered other European cities, including one which went via St Mawgan down to Marseille and on to Naples.



Handley Page Hermes IV still in partial BOAC colours and later used for trooping by Skyways and then by Air Safaris

The RAF returned to Bovingdon in April 1946 followed by various civilian operators but the intention at that time was to develop the airfield for civilian use. The Ministry of Civil Aviation took over the airfield on 1 July 1946 for retention on a long-term basis. Its initial use was as a temporary fourth airport for London and with the smogs then common in the London area, Bovingdon was regularly used for diversions from Heathrow and Northolt. BOAC and private operators also made use of Bovingdon for maintenance and passenger operations. Aviation Traders was formed by Freddie Laker at Bovingdon in 1947. This period proved to be very busy with modified Halifaxes, Tudors, Yorks, DC-3s and DC-4s being maintained at Bovingdon for use in the Berlin airlift.



FCCS apron with Hornet, Mosquitos and Ansons

Its proximity to Northwood and Bentley Priory led to the stationing of Fighter Command's Communication Squadron (FCCS) and Coastal Command's Communication Squadron at Bovingdon. A miscellany of aircraft types were used including Hornets, Meteors and Vallettas. Over the next few years various speed records were broken. On 25 November 1947 Sqn Ldr James Lomas set up a speed record in a Meteor 4 between Edinburgh (Turnhouse) and London (Bovingdon) of 617.6mph (30 min 25 secs). The point-to-point record between London and Gibraltar was set by Flt Lt Peebles in a Hornet Mk3 in 3 hrs. 3 mins. at 357mph. The return flight took only 2 hours 31 mins. The London (Bovingdon) to Amsterdam

(Schipol) point-to-point record was set by Lieutenant J.R.S. Overbury flying a Seahawk on the 29th July 1954 in 23 mins. 39 secs.



Successor to the B-29, the Boeing KB-50 on Bovingdon apron

Although the USAF had continued to use Bovingdon it was the blockade of Berlin that triggered the formation of the Third Air Division to support and control B-29 Superfortress units deployed to four East Anglian bases. The growing size and presence of US Air Force operations in the UK led to the creation of the Third Air Force, headquartered at South Ruislip, overseeing tactical air operations from the UK and supporting the rotation of Strategic Air Command units from the USA. To support the headquarters the 7531st Air Base Squadron was set up at Bovingdon on the 25th May 1951 and a new operations block was built in front of No.4 hangar to facilitate this new unit. The 1950s were a busy time with both civilian and military operators based at Bovingdon and a varied range of visitors adding to the traffic. Many of the independent airlines such as Skyways, Hunting-Clan and Airwork started life at Bovingdon.

January 1954 saw the tragic demise of the 17 passengers and crew of Valletta WJ474. After a game of rugby at Halton in the second round of the RAF Rugby Cup, the visiting team from Thorney Island had taken off from Bovingdon to return to Thorney, only to come down a few minutes later at Tom's Hill near Aldbury. The aircraft had taken off in a blinding snowstorm.

In March 1955, for the first time in its post-war history, Bovingdon handled no passengers for an entire month although freight passing through had reached 4,400 tons. There were over 1,300 movements that month.



C-54s and C-118s were regular visitors at Bovingdon customs

The USAF closed its MATS terminal at Burtonwood in 1958, moving it to Mildenhall, whilst the AC-47D aircraft of the Airways and Air Communications Service (AACS), used for navigation aid calibration, were moved initially to Speke and then to Bovingdon.



AC-47D of the USAF AACS at Bovingdon

Due to its proximity to London and its various headquarters, Bovingdon saw a stream of visiting NATO aircraft. The National Defence College at nearby Latimer also hosted conferences which attracted visitors from all over Europe. The USAF flew supply flights twice daily, initially using C-123 Providers or C-119 Packets and later C-130A Hercules. One Italian C-119 pilot called 'final to land' at Bovingdon but never appeared. It transpired later that he had landed at Westcott!!



Italian Air Force C-119 Packet at Bovingdon 1957 (Bernard Martin)

The 1957 Sandys Defence White Paper proposed a radical shift in defence thinking by ending the use of manned aircraft in favour of missile technology. Britain had its own MRBM programme based on the Blue Streak missile and Bovingdon was chosen alongside the nearby RAF Chenuis as an ideal site for underground silos. Compulsory purchase orders were put in place to extend the airfield estate but the project was later cancelled because it did not have credibility as a deterrent. Though later Ministers reversed the policy, the lost orders and cuts in research were responsible for several aircraft manufacturers going out of business at that time.

Although display visitors were not uncommon, Bovingdon only hosted one major air display, in 1960. It proved very popular judging by the traffic jams for miles around. As an enthusiastic 13-year old I remember crawling over a Shackleton MR3 of 201 Sqn. I can still recall the 'smell of aviation' today!!

Shortly after 'The War Lover' was made the USAF left Bovingdon as part of the 1960s US drawdown. Large-scale rotational bomber deployments to Britain were also halted and other airfields such as Sculthorpe and Greenham Common were returned to the Air Ministry.



How low can you get? – John Crewdson during the filming of 'The War Lover'



The 1960 Bovingdon 'Armed Forces Day' display

The post-war years saw some interesting filming activities. The airfield and associated buildings had remained substantially untouched since the 1940s and were the ideal setting for a series of war films that were made. The first of these was in 1958 when Bovingdon was used for a film called 'The lady takes a flyer'. Apparently it gives a good account of a GCA talkdown (now called a PAR). The next and possibly most well-known film was 'The War Lover' starring Steve McQueen. The film has a pretty weak story but some excellent flying sequences (check out YouTube - http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ewi-bPXFo_M) including the low pass made by John Crewdson who flew the aircraft in between two of the hangars. Crewdson was later to be killed in 1982, flying a helicopter during filming sequences. If one looks carefully at the low-flying sequence one or two non-WW2 aircraft are visible including a USAF C-97 Stratofreighter. In the picture shown with this piece you may notice a Varsity taxiing out to Rwy24.

Bovingdon had by now reverted to primarily RAF use and in 1963 Bomber Command communications aircraft were moved from Booker to Bovingdon. By this time the only jet operating regularly out of Bovingdon was the Fouga Magister belonging to the French air attaché. At one time several Meteors, including the last Meteor built, an NF14 WS848, were used by FCCS which now became part of the Southern Communications Squadron, and part of Transport Command. The stalwart Anson plodded on as the Squadron introduced the new Beagle B206 into service. Joining the Ansons, Devons and Pembrokes, the Beagle never found great popularity. Carrying senior officers in the back overlooking your every move was a retrograde step from the existing aircraft in the fleet.



The last Meteor built, an NF14 WS848

It was also said about the Beagle B206 that on a hot day it only had sufficient range to do a couple of

circuits and landings had to be smooth as prop clearance was only a few inches!!



A Beagle B206 in RAF livery

The sound of Merlin engines again resounded around Bovingdon in 1964 when it was used to film '633 Squadron'. Some amazing low-flying sequences were flown by Neil Williams but don't appear to have been included in the film. A sequel, 'Mosquito Squadron', was filmed 5 years later, shortly before the airfield was relinquished by the RAF.

Bovingdon can also be found featuring in the Avenger's episode 'The hour that never was'.



The end of a day's flying and the end of an era. Bovingdon shortly before it closed.

Flying ceased at Bovingdon in January 1969 when the Southern Communications Squadron was renamed Strike Command Communications Squadron and moved to Northolt. It was later to be renamed 207 Squadron. The hangars had only recently been refurbished, as had the heating system, but the Air Force was becoming too small to support two London airfields and Northolt was chosen in preference to Bovingdon. Unfortunately no other users could be found, partially due to the main runway being only 1500m in length. Considerable investment was going into Luton and in 1978 Bovingdon was

eventually sold off, the technical site to be developed into a prison, and its ICAO code of EGWX passed to Northwood.



US aircraft continued to visit Bovingdon throughout the 1960s.

The Bovingdon story would not be complete, however, without mention of the filming of 'Hanover Street' starring Harrison Ford. Five B-25 Mitchells were assembled and flown to Bovingdon in 1978 before the prison was built and the concrete from the aprons dumped next to the main runway so flying could no longer take place.



Filming of 'Hanover Street' in 1978



The final flypast of Ansons shortly before RAF Bovingdon closed and the Anson left RAF service.

Bovingdon village is to the right with the technical site, including hangars 1 and 2, on the left.

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