

## BOTTISHAM AIRFIELD MUSEUM - Rosemary Foreman

**Opening Times:** The museum will reopen as soon as Covid-19 rules allow.

**Admission:** Free

**Website:** [www.bottishamairfieldmuseum.org.uk](http://www.bottishamairfieldmuseum.org.uk)

**Email:** [info@bottishamairfieldmuseum.org.uk](mailto:info@bottishamairfieldmuseum.org.uk)

**Travel Time:** From Newmarket by car - approximately 10 minutes.

**Parking:** Free parking on site or nearby.

**General Information:** Bottisham Airfield Museum is run entirely by volunteers and is situated on the Wilbraham Road, Bottisham, on the corner to the old A1303 Cambridge road. It is owned by a registered charity that acquired the last remaining original WWII buildings still existing on site, with the aim to protect and restore them to as they were in 1944. It opened in 2009 to commemorate the role of Bottisham Airfield in WWII and is the only UK museum to be dedicated to the RAF, USAAF 8<sup>th</sup> Army Air Force and Belgian Air Forces.

The museum contains a wide variety of exhibits ranging from clothing to documents and relics of aircraft from crash sites. They hope to create a complete replica P-51 Mustang cockpit using originals parts as far as possible. They also remember the part local people played, including material relating to the Home Front and local individuals.

The original grass airfield opened in 1940 as a satellite of RAF Waterbeach and was used by Cambridge based Tiger Moths of No 22 Elementary Flying Training School as a relief landing strip. From 1941-43 it was used by several RAF Army Co-operation squadrons and was equipped with a variety of aircraft including Lysanders, Tomahawks, Tiger Moths, Austers and Mustangs. In 1941 the grass runways were reinforced with Army track surfaces and the in the following summer were replaced again by steel mesh Summerfield Track.

It was not until June 1945 that the airfield saw any further flying and that was as a relief landing strip for the RAF Belgian Initial Training School, which was based at RAF Snailwell. On 1<sup>st</sup> October it became a full satellite of Snailwell. Training proceeded steadily until 9<sup>th</sup> March 1946 when the Belgians left for home. Bottisham airfield finally closed on 1<sup>st</sup> May 1946 and was sold for agricultural use 1<sup>st</sup> October 1958.

**Photos:** Courtesy of UK Airfields



In 1943 the Air Ministry Works Directorate began to enlarge and improve facilities for the arrival of new tenants – the 361<sup>st</sup> Fighter Group, United States Eighth Air Force, comprising the 374<sup>th</sup>, 375<sup>th</sup>, and 376<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadrons plus seven support units. They had arrived on HMS Elizabeth and were commanded by L/ Col. Thomas J.J. Christian Jnr and were the last group to be equipped with the P-47 Thunderbolt and were tasked with providing escort to the Eighth's daylight bombing offensive as well as conducting ground attack missions.

When the base was handed over to the Americans on 3<sup>rd</sup> January 1944, it was renamed as the Army Air Force Station F-374. On the 21<sup>st</sup> January the Group flew its first combat mission. Only a few days later the main runway was widened using Pierced Steel Planking (PSP) to allow for formation take-offs.

Despite the range limitations of the P-47, the 361<sup>st</sup> Fighter Group gave a good account of itself against the Luftwaffe but in May 1944 they converted to the long range P-51 Mustangs with continued success but not without losses. A new L/Col Joseph J. Kruzsel took command of the Group. A heavy toll of enemy aircraft followed but by summer the Group had moved to Little Walden, Essex and Bottisham fell silent. The 361<sup>st</sup> had flown 214 missions, claiming 148 enemy destroyed in the air and 86 on the ground, with a loss of 39 pilots.

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