



# A Brief History of R A F Honington

## Part 1 - 1935 >1942, Construction and RAF Bomber Command in WWII

The story of R.A.F Honington probably begins at the end of the First World War and the subsequent Versailles Treaty whereby the Allies imposed severe restrictions and crippling demands for war reparations on Germany and its defeated citizens. This Treaty was the seed that eventually brought forth the rise of the National Socialist German Workers Party – led from 1921 until the end of the Second World War by a decorated veteran of WWI, the Austrian-born Adolf Hitler. Under his leadership the Party grew, preying on the mood of the population that had been humiliated as much by the Treaty as by defeat in the preceding war. The cry to re-take the Rhineland, provide room for expansion, and rebuild the military and to make Germany ‘great’ again led to the surge in his popularity and that of the Party which he led.



The ‘drum-beating’ in Germany caused ringing of alarm bells around Europe – but most people were not listening! One, who was, however, was the politician Winston Churchill - a believer in the Roman philosophy, “If you want peace, then prepare for war”. Churchill spoke long and often in Parliament about the need for military expansion in Britain to counter the threat posed by a resurgent Germany and the doctrine by which it was being led. On one such occasion as he was speaking of the need for more air defence, he was interrupted by a ‘back-bencher’ who asked “How much is enough?” Churchill responded that the question reminded him of a man who received a telegram informing him: “Your mother-in-law dead. Send instructions.” The man, Churchill said, immediately telegraphed back: “Embalm, cremate and bury at sea. Take no chances.” Once Britain ‘woke up’ to the threat being posed to Britain and Europe as a whole, so began the so-called ‘Expansion Period’ – and the origins of R.A.F. Honington.



Construction of what was to become R.A.F. Honington was commenced in 1935 by John Laing and Son and many of the original buildings still survive. As was the custom in those days, it was to be a purely grass airfield with no concrete runways – these would come much later. Honington was assigned to 3 Group, Bomber Command and the facility was opened on 3<sup>rd</sup> May, 1937. In the period leading up to the outbreak of the Second World War, Honington was host to a motley collection of obsolete inter-war bombers flown by a variety of squadrons.



*As far as I can discern, the aerial photo above was taken soon after construction and it ties in quite accurately with a site plan I have which is dated 1939.*

*Compare this with other aerial photos which will appear later in the story.*



Resident aircraft between July 1937 and July 1938 were single-engine Hawker Hart biplanes and Vickers Wellesley monoplanes – light bombers of No. 77 Squadron. Joining them during that period was No.102 Squadron with their Handley Page Heyford twin-engine, open cockpit, bi-plane ‘heavy’ bombers. (The term ‘heavy’ when discussing the Heyford is merely relative to the mid 1930’s – it was designed to carry a bomb load of 1600 lbs. Compare this to the 22,000 lb



‘Grand Slam’ bombs carried by the Avro Lancaster later in the war!) For the next year, Honington was occupied by Nos. 75 and 215 Squadrons with their Handley Page Harrows – *slightly* more modern, twin-engine monoplane heavy bombers.

Of all the resident aircraft so far mentioned, only the Wellesley had retractable undercarriage but perhaps of more significance here is the fact that its structure was of a geodesic design (a lattice framework covered by fabric) which the designer Barnes Wallis, (of Dambuster 'bouncing-bomb' fame), first used in constructing the R100 airship. This design was used in Wallis's next aircraft the Vickers Wellington which was to become the mainstay of Bomber Command for the first half of the war. Known affectionately as the 'Wimpey' after the character 'J Wellington Wimpey' who appeared in early Popeye cartoons, it was much-loved by ground and aircrews alike for its robustness and 11,461 were built in 18 different Marks and with 4 different engine designs. IX Squadron brought the Wellington to Honington in February 1939 and with which they went to war.



....and they didn't have long to wait! War was declared on 3<sup>rd</sup> September and the following day Wellingtons of IX Squadron took off from Honington for one of the first RAF bombing raids of the war. Along with Wellingtons of 149 Squadron from Mildenhall, they targeted German Naval vessels at Brunsbüttel - situated at the mouth of the Elbe River and the western portal of the Kiel Canal. Whilst sources appear to vary, it would appear that IX Squadron aircraft were the *first* to hit the enemy, the *first* to get into a dogfight, possibly the *first* to shoot down an enemy aircraft – and the *first* to *be* shot down when two were hit by German Messerschmidt Me109 fighters.

The early months of Honington's war, and that of most of Bomber Command, was largely restricted to attacking naval vessels - but they had to be in open water rather than moored in harbour or where there was a risk of civilian casualties. Consequently many raids were aborted when the crews were unable to bomb 'safely' either due to the location of the targets or because of poor visibility in the target area. However, there was no such restriction on being shot at! Many aircraft were lost by Bomber Command whilst on aborted raids – which did nothing for morale.

In the early part of the war, bombing raids were conducted in daylight for ease of navigation and target location and it was felt that the bombers could 'fend off' attacks by enemy fighters – although some losses were to be expected! During December, three operations were launched by Bomber Command that would have far-reaching effects of the philosophy of daylight bombing. On the 3<sup>rd</sup>, twenty four Wellingtons took off from East Anglian bases to bomb warships off Heligoland and returned unscathed, but without bombing, despite

frenzied attacks by enemy fighters. This gave the Bomber Command chiefs an encouraging but totally false and misleading sense of security. On 14<sup>th</sup> December, twelve Wellingtons were ordered to attack the cruisers Nurnberg and Leipzig – this raid was a total disaster! No damage inflicted on the ships but 5 aircraft were shot down with another crash-landing at Newmarket. This fiasco did nothing to dent the chief's belief in the principle of unescorted daylight bombing – they blamed the losses on flak, (anti-aircraft fire), despite the fact that the crews had used up all their ammunition in fighting off attacks by Me109s! Thus, orders were posted for another raid on the 18<sup>th</sup> in which nine Wellingtons left Honington and joined up with a further fifteen from Feltwell and Mildenhall to attack warships in the Schillig Roads, off the north-west coast of Germany. The ships were deemed to be too close to land to be attacked and the raid was again aborted but the aircraft had been subjected to intense flak and, on turning for home, were set upon by a large formation of Me109 and Me110 fighters in a ferocious, but brief, running battle which resulted in the loss of ten Wellingtons. A further two ditched in the North Sea and another three crash-landed at various airfields near the coast. Of the nine which departed Honington that day only two returned.



In addition to the fallibility of unescorted daylight bombing, these disasters highlighted a major shortcoming of the Wellington. Whilst its geodetic construction made it immensely strong and able to withstand a lot of punishment, it lacked armour-plating and self-sealing fuel tanks – most of the Wellingtons lost on the 18<sup>th</sup> had gone down in flames. From now on IX Squadron, along with their comrades in Bomber Command, would operate at night. It is worth noting here that Air Marshal (Lord) Trenchard, viewed as the founder of the RAF as an independent force, once remarked that “Only bats and bloody fools fly at night!” As a ‘tongue in cheek’ riposte, the emblem of IX Squadron is a bat with the motto “Per Noctem Volumus” – (“We Fly Through the Night”).



The limited bombing campaign, (no land-based targets), continued into 1940 and up until the German invasions of France and the Low Countries – then the gloves finally came off. On the night of May 15<sup>th</sup>/16<sup>th</sup> 1940, ninety nine aircraft attacked industrial targets in the Ruhr valley and such raids were to continue throughout the remainder of the war with IX

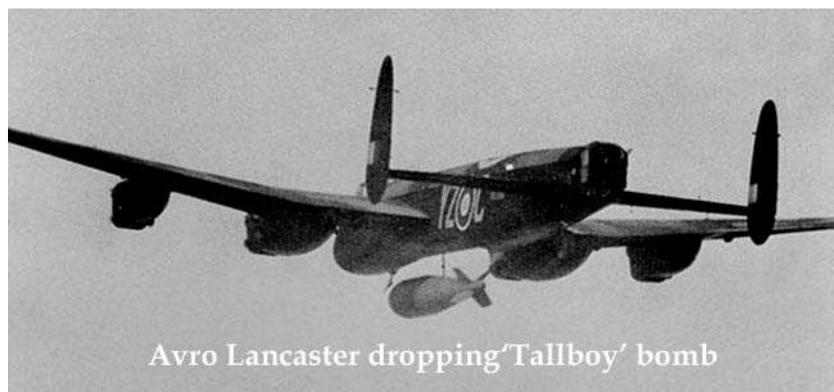
Squadron aircraft from Honington being involved in many of them – including raids as far afield as Turin and Milan in Italy – and missions to such places as Cologne and Hamm became almost routine.

In July 1940, a new Squadron was formed at Honington – 311 Squadron was made up of Czech aircrew who had escaped their homeland when the Germans invaded and found their way to England to continue the fight. Much of their training was carried out at East Wretham airfield which was a ‘satellite’ station to Honington and they took up permanent residence there that September. 311 Squadron became the first Allied Squadron to fly operationally in Bomber Command and were the only Czech Squadron in the Command. Other Squadrons to have brief stays at Honington around this time were Nos. 103 and 105 who arrived in June 1940 with their Fairey Battle light bombers after taking a mauling as part of the British Expeditionary Force in France. They left the following month – 103 to Newton, near Nottingham, and 105 to Watton – the latter with new Bristol Blenheim aircraft. 214 Squadron with their Wellingtons had a week’s ‘vacation’ at Honington from their base at Stradishall during January 1942.

Meanwhile, IX Squadron continued to operate from Honington and during 1942 was involved in most of the major raids including the ‘firestorm’ raids against Lubeck and Rostock in March and April before being in the leading formation for the ‘1,000 bomber raid’ on Cologne on the night of 30<sup>th</sup>/31<sup>st</sup> May. The Squadron carried out its final mission of the war from Honington on the night of 31<sup>st</sup> July/1<sup>st</sup> August when it bombed Dusseldorf. During almost three years of operations, the Squadron had mounted 272 bombing missions for the loss of 66 aircraft – a loss rate of 2.8% which, considering the missions flown and the period of the war in which they flew them was more than respectable.

(As an ‘aside’ here, two IX Squadron Wellingtons were involved in a local mid-air collision on 30<sup>th</sup> October 1939 and all crew died – five of whom are buried in Honington churchyard. In 1982/3 volunteers from the ‘Norfolk and Suffolk Aviation Museum’ at Flixton recovered considerable remains of one of the aircraft, L4288, from marshy ground near Sapiston, and which has subsequently been restored to form a centrepiece of their Bomber Command exhibition.)

IX Squadron moved to Waddington where they re-equipped with the new Avro Lancaster and with which they went on to achieve even greater fame as, along with No. 617 ‘Dambusters’, they formed two specialist Squadrons attacking ‘precision targets’ with the 12,000lb ‘Tallboy’



Avro Lancaster dropping ‘Tallboy’ bomb

bomb – including the sinking of the German battleship, ‘Tirpitz’, in Tromso fjord, Norway.

Even when Squadron aircrew were shot down and captured they were still a thorn in the flesh of the enemy being leading characters in the 'Great Escape' and in Colditz prison camp. This is not the last we will hear of IX Squadron in this series as they will return to Honington in 1982 with Tornados – but that comes later.

In the next instalment we look at the 1942 to 1946 period when the 'Stars and Stripes' flew over Honington.

## **"The Yanks are coming!"**