

The Shottermill Air Crash Memorial Fund



The Rex Cinema in its heyday

Hello, my name is Mick Bradford and it has been a long-nurtured wish of mine to create a memorial for three airmen who were killed when their aircraft crashed at Junction Place in Shottermill in September 1942. The disintegrating aircraft fell into the road, while one of its engines, running at full power, smashed right through the roof of Haslemere's main cinema, the Rex, as people inside were watching a film show. Mercifully, no one in the cinema was killed and injuries were few and light, but in the street outside, amongst the twisted and mangled wreckage, lay three young RAF men, their bodies crumpled and broken.

The day the roof came in at the Rex

The three airmen, Flying Officer William Michael Winter, 22, Pilot Officer John Horace Lindley, 34 and Flight Sergeant Wilfred Ernest 'Jimmy' Cleall, 27, were flying in a Douglas Boston night-fighter when it broke up over the area of Shottermill School and crashed onto the Hindhead Road near the Shottermill Club. The starboard engine detached from the aircraft and carried on for some distance, to end up going through the west wall and roof of the Rex Cinema and on into the auditorium, the remains of its propeller still turning. Like some hideous runaway power-drill, it scythed its way through the ceiling, ripping the screen to shreds as it carried on down into the orchestra pit, jumping around like a giant

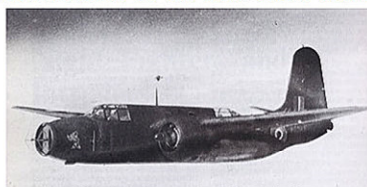


The auditorium - repairs to the ceiling are clearly visible

firecracker, and showering startled members of the audience with pieces of wood, masonry and burning debris. Although there were about 100 people inside the cinema at the time, there were no fatalities, just a few minor injuries, mainly burns. In all, eleven people required hospital treatment. The crash occurred at about 5.55pm when many people were going home from work, but, happily, no one was killed or injured outside. And the timing was critical - had it been an hour later, the outcome may have been very different. During those dark times, the cinema was people's chief form of entertainment. It was how they both endured and forgot the hardships of war. On any given evening, the Rex would have been full to capacity, typically more than three hundred people. It was indeed a very lucky escape for the people of Haslemere. The Boston, which belonged to 534 Squadron, was based at Tangmere, near Chichester and was quite unusual. It was equipped with airborne radar and had a powerful searchlight mounted in the nose, part of a top-secret project known as 'Turbinlite'.

The Turbinlite Project

Conceived at the height of the Blitz in late 1940, and to some extent in desperation, the 'Turbinlite' project was intended to be an interim measure that would give fighter pilots 'eyes' in the night sky until radar was developed sufficiently to do the same job. The German night-bombing offensive was taking a heavy toll on people, homes and industry and there seemed little that could be done to counter it. Successful interception depended on visual contact, virtually impossible even on the brightest of moonlit nights. It was obvious that airborne radar held the key, but in 1940 it was still very much in its infancy, bulky, heavy and far too insensitive to provide the accuracy required for successful interception, and it needed a trained operator to work it and interpret the information it gave. All this ruled out single-seat fighters. The twin-engined Bristol Blenheim was a contender, but it proved to be too slow for effective night interception of the latest German bombers, and so the adaptable - and relatively fast - Douglas Boston appeared to be the ideal machine for the task - and it was in plentiful supply at the time due to the fact that a large number of the type had been originally intended for the French Air Force. Following the fall of France, the order was diverted to Britain. A heavily armed 'attack' version of this aircraft had already proved itself to be very successful in the night intruder role, so it seemed a natural choice to spearhead the 'Turbinlite' project. In RAF service, all the earlier night-fighter conversions were designated the name 'Havoc' but later examples reverted to the original name, 'Boston'. Due to various delays ironing out teething problems with the searchlight and its installation, the 'Turbinlite' project didn't get underway properly until late 1941. It was abandoned in January 1943.



Douglas Boston III 'Turbinlite'



Michael Winter

The Equipment

The 'Turbinlite' installation consisted of a 27,000,000 candle-power carbon arc-lamp consuming 14,000 amps. It was awesome power by anyone's standards, and to energise this mind-boggling set up, forty-eight 12 volt accumulators (similar to car batteries), were fitted via racks in the aircraft's redundant bomb-bay. Adding about a ton to the operating weight, these batteries gave the lamp a total light-up time of 120 seconds, since they could not be charged in flight. The beam spread to a width about 950 yards with a range of about a mile. Apart from ruining the aircraft's aerodynamic qualities, the installation of the Turbinlite equipment, plus all the radar gear, increased the Boston's all-up weight to the point where no guns could be carried. It had become little more than a guided airborne 'torch'. In order to complete the interception of a potential enemy raider, the unarmed and unstable machine was to be accompanied by two Hurricane fighters, whose job it was to shoot the raider out of the sky before the battery power was expended and the light went out.



The searchlight installation exposed

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How it worked

The idea was that, following vectors given to him from ground controllers, the radar operator in the back of the night-stalking Boston would guide the pilot to within 3,000 yards of the target, whereupon a code word would be given. The Hurricanes would then open their throttles and slip into a firing position a few hundred yards ahead of and below the Boston, closing steadily on their 'victim'. The light would then be switched on and the fighters would line up their sights and open fire with their 20mm cannon. They had to be quick as usually the target aircraft - understandably - took immediate avoiding action to escape the beam. The Hurricanes' only means of keeping station during the stalking process was by reference to illuminated white strips painted on the Boston's wings. Formation flying at night is a tricky business at the best of times, so a huge amount of time was spent during the day perfecting the teamwork and proficiency necessary between pilots of both types of aircraft, the radar operators in the rear cockpits of the Bostons and the controllers on the ground. In addition, preventing these lumbering aircraft from shearing about directionally called for considerable piloting skills, so these 'night-flying exercises' were reckoned by all involved to be time well spent.



Night stalking - the 'Turbinlite'/fighter combination makes an interception

AL470



Aircrew briefing with 'Turbinlite' Boston at Tangmere, 1942

The aircraft in question, a Boston III AL470, actually built by Boeing under licence, was on such an exercise on the afternoon of 22nd September, 1942 when it was last seen heading north from overhead its Tangmere base, possibly in pursuit of a contact of some kind. It was next seen emerging from low cloud over Hindhead Common and descending at high speed and full power into Polecat Valley, followed by its eventual disintegration above Lion Lane. The wreckage trail extended from Priors Wood* to the Rex Cinema, a distance of about 250 yards. The crash was investigated by the Air Accidents Investigation Branch (Farnborough) and the subsequent report put the cause as failure of one of the starboard engine's bearers, leading to the engine departing from the wing and the disintegration of the aircraft's structure. This failure was due to a combination of structural weakness in the bearer, high 'G' loading from the pull-out from the dive and excessive vibration caused by application of high engine power to assist it. The inspector cited the cause of the weakened bearer to be electrolysis of the metal due to electrical clamping during routine maintenance. AL470 had flown for a total of just 160 hours.

*Priors Wood is now a housing estate but at the time of the crash it was part of the grounds of Holy Cross Hospital

How it all began

I first heard about this air crash in the early seventies from a work-colleague who also happened to be the cinema's projectionist at the time and who was on duty when it happened. His wife and son were inside, watching the film he was running which, incidentally, was Abbot & Costello's 'Ride 'em Cowboy', so obviously he remembered the incident very well! I often thought about this crash over the ensuing years and wondered why no one had ever done anything about it; after all, three men had died on war service. People mentioned it from time to time and articles and letters appeared about it occasionally in the Haslemere Herald, but it was obvious that they were all wide of the mark and in truth, no one seemed to know very much about the background to the story at all. As this lack of knowledge began to puzzle me more and more, I resolved that one day, when I had the time, and if no one else had already done so, I would try to unravel the mysteries of this crash, and if possible, set about providing a memorial for these men, whose names and unit were, at that stage, unknown to me. It bothered me that their names were also unknown to the world at large, and it never stopped bothering me. I reasoned that these men must have had parents, brothers, sisters, maybe even wives and children, and I couldn't stop thinking about how their young lives had come to a sudden and violent end right here in our town. These feelings were to haunt me, on and off, for many years

The unravelling process

In May 2012, I found myself retired from my job after 42 years. Suddenly I *had* the time, and, as far as I knew, no one else had done anything about the crash, so it seemed I was fated to begin the unravelling process. I started with a completely blank sheet. All I knew for certain, thanks to my former colleague's account, was where it took place and that it was a Douglas Boston with three men on board; I had only a rough idea of the date! Now,



Michael Winter's grave at Ocklynge Cemetery, Eastbourne



John Lindley's grave at The Oaks-in-Charnwood, Leics

just over a year later, I know almost everything about it. I have located the graves of all the men and I am pleased to see that they are all well-kept and cared for. I feel I have come to know them, for I have uncovered intimate details about their lives and families, and taken a fascinating glimpse into times past and how we used to live. In the process, I read files and documents which brought each of their stories to life, to find myself smiling at their triumphs and shedding tears for their tragedies. Being involved with this project has been a fantastic and long - sometimes frustrating - journey. And it has been a real detective story too, with twists, turns, blind alleys and red herrings galore, but worth every single moment. I hope it won't be long now before I am able to invite living relatives of one or more of the men to the site when the second part of my resolution will have been fulfilled, a fitting memorial to their sacrifice. Something I dreamed of achieving nearly forty years ago will have at last become a reality, which is very satisfying. I am confident that the community of Haslemere will support me in this project, so that it will become genuinely 'the people's' stone, cared for and looked after for generations to come.'



Jimmy Cleall's grave at Brookwood Military Cemetery

'The people's' memorial stone

My aim is to raise about £1,500 for a permanent memorial stone to be erected near the site of the crash, on the green triangle of land which forms the junction of the Hindhead and Liphook Roads. I have chosen granite for the stone, which should provide both durability and longevity. This means it should look in tip-top condition forever. I always felt it should be a communal project and that the stone should be funded entirely by public subscription, so that if any living relatives of the crew can be found and brought to see it, they will know that it was placed there by the will of people of Haslemere, a truly fitting memorial to three young men who died in the defence of their country. The project is being supported by Surrey County Councillor Nikki Barton, Haslemere Mayor Libby Piper and several local businesses. Please donate something towards this memorial, it doesn't matter how much, as it all counts. One or two local individuals have already kindly donated generously towards the stone, which means the fund has truly started now, so there's no turning back!



THE SHOTTERMILL AIR CRASH MEMORIAL FUND

Please give generously



In Memoriam
F/O W M E WINTER RAF (VR) Age 22
P/O J H LINDLEY RAF (VR) Age 34
F/Sgt W E N CLEALL RAF (VR) Age 27
534 Squadron
22nd September 1942
"Through adversity to the stars..."