The RNAS Chingford Airdrome

Chingford Airdrome was located just north of London between Chingford and Ponders End railway station and was situated on what was described as ‘a strip of fogbound and soggy meadowland . . . between a reservoir (The King George reservoir) and a sewage farm’. This airfield was officially opened as a second class landing ground for the Royal Naval Air Service in April 1915.

Situated in 150 acres, the site was 1,500 yards by 400 yard. Most, if not all, of the buildings associated with this landing ground, hangers and barracks, were situated within the northern section of the site, the former along the perimeter alongside the Lea Valley Road linking Chingford to Enfield and the barracks at the western side.

Unfortunately the clay soil, that was to be ideal for the building of reservoirs, led to severe problems for an airfield in wet weather. Although it was a hazard that collected its share of fliers, the large King George VI reservoir, lay to the north of the airfield and provided a useful landmark for the young trainee fliers who made up the main pilot Wing and was used by 44 Squadron whilst they were on home defence duties as well as being a depot and main training base. It later became 207 Training Depot Station, being linked to Hainault Farm.

Aircraft types this station included:- Farman Longhorn, de Havilland DH6, Airco DH9A, BE2, Bristol Bullet and F2B Fighter, Grahame-White XV, and even the rare Avro 503 and Sopwith TF2 Salamande
**The Royal Navy Air Service**

The first British flying service was formed in 1910 and was the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS). By the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914, the RNAS had ninety-three aircraft, six airships, two balloons and seven hundred and twenty-seven personnel. The Navy maintained twelve airship stations around the coast of Britain from Longside, Aberdeenshire in the northeast to Anglesey in the west. On 1 August 1915 the Royal Naval Air Service officially came under the control of the Royal Navy. In addition to seaplanes, carrier borne aircraft, and other aircraft with a legitimate “naval” application the RNAS also maintained several crack fighter squadrons on the Western Front.

The Royal Flying Corps (RFC) was created in May 1912. During World War One, the Royal Flying Corps became the eyes of the British Army directing artillery gunfire, taking photographs for intelligence analysis and taking part in dogfights with the German Air Service.

In April 1918, the Royal Naval Air Service and the Royal Flying Corps merged to form the Royal Air Force.

**A Second Class Landing Field On A Fogbound Soggy Meadow**

Chingford was a second class landing ground and a main training station for Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS) pilots. This organisation was the naval arm of the Royal Flying Corps (RFC). The RNAS was responsible for defence against air raids and for training pilots, a task that they carried out until 1916, when the RFC took over these duties. Between 1915 and 1919 it was used to train around 1,000 pilots before they were sent to Europe.

It became No 207 Training Depot station with Hainault Farm as a sub-station. Senior personnel were instructors. The King George reservoir was used as a navigation landmark, but some pilots crashed into it. A navy ‘whaler’ was kept on it to help rescue or the recovery of bodies. This is thought to be the only time the white ensign was flown on a reservoir.

One famous crash-landing concerned a pilot named Flight-Lieutenant Norman Blackburn, who took a nose-dive into bank of the reservoir. Fortunately he was discovered calmly walking away, dripping with water and slime. Other than the water hazards, several aeroplanes also crashed into Epping Forest.
All Ship Shape & Bristol Fashion

RNAS Chingford was run like a ship, with a No 1 (First Lieutenant) assisting the CO, and a ‘ship’s company’, time was measured in ‘bells’, the dining room was the ‘mess deck’. Ivor Novello joined the RNAS in 1915 and was a pupil of fellow thespian Ben Travers at Chingford.

Britain’s Oldest WWI Veteran

Henry Allingham, who died aged 103 years in 2009 and was Britain’s oldest WWI veteran, volunteered to serve in the RNAS and was posted to Chingford Airdrome in September 1915 as an Air Mechanic 2nd Class.

A Pilot’s First Experience Of Chingford Airdrome

The following is an account taken from ‘Loughton & District History Newsletter 189’

‘Shortly after Christmas 1917, I was sent to Chingford. The CO there was another Marine officer, Col. Eugene L. Gerard. We had lectures for the first three weeks, and some practice at taking engines to bits. After this, we were allotted to our various flights. I had my first flight on a Maurice Farman Longhorn with Flight Commander Warren Merriam. The Maurice Farman was a very odd machine, very easy to fly, but extremely slow. I think it did about 50 knots full out, and I thoroughly enjoyed it. Chingford was rather a curious aerodrome because it had a lot of streams running across it which you had to cross on wide wooden boards, bridges........... I was told I could take up a Maurice Farman. No sooner had I got in the air, than another storm sprang up. When I turned round, I was blown at enormous speed to the other side of the aerodrome, right over what was King George the Fifth’s Reservoir. I had awful difficulty getting down; I had to land with full engine, and I was worried the whole time that I should eventually descend into the reservoir. I managed to get down alright. After this, we were put on the Avro 504 for a short time.’

The ‘Chingflier’

The Pilots and staff enjoyed a varied social life. This included a range of sports teams, who often played against local sides, and an orchestra. At that time large military bases often produced their own magazines for their troops’ entertainment. The late Chingford historian, Leonard Davis said: “The story is that five young men who described themselves as ‘humble Air Services ratings’ sat around on orange boxes and biscuit tins and discussed the possibility of producing a station journal, and decided to make the ‘precarious’ attempt.

As a result in October 1916 ‘The Chingflier’ was launched. It contained a mixture of poems, articles, short stories and illustrations, all produced by the base’s staff. Many of the men had spent time abroad so articles were often about their experiences, such as that of Warrant Officer Abbott, who had been part of Captain Scott’s expedition to the Antarctic in 1901. Letters were received from readers in Australia, Zanzibar, Cape Town, Italy and Egypt, as well as from ships at sea.
Cobham’s Flying Circus

In 1932 the Airdrome was used by Sir Alan Cobham as the base for one of his National Aviation Day displays and was attended by Councillors and Officers of Chingford Urban District Council. Cobham’s intent was to make people ‘air minded’ and the events were a combination of barnstorming and joyriding.

They consisted of a team of up to fourteen aircraft, ranging from single-seaters to modern airliners, and many skilled pilots. Generally known as "Cobham’s Flying Circus", they toured the country, calling at hundreds of sites, some of them regular airfields and some just fields cleared for the occasion. The events were hugely popular and gave thousands of people their first experience of flying.

A Watery End – Chingford Airdrome Is Drowned

In 1935, work on the William Girling Reservoir was started and the aerodrome was lost forever beneath the reservoir near to the border with Enfield.

The picture left shows the ‘Chingford’ reservoirs. Top left is the divided King George V reservoir, in the middle is the William Girling Reservoir (below which is Chingford Airdrome) and the smaller bottom circular reservoir is the Banbury reservoir.

Sources for this article include:

www.thisislocallondon.co.uk/.../8791417.HISTORY__Chingford__
Loughton & District History Newsletter
en.wikipedia.org/wiki/AlanCobham
http://www.flickr.com/search/?q=rnas+chingford
http://www.enfieldindependent.co.uk/features/newsfeatures/8791417.HISTORY__Chingford_Aerodrome/

Readers may want to read Leonard Davis’s publication ‘Chingfliers, Chingboys and Chingford Airdrome: the story of the Royal Naval air station Chingford and also an account of Chingford during the Great War of 1914-1918 in issue 16 of the Bulletin of the Chingford Historical Society

The two coloured pictures at the head of this article are taken from original contemporary pictures of the airdrome that are the property of the author

Bill Bayliss (Chingford 2013)