



16 • Airfield

It is likely that few of the present inhabitants of Horton Kirby realise that the village had its own airfield in the 1930s. Situated at the end of Stack Lane to the North East of the village, the airfield was part of high farmland in a field of some 100 acres with a hump in the middle. Shaped like an inverted “T”, the largest runways were NE/SW 720 yds and N/S 675 yds. It had a hangar, a wooden pavilion as a clubhouse and a small shed for control of movements. Only the hangar remains today, used in conjunction with other farm buildings.

The field was originally an RAF emergency landing ground and Mr Harris, a native of Horton Kirby who worked on the farm, remembered lighting gooseneck flares on the field for night exercises. On one occasion a Handley Page bomber landed there.

In 1931 Surrey Flying Services ran joy rides from the field. In 1936 a Flying Flea, a kit plane of the time, built by Wally Millen had taxiing trials on the airfield, although according to Wally, it never actually flew. Ray Knowler remembered that his father, the South Darenth tailor, assisted Wally with the stitching of the canvas. Wally recalled that in transporting the plane from Westminster Mill, where it had been built, to the Airfield, the Flea’s wings got stuck for a while in the high banks which were along Forge Lane at that time.

After its one (unsuccessful) outing on the airfield, the Flea was stored in the coach house of his father’s house, Holmesdale in Horton Kirby. Later it was stored in a mini hangar in the garden when the old coach house was converted to residential use. In 1964 Wally decided that he would sell his Flying Flea in order to raise some money for the church. Denis English recalled helping Wally to get the engine going again. This was done in a workshop which had been converted from a prefab and the engine (an upside-down aircooled Scott engine) was so powerful that, when Denis finally got it started, it pulled the old wallpaper off the walls and ceiling!

Wally Millen with his Flying Flea



*Aerial view looking towards the Thames with the old airfield boundaries shown in dotted lines 1981
Photograph courtesy of Len Pilkington*

RIVER THAMES

SOUTHDOVNS

STACK LANE

AIRFIELD

SCHOOL LANE

RABBITS FARM

MUSSENDEN LANE

SAXON PLACE

Wally's Flea was bought by D Collyer and R Mitchell who tried one more, and again unsuccessful, attempt at flight (though some present had said they saw light under the wheels). It was then displayed at air shows and later donated to the Air Museum at Schipol Airport, Amsterdam, where, according to Mr Collyer, it still resides as the only aircraft of this type built in Kent that has been preserved for posterity.

In 1938, with the clouds of war forming over Europe, Horton Kirby Airfield saw its finest hour. The acute shortage of trained airmen induced the Government to introduce the Civil Air Guard Scheme, whose aim was to train a nucleus of civilian pilots through the flying clubs and schools. Clubs had to undertake that CAG members should not pay more than 10s per hour for training on standard machines.

At the beginning of 1939 the Horton Kirby Flying Club was formed as a CAG Training Unit, under the direction of Mr G W Alexander,

who was a former Imperial Airways pilot. He was later killed flying a Wellington bomber in a raid on Berlin in 1942.

Flying instruction commenced on 10th March 1939 with a fleet of aircraft comprising a B.A. Swallow, 7 D.H. 60 Moths, an Avro Avian 4, a D.H. 82 Tiger Moth and a D.H. 80 Puss Moth. There were nine instructors under Mr Alexander. Flying training was continuous and, in fine weather at weekends and evenings, aircraft would taxi in, the student disembark and, with the instructor strapped in and the engine running, the next pupil would be quickly bundled into the rear cockpit and away would go the aircraft for another training session.

Several instructors and pupils have recalled their memories of life at Horton Kirby in that hectic period shortly before the War. Rupert Mitchell was a builder living in Horton Kirby at the time who, before the War, had learned to fly with No. 601 Auxiliary Squadron at Hendon. Working long hours as an instructor he had several



*A line-up of the Horton Kirby Club machines outside the bangar. A visiting machine is far right. The Paper Mill chimney can be seen between the wings of the tiger Moth.
Photograph courtesy of N R Ralph*



*A Gypsy Moth in front of the hangar, August 1939
Photograph courtesy of G Adams*

experiences to relate. On 6th June 1939 he was taking off with a pupil in the Avro Avian climbing out over the A20 roundabout at Farningham when the engine stopped dead. Looking round for somewhere to land he remembered the old World War I Home Defence landing ground alongside Farningham Road railway station. The field was a reasonable size and flat but it was the time of year when the grass could well be long and wiry and easily wrap itself around the undercarriage. Approaching cautiously in a flat glide, Rupert was relieved to see a friendly rabbit pop up and scamper away, easily seen in the apparently short grass. The Avian was set down gently in a dead stick three pointer.

Probably the last flight from Horton Kirby was by Rupert Mitchell in D.H. Moth G-AARA on 1st September 1939, when he spotted one of the last Lufthansa machines on its way back to Germany. When the airfield closed, Rupert, who had clocked up over 450 instructional hours, immediately joined the RAF and served throughout the war as an instructor. He was, incidentally, also an excellent tennis player having played for the County on a number of occasions in the 1930s. Even in his sixties, he was still good enough to win the Singles Championship at the Sutton and Wilmington Tennis Club on two occasions.

Frank Evans also learned to fly at Horton Kirby. He was, curiously enough, also a builder and tennis player but this time came from

Sutton-at-Hone. It was not his first flight from the field because he had in 1931 paid his five shillings for a "joy ride". He gained his "A" licence and was proceeding to more advanced training when the Club closed in September 1939. He immediately volunteered for the RAF and was later sent as an instructor to Canada.

Mr N R Ralph commenced his training on 3rd May 1939, his first flight being in a Gypsy Moth with instructor Mr S Dew. Mr Ralph recalled the Moth landing and taxiing up to the Club House. "I was quickly bundled into the rear cockpit and we were off, taxiing to the NE corner of the field, accompanied by much banging and scraping of the tail skid in the long grass. The Moth then charged up to the rise in

the centre of the field and down the other side until, suddenly, the ground was falling away under the wings. At 1000 ft we levelled off and I was shown the controls. I was then asked to find the airfield, but, although living in the area for 18 years, it looked different and I did not know. The Moth was pulled round in a steep turn and the instructor



Frank Evans wearing the CAG overall uniform with a Gypsy Moth in front of the clubhouse in 1939

said "it is straight ahead and I have control". With a neat side-slip we were soon touching down over the hedge and back to the clubhouse where the next pupil was waiting". Mr Ralph later became the proud owner of an "A" Licence but his more advanced training was stopped by the War.

On a Saturday evening in August 1939 a formation of CAG aircraft from Horton Kirby "bombed" Dartford Grammar School. Diving on bonfires lit in the playground, the simulated air raid gave members of the School's Officer Training Corps practice in air raid precautions.

When the CAG was disbanded in September 1939, flying ceased at Horton Kirby. In seven glorious months, the Club had flown hundreds of hours and trained many pilots.

In the late 1980s there was a partial revival of the field when it was used by parachutists dropping from aircraft flown from Biggin Hill. Many had their first experience of parachuting here, often in aid of charity. Eventually the use of the field for this purpose was disallowed, largely due to complaints from some local residents, and the field has now reverted to farm use.

HORTON KIRBY FLYING CLUB

LTD.

HORTON KIRBY AERODROME

Nr DARTFORD, KENT

Telephone : FARNINGHAM 231

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"B" LICENCE COURSES

The Club make a speciality of training "B" licence pilots, both in flying and ground subjects. Please apply to Secretary for details.

Farningham Road Station is 1 mile distant. Dartford 4 miles. Buses from Dartford, Farningham and Sevenoaks pass ½ mile from Aerodrome.

The Aerodrome is 18 miles from London, alternative routes being via Maidstone Main Road, turning left at second turn past Farningham Hotel, or via Blackheath, Rochester Bye-Pass, turning right at Dartford.

This chapter is based on an original article by Len Pilkington, a member of the Kent Aviation and Historical Society who also provided the photographs.