

Kingston Local History Society

The History of RAF Harrowbeer event 24 May 2018

This lively, informative and interesting presentation was delivered by Stephen Fryer and his wife, Claire, both in exceedingly smart RAF uniforms, which added greatly to the authenticity of the Harrowbeer story and demonstrated also the commitment of members of the Harrowbeer Interest Group. This was established in 2004 to preserve interest in and records of the airfield from 1941 to 1945. Harrowbeer was selected by the RAF from three potential Devon sites and was one of the first RAF built airfields.

The wide-ranging presentation included many photographs of the airfield and its surrounding topography, both at the time of its active use and today, when significant exploration and restoration of the site has taken place. The historical (*black and white*) photographs had been 'cleaned up' wherever possible to provide clearer images than achievable at the time they were taken. The contrast between Yelverton before and after the establishment of the airfield was very clear, with significant changes to existing buildings and the demolition of some large and gracious houses. In addition, the two top stories of the buildings in the centre of Yelverton, which are now occupied by shops and businesses, were removed as they presented a safety risk to aircraft and their crews. The church also was damaged by a flying error, but the vicar continued the service regardless of the loud noise.

The richly informative presentation provided stories and facts about the airbase itself, development of the airfield and current exploration and improvements to old buildings and features. In addition, there were entertaining anecdotes about near misses, skilled piloting and the pilots themselves, including those who came from Poland and Czechoslovakia to assist the British war effort. Photographs gave a clear sense of the activities when the airfield was operational; the aircraft in use – some very rare; and the many building and runway features (*including a slope on one runway known by pilots as "The bugger"*) remaining today but some recent regrettable vandalism has also taken place. We were entertained by examples of heroism and skilful ingenuity in using a crowbar to lock the joystick in place to fly and control a plane back safely from Dieppe to Harrowbeer, after one of its wings was destroyed. During the war, the 'Bellows of Brazil' group raised an enormous amount of money and donated 9 Typhoon aircraft to Harrowbeer in 1943 (*when a fly-past was abandoned in favour of a taxi-past, which accidentally ran over a BBC van*) This group operated a status symbol for each set level of donations achieved by its members. These were in the form of unusual lapel badges, which members were required to wear at all times (*with a small number of obvious exceptions!*). Harrowbeer saw some very distinguished formal visits from around the world, including the Bellows of Brazil, the Air Attaché of Brazil and the Duke of Kent.

The Interest Group has been successful in locating some of the pilots who were based at Harrowbeer and following up on their lives since the war. It raises money for its ongoing research and aircraft related funding events, in accordance with its stated aims.

A warm invitation was proffered in respect of the **RAF Harrowbeer weekend at Yelverton on 11 and 12 August 2018.**