

ANDOVER'S LANCASTERS

Lecture given to Andover Archaeology and Local History Society on 23 February 1996.

When I read in John Spall's 'Andover - A Historical Portrait'

"...into which leads Lancaster Close, named after the bomber aircraft of 1939-45. The logbooks of two Lancaster aircraft which were paid for by the Wings for Victory campaign in Andover rest in the archives."

I knew I had found a subject which could combine Local History research with my interest in R.A.F. Bomber Command and in particular Lancaster bombers. I made some enquiries and Tony Raper kindly introduced me to Mr Norman Ling, who had done some basic research on the aircraft using the R.A.F. Squadron records held in the Public Record Office at Kew. Since then I have been delving away in Kew when I can and tonight present some of the fruits of my research.

During the Second World War the Government lead National Savings Campaign ran various drives to raise much needed funds for the war effort. As with all communities, large and small, Andover was involved in these.

In 1940, with R.A.F. Fighter Command keeping the Luftwaffe at bay in the skies overhead the savings drive, held in August and September 1940 was for the Spitfire Fund. £5,000 was raised, enough to purchase a Spitfire. A Mark Vb Spitfire, serial AD 204 was duly allocated as the town's gift, and named "The Andoverian". The history of this aircraft has been ably told by Mr Ling in "Johnnie Spitfire", available from the Andover Museum.

In 1941 War Weapons Week was held in May 1941, and raised the much larger total of £204,026, for munitions in general. In 1942 it was the Navies turn, 'Warship Week', held in March 1942 raised £214,467 and the town then adopted H.M.S. Nestor, a 'N' class destroyer launched in July 1940. Unfortunately it was a short association, as Nestor was bombed and sunk in the Mediterranean on 15 June 1942.

In 1944 with the invasion of Europe, and a major land battle with the Germans in prospect it was 'Salute the Soldier Week' in June 1944, and the sum of £229,611 was raised. But in 1943 the invasion was some way off, and though the Empire was fighting the German armies in Africa it was only R.A.F. Bomber Command which was capable of taking the war to the soil of Germany itself. So for 1943 the National Savings effort was 'Wings for Victory' to raise funds to supply the R.A.F. with aircraft. Smaller communities were set targets of raising enough to provide a fighter or two, Andover was set a target of five Lancaster bombers, £200,000.

The campaign started quietly in January 1943, with fortnightly advertisements appearing in the 'Andover Advertiser', encouraging War Savings, and emphasising the R.A.F.'s contribution to the war effort. As the 'Wings for Victory' week grew nearer the advertisements became weekly, and more specific.

News of the forthcoming campaign was obviously passed down to the local National Savings Committees, and on 2nd April 1943 an Andover "Wings for Victory" committee was set up, with the Mayor, Counsellor Bell as the Chairman, Mr L. Hoton, of Lloyds Bank as treasurer, Mr F. Sherwood as Secretary and Mr H. Broadbridge as Publicity Officer. They organised a grand week of celebrations, and publicised this in the 'Andover Advertiser'.

Different communities held their "Wings for Victory" week at different times. Andover's was sent to last from Saturday 22nd May to Sunday 30th.

Saturday 22nd saw the grand opening of the campaign. The Guildhall had been suitably decorated with paintings by Mr H. Hasling, and on a platform outside stood a Spitfire. Further down the street were an R.A.F. Seaplane Tender, an airfield beacon, a bomb trolley, and a German aircraft which had been shot down. The meeting was addressed by Mayor Bell, and by Air Marshal Donald, Commander in Chief of R.A.F. Maintenance Command. After his address a 1,000 strong parade of the services was held, and a Lancaster bomber flew over the town three times at 400', on the last time being accompanied by six fighters. Alas, the R.A.F. cannot repeat this today as the Battle of Britain Memorial flight has one Lancaster, but only five fighters. During the ceremony the Indicator had been unveiled, it was in the shape of a dropping bomb and marked the sum of money collected each day, rather like the "thermometers" one sees outside churches and the like. Photographs were taken of the opening ceremony and one is available from the museum as a postcard.

Sunday 23rd was Youth Day. There was, of course, a Church Parade and service, to which, originally, the Girl Guides had not been invited, an error quickly rectified. In the afternoon the R.A.F. Symphony Orchestra held an Grand Concert in the Savoy Cinema.

Monday 24th was Empire Day. The R.A.F. exhibition was opened, showing, among other things, a representation of an airman in full flying gear, 2 rubber dinghies, a Vickers Machine Gun, Aerial photographs and a Rolls Royce Merlin engine. In the evening a Popular Dance was held in the Guildhall.

Tuesday 25th saw a Childrens Concert in the Guildhall. Wednesday 26th was Civil Defence Day, and after a garden party in the afternoon, held at a WAAF hostel at Highfield, Weyhill Road, there was a Civil Defence display on the recreation ground. The market place of Barchester was recreated, with the inhabitants going about their business, until an imaginary bombing raid struck them, whereupon the Civil Defence forces demonstrated their skills. The evening saw another concert, this time with a WAAF band.

Each day the ceremony of the raising of the indicator was held, to mark how much had been collected to date. On Thursday 27th this was interrupted to allow a convoy of heavy tanks to pass through the marker place. A Bridge Drive was the main feature of the Thursday.

Friday 28th was Farmers Day. An Auction Sale was held at the Guildhall. At the raising of the Indicator Group Captain E W Evans urged the townsfolk to raise enough money to replace the eight Lancasters shot down on the raid on the German Dams by 617 Squadron, which had occurred ten nights earlier. That evening there was another Popular Concert.

Saturday 29th was marked by an Air Training Corps Display, and a demonstration of Field Cooking by the R.A.F. at the Walled Meadow. A Popular Dance was held in the evening, and the whole week was rounded off on the Sunday by a Grand afternoon Concert by the R.A.F. Dance orchestra.

The whole week was a great success, with a total of £232,787 being raised, enough for five Lancaster and six fighters. In September 1943 the local Savings Committee was presented, by the National Savings organisation, with two plaques to mark their achievement, one for the Rural District Council, and one for the town Council. One of these plaques can be seen in the Story of Andover display. At this meeting the Savings Committee gave the the National Organisation two logbooks which were to be marked up with details of the flights of two of the aircraft paid for, and returned to the town as a memorial.

It is these token logbooks which are in the archives today, claiming to have details of the service of Lancaster Mark I serial W 4933 and Lancaster Mark III serial ED 656. In fact these log books are more partial than they appear. I have only so far checked on that of ED 656. This aircraft did 46 sorties, there are details of ten sorties listed in the log book, of which only one was flown by ED 656, the rest of the sorties were flown other aircraft from the same Squadron.

So to the aircraft. A V Roe's Lancaster's, four engined heavy bomber, first flown on operations in March 1942, and going on to become the R.A.F.'s most successful wartime heavy bomber. Powered by four Merlin Engines, with a speed of 275 mile per hour at 15,000', and with a normal bomb load of up to 18,000 lbs the Lancaster managed ultimately to carry 22,000 lbs, the Ten Ton Grand Slam, the largest conventional bomb ever used. Lancaster's are famous for the raid on the Dams by 617 Squadron in 1943, and for sinking the German battleship "Tirpitz" in 1944, but they were the backbone of R.A.F. Bomber Command from 1943 onwards, Air Marshall Sir Arthur Harris, Commander in Chief of Bomber Command could never get enough of them. 7374 were built, they flew over 40% of all operational bombing sorties flown by Bomber Command and almost half of the numbers produced, 3431, were lost on operations. Crewed normally by seven man, bomb aimer, who also manned the front turret, with two .303 Browning machine guns, pilot and flight engineer, navigator and

wireless operator, mid upper gunner with two .303 Browning machine guns, and 'Tail End Charlie' manning the rear turret with four .303 Browning machine guns. The crew cost about £10,000 each to train and would serve a tour of 30 completed operations, be rested at an Operational Training Unit for some six months, and then do another tour of 20 operations - if they survived. Of the aircrew who entered training and went through the full cycle of service about 24% finished a second tour, 13% became Prisoners of War, 3% were seriously injured and invalided out, and the remaining 60% were killed.

The two Lancasters "allocated" to Andover were NOT presentation aircraft, unlike the Spitfire AD 204 purchased in 1940. They never bore the name "Andover", and indeed were both built before the Wings For Victory drive started. Never the less they are the aircraft which someone decided to associate with Andover, and so I decided to find out all I could about the two aircraft, and about every airman who flew them on operations. I have not yet found any photographs of W 4933, but there is a photograph of ED 656 in the book "Bomber Squadrons of the R.A.F".

I shall deal with W 4933 first, as I have so far done much less research on this aircraft. This Mark I Lancaster was built by Metropolitan Vickers in Manchester, and allocated to 156 Squadron, based at Worbys in Cambridgeshire on 14 March 1943. 156 Squadron was part of the Path Finding Force, which lead the rest of Bomber Command to the target, found it, and then marked it with specially coloured flares and bombs. The aircraft went on 18 sorties while with 156, on its second it failed to complete the raid because of a technical failure. On the 27 May Flying Officer Pritchard took the aircraft to Essen, in the Ruhr. The aircraft was damaged by flak, and was in a minor collision with another Lancaster. The damage was repaired on the Squadron by 19 June, but on her next raid on Krefeld the port outer engine and the navigational equipment caught fire, but the aircraft and crew returned safely.

156 was reequipping with new aircraft, and so W 4933 was transferred to the Path Finding Force Navigational Training Unit at Upwood. Here, for two and a half months, she flogged round the English skies, bringing navigators up to the high standards called for the Pathfinders. On 19 September 1943 she was transferred again, to 44 Squadron, at Dunholm Lodge, north of Lincoln and marked KM-Y, KM being the code for 44 Squadron, and Y the aircraft letter.

While with 44 Squadron W 4933 flew 26 sorties, two of which were not complete due to engine failures. At this time it was common for a crew to be allocated an aircraft as "theirs". They would share it with other crews, but it was understood that if available when they were on op's they could have that aircraft. The two crews who shared W 4933 were that of T Knight and John Chatterton. Knight was senior to Chatterton on the Squadron, but that changed after Knight took W 4933 for a practice bombing session, and, on landing, damaged the aircraft on the chimney of a tar boiler parked by the perimeter track. The Squadron commander was furious, and sent him to the Aircrew Center at Sheffield for two weeks. This was a disciplinary center where errant flying crew were sent. When Knight returned Chatterton

was now senior to him and so had preference for 'Y'. Knight flew 9 sorties in W 4933 before he and his crew were killed over Berlin 23/4 December, losing another aircraft. John Chatterton did a total of 6 sorties in W 4933, before the aircraft was replaced by a new one. This aircraft, ND 578, went on to complete 123 operations. Chatterton completed his own tour safely and now farms in Lincolnshire. His son, Flight Lieutenant Mike Chatterton, serves with the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight, and now flies the Lancaster! You may have seen him doing the Poppy drop during the VJ Day parade in London last August.

W 4933 moved on to 50 Squadron, based at Skellingthorpe, on the outskirts of Lincoln. Here she was flown by two pilots. The first was D J Oram, who made 7 trips in her. He later transferred to 617 Squadron, and survived the war. The second pilot to fly her was G C Bucknell, an Australian. He flew three successful trips. He and W 4933 were then paired for the raid on Nuremberg on 30/31 March 1944. This was Bomber Command's most disastrous raid, of the 781 aircraft dispatched 95 were missing and 11 crashed at base or were written off, a loss rate of 13.6%. Little damage was caused to the target. W 4933 was the first aircraft to be lost. While taking off a tyre burst and she slewed off the runway, an engine and part of the port wing were ripped out. Despite having a full bomb and petrol load there was no fire or explosion, and the crew were all unharmed. They were probably the luckiest crew in Bomber Command that night. Bucknell and his crew later transferred to the Pathfinders, where they were shot down and killed in a raid on a supply depot near Paris in August 1944. W 4933 had flown at total of 47 successful operations, in the hands of 19 different crew.

ED 656 was a Lancaster Mark III, essentially exactly the same as a Mark I, but the engines were made by Packard, not Roll Royce. She was built by A V Roe in Manchester, and flew all of her 46 operations with 9 Squadron R.A.F., official motto "Per Noctem Volemus", unofficial motto - "There's always bloody something", I must confess I prefer the latter.

9 Squadron was based at Bardney, to the west of Lincoln, and the aircraft was coded WS-V. From April to November 1943 17 different crews flew her on operations. I have almost finished the basic research on each individual who flew operationally in the aircraft. Of the 133 men 65 were killed, 4 became prisoners of war, 39 completed their tours and I do not know about the remaining 25.

Just as one of W 4933's pilots joined 617 so did one of ED 656's. Geoff Stout flew one raid in ED 656, and a further 21 with 9 Squadron before transferring to 617. He and his crew then flew a further 27 operations, before the raid on Munich, during which the aircraft just escaped being shot down. The rest of Stout's crew, apart from the bomb aimer, decided they did not like the exposure, and asked to be taken off operations. Stout, and his bomb aimer, W S Rupert, a Canadian (who had joined the crew when they came to 617) did four more trips, including the first raid by 617 on the German battleship "Tirpitz", flying from an airfield in Russia, this particular raid badly damaged the ship but did not sink her. The next trip was to breach the Dortmund-Emms canal, a vitally important waterway in North Germany. Rupert

was not able to spot the aiming point, despite two bomb runs, and so Stout took the load, a 12,000 Tallboy bomb home. En route they were attacked by three German night fighters. The aircraft was shot down, the bomb aimer and two others jumped clear before the aircraft hit the ground, but Geoff Stout paid the ultimate price of many pilots, trying to keep the aircraft flying till all the crew had left. Rupert, the bomb aimer evaded capture by the Germans, and spent six months helping the Dutch resistance before he was liberated. He now lives in Canada.

To survive a tour with Bomber Command you had to be skilful and lucky. One crew, who flew in ED 656, seemed to lack luck, that of Pilot Officer J Argent. On their first trip on 29 September 1943 the hydraulic pipe to the mid-upper turret broke, and they had to turn back. They then managed five trips, but on 22 October, when flying ED 656 another burst hydraulic pipe meant they left 50 minutes late, and so decided to turn back. On 18 November, not in ED 656, the navigator became ill after take off, and so again they turned back, the port outer engine failed and they had to make a belly landing. On 20 December 1943, over Berlin, they bombed, but were then were attacked by two fighters. Sgt Knox, the rear gunner, was killed. The fighters were evaded, but the aircraft was loosing petrol from holed fuel tanks, and so they had to ditch the aircraft in the sea, 15 miles north of Yarmouth. After four hours in their dinghy the crew were picked up by an Air Sea Rescue launch. Following some leave they were on the battle order again, to Brunswick on 14 January 1944. They did not return from this trip, being shot down. The Flight Engineer and Bomb Aimer became prisoners of war, the other five in the crew were killed.

On 9 Squadron there were three crew's who flew ED 656 more than others - Sgt John Evans, Flying Officer Brill and Paddy Robinson.

Evans, and his crew, made their first trip to La Spezia, in Northern Italy, on 18 April 1943, and this seems to have been trouble free. Their second trip, to Stettin on the German Baltic coast, flying ED 834 WS-Z, was not. When near the target area the aircraft was hit by flak, a fire was started in the cockpit and under the pilot seat, but this was soon put out. The aircraft was hit again by flak, and the port engine caught fire. The engine was feathered, and eventually the fire went out. Presumably during all of this Evans had been diving the aircraft, but all of the crew were not aware at what height he was flying, for owing to a breakdown of the intercom system the bomb aimer jettisoned the bombs at about 200-500', the resulting explosions severely damaging the aircraft. Despite all of this Evans brought ED 834 WS-Z home safely.

Six quiet trips followed, but life with Evans was not just dangerous on operations. I have been fortunate enough to have met the Sergeant in charge of ED 656's ground crew, Bill Parry. He supervised the three men who kept the aircraft flying. There were problems with one of the aircraft for which Parry was responsible for, and he asked Evans to take her up for an air test. Parry went along as Flight Engineer. They dropped some practice bombs, and then came back at low level, Evans having obtained permission for this. They came down low over the sea off

Skegness, and then inland at about 200'. Over a forest near Spilsby Evans dropped down very low indeed, and then trying to pull up at the end of his run took 12' off a pine tree. The temperature in the starboard outer shot up and smoke started to come from it. Parry cut and feathered the engine, as Evans pulled up to 200' on full power. He suggested that maybe they would have to jump if the engine fire did not go out - Parry was not amused by this as he was not wearing a parachute harness (he found it too uncomfortable) and his chute was back by the entrance door! However the smoke died away - it turned out to have been steam. The aircraft got back to base with the starboard outer useless and the main spar of the wing damaged. Evans was told he would face a court martial over this.

On 29 May he and his crew took ED 656 to the Ruhr, with a mixed load of fire bombs and a 4,000 lb high explosive bomb. They got off track, never a good thing to do near the Ruhr, and rather than passing round of the most heavily defended area in Germany flew right over it. The aircraft was caught in searchlights, and hit by flak. Fires and target markers were then seen to starboard, and course had been set for them when the aircraft was reported to be on fire. The Bomb Aimer was ordered to jettison the fire bombs, and keep the 4,000lb, but he jettisoned the lot before the target was reached. ED 656 returned home, and was out of action for some 20 days. The Bomb Aimer in the crew was replaced.

The Evans crew had one more successful raid. A trip to the Ruhr was then aborted due to a burst hydraulic pipe, and then on 14 June 1943, on a trip to Oberhausen, the crew failed to return. The aircraft was shot down and all were killed.

There is little to say about Flying Officer Brill's crew. They flew five trips in ED 656 in September 1943, when Paddy Robinson was not using it. After a total of 10 trips with 9 Squadron they transferred to 97 Pathfinder Squadron, where on their sixth trip to Berlin on 16 December 1943 they were shot down and all killed.

The crew which flew ED 656 the most was that of Paddy Robinson. They came to 9 Squadron in June 1943. Paddy became great friends with Bill Parry and they did a lot of drinking in the Sergeants Mess on the base, or in pubs in Lincoln. Bill describes Paddy as an outstanding, fearless pilot. He came from Waterford, in the Irish Republic, and was proud of his origin. He had joined up to fly, but was quite happy to be bombing Germans. Aircrew started out as Sergeants, but after a while Pilots were usually promoted to officer rank. Paddy took some time to leave the non-commissioned ranks as when the Group Captain called him and suggested Paddy apply for a commission he said that he was delighted to meet an Irishman who was still patriotic. Paddy told him what he could do with the commission! Despite this he was commissioned later.

There is little more to tell about his crew. They went about their part in the war efficiently as far as the Squadron records are concerned.

By mid November they had completed 22 operations with 9 Squadron, 16 in ED 656. On 23 November 1943 they were down to take ED 656 to Berlin. They took with them the pilot of a new crew, Pilot Officer Hinton. This was common practice, to give the captain of the crew experience of conditions over Germany before sending him off in charge of his own crew. ED 656 took off at 2 minutes past five in the afternoon. Presumably they reached Berlin and bombed successfully, but on the way back fog had set in. Bill Parry tells me that in fog Paddy would let the aircraft down until he could see the treetops. Aircraft relied on a altimeter to provide them with information as to what height they were at. This was operated by the different pressure of the air at different altitudes. However, air pressure can change, and it was the practice, as aircraft returned in darkness or fog, to ask for a QFE from base, the current air pressure, in order to set the altimeter accurately for landing. The QFE given to Paddy's crew was 250' too low.

Coming down through the clouds, and believing himself well above the ground, at 23.45 hours the aircraft suddenly crashed into an area called Ings Wood, north east of base. The aircraft burst into flames. The rear gunner, Sgt Casey, received burns to his face, but was thrown clear. He managed to assist Flight Sergeant Mitchell from the wreckage, Mitchell having burns, and a broken leg, but the other crew perished. Casey and Mitchell were taken to the R.A.F. hospital at Rauceby, and that is the last I know of them.

That is the end on my tale, not a happy ending I am afraid, but such is the nature of war and it was for this that the town of Andover raised its Wings For Victory monies.