

The History of RAF Usworth

The site now occupied by the Nissan Motor Manufacturing factory was an active airfield between 1916 and 1984. This is a history of its time as a military base drawing on the extensive archives of the North East Sea Land and Air Museum (NESLAM) just over its northern boundary, and recently released military records.

The 1916 – 18 War Years

As German bombing raids increased the Royal Flying Corps took over the task of Home Defence, setting up a number of squadrons with flights spread over the length of the British coastline. The North East was protected by the **36 Home Defence Squadron**, formed at Cramlington, Northumbeland on 1 February 1916. Land just north of the River Wear, between Washington and Sunderland, was identified for a new, satellite landing field. It was referred to as West Town Moor or Hylton before **Usworth** became its long term name. There are no maps of the landing field immediately south of Washington Road but it occupied about 110 acres.

Table 1 shows the units (**A** and **B Flights**) and their aircraft that operated out of the airfield. Other flights were located at Seaton Carew and Ashington in Northumberland. The main action of the squadron was against Zeppelin raiders in November 1916 and New Year's Day 1918.

Table 1

World War One Units	World War One Aircraft
36 Home Defence Squadron- B Flight, A Flight	Royal Aircraft Factory BE2, BE12, FE2b, FE2d Bristol Scout



Royal Aircraft Factory BE2



Bristol Scout

Early flying was very hazardous. In May 1917 an Usworth aircraft crashed, killing 5 and injured 8 spectators at Southwick Sunderland, though the pilot, **Lieutenant Phillip Thompson**, survived. Three Usworth airmen died when flying out of Ashington airfield in Northumberland, **Lieutenant Alexander Wald** in August 1918, and **Lieutenants Harold Croudacre and Fred Yorke**, when they collided in January 1919.



Sunderland Echo 25 May 1917



Blyth News 18 January 1918

Sadly another Usworth flyer, **Sergeant Pilot Arthur John Joyce**, died when he crashed on Pontop Pike between Stanley and Consett in March 1918.

*Tragically Sergeant Joyce's son, **Sergeant Dennis Arthur Joyce**, was killed in an RAF raid over Germany in 1940. An original memorial built after World War One at Anfield Plain was rebuilt in 1959 as an RAF memorial to those who died in both wars.*



Consett Guardian 21 March 1918



RAF Memorial West Rd Anfield Plain

On 1 September 1918 the squadron became part of the **Royal Air Force** with the merging of the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) and the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS). However after peace was declared the squadron was disbanded on 13 June 1919, and the airfield decommissioned on 1 October.

The Inter-War Years

With the ending of WW1 the land of the airfield was returned to the original owners, and it languished unused for over a decade, apart from a visit by the **Alan Cobham's Flying Circus** in July 1929.

The airfield was re-activated on March 17, 1930. The flying field was situated to the south of Washington Road, with ancillary buildings to the north. It was designed to accommodate a squadron of the recently expanded Auxiliary Air Force **607 (County of Durham Squadron)**. The North Camp provided living quarters for officers, NCOs and airmen. The South Camp included the large **Lamella** hangar- that survived until 2004- the Squadron Office, pilots huts, armoury, photographic hut and bombing training aids. Alongside the railway were firing butts.



**North Camp
Residential quarters-
now the site of the
North East Sea Air
and Land Museum**



**The airfield in
the early 1930s**

Table 2 shows the units and their aircraft stationed at Usworth. 607 was the home squadron with others posted there for quite short periods. The weekends were busiest, as the part-time Auxiliaries reported for training, that became more intense as war threatened.

Table 2

Interwar Units	Interwar Aircraft
Auxiliary Airforce 607 (County of Durham Squadron)	De Havilland Gypsy Moth Avro 504n Westland Wapiti Avro Tutor Hawker Hart Hawker Demon Gloster Gladiator
Squadron, 103 (B)	Hawker Hind Fairey Battle
226 Squadron	Hawker Audax
19 Squadron	Gloster Gauntlet
	Boulton Paul Overstrand
'G' Flight of No 1 Anti-Aircraft Co-operation Unit	Hawker Henley Battle Wallace

The Wearside public were entertained by fly-pasts, aerobatics and mock dive bombing during Empire Days from 1934 to 1937, but low cloud and rain stopped the 1938 show. While 2,000 to 3,000 paid to attend, many more watched from nearby fields and hills.



Inside the Lamella hanger



607 Squadron 1936



Wapiti 607 Squadron



1935 Air Day

World War Two

Not surprisingly these were the busiest years in the military life of the airfield. It took the physical form that survived until 1984, and thousands of servicemen past through the facility.

Development of the airfield began in the month war started (September 1939) when work started on the construction of two concrete runways, one of 2,800 feet laid north west to south east, with another of similar length on a north-south heading. At the same time the airfield was extended to the south, east and west, taking in adjoining fields, to occupy about 225 acres. A new perimeter track was laid along the airfield boundary with eight dispersal points and hard-standing areas.



Many additional buildings were built along with an Operations Room, later supplemented by an underground Battle HQ near the Cow Stand Farm corner of the airfield, plus a new radio station. On the North Camp side of the road new accommodation blocks were constructed. On both camps numerous air raid shelters were built.

A series of dispersal sites off the airfield were also constructed, including a searchlight camp at the top of Ferryboat Lane. Anti-Aircraft gun posts were set up on the Birtley Road at the bottom of Boldon Bank and along a disused railway line towards north Hylton. A large gun site was set up near Downhill Farm, and a new decontamination centre was built on the Birtley Road. Most of these sites would be manned by members of the Durham Light Infantry and the Royal Artillery.

Table 3 shows the mix of air force and other military units stationed at Usworth at one time or other and the variety of aircraft- mainly trainers- that used the airfield, quite often for very short periods.

The most intense years were 1940 to 1943. The most significant action involving Usworth aircraft took place on 15 August 1940. Usworth was one of many targets for a large German raid, that was driven off, with large casualties, without reaching the airfield. See [Wartime & Military -607 Squadron, RAF Usworth](#) for a detailed account of this action.

The only other hostile actions were high explosive bombs landing near the airfield in April 1942, and one that hit the runway in March 1943 that didn't explode.

Pilots of many nations were trained at Usworth, including Polish, Czech, Canadian, Australian, American, New Zealanders and smaller numbers from Latvia, Lithuania and Ceylon. Training was dangerous and many aircraft were damaged or destroyed during training, killing

Table 3

World War Two Units	World War Two Aircraft
Sector Fighter Station in 13 Group Fighter-Command	
64 Squadron	Supermarine Spitfire
607 Squadron	Hawker Hurricane
43 Squadron	Hawker Hurricane
3 Radio Maintenance Unit	de Havilland Hornet Moth
55 Operational Training Unit	Hawker Hurricane Fairy Battle Miles Master Martinet De Havilland Tiger Moth North American Harvard Bristol Blenheim Boulton Paul Defiant
72 (Signal) Wing	de Havilland Hornet Moth Bristol Blenheim
62 Operational Training Unit	Avro Anson Vickers Wellington Hawker Hurricane
Airborne Interception Training (AI) Flight	Avro Anson
3RSS	de Havilland Hornet Moth Hawker Hurricane
US Army Signal Corps 416 th Night Fighter Squadron	USAAF Bristol Beaufighter
776 Squadron	Bristol Blenheim Blackburn Roc Blackburn Skua Vought Chesapeake Fairey Barracuda Grumman Martlet
20 Initial Training Wing	
31 Gliding School	Miles Falcon 111 Slingsby Cadet
Aircrew Disposal Unit	
2739, 2759 Squadrons RAF Regiment	
14 Maintenance Unit	

55 aircrew, 32 in 1941 alone- see **Appendix 1**. The greatest loss of life was when two Ansons collided over Boldon in 1943, killing all 9 servicemen. Many of these are buried in **Castletown Cemetery**, near the airfield, where ten of their German enemies are also interred. Another serviceman was killed during a bombing raid at nearby Whitburn.



Polish Air Force airmen



**Miroslaw Orzechowski PAF
14 Jan 1941**

A companion article ([Washington in World War 2](#)) includes some of the mishaps by Usworth-based aircraft, up to February 1942.

Apart from occasional visiting aircraft most flying from 1944 onwards was training by the Gliding School, a role that continued until 1958.



Hawker Hurricane at Usworth

The Post War Years

Powered flying returned to Usworth on 1 February 1949 when 23 Reserve Flying School was formed, and later the **Durham University Air Squadron** moved to Usworth. In 1951 control of Usworth past to **2 Basic Air Navigation School**.

Table 4 shows the mix of units, training aircraft and gliders that used Usworth up to 1962.

Table 4

Post War Units	Post War Aircraft
31 Gliding School	Slingsby Sedbergh
23 Reserve Flying School	Avro Anson de Havilland Tiger Moth de Havilland Chipmunk
1965 Flight of 664 Squadron	Taylorcraft Auster
2 Basic Air Navigation School	Avro Anson T21
Durham University Air Squadron	De Havilland Tiger Moth North American Aviation Harvard de Havilland Chipmunk Airspeed Oxford Avro Anson Percival Proctor Boulton Paul Balliol
Auxiliary Observation Flight	
641 Gliding School	Slingsby Cadet Slingsby Sedbergh
Territorial Army	

The airfield was now back to operating 7 days a week. The student navigators were all RAF (mainly on National Service), though the pilots were RAF Volunteer Reserve, all ex-RAF pilots and navigators. **Airwork Ltd** had a contract to run the school, employing civilians to

do aircraft maintenance and overhauls. Most of the fitters were ex-RAF.

After these units departed the last military use was by the **Territorial**



Territorial Parachute Training



Chipmunk Trainer



Slingsby Sedbergh glider

Army for parachute training from tethered balloons.

On 3 July 1962 RAF Usworth was purchased by Sunderland Borough Council for £27,000 and was reopened as Sunderland Airport. The long life of RAF Usworth had come to an end.

It became England's smallest municipal airport, though it never had any scheduled passenger services. Business use was a small amounts

of freight and corporate light aircraft. It was used by the **Royal Flight** and a base for military parachuting display teams. Its greatest use was by private pilots of light aircraft and microlights, and skydivers. In May 1974 the North East Air Museum opened- now The North East Land Sea & Air Museum (**NELSAM**).

In January 1983 the largest RAF aircraft even to land at Usworth, the **B2 XL319 Avro Vulcan** bomber, arrived, and is now on NESLAM's site, on what was the North Camp.



There are no records of the myriad of aircraft based there, or called in, or those who made the occasional emergency landing. The clubs based there organised Air Days from 1966 to 1983. However it was offered to **Nissan Manufacturing** in March 1981 for their UK manufacturing site, which they chose in March 1984.

The last flights took place on 31 May 1984. A Jet Provost flypast acknowledged the history of one of the RAF's oldest airfields.



Jet Provost Trainer

Appendix 1

RAF World War 2 Usworth deaths

Date	Causality	Service	Age	Location
14 Jul 40	P.O. Phillip Knox Vartan*	RAF	22	Boldon Colliery
26 Jun 40	Sgt. Richard Thomas Glover	RAFVR	22	Sedgefield
24 Oct 40	Sgt. Donald Raymond Stoodley	RAFVR	21	Usworth
27 Oct 40	Sgt. Leonard Vivian Toogood	RAFVR	20	Congburn Dene, Edmondsley
28 Feb 41	P.O. Gordon Charles Smillie	RAF	25	Ryhope
8 Apr 41	Sgt. John Samuel Bennett	RAF	36	Usworth
19 Apr 41	Sgt. Jezey Nizynski*	PAF	20	Penshaw
21 Apr 41	Sgt. Richard Selkirk Waddy*	RAAF	30	East Boldon Meggrims Knowe,
25 Apr 41	P.O. Martin Walter Rivers	RAF	24	Northumberland
26 Apr 41	Sgt. Alfred Vernon Band	RAFVR	22	Allendale
5 May 41	P.O. Albert Ernest John Thorne	RAF	27	1 mile north of Usworth
3 Jun 41	P.O. Ignay Makomaski*	PAF	26	Coxhoe Ettisgill Moor, Middleton in
6 Jun 41	Sgt. Joseph Miles McDonell	RCAF	23	Tees
14 Jun 41	Sgt. Donald Fredrick Henderson	RCAF	21	Red Shaw Moss, Hawes
22 Jun 41	Cpl. Ernest Llewellyn Crewe	RAF	33	Jarrow
1 Jul 41	Sgt. Maurice Fieldhouse	RCAF	20	Rothbury
22 Jul 41	Sgt. Herbert Basil Kenneth Moss P.O. Geoffrey Northcote Christian	RAFVR	22	North Sea off Grangetown
22 Jul 41	Mieville	RAFVR	19	North Sea off Grangetown
23 Jul 41	Sgt. Richard Harvey	RAFVR	20	Usworth
11 Aug 41	P.O. Stanislaw Brunon Swiderski*	PAF	22	Wingate
12 Aug 41	P.O. Zygmunt Hohne*	PAF	24	Scarfell
12 Aug 41	Sgt. Stanislaw Karubin*	PAF	25	Scarfell
15 Aug 41	Sgt. Frank Percy Stamp*	RCAF	22	Warden Law
28 Aug 41	Sgt. John Albert Parker	RCAF	23	Washington
15 Sep 41	P.O. Lewis Benjamin Loudon*	RAFVR	31	Pittington
12 Oct 41	Sgt Sidney John Sculley	RAFVR	19	Castletown
26 Oct 41	Sgt. Stanley Jerome Connell*	RCAF	22	Usworth
3 Nov 41	Sgt. Allister George Dumville*	RCAF	25	Chester le Street
11 Nov 41	Sgt. William Maughan Mccausland*	RCAF	26	Waskerley
5 Dec 41	Sgt. John Donald Lenehan*	RCAF	26	Pelton
12 Dec 41	Flt. Sgt. John Kenneth Pollard	RAF	24	North Sea
12 Dec 41	P.O. William Francis Avery*	RAF	27	North Sea
30 Dec 41	Sgt. William Gilbert Bothe*	RAAF	23	Sunderland
30 Dec 41	Sgt. Peter Morphett Piggott*	RAAF	21	Sunderland
30 Dec 41	Sgt. Leonard Douglas Wright*	RAAF	22	Sunderland
30 Dec 41	P.O. Arthur Raymond Kirby*	RCAF	26	Sunderland

Service: **RAFVR** Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve, **RAF** Royal Air Force,
PAF Polish Air Force, **RCAF** Royal Canadian Air Force,
RNZNVR Royal New Zealand Naval Volunteer Reserve

1 Jan 42	Sgt. Robert Graham White Carter*	RAF	24	Castle Eden Dene
10 Feb 42	Sgt. James D'Arcy Lees Graham*	RCAF	24	Wickham
14 Feb 42	Sgt. John Porter	RAF	22	Tudhoe Colliery
14 Feb 42	Sgt. Clifford James Scott	RCAF	26	Tudhoe Colliery
9 Mar 42	Sgt. Joseph William Avis	RAF	22	Usworth
11 Mar 42	Sgt. Albert Garlick*	RAF	21	Tritlington, Morpeth
12 Mar 42	Sgt. Edgar Glenville Wingate	RAFVR	21	Wingate
28 Mar 42	Sgt. Alan Joseph Ainsley Dodd	RAFVR	20	Warrenford
28 Mar 42	Sgt. James Ashley Everard Sharp	RAF	22	Warrenford
12 Apr 42	Sgt. Keith Stanley Cornwell	RAFVR	19	Stanley
12 Apr 42	Sgt. Harold Mills	RAFVR	21	Stanley
19 Feb 43	Sgt. Alistair Cameron Dunlop*	RNZAF	23	Southwick
19 Feb 43	Flt. Sgt. Donald Kenneth Upperton	RAFVR	22	Southwick
19 Feb 43	Sgt. Frank Wickenden*	RAFVR	27	Southwick
19 Feb 43	Sgt. Charles Davidson	RAFVR	21	Southwick
19 Feb 43	Sgt. Ian Duncan McDonald*	RAFVR	21	Southwick
19 Feb 43	P.O. Arthur Joseph Kelly	RAFVR	19	Southwick
19 Feb 43	P.O. George Miller Johnston	RAFVR	40	Southwick
19 Feb 43	LAC John Ramsden Smith	RAFVR	29	Southwick
14 Apr 43	Sgt. Robert Henry Malcolm Thomas	RAF	44	Usworth
* Buried in Hylton Cemetery				24
				57

Sources: Fold3 Records, Commonwealth War Graves Commission, Royal Air Force Command

Service: **RAFVR** Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve, **RAF** Royal Air Force,
PAF Polish Air Force, **RCAF** Royal Canadian Air Force,
RNZAR Royal New Zealand Air Force

Appendix 2: Article Sources

The North East Land Sea & Air Museum (**NELSAM**) www.nelsam.org.uk

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