

**RANCH
MEMBERSHIP
196**

ROYAL AIR FORCES Association

The charity that supports the RAF family

SUMMER 2024

RAFAGEN

THE NEWSLETTER & MAGAZINE OF THE LETCHWORTH, HITCHIN &
DISTRICT BRANCH (including Stevenage)

Branch formed 15th October 1946



Chairman lays a wreath at the Letchworth D Day 80th anniversary



Branch Registered Charity No. 1071536

Association Registered Charity No. England 226686 Scotland SC37673

Patron His Majesty King Charles III

RAFAGEN

The official newsletter and magazine of the
ROYAL AIR FORCES' ASSOCIATION
LETCWORTH , HITCHIN & DISTRICT
BRANCH OFFICIALS FOR 2023/4

Now including Stevenage



Hon. President Viscount Lord Trenchard

Chairman:- Jim Box

Vice Chairman:- Rev, Lindsay Dew

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Branch Welfare Officer: Vacant

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Branch R.A.F.A.L.O. Flt. Lt. Liam Obiston

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**VISIT OUR
WEBSITE**

rafa-lethworth.org.uk

NEWS FLASH FROM H.Q.



The charity that supports the RAF family

Updates to the RAF Association's crest

Following the announcement of His Majesty The King as our new patron, our updated crest is now available for use. The updated crest features the Tudor Crown, in line with His Majesty The King's new cypher, and replaces the St Edward's Crown used on the previous crest. RAF Association branded items, such as letterheads, marketing materials and merchandise featuring the crest are currently being updated on a rolling basis. Existing stock of these items is being used up before replacements are ordered to avoid wastage.



NEWS FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK



I was speaking to our Vice Chairman the other day, and he tells me that he has arranged for the R.A.F. Chaplain from R.A.F. Wittering, Rev. Andrew Tucker, to preach at our Battle of Britain Service on 29th September at the Letchworth Methodist Church in Pixmore Way. Make sure the date is in your diary.



You may have read in the last issue the article on the modern R.A.F. Police Dog, so keeping the dog theme going there is another story on page 10.

I wish to point out that although this scenario could have been me whilst posted to R.A.F. Negombo in Ceylon, it isn't. I never caught anyone that interesting. I wish it had, it would have made night duty a little more interesting.

Not that airfield patrols were boring, there may have been no humans, but there was plenty of tropical animals. - Jackals; Leopards; Snakes; Scorpions, to mention a few.



Armed Forces Day outreach

This is a report from Head Quarters, and I suggest that you read it, as your committee have agreed that our branch members are included in this operation.

“This year we are once again undertaking a large scale campaign to help identify members of the R.A.F. community who may be struggling and in need of our support. In the week leading up to Armed Forces Day, between Monday 24 June and Friday 28 June, we are aiming to call 5,000 RAF veterans, widows and widowers. We are offering our support again this year to any branches that would like our assistance to contact your members”.

If H.Q. call you please be honest with the caller, as any information you pass on is between you and H.Q., and is not passed on to the branch, unless you request it. It is important to the Association, and your branch that we look after our comrades of the R.A.F. family in need, after all, that is what we are here for. The callers are trained people. They are not prying they just want to know that you are not struggling with life.



I am now one of the many Veterans in possession of my very own HM Armed Forces Veterans card. It has taken a few weeks to arrive, but I am now the proud owner of a card.



BATTLE OF BRITAIN SERVICE

**METHODIST CHURCH
LETCHWORTH
Sunday 15.00hrs**

29th September 2024



What you have
been saying about
us.

Thank you Ken, great to see the Branch getting out on visits again, so important. I hope the visit is well supported.

Shaun Griffin (Ex Branch Chairman and RAFALO)

Thanks Ken for a very noteworthy edition, every article read particularly well, our local branch has nothing like it, and although during the Second World War there were 47 airfields in and around the County, there are very few members of note in the Lincoln Branch and certainly nothing like the Newsletter, well done and keep the flag flying. The R.A.F. is dwindling quite sadly specially with the news of the Mothballing of 30 serviceable Typhoon 1's that took over from the Tornado's, we now rely on so few Typhoon Mk2's and the American F23's in our dwindled defence of our Realm.

JS (Ex R.A.F.P. now living in Lincolnshire)



ROYAL AIR FORCES ASSOCIATION EASTERN REGION ANNUAL CONFERENCE

REPORT BY KEN NEEDHAM

I stood in for John Airey, who is the Branch's official Conference delegate. Unlike John who usually attends the conference in person, I didn't go to Bognor Regis, I sat in front of my computer and took part in virtual reality, a new experience for me. Plus I have never been to conference before.

There was 13 of us on the virtual link, with one via his mobile whilst at a rugby match. I do not know how many delegates there was at Bognor as we didn't see the audience.

Each speaker gave a report on what their section had done and was doing for the future. Using statistical data to prove their points on success or failure.

Here are a few of those stats, and how they tell part of the story of our Association.

Total number of members 65538 and increasing, mainly in the younger age group, which is good. The age group with the highest membership is those aged 30 to 40. Many of those are serving personnel, as we know from our own branch. Members are scattered over 109 countries.

One of the not so successful stories was the fall in branches, now down to 229. Reasons given was that branches cannot get members to form committees. Nobody wants to be an official. They like to attend meetings and functions, but don't want the job of controlling the branch. Due to age too few members were attending meetings. Plus with fewer branches members had to travel distances to get to a branch.

The Association are looking for answers to this problem, and a number of suggestions were made, but we will have to await for an answer. If you think you have one, I am sure the Council would like to hear it.

One item that surprised me, but shouldn't have done. was the fact that the Welfare team are now looking after a younger age group than they did before Covid. This is mainly because of the cost of living. Don't worry us "older" members are still looked after if necessary.

RAFAKidz, the RAFA children's nurseries, have been reported in your magazine before, and since that article was published, the numbers have grown, and are very popular. Families using these nurseries still have to pay for the service, but not as much as a nursery in civvy street, which parents had to use before the RAFA came along. RAF personnel feel the cost of living crisis as much as everyone else, so cheaper childcare helps,

An item which was discussed in great depth, was the voting at Conference, it was felt to be unfair to all members. The answer being looked at currently is to have a system similar to the one the National Trust use. Which is that each member gets a ballot paper through the post. My immediate thought was of the cost of postage to 65538 members. A ballot paper via e-mail wouldn't work as some members do not have an e-mail. It could be a mixture of the two. I think we will leave that to the Council and action whatever they choose.

Something I didn't know. This came up. *"We know that navigating dementia can sometimes be difficult, but you're not on your own. We're here to support you through caring for a loved one with dementia, to help you identify how and where you can access addition and specialist support, and to provide you with up-to-date information about dementia and dementia care"*. If you would like further information in this area, contact HQ or I can point you in the right direction.

I did not travel down to Bognor Regis to the conference, but sat in front of my computer, but I enjoyed listening to all the points raised and debates. If the branch do it again, I that I know conferences are and get more

require me to will, but now how on line run, I will try involved.



Wings appeal 2024

Wings Appeal Officer,
Eric prepares the day by
making up some
windmills.



Eric wishes to thank
all members who
helped make the day
a very successful
one.



STANDALONE FARM STEAM RALLY



Annual Service to Commemorate the Formation of the RAF

By

Jim Box

Occasionally I am offered tickets to attend the annual service at St Clement Danes. I am a member of the Shackleton Association that is allocated a small number of places at this event. As very few members are able to get to London early on a Sunday morning, I was offered two tickets this year.

The service took place on 14 April and Commemorated the Centenary of the Royal Auxiliary Air Force. The band of the RAF Regiment was there and the lesson was read by the Venerable Dr (AVM) Giles Legood MBE KHC RAF, the Chaplain - in- Chief. There was plenty of gold braid in evidence as well as cadets and veterans.

Having arrived before the time stated for taking our seats, Brenda and myself looked for shelter from a strong wind. Opposite the church is a Pret-a Manger where I could see various RAF personnel having coffee. The café took on the appearance of an all ranks RAF mess from cadets to an Air Vice Marshall.



OUR VISIT TO THE SHUTTLEWORTH AIRCRAFT MUSEUM

The Shuttleworth Collection is a working aviation, automotive and agricultural collection located just up the road, at the Old Warden Aerodrome, Old Warden in Bedfordshire.

The collection was founded in 1928 by aviator Richard Ormonde Shuttleworth. While flying a Fairey Battle at night on 2 August 1940, Shuttleworth fatally crashed. His mother, in 1944, formed the Richard Ormonde Shuttleworth Remembrance Trust "for the teaching of the science and practice of aviation and of afforestation and agriculture."



Jim stands down as our guide for a while, to let one of the Museum's apprentices explain how to change a Spark Plug. A little different from your car.



Jim introducing our party to Shuttleworth's magnificent machines

Restoration and maintenance work is carried out by a staff of 12 full-time and many volunteer engineers. These volunteers are all members of the 3,000-strong Shuttleworth Veteran Aeroplane Society. These dedicated enthusiasts are crucial to the preservation and restoration of the collection. One of whom is our Branch Chairman, Jim Box, who also acted as our guide for the day.

A party of 15 arrived ready to be shown around this collection of non jet engines flying machines, plus a few vintage vehicles.

We learnt of the history of each aircraft, and the conditions that the pilots endured whilst flying the planes with open cockpits. In the later models we learnt of the duties they carried out during World War II. We saw aircraft that had taken part in long distance races.

On duty with a R.A.F. Police Dog Handler



On a large military airfield in some far-off part of the world a Royal Air Force Police dog handler and his Alsatian dog are on patrol protecting the aircraft that are standing on the dispersal area prepared and ready for their next mission. It is a moonless night filled with the sounds of the local wildlife, and a gentle breeze offers some relief from the oppressive sticky heat.

In the darkness the dog suddenly picks up on an unfamiliar scent, and as his hackles begin to rise, he strains on the leash. The handler attuned to his dog's reactions knows that something is amiss. He immediately sends a discreet radio message to alert the staff in the RAF Police Control Room as the dog leads him towards the source of the scent. Suddenly, a figure breaks cover from behind a nearby building and starts to run off into the darkness where he thinks he will be safe. The handler immediately shouts out "Halt or I will release my dog", but the man foolishly ignores the warning and continues to run, hoping to make good his escape. At that point the handler releases his dog and the chase begins.

In a matter of seconds the dog has caught up with his quarry and brought him down to earth. The dog stands guard over the terrified man until the handler arrives to take charge. The dog is called off and the man ordered to stand up with his hands in the air. While the dog continues to guard the intruder, the handler radios again to request urgent assistance at his location.

A R.A.F. Police mobile patrol is dispatched to the scene and the intruder is searched and taken away, questions urgently need to be addressed, who is the man, what was he doing in the area, where had he been, and what had he taken or left behind?

THE LUCKY PENNY

Back in 1991 I was in The Royal Brompton Hospital recovering Open Heart Surgery.

After a few days I was sitting up in a hospital bed and expecting to go home the following day. I was reading one of my favourite books, Len Deighton's "Bomber" when I was approached by the wife of a man who had just arrived to await his operation. She asked if the book I was reading came from the Hospital library. I replied that it was not, but why did she want to know?

She replied that her husband (who was sitting in a bed opposite me) was thinking of buying the book as he was an ex-R.A.F. Bomber pilot who was shot down over Berlin during WW2.

This of course made him a hero in my eyes so I said he was welcome to the book. I went over to speak to him. His name was Jim Penny, and he insisted upon having my name and address so that he could return the book once he had read it. So began a great friendship that lasted 31 years. He and his wife lived in Shropshire and during one visit I managed to persuade him to tell me his incredible story. I eventually persuaded him to write his memoir which was published in 2013. I also persuaded him to title the book. "THE LUCKY PENNY" His was a remarkable story that deserves to be heard.

Member Bernard Drummond

It was the evening of the 23rd November 1943.

Flight Sergeant Jim Penny was sitting at the controls piloting his Lancaster Bomber towards Berlin. Five of his crew were like Jim all NCO sergeants of 97 Squadron. The exception was the mid-gunner, Pilot Officer G. Bate.

This was their 20th operation of WW2 and the seventh time that Berlin was their target. They were carrying 7 Target indicators, a

Cookie, which was a 4,00 lb blast bomb, and 3 x 1,000 lb High explosive bombs.

There was about 8\10th of cloud, but the searchlights were lighting up the clod and the sky above. The flak seemed heavier than ever as they flew towards their aiming point.

The bomb aimer's voice had reached a crescendo of "steady-steady-steady indicating imminent bomb release when they were hit by flak in the bomb bay. One of the Target bombs exploded and they were surrounded by green fire. All the electronics had fused so Jim had no intercom.

Unable to tell his crew to bail out he undid his Sutton harness hoping that his crew would bail out as they had practised so many times before. Jim also knew that it was only seconds before the burning target indicator set off the Cookie.



Jim still had full control and tried to keep his aircraft steady to give his crew time to bail out. There was now flames between him and his

instrument panel when the Cookie blew up. Jim still was sitting in a sitting position in the cold air thinking "Where's my bloody plane gone?"

Bomber pilots at this time sat on an armour plated seat for safety reasons. The seat was hard and cold so pilots always sat on their parachutes and still strapped up. This obviously saved Jim's life. He was semi conscious but alert enough to pull the ripcord. The chute opened and Jim floated down through the intense flak, and was terrified that he would be hit.

The light from the searchlights helped Jim to land safety, although he admits it was a good landing. His head and neck hurt because he had been blown through the Lancaster's windscreen, he also hurt a leg but he was still alive. Unfortunately, he was the only

survivor as all his crew had perished. Six of the total 75 thousand Aircrew killed in WW2.

Jim was now a POW. For some strange reason the Germans thought that he was a Mosquito pilot and in an effort to gain info about the Mosquito kept him in solitary for two months questioning him. He was still injured but couldn't get them to believe that he was just a Lancaster pilot.

Jim spent the rest of the war in Prison camps mainly in Lithuania until the advancing Russians caused the Germans to move their prisoners further South towards Germany. They knew the war was lost but had no intension of allowing the prisoners to be repatriated by the Russians so on 7th April 1945 they forced into what was to become known as The Long March.

In a long column Jim and his fellows trudged further South with little food or rest for 3 weeks. It was a terrible time and the worst thing that happened was that the long column was mistaken as German soldier and strafed by R.A.F. Typhoons. 29 men were killed and many wounded. On 1st May 1945 Jim and all of the the prisoners were liberated.

When Jim was shot down in 1943 he weighed 10 stone, he was now just 6 stone.

After some time recuperating in hospital, and then some leave he was reunited with his family. Jim stayed on in the R.A.F. For another 26 years retiring in 1971 as a Flt Lieutenant aged 49.

Jim had married and was the proud parent of 4 children. He became a teacher and lived a fulfilling and happy life until he died in 2022 aged 97.

I was honoured and proud to have known him.

Bernard Drummond



ARMED FORCES DAY

Organised By the Royal British Legion Letchworth

Letchworth Garden City



Saturday 24th June 2023

10.00 - 16.00

BROADWAY GARDENS – SG6 3PF

Military Bands – Hitchin Brass Band- Military Vehicles

Food - Stalls - Fun Fair

Cadets Challenge Shield Sponsored By Chasestead

RBL Riders & Classic Cars

~~Fly pass of a Vintage Plane~~

Other Sponsor of Event Wentworth Kitchens Letchworth

Free entry

Proceeds to local Armed Forces charities

Support your Armed Forces



COMMITTEE NEWS

May 2024

All members present, and the staple points of order dealt with, the first item on the agenda was a point raised by Ken Needham.

He was concerned that the memorial on the Wymondley Road was almost over-grown by weeds. As the memorial was close to this Branch after the 2012 centenary service we had organised, and paid for it (with the help of Herts County Council) to be cleaned and the words repainted. In 2018 Ken had found that the memorial had been listed and was under the control of Historic England.

Before Historic England will take a complaint, one had to report it to the local council. With the committee's approval, Ken will do.

After reporting a very successful day at Letchworth Sainsburys, Eric Dagless listed the events he had organised so far for Wings Appeal collections for later in the year.

Standalone Steam Rally 1st and 2nd June

Letchworth Armed Forces Day 22nd June

Street collection and stall in Hitchin High Street 14th September * **Note new date**

Eric also advised those present that the local RBL were arranging an informal meet at the Letchworth War memorial to remember the D-Day Landing. 6th June. Chairman Jim Box will lay a wreath on behalf the Branch.

Lindsay Dew reported that the Battle of Britain service on 29th September was well in hand.

The new Vice Chairman needs to be included as a Branch Trustee to meet Association rules. Ken agreed to contact the Charity Commission after the meeting as he was the Branch contact with the Commission.

WHAT AM I USED FOR?



This piece of original Royal Air Force equipment at Shuttleworth, (believed to be the only one of it's kind), was built for a special purpose in those pioneer days of aviation. I am told that it still carries out those functions today. All I need to know is "What is this vehicle used for?" Answer in the next issue of RAFAGEN

WELCOME TO NEW MEMBERS

Information supplied by Membership Department of The Royal Air Forces Association

Mrs Jane Tunsei of Baldock

**WE NEED MORE NEW
MEMBERS**



The Last Post

A chance to pause for a moment in quiet contemplation
for our friends and colleagues who have passed away

Mr Ron Smith of Stevenage

Mr Michael Weeks of Baldock



DIMPLES Bar & Cafe.

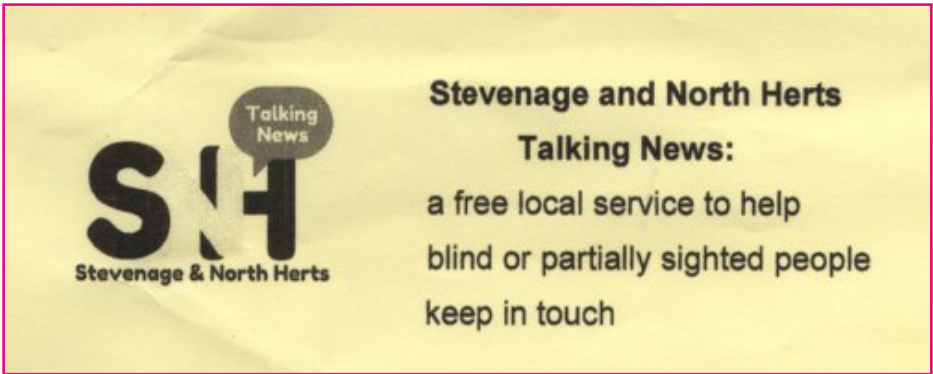
Willian Way,

Letchworth Garden City. SG6 3JH

**Open Tuesday - Sunday (10 am to 4 pm Winter times - 10 am
to 6 pm Summer Times)**

The home of the Branch NAAFI

BREAK



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Or speak to one of our volunteers on 07856 736108

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The RAFAGEN is produced every quarter and sent to members of the Letchworth, Hitchin & District branch of the Royal Air Forces Association.

If you would like to tell your story in RAFAGEN or have any comments about the magazine, the branch or the Association, we would like to hear from you. It can either be by hard copy through the mail, (any photographs will be returned immediately) to Ken Needham 68 Broadwater Avenue, Letchworth Garden City, Herts SG6 3HJ, or via email to kwn056@btinternet.com

NAAFI BREAKS for the next few months are as follows :-

26th June 2024

31st July 2024

28th August 2024

25th September 2024

Should you wish not to receive the regular issues of RAFAGEN, would you please advise the branch secretary on secretary@rafa-letchworth.org.uk, who will arrange for your address to be deleted from our list.

