

The American Aerodrome in Rustington

By

J GREEN

In 1911 the Census recorded 973 people living in Rustington. In 1921 it had increased to 1,128. What this statistic does not show is that 15,000 North American servicemen and a further contingent of skilled workers came to the UK in 1918 to construct aerodromes and receive pilot training along the south coast of England. An Agreement had been reached between the US and British governments in which the United States undertook the task of flying night time raids on Germany using Handley Page bombers¹. This plan to carry out night time bombing with the Americans joining the war effort seemed to be part of a big push to force a change.

One of the aerodromes was on 159 acres of land in Rustington stretching from Ash Lane to Pigeon House Lane and to the north and south of Station Road². US personnel left in November 1918 as soon as the Armistice was signed without one bomb dropped in a raid on Germany. Over those few months of intense activity Rustington aerodrome was very nearly completed but the ending of the war meant that the site never reached full operational status. In a memo signed by the US Air-Service Chief of Night Bombardment Section, it was noted that on 20 November 1918 hangars were 75% built, the Handley Page building 80%, the field 60%, living quarters 90%, regimental institute 90%, lavatories 90% and the remaining buildings 40%³. The hangars were designed for aircraft erection and repair. The buildings at Rustington had a span of 75 ft and were 408 ft long. The aerodrome was served by a railway branch line so that the bombers could be transported in crated parts to be assembled at Rustington in the 'sheds' at the training Depot⁴. A siding off the London & Brighton and South Coast Railway was also constructed connecting to Angmering Station⁵. LB & SCR were under government control during the war.

A hundred years on and it is hard to comprehend the underlying decision making that brought American airmen to Rustington. In this respect it might be useful for some background information to understand the context in which these events happened and what contributed to the outcome.

The south coast has always been vulnerable to attack. It was also an ideal location for the development of a modern form of warfare close to the action and flat – ideal for airfields. Germany had started using fighter planes able to fire machine guns through the propellers which replaced Zeppelin style airships⁶. Governments looked to the sky as a new theatre of war with the development of more powerful engines for bombers able to carry heavier bomb loads.

The US entered the war in 1917⁷. Prior to this the American Government under the leadership of its President, Woodrow Wilson, had been following a neutral policy of blockades and mediation. Public opinion in the US was divided about support for the war effort because many Americans were European immigrants. American loss of life in the Atlantic and disruption to merchant shipping caused by German U-boat attacks was one of the contributory factors that tipped the balance. The application of aircraft technology to boost the Allies' campaign could transform the situation being experienced by those wretched soldiers in the trenches. The inclusion of American resources and energy, coupled with the burgeoning aircraft technology was seen as a route out of the impasse.

In the UK the British Air Board had decided upon a policy of night time bombing of German cities further behind the Western Front. This was in response to German daylight attacks on south-east England and London, followed in September 1917 when the Germans switched to night time bombing⁸. The air section of the Royal Navy (RNAS) had already been successfully using twin engine Handley Page O/100s on raids. The bigger British made O/400s had Rolls-Royce Eagle V111 twin-engines on a three-bay biplane. They could carry a crew of four or five and, more importantly, a much larger bombing capacity. The larger aircraft able to carry out night time bombing were found to be more strategically and economically favourable⁹.

So it was that US Air Services pilots and gunners were sent to complete their training on O/400s in Britain because British expertise was already well advanced. Once the planes were assembled they could then fly from English shores and massively increase the offensive from the air.

The Handley Page Agreement between the governments of the United States and Britain was signed on 26 January 1918 after much discussion and negotiation in which the United States agreed to fabricate and supply parts for the Handley Page Bombers which would then be sent to Britain to be assembled into unit parts in factories in Oldham by British workers. The Agreement also committed the US to send labourers to construct aerodromes¹⁰.

Rustington was one of five sites chosen. The official address was:

The Bombardment Section in England
American Construction Detachment ASCC
Rustington AF Training Depot
Rustington
Sussex

The other sites – Ford Junction, Tangmere and Emsworth (Southbourne) were controlled from the Chichester area American Construction Detachment. Goring was subsequently considered inappropriate as an airfield. In order for the US to meet its contractual duties to build the five aerodromes, it was agreed that a further 3,000 skilled labourers should be sent – bricklayers, carpenters and levellers – arriving over the months of April, May and June 1918 in addition to 15,000 American mechanics who were to be trained in Britain. The US had established Headquarters for its American Aviation Base Section in London at Eaton Place, SW1 in order to facilitate the speedy and efficient running of the Agreement¹¹.

In preparation for the laying down of the grass runway in Rustington which was to run from north to south, it was necessary to demolish two old flint cottages on the south side of Station Road and some brick kilns. The area concerned is now known as the Sea Estate. Road access was from where Preston Avenue is now situated and the siding from the railway came nearest to the Parkway, crossing Station Road to serve the aerodrome.

The object of the Agreement was to build enough planes to serve 30 squadrons¹². It was a mutually beneficial arrangement in which not only the American factories were able to fill their order books but the US military was also able to acquire training and, in return, the declining textile industry in Oldham could use its local labour, as well as massively boost air power, all in the cause of the Allies' war effort.

Delays, however, were experienced from the start as parts failed to arrive and materials were in short supply. The Agreement specified that the unit parts made in America were to be conveyed to the training depots for final assembly. There was a hold up, due to U-boat attacks, in the delivery of fabricated parts from the US as plane parts, motors and large wing sections were not always shipped in time from the US factory to the textile mills in Oldham¹³. If the war had continued the Americans would have contributed up to 1,500 Handley Page O/400 bombers built with Liberty engines by the Standard Aircraft Corporation at a factory in the US in Elizabeth, New Jersey. Overall the Handley Page bombers made a large contribution to the final months of the war. They enabled the newly formed Royal Air Force to focus on strategic bombing because of their night bombing capacity. Some 476 O/400s are recorded as being delivered to the RAF at the end of the war¹⁴.

The Handley Page O/400 series bombers were biplanes made of metal, wood and fabric¹⁵. Flight was truly in its infancy. The fact that there was an aerodrome in Rustington in 1918 throws up so many questions which are so complex. It could easily be the subject of much deeper research than can be achieved here.

How were, for example, decisions made at the highest levels of government and what influenced those decisions? At a local level how was land requisitioned for the purpose of building the aerodromes? How did the local services deal with such a large influx of people needing feeding and watering and generating so much waste? How did they organise the transportation of people and materials?

There is also the effect upon the local residents. It is difficult to know as no-one living at that time is around to inform us about the Americans who came to Rustington. There is no direct mention of the presence of the American servicemen in the local Rustington parish magazine 'Scribble'¹⁶ though flying accidents are reported of airmen from other areas crashing in the vicinity¹⁷. It was, however, mentioned that the War Agricultural Committee of West Sussex County Council served a Notice on a local farmer in December 1917 with a request 'not to interfere with the surface of 130 acres of arable land'. A protest was laid before the Air Board¹⁸.

In the local newspapers of the time it was reported in the West Sussex Gazette under the headline 'The 4th of July' that a crowd of 4,000-5,000 gathered to watch 120 American troops stationed at Rustington take part in Independence Day celebrations in Worthing. Captain Neumiller, Commander of the Construction Corp stationed in Rustington made a speech in Worthing in which he said that there were over one million US soldiers already in the United Kingdom and more to come. A planned circling by American airmen overhead

was cancelled due to circumstances¹⁹. The airmen were later conveyed by big army motor lorries to Rustington to continue the festivities where an American-style sports event took place. The Littlehampton Observer describes a baseball game at the aerodrome between an Aero Squadron from another training depot and one of the construction companies from the Rustington aerodrome, resulting in a win for the visiting team by seven runs to three. Real ice cream was provided at the YMCA hut with over 200 gallons made²⁰. Later in the day flying stunts were performed by the American airmen and the whole event was rounded off with a concert²¹. It must have been a day to remember. The American visitors were able to celebrate the 4th of July in England and

Rustington children could watch airplanes performing amazing stunts, learn about American sport and experience, probably for the first time, the joy of eating ice-cream and it happened all in one day.

The Handley Page Agreement was stopped abruptly the day after the signing of the Armistice. Two of the thirty squadrons proposed completed their training programme in England. More trained personnel could have been used had the planes been ready²². There then followed a major evacuation of the US personnel leaving behind the buildings stripped to their shells. But some things were left behind which caused a spectacular fire display. Some lads found Verry pistol flares on the airfield which were lit at the bonfire celebrations for the Armistice with devastating results. A thatched barn burnt down but it was a lively show for the spectators²³.

Four of the hangars were sold to Wm Osborne & Co Ltd, boat builders, and erected as warehouses along the east bank of the river Arun in Littlehampton. The last of them was demolished in 2000 to make way for the development of the river bank²⁴.

Interest in the Handley Page Company and the O/400 continues to this day and a quick search on the internet produces information about various associations run by dedicated followers of these early planes²⁵. The airfields and their buildings are also the subjects of research by enthusiasts²⁶.

This event is barely known about now and there is very little evidence left behind. One or two houses still on the now long ago developed Sea Estate started life as US Air Services buildings²⁷ and railway lines remain buried. Even the odd ancient looking peanut husk with nut still rattling inside turns up in our gardens but maybe that is old bird food and cannot seriously be regarded as an archaeological find. It does set the imagination going, however, thinking about these men working here, how they got here, who they were, what they did whilst here, what relationships were forged between them and with our community; even how they were entertained.

The plan to build night time bombers with such a complex supply line, involving two countries divided by an ocean, in the context of a war that had spread across the world, fought on land and at sea, was truly audacious.



¹ *The US Air Service in World War 1, Vol 1 'The Final Report and a Tactical History'* (Edited by Maurer Maurer) p 85 The report which looked at all air activities in Europe during the First World War was written by Assistant Chief of Staff, American Expeditionary Forces, Col Edgar S Gorrell and his staff and can be viewed online at <http://www.afhso.af.mil/booksandpublications/titleindex.asp> in the index under 'The US Air Service in World War 1 Series', December 2013

² M. Taylor, '*This was Rustington Series No 3 Rustington in Times of War*' (December 1981) p.61 'Rustington Handley Page Aerodrome American Airforce Training Depot 1918 Site Plan'

Mary Taylor BEM, our local historian, has researched extensively on this subject and I am indebted for her and her husband Beverley for their assistance.

³ Taylor, *Rustington in Times of War* , p. 8

⁴ For further information and pictures search online on www.airfieldinformationexchange.org under FWW Aerodrome Buildings – Handley Page Sheds, December 2013

⁵ MP/1704– Plans of RFC Airfields at West Sussex Record Office

⁶ D. Stevenson, '*1914-1918 – The History of the First World War*' (Penguin Books, 2012), p. 190-192 Stevenson writes that in 1915 Roland Garros (French) solved the problem of machine guns firing through propeller blades by synchronizing the firing system but the Germans got hold of the invention. Fokker planes held the advantage 1915-16 then the Allies shot a Fokker down and captured the technology. Stevenson cites G. Hartcup '*The War of Invention: Scientific Developments 1914-18*' (London 1988)

⁷ Stevenson, '*1914-1918 – The History of the First World War*' p. 310-319

⁸ F.K. Mason, '*The British Bomber Since 1914*' (Putnam's British Aircraft) 31 December 1994 p. 92-95

⁹ Mason , *The British Bomber Since 1914*' p 94

The Handley Page experience was a major influence on the future development of the bombing strategy of both the US Strategic Air Command and the RAF which was formed on the first of April 1918 by Lord Trenchard. The 0/100s and 0/400s continued to operate alongside each other for the duration of the war.

I am indebted to John Land, ex RAF and aviation historian, who supplied me with background reading on the Handley Page 0/400 bomber ('*Action Stations*', '*The British Bomber since 1914*' and '*Handley Page: A History*')

¹⁰ *The US Air Service in World War 1 Vol 1*, p. 85

¹¹ Taylor, *Rustington in Times of War*' p. 2-8

¹² Taylor '*Rustington in Times of War*' p. 2-8

¹³ *The US Air Service in World War 1*, p.86 See the Handley Page Flow Sheet

¹⁴ A. Dowsett, '*Handley Page: A History*' (Tempus 2003) p. 41-42

¹⁵ To view an image go online 'picture of Handley Page 0/400 bombers'

¹⁶ *Scribble*, West Sussex Record Office

¹⁷ *Scribble*, Vol 1 No 6, Vol 2 No 2

¹⁸ *Scribble*, Vol 2 No 3 December 1917 p. 16, headlined 'We Hear...'

¹⁹ *West Sussex Gazette* 10 July 1918, West Sussex Record Office

²⁰ *Littlehampton Observer*, 10 July 1918 ‘America’s Day at Littlehampton – Independence Day Celebration’, West Sussex Record Office

²¹ Taylor, ‘*Rustington in Times of War*’ p. 11

²² *The US Air Service in World War I*, p. 86

²³ Taylor, *Rustington in Times of War*’ p. 14

²⁴ H. Clark, ‘*Past Times: Roads, Railways and Runways – A village Walk in Rustington*’. (A series of occasional publications by Rustington Heritage Association No 3)

²⁵ The Handley Page Association

²⁶ WW1 Airfields in England

²⁷ Taylor, ‘*Rustington in Times of War*’ p. 9