Uncovering Second World War secrets in the Great

Pilot Officer Harold Penketh's story will be told Aviva Group Archive

Starting today (5 Oct), a Mark I Spitfire is being excavated near Holme Lode, between Huntingdon and Peterborough. The Second World War plane, and the story of its pilot, has been a part of the local area for nearly eight decades.

On 22 November 1940, Pilot Officer Harold Edwin Penketh was on a routine training flight from RAF Wittering when he broke from formation with two other Spitfires and entered a dive from which he didn’t recover. The remains of the plane have been there ever since.

As well as marking the 75th anniversary of the Battle of Britain and also of the crash, the excavation is part of the wider The Great Fen project. This project aims to transform farmland into a diverse and beautiful fenland landscape for the benefit of people and wildlife.

[quote]Unearthing the Spitfire not only clears the way for the land to be restored but also enables Pilot Officer Penketh’s story to be told.[/quote]

As well as the support of HRH Prince of Wales and Stephen Fry, the project has benefited from a £9million HLF grant made possible by National Lottery players. It is led by the Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire alongside a number of high-profile partners. It has been described as being part of one of the largest and most ambitious habitat restoration projects in Europe.

Unearthing the Spitfire not only clears the way for the land to be restored but also enables Pilot Officer Penketh's story to be told. RAF Wyton Pathfinder Museum will receive the excavated items so they are safely conserved. While members of the public can discover more about the excavation at the Great Fen Discovery Day at Holmewood Hall on Saturday 17 October. Visit the Great Fen Project website for more information.

Five excavation facts

1. The excavation is scheduled to take one week starting on Monday 5 October
2. All artefacts uncovered will remain the property of the Ministry of Defence
3. The remains were located in August after Peter Masters from the Cranfield University Forensic Institute conducted a geophysical survey of the site
4. Several organisation's will be involved – including Oxford Archaeology East, the Great Fen Archaeology Group and aviation archaeology experts from Historic England
5. The Defence Archaeology Group will also be present. The group oversees Operation Nightingale which sees service personnel and veterans using aspects of field archaeology and heritage skills to aid recovery and skill development

The Great Fen is one of the largest restoration projects of its type in Europe

Secrets of the Second World War revealed in the Great Fen