



History of RAF Benson

Post-War / World War Two

RAF Benson goes back to 1937 when building work began with the erection of four 'C' type aircraft hangers, workshops and domestic accommodation. The new airfield was ready to accept its first aircraft when two squadrons of Fairey Battle Bombers moved in on 3rd April 1939. No. 150 Squadron moved into Benson from Boscombe Down to be joined a month later by No. 103 Squadron from Abingdon. Both Squadrons were equipped with Fairey Battle aircraft and these were the first to fly at the new airfield under the command of Group Captain R. T. Leather A.F.C. Both squadrons left Benson to move to France in September 1939 as components of the Advanced Air Striking Force.

At the outbreak of war the station became No. 12 Operational Training Unit, its first task being to train pilots, observers and air gunners in Fairey Battles and Avro Ansons. The squadrons were soon joined by aircraft of the King's Flight from Hendon. The Flight, renamed the Queen's Flight after the death of King George VI, was destined to remain at Benson for many years, apart from a four-year break during World War II, until moving to Northolt in 1995.

The Battles left Benson in December 1940 to be replaced by twin-engined Wellington bombers. In 1941, RAF Benson was chosen as the home for an experimental Photographic Reconnaissance Unit (PRU) which had been set up to test and develop new methods of carrying out photographic reconnaissance over enemy territory. Using Spitfire aircraft, pilots found that their speed enabled them to avoid interception and that their camouflage and height rendered them virtually invisible. Extra fuel tanks allowed them to fly deep into enemy territory. It was an aircraft from this unit which was to spot the Bismarck near Bergen in May 1941.

The advent of more advanced types of aircraft required the building of runways and these were completed in 1942. This work caused the closing of the Old London Road and, as a result, the Royal Engineers built the present road to Crowmarsh. With this development came the expansion of No. 1 PRU into No.'s 540, 541, 542, 543 and 544 Squadrons and the grouping of the station under Coastal Command.

Until the end of the war the special Spitfire and Mosquito aircraft of these squadrons ranged far and wide, from northern Norway to southern Italy and as far east as Vienna. Outstanding events during that period were: the photography of the Mohne, Eder and Sorpe Dams shortly after the attack by the Dambusters; a flight over Berlin 1943 when the pilot remained over the target for three quarters of an hour and obtained an almost complete mosaic of the city; and the photography of the Tirpitz which was to lead to its destruction. A PRU Mosquito from Benson was the first aircraft to encounter an Me 262, the German jet-propelled aeroplane. Although the encounter lasted for 20 minutes, the Mosquito was able to escape into the clouds and return home undamaged.

In 1944, a Mosquito from Benson was stripped of its photographic equipment and flew to Moscow in four hours, acting as a courier for the Moscow Conference. As a result of this flight, Mosquitoes from RAF Benson were given the job of carrying diplomatic mail from the Yalta and Potsdam conferences in 1945. In May 1945, four Mosquitoes were delivered to Karachi within 13 hours of take-off from Benson, beating the previous record by over four hours.

Post-War

The King's Flight was reformed at Benson in 1946, and PRU squadrons of Mosquitoes continued to operate from Benson until the 1950s. Many changes occurred during the demobilization period and during this time No.'s 540 and 58 Squadrons were based here. For a time also No. 54 Group Headquarters of Flying Training Command was a lodger unit on the station.

In 1953, the Station re-grouped under Transport Command, Two squadrons, No.'s 147 and 167, had responsibility for the ferrying of aircraft to all parts of the world including Germany, and the Near and Far East. The Ferry Wing, as it was known at Benson, was disbanded in 1960 when squadrons became responsible for the collection and ferrying of their own aircraft.

Meanwhile, plans for development of Benson in its new role, in the medium-range tactical air transport force, were put in hand. The first Armstrong Whitworth Argosy arrived on 20th November 1961 and was the first of six which formed the Argosy Operational Conversion Unit. This unit subsequently moved to Thorney Island after training over fifty crews of the Argosy Force. The first Argosy Squadron to form at Benson was No. 105 Squadron, which subsequently moved to Aden to become part of the Middle East Air Force. Later a second squadron, No. 215 Squadron, was formed and this moved to the Far East in July 1963. Two Argosy squadrons, No.'s 114 and 267, operated from Benson until the spring of 1970 as part of the medium-range transport force of Air Support Command.

The continued presence of The Queen's Flight and the arrival from Odiham of HQ 38 Group in 1972 - together with its associated unit of No 38 Group Tactical Communications Wing - meant that the level of activity at Benson remained high and this led to the extension and improvement of many of the facilities, both technical and domestic, on the station.

In 1976, No. 38 Group (by now part of Strike Command) moved to Upavon, whilst the Tactical Communications Wing went to Brize Norton. To replace these units, the Support Command Signals Headquarters (SCSHQ) and the Radio Introduction Unit moved to Benson from Medmenham in 1977. SCSHQ remained at Benson until 1981.

In January 1983, No. 115 Squadron, the Andover Training Flight, the Andover Servicing Flight and the Support Command Flight Checking Unit all moved to RAF Benson from RAF Brize Norton.

In 1986, the BAe 146 entered service with The Queen's Flight, with the arrival of the first aircraft in May and the second in July, to be joined by a third aircraft at the end of 1990. The Support Command Flight Checking Unit disbanded at the beginning of 1987, its function and personnel transferred to No. 115 Squadron which, in April 1988, celebrated its 70th Anniversary.

Undoubtedly the highlight of RAF Benson's 50th Anniversary Year - 1989 - was the selection of the station as the venue for the presentation of the Colour to the Royal Auxiliary Air Force by HM The Queen, the Air Commodore-in-Chief, on 12th June. With HRH the Duke of Edinburgh and numerous distinguished guests in attendance, the ceremonial took place in splendid weather and was a unique and memorable occasion.

A link with Benson's illustrious past was re-forged on the 17th November 1989 when a commemorative plaque in front of the gate-guardian Spitfire (replica) EN343 was unveiled by Squadron Leader Gerry Fray, DFC RAF (Retd). EN343 was the Spitfire PRXI flown by, then, Flying Officer Fray on the morning of the 17th May 1943 to photograph the Mohne and Sorpe Dams after the successful raid by No. 617 Squadron.

Since 1990 the role of RAF Benson has changed with an influx of new units to the station. In March 1992, No. 60 Squadron formed with Wessex HC2 helicopters and returned to the UK mainland from service in Northern Ireland.

Further units moved to the Station in July 1992 on the closure of RAF Abingdon, including the University of London Air Squadron, Oxford University Air Squadron and No 6 Air Experience Flight. The Mobile Catering Support Unit (MCSU) returned to RAF Benson, their home in the 70's, in November 1992. The unit provides a training facility along with three Air Combat Support Units. The units are air portable and each is capable of feeding up to 500 personnel with fresh rations under field conditions.

The first of the current helicopter squadrons arrived at RAF Benson in June 1997 when the Pumas of No. 33 Squadron took up residence. They were joined 8 months later by the Operational Conversion Flight for the Puma helicopters, which is responsible for teaching helicopter aircrews how to fly the Puma. July 2001 saw the reformation of No. 28 (Army Cooperation) Squadron at RAF Benson. The Squadron was reformed to accommodate the newest Support Helicopter in the RAF's list of assets at the time, the Merlin HC3.

As 2007 drew to a close, a new Merlin Squadron was officially stood up at RAF Benson. In a formal ceremony No. 78 Squadron was reformed alongside No. 28 (AC) Squadron, creating the Merlin Force, in order to accommodate the increase in personnel required to house the additional 6 Merlin Mark 3a's.

After over 20 years apart, the Puma Force was reunited at RAF Benson in November 2009 when No. 230 Squadron moved from Northern Ireland to join No. 33 Squadron at RAF Benson. As well as co-locating the Puma Force, RAF Benson now hosted both the Puma and Merlin Forces under the direction of the Station Commander, who was also the Puma and Merlin Force Commander.

Having spent over 10 years of continuous deployments on operations in Bosnia, Iraq and Afghanistan, the Merlin Force returned from Operation HERRICK to RAF Benson. No.78 Squadron was disbanded on 30th September 2014 and the Merlin helicopters were formally handed to the Royal Navy Commando Helicopter Force. In March 2015, No. 846 NAS departed RAF Benson and moved to RNAS Yeovilton. Twenty-five Merlin HCMk3 and HC Mk3A aircraft will be modified for operations at sea. In October 2015 six Chinooks from RAF Odiham joined four Pumas at Benson to reform No. 28 (AC) Squadron as the Chinook and Puma Operational Conversion Unit.



28 Squadron



33 Squadron



230 Squadron