

THE ROYAL AIR FORCE IN DEVON

An Interim Gazetteer



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Cover Illustrations:

RAF Exeter Memorial at Exeter International Airport;
Air Traffic Control Tower, Winkleigh;
Gunnery Range Observation Post, Brandy Head, Lyme Bay;
Aircraft Dispersal Pens, Harrowbeer.

THE ROYAL AIR FORCE IN DEVON

The Royal Air Force (RAF) was formed on 1 April 1918 by a merger of the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS) and the Royal Flying Corps (RFC). Since that date the RAF has had a significant presence in Devon. This document presents a brief gazetteer of its stations and sites. The dates quoted represent the consensus of opinions of the numerous sources consulted, which do not always agree. A study of the Operations Record Books in the National Archives at Kew has not yet been undertaken, except in the case of the twelve air-defence radar stations.

THE FIRST WORLD WAR AND BEYOND

| | |
|------------------|---|
| RAF Mount Batten | A seaplane base was established at Mount Batten by the RNAS in 1917. Flying-boats were later introduced. Originally known as RNAS Cattewater, the site became RAF Cattewater, and then in 1929 assumed the name RAF Mount Batten. |
| RAF Prawle Point | A small coastal reconnaissance airfield was formed by the RNAS in 1917 and this became RAF Prawle Point. Disbanded in 1919. |
| RAF Torquay | A seaplane station and a kite balloon site were established in 1918 at the harbour, with a kite observation station at Berry Head. |
| RAF Westward Ho! | Established in 1918 on Northam Burrows, the station's role was that of coastal reconnaissance. Disbanded 1919. |

THE SECOND WORLD WAR AND BEYOND

1. AIRFIELDS

| | <i>Operational from</i> | <i>Site closure or cessation of operations</i> | <i>Principal role/users</i> |
|----------------|-------------------------|--|---|
| RAF Bolt Head | 1941 | 1945 | 10 Group Forward Operating Base. |
| RAF Chivenor | 1940 | 1994 | North Devon Airport requisitioned by Air Ministry. Coastal Command station, then Fighter Command. Now a base for the Royal Marines, but home to an RAF Air-Sea Rescue Flight (A Flight, 22 Squadron). |
| RAF Dunkeswell | 1943 | 1949 | RAF Station, mostly used by United States Navy in WWII. |
| RAF Exeter | 1940 | 1946 | A civil site requisitioned by the Air Ministry. Fighter Command (10 Group) airfield. USAAF troop carriers in 1944. |
| RAF Folly Gate | 1928 | 1945 | Sometimes referred to as RAF Okehampton. Army Co-operation. Forward Holding Unit (aircraft spares). Some army co-operation activity post 1945. |

| | | | |
|----------------------------------|------------------|------|---|
| Haldon | 1940 | 1950 | Pre-war civil aerodrome requisitioned by the Air Ministry and used by a research unit, but no reference traced to the site being named RAF Haldon. Passed to the Admiralty in 1941 as a satellite to <i>HMS Heron</i> (RNAS Yeovilton). |
| RAF Harrowbeer | 1941 | 1946 | Fighter Command (10 Group) airfield. Satellite of RAF Exeter. |
| RAF Mount Batten | 1917 (see above) | 1992 | Coastal Command Sunderland base in WWII. HQ RAF 19 Group. Marine Craft Unit. School of Combat Survival and Rescue. |
| RAF Roborough | 1940 | 1946 | Civil airfield requisitioned by Admiralty, but became an RAF station in 1942 under Coastal Command. |
| RAF Upottery (aka Smeatharpe) | 1944 | 1948 | USAAF troop carriers, gliders and D-day embarkation. RAF Maintenance Command store post WWII. |
| RAF Winkleigh | 1943 | 1948 | 10 Group Fighter Command. USAAF pre-invasion exercises. |

2. RAF AIR-DEFENCE RADAR STATIONS

| | | |
|--------------------|-----------|---|
| RAF Beer Head | 1941-1946 | Chain Home Low. |
| RAF Bolt Tail | 1942-1947 | Chain Home Low. |
| RAF Branscombe | 1940-1945 | Chain Home. |
| RAF Exminster | 1941-1956 | Ground Controlled Interception. Limited activity until mid 1950s. |
| RAF Hartland Point | 1941-1983 | Chain Home Low. Post-war Ground Controlled Interception and Chain Home Extra Low. Air-to-air gunnery range surveillance. |
| RAF Hawks Tor | 1940-1942 | Chain Home. Reserve station for RAF Downderry. |
| RAF Hope Cove | 1941-1958 | Ground Controlled Interception. Post-war operated from a Cold War semi-underground (ROTOR) bunker. School of Fighter Control. Passed to Home Office in 1958 as <i>inter alia</i> a Regional Seat of Government. |
| RAF Kingswear | 1941-1946 | Chain Home Low. |
| RAF Northam | 1941-1944 | Chain Home. |
| RAF Start Point | 1942-1946 | Chain Home Extra Low. |
| RAF West Prawle | 1942-1958 | Chain Home. Limited Cold War role until 1958. |
| RAF Wrafton | 1941-1946 | Ground Controlled Interception. |

3. "Y" STATIONS

"Y" Stations were secret listening posts established at strategic locations in the UK and beyond. Personnel at these stations intercepted the enemy's radio communications, both Morse code and spoken, and all such intercepts were transmitted to the British Government's wartime Code and Cypher School at Bletchley Park, and, where appropriate, to other bodies.

| | | |
|---------|-----------|--|
| Strete | | Further research necessary. |
| Lydford | 1936-1945 | Interception of German communications and direction finding. |

4. NAVIGATIONAL AID SITES

Ground navigational systems (eg Gee and Oboe) transmitted signals that (a) enabled an aircraft to fix its position *en route* to a target or (b) directed an aircraft to its target.

| | | |
|-----------------|----------------|--|
| RAF Sharpitor | 1942 (?) -1971 | Gee Station. |
| RAF West Prawle | 1951 (?) -1957 | Gee Station. |
| RAF Plympton | | It is understood that No. 480 Signals Unit operated a direction-finding site at Plympton in the 1950s. Further research necessary. |

5. THE RAF IN SIDMOUTH

| | |
|--|----------------------------|
| Medical Training Establishment and Depot | Dates not yet established. |
| RAF Regiment Officer Cadet Training School | 1942-1943 |
| Aircrew Training School. | 1943-1945 |

6. THE RAF IN TORQUAY

| | | |
|---|-----------|---|
| No. 39 Air-Sea Rescue Marine Craft Unit | 1942-1944 | |
| Initial Training Wing | | |
| Convalescent Hospital (Palace Hotel) | 1939-1943 | (Abandoned as a result of enemy raids.) |

7. BALLOON SITES

During WWII barrage balloons sites appeared around vulnerable areas such as Plymouth and Exeter to deter low-flying invading aircraft. The principle was to force such aircraft to fly high to avoid these obstructions, thus putting them within range of RAF fighters and army anti-aircraft batteries. No research yet undertaken.

8. AIR-SEA RESCUE MARINE CRAFT UNITS

| | |
|---------------------------------|--|
| No. 38 Exmouth | |
| No. 39 Torquay (see above) | |
| No. 41 Salcombe | |
| No. 43 Mount Batten (see above) | |

9. ROYAL AUXILIARY AIR FORCE UNITS

| | | |
|--|-----------|---|
| No. 3512 (County of Devon - Exeter) | 1948-1957 | Fighter Control Unit based at Duryard in Exeter. |
| No. 3513 (County of Devon - Plymouth) | 1948-1957 | Fighter Control Unit based at Raglan Barracks, Plymouth. |
| No. 3 (County of Devon) Maritime HQ Unit | 1959-1999 | Initially based at RAF Mount Batten but later located at RAF St Mawgan in Cornwall on the closure of Mount Batten. Merged in 1999 with No. 1 HQ Unit to become No. 600 (City of London) Squadron at RAF Northolt. |

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