

W.A.A.F. SITE, BRIDGE, PORTREATH

ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

**Report to Kerrier District Council
Peter Herring BA, MPhil, AIFA**

Cornwall Archaeological Unit

A REPORT TO
KERRIER DISTRICT COUNCIL

KERRIER LAND RECLAMATION SCHEME
WAAF SITE, BRIDGE, PORTREATH

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

WAAF Site, Bridge, Portreath

In the Spring of 1992, the Cornwall Archaeological Unit (CAU) was asked by Kerrier District Council (KDC) to undertake an archaeological assessment of 17 areas of land in the Camborne-Redruth area, and one near Hayle. In general these comprise portions of abandoned mines, and are all now characterised by varying degrees of dereliction; some have been the subject of dump removal and regrading in recent years. The areas concerned are now to be reclaimed using Derelict Land Grants (DLG) from the Department of the Environment.

Some of the sites contain upstanding buildings in the form of engine houses and other associated mine buildings; many of these are now Listed Buildings (generally Grade II). One site (Marriott's Shaft) contains Scheduled Monuments. Elsewhere, the sites may have little in the way of surviving buildings or large earthworks, but nonetheless contain areas of significant archaeological potential below the present land surface. The sites dealt with in this phase of Kerrier DLG Schemes are as follows:

1. Dolcoath Road, Camborne. The central portion of the Dolcoath Mine.
2. Old Dolcoath Tailings, Camborne. Reservoirs and ponds for the mine.
3. Wheal Harriet Shaft, Lower Pengegon. Part of Dolcoath.
4. Chapel Road, Camborne. Part of the Dolcoath dressing floors.
5. Williams Shaft, Pengegon. Part of Dolcoath.
6. South Crofty, Camborne. Includes Cooks Kitchen and part of Dolcoath.
7. Taylors Shaft, Trevithick Road, Pool. Part of East Pool and Agar.
8. Tolskithy Valley, Redruth. Includes part of West Wheal Tolgus.
9. Wheal Harriet, Camborne.
10. Flat Lode Area 1: Marriot's & Pascoe's Shafts.
11. Flat Lode Area 2: East Basset Stamps.
12. Flat Lode Area 3: West Basset Stamps & North Basset.
13. Flat Lode Area 4: Higher Carnkie.
14. Flat Lode Area 5: Newton Moor (Daubuz Shaft).

15. East Wheal Basset (Seleggan Smelter).
16. Wheal Prussia, Treleigh, Redruth.
17. West Wheal Seton, Roskear, Camborne.
18. Binner Downs, Leedstown, Hayle.

In addition to these sites the Cornwall Archaeological Unit was also asked to prepare an archaeological assessment of the old WAAF (Women's Auxiliary Air Force) site at Bridge, near Portreath, the subject of the present report.

2.0 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) provided ground support for fighter and bomber squadrons in the Second World War; the women who took radar messages and plotted the positions and movements of enemy and friendly aircraft on map-tables in operations rooms belonged to the WAAF. They also performed more mundane jobs at airfields and in their associated buildings, even turning their hand to repairing aircraft (see cover showing WAAF women at work on a Spitfire at St Eval; taken from Walford 1989).

The site under consideration here appears to have been the barracks, messes and offices of the WAAF personnel working at the highly important Portreath fighter and bomber airfield, used from March 1941 for convoy protection in the Western Approaches (Spitfires, Whirlwinds, Hurricanes), for ferrying gliders to Europe and north Africa (Halifaxes), for despatching bombers and fighters to European airfields, and as a base for Mosquito and Beaufighter raids on German-held ports and ships in France. It also served, towards the end of the war, when the Allied invasion had pushed eastwards beyond Portreath's useful strike range, as an air-sea rescue station with two Lysanders operational. Portreath was the principal fighter airfield in West Cornwall, controlling Perranporth and Predannack.

The WAAF would have been busy at the airfield, on the cliffs a few hundred metres to the north, and in the Sector Operations Centre (originally at Tehidy Barton, to the west of Portreath village, and then from July 1943 at Tregea Hill). Photographs exist of WAAF personnel at work in these 'ops rooms' (see Walford 1989).

3.0 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE WAAF SITE

Material remains of World War Two military installations form a rapidly diminishing archaeological resource; normally built of grey concrete and with starkly functional rectangular lines, they are generally regarded as ugly eye-sores, reminding survivors of the war of a stressful and depressing period. They are also often completely redundant, taking up land which could be put to other uses. As such they have been

swept aside so thoroughly that relatively few complexes survive in good condition. The recent decisions to preserve and consolidate World War Two pill-boxes and other structures by bodies like the National Trust mark the beginning of a trend, which will no doubt grow, towards the retention of the more important of the surviving 1939-45 remains.

Military airfields are important sites locally as it is rare for national history to directly impinge on an essentially parochial rural world. It has also been suggested that the construction of c.500 airfields and their associated buildings in the British Isles in the last war represents an enterprise only exceeded by the building of the Great Wall of China (Nicholas Johnson pers.comm.).

The significance of the WAAF site at Bridge, Portreath should be assessed then with the following points in mind:

- the historical importance of Portreath as a command fighter station;
- the imposition of national events in the form of the airfield and its associated WAAF site on the Portreath countryside;
- the increasing rarity of reasonably well-preserved World War Two complexes;
- the rarity of the remains of women contributing to the war effort, making Portreath an important site for studying womens' history.

The WAAF site is clearly of some historical importance although its partial demolition (removal of Nissan huts etc.) greatly weakens any argument for its permanent preservation. The Cornwall Archaeological Unit accordingly does not specifically recommend its retention but would regret the loss of another WW2 site. A recommendation for the provision of an archaeological watching brief during any demolition of any of the three air raid shelters has been made (see 5.1, below). It is also recommended that the 2 concrete gate posts (site 1) are retained.

4.0 THE SITE TODAY

The survey method used for this assessment involved annotating an OS 1:2500 map. Each archaeological site identified in the field was located on the map, numbered and described. The information gathered forms the basis of the site Gazetteer (section 6).

4.1 Structures

Nearly all buildings have been dismantled and their materials (walls, roofs, internal fittings etc.) removed from the site. Only their neatly levelled concrete platforms remain. These survive intact (sites 2-7 and 12) and the original layout of the site can still be reconstructed (see Map 1 at rear). The only above-ground structures surviving are the ivy-clad blast shields and entrance cowls of the three air-raid shelters (sites 8-10). A mound towards the SE corner may be the remains of an anti-aircraft gun position (site 14).

It seems that basic accommodation, in 14 barracks blocks (Nissan huts) was provided around the NW, N and S sides (site 12) while offices, messes, stores (site 3?) and workshops were located near the SW entrance and in the centre of the site.

4.2 Other features

A well(?) and a fire hydrant (site 11) survive near the centre of the site. Concrete footpaths (site 15) link the various barrack blocks and other buildings. One leads to the main entrance to the site, in the SW corner where there are two tall concrete gateposts (site 1). Two older posts, from a gateway into a 19th century enclosure, stand in the NW corner (site 17). A military concrete post and wire fence (site 16) defines the site's eastern side.

5.0 GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations which follow comprise an overall archaeological management strategy for the WAAF site. They have been formulated by considering a combination of documentary, cartographic, and field evidence within the study area. Recommendations for individual structures and features are contained in the SITE GAZETTEER (section 6) which follows this section. In making these recommendations it has been assumed that all structures will be demolished as part of land reclamation although it is understood that some platforms will in fact be retained (Sharon Bird, KDC, pers.comm.).

5.1 Further archaeological recording: Evaluation

A limited amount of further archaeological recording and historic research is recommended. Oral history, WAAF survivors in particular, photographic archives and, where available, documentary sources can all be expected to confirm, refute or refine the interpretations of buildings' functions made in this report.

Evaluation stage archaeological recording is required for at least one of the three air-raid shelters. This may be most easily achieved at site 10, the most south-easterly, where one of the blocked entrances has already been slightly breached. Alternatively the NE shelter (site 9) may be entirely intact. A measured sketch plan of both surface and underground remains, with archive photography where necessary, is recommended. This would be most safely done before other earth-moving work began on site.

5.2 Archaeological conservation

It is assumed for the purposes of this report that the site will be entirely cleared during the land reclamation. It is, however, recommended that the two concrete gate posts at the site's entrance (site 1) are retained, either in their present position or in a suitable alternative entrance way, to act as a monument to the WAAF site. It may also be suggested that the name "WAAF site" or "WAAF base" be retained for the

site so that its former historically important use is not forgotten.

6.0 SITE GAZETTEER

No: 1 Gate Posts, SW 6830 4509

Two tall concrete gateposts define the main vehicular access to the WAAF site, in the SW corner of the field. They are c.3.0m apart and c.2.5m high. They have square plans with gentle tapers to pyramidal tops and appear to be cast.

Recommendations

If the buildings and features within the field are to be dismantled and removed KDC may consider retaining these posts either in situ or re-positioned nearby (if the entrance is to be widened) as a permanent monument to the WAAF site.

No: 2 Building platforms, SW 6831 4510

Features: 3 contiguous platforms, one with a concrete plinth

Immediately inside the entrance to the WAAF site is this row of three conjoined level concrete platforms. That to the W is c.7m (E-W) by c.8.5m and the platform is c.1.2m high on the downhill S side. The central platform, c.10m (EW) by c.5.0m has traces of concrete footings for subdividing walls which would have created several small rooms. The eastern platform, the smallest, is c.3m by c.2.5 and supports a concrete plinth c.1.2m square and c.0.2m high.

The platforms presumably served separate but linked functions, perhaps related to the reception of visitors (being beside the entrance). A 1946 RAF aerial photo (106G/UK, 3065) shows gabled roofs and a fairly tall (c.5m?) chimney at the east end, possibly indicating that the plinth supported a stove or an oven.

Recommendations

The platforms are stable and could be re-used.

Further oral history and documentary research may throw light on functions.

No: 3 Building platform, SW 6831 4511

A featureless concrete building platform c.27m (E-W) by c.6m, the largest single structure on site. Its function is unclear but if undivided may have been some sort of store, deliveries being facilitated by closeness to the vehicle entrance. The 1946 RAF aerial photograph (106G/UK, 3065) does suggest a subdivision (at least in

roofing) c.8m from the west end. It also shows a gabled roof - unlike most of the other buildings.

Recommendations

The platform is stable and could be re-used.

Further research required to determine function.

No: 4 Building platform, SW 6833 4514

Features: Platform; plinth; porch; subdivisions

Near the centre of the site is a standard-sized building platform (c.11m x c.4.5 - the same as the barracks buildings) with several additional features - a porch (1.8 x 1.8) at the centre of the short E end; a central plinth (c.0.8 x c.0.4), possibly a fireplace; and footings for subdividing rooms. It clearly served a more complex function than the barracks and was presumably an office-block or some sort of work-room. the 1946 RAF aerial photograph (106G/UK, 3065) shows the building with a dark curving roof (a Nissan hut).

Recommendations

The platform is stable and could be re-used.

Further research required to determine function.

No: 5 Building platform, SW 6835 4515

Features: Platform, walls, porch(?)

The central platform of 3 at the heart of the site (with 4 and 6). Standard-sized (11 x 4.5m) but with debris from collapsed/pushed in concrete block internal walls. A small square brick structure, c.1.2m square, c.0.7m high at W end may be a fireplace or another porch. Again, not a standard barracks block but instead an office-block or work room. The 1946 RAF aerial photograph (106G/UK, 3065) shows a dark painted curving roof (a Nissan hut).

Recommendations

The platform is stable and, with the debris cleared, could be re-used.

Further research to determine function.

No: 6 Building platform, SW 6836 4516

Features: Platform, porch, plinth

The most easterly of the line of 3 offices/workshops in the heart of the site. Standard size (11 x 4.5) with a 1.8 x 1.8m extension at centre of W end, possibly a porch. A central plinth c.0.9 x 0.4m, 0.2m high may be the remains of a fireplace. The 1946 RAF aerial photograph (106G/UK, 3065) shows a dark painted curving roof (a Nissan hut).

Recommendations

The platform is stable and could be re-used.

Further research to determine function.

No: 7 Building platform, SW 6836 4513

Features: Platform, porch

A standard sized (11 x 4.5m) platform to the south of the line of 3 offices/workshops. Has a porch at E end, suggesting it too may have been an office/workshop. The 1946 RAF photograph (106G/UK, 3065) shows a dark painted curving roof (a Nissan hut).

Recommendations

The platform is stable and could be re-used.

Further research to determine function.

No: 8 Air-raid shelter, SW 6830 4515

Features: Entrances, blast shields, collapsed chamber(?)

The NW of 3 shelters on the WAAF site. (Very overgrown with brambles so not closely inspected.) Two blast shields, each c.2.8m long, c.2.5m high, c.0.5m thick, of concrete blocks, to the S of two entrances. These will, from site 10, have had steps down from narrow doors in concrete block and corrugated asbestos cowls. The underground chamber may have collapsed at this shelter as there is a depression, uphill from the entrances, c.12m by c.4.5m and c.0.8m deep. A rectangular concrete-lined ventilation pipe was recorded roughly centrally placed between the two entrances.

This shelter would have served some of the barracks in the NW corner of the site and was probably used mainly for night raids.

No: 6 Building platform, SW 6836 4516

Features: Platform, porch, plinth

The most easterly of the line of 3 offices/workshops in the heart of the site. Standard size (11 x 4.5) with a 1.8 x 1.8m extension at centre of W end, possibly a porch. A central plinth c.0.9 x 0.4m, 0.2m high may be the remains of a fireplace. The 1946 RAF aerial photograph (106G/UK, 3065) shows a dark painted curving roof (a Nissan hut).

Recommendations

The platform is stable and could be re-used.

Further research to determine function.

No: 7 Building platform, SW 6836 4513

Features: Platform, porch

A standard sized (11 x 4.5m) platform to the south of the line of 3 offices/workshops. Has a porch at E end, suggesting it too may have been an office/workshop. The 1946 RAF photograph (106G/UK, 3065) shows a dark painted curving roof (a Nissan hut).

Recommendations

The platform is stable and could be re-used.

Further research to determine function.

No: 8 Air-raid shelter, SW 6830 4515

Features: Entrances, blast shields, collapsed chamber(?)

The NW of 3 shelters on the WAAF site. (Very overgrown with brambles so not closely inspected.) Two blast shields, each c.2.8m long, c.2.5m high, c.0.5m thick, of concrete blocks, to the S of two entrances. These will, from site 10, have had steps down from narrow doors in concrete block and corrugated asbestos cowls. The underground chamber may have collapsed at this shelter as there is a depression, uphill from the entrances, c.12m by c.4.5m and c.0.8m deep. A rectangular concrete-lined ventilation pipe was recorded roughly centrally placed between the two entrances.

This shelter would have served some of the barracks in the NW corner of the site and was probably used mainly for night raids.

Recommendations

Apparently the least well preserved shelter. An archaeological watching brief should be provided for during any demolition so that subterranean features (including WWII graffiti) can be recorded.

No: 9 Air-raid shelter, SW 6835 4517

Features: Entrances, blast-shields

The NE shelter, again probably serving the barracks at night, appears better-preserved than that previously noted (site 8). Both blast shields are intact and the door in the western entrance cowl is still blocked (with concrete blocks). (The eastern entrance is very overgrown and was not closely inspected.) Entrances are c.9m apart.

Recommendations

Possibly the best-preserved shelter and thus the one to select for any conservation. An archaeological watching brief should be provided for during any demolition so that subterranean features (including WWII graffiti) can be recorded.

No: 10 Air-raid shelter, SW 6836 4512

Features: Entrance, blast shields

The SE shelter would probably have served the central and western office/workshops in the daytime and the southern barracks at night. It is identical to the other two. The concrete block blocking of the western entrance has been partially breached and it is possible to see a straight flight of concrete steps running down to a chamber lying between the two entrances.

Recommendations

An archaeological watching brief should be provided for during any demolition so that subterranean features (including WWII graffiti) can be recorded.

No: 11 Well(?) and hydrant, SW 6832 4514

Features: Pit and fire hydrant

Uphill from the central offices/workshops is a fire hydrant with a cast-iron cover to a small rectangular structure. The cover has the cast lettering: W VISICK & SONS LTD, FIRE HYDRANT, DEVORAN and is c.0.4m by c.0.2m. It lies c.10m downhill from a circular pit c.2.0m diameter, c.0.7m deep, possibly a spring, well or similar feature. A fire hydrant will obviously have been a valuable feature on a

site vulnerable to air raids.

Recommendations

If demolished the cover should be rescued. CAU can offer to curate it. KDC should be aware of the likelihood of underground tanks, pipes etc. existing in the vicinity.

No: 12 Barracks, SW 6828 4515, 6834 4518 and 6836 4510

Features: 14 building platforms

At the NW, N and SE margins of the site are the simple, standard (11 x 4.5m) concrete platforms of 14 identical buildings. These are apparently the WAAF barracks. All are now featureless level platforms except for the most north-easterly which has a central concrete plinth (c.0.8m x 0.4, c.0.2m high), possibly a fireplace, and the platform immediately uphill from the fire hydrant which has the debris of collapsed rendered concrete block walls (presumably internal subdivisions). The latter also has, amongst the debris, fragments of trapped galvanised sheets (flat, not corrugated), possibly remnants of the roof. The 1946 RAF aerial photograph (106G/UK, 3065) shows these buildings to have had curved roofs painted a dark colour (Nissan huts).

Recommendations

The platforms are stable and, with any debris removed, could be re-used. Further research is required to confirm identification as barracks.

No: 13 Support, SW 6836 4515

A guy from a telegraph post or electricity pylon was recorded here.

No: 14 Mound, SW 6839 4513

A square, level-topped mound, c.9.0m square, up to c.1.8m high (to S) towards the SE corner of the site may have been the position of a defensive anti-aircraft gun.

Recommendations

Further research may confirm identification. The provision of a watching brief during vegetation clearance and any demolition may enable further archaeological evidence to be gathered and will provide an opportunity for recording.

No: 15 Footpaths, throughout site

Most of the buildings have narrow (c.0.5m wide) concrete footpaths leading to them. They are generally straight and conform to a grid pattern. The dense vegetation on the site makes it likely that others exist, as yet unrecorded. Women would have been able to pass between buildings in their shoes; the ground is otherwise heavy and muddy. Clearly visible on 1946 RAF aerial photograph (106G/UK, 3065).

No: 16 Fence, SW 6835 4520 to 6841 4510

The eastern boundary of the WAAF site is defined by a concrete post and wire fence. The posts are cast square with perforations for the wire. A roughly central gateway with girders for posts is probably secondary.

No 17 Gateposts, SW 6828 4517

In the NW corner of the field is a pair of granite gateposts leading into a very recently destroyed rectangular enclosure (destroyed by infilling with soil).

Recommendations

Retain the posts; likely to be early 19th century.

