

*Dunse History Society Lecture - David McLean - Charterhall Aerodrome in WWII.*

The Dunse History Society was entertained and greatly informed about 'Charterhall Aerodrome in World War II' by David McLean to over 70 attendees on 25 September. Now a quiet corner of Berwickshire Charterhall was a very busy site during WWII. By 1939 the UK had the most developed RADAR in the world located all around the coast up to the Western Highlands. This allowed night vision and aircraft later had small RADARs fitted. This required pilots and navigators to be trained for night flying. About 12 UK air stations specialised in training including No 54 Operational Training Unit, RAF Charterhall located between Duns, Greenlaw and Coldstream and RAF Winfield near Greenlaw. Charterhall was a training airfield and not militarily active. Berwickshire was far enough north to avoid German air attack, less prone to fog and near the sea to allow training and live firing. Two runways were built at Charterhall on land requisitioned from the Trotter family. Taking 7 months to build the airfield was active for 3 years from early May 1942. Almost 2000 personnel, including WAAF, were housed on the site in a small village of Nissen huts which were spread out to minimise damage from air attack. A Nissen hut still survives. Aside from staff accommodation the site included a post office, showers, stores, hairdresser, shoemaking, a medical centre and sick quarters. In addition there was an instructional site for lectures and simulations, a defence site and a contractors site for storage and repairs. The site had 4 Bellman hangars with Bristol Aviation staff (most of the planes were Bristol Aviation made) scattered over the airfield and 2 are still visible, plus several Blister hangars. Pilots and navigators from all over the Commonwealth were given 3 months training in night flying and navigation relying completely on instruments, with a new class starting every month. Over 1000 aircrew went through Charterhall. Charterhall was provided with used aircraft, mostly Blenheim Bombers and Beaufighters and thus the training was with worn out planes. Charterhall became infamous for fatalities and nicknamed Slaughterhall. A Total of 51 fatal accidents with 81 fatalities (excluding ground staff) occurred, many on runways, 15 on the airfield and 11 during firing over the North Sea. Thus a death every fortnight and with 336 total accidents over 3 years equivalent to one every 3 days. Many are buried in a Commonwealth War Graves site at Fogo church. A notable death was Flight Lieutenant Richard Hillary, a Battle of Britain ace. One runway is now kept operational to take small aircraft and the perimeter road became a motor racing circuit for Formula 2 cars and motor cycles until 1964 and rallying ceased 10 years ago. The RAF left in 1947 with the land returned to the Trotter family for agricultural use.

Donald Ritchie

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