UK's best-preserved First World War aerodrome



Buildings at Stow Maries

A near-complete example of a First World War aerodrome, untouched and largely forgotten for 60 years, is to be revived and turned into a major visitor attraction thanks to £4.3million from the National Lottery.

Stow Maries Great War Aerodrome was established by the Royal Flying Corp (RFC) in 1916 and played a pivotal role in defending London and the British mainland from German zeppelins and Gotha bombers.

Following the end of the First World War, the site reverted to agricultural use, leaving behind a unique collection of historic buildings still in their original form. Stow Maries fell increasingly into disrepair and was largely forgotten until the late 1970s when local historians and military aviation enthusiasts recognised its importance.

The 24 surviving structures and airfield remain relatively unaltered since the aerodrome was taken out of service in March 1919. Since 2015, however, one-by-one the buildings have started to be restored. Now, a major conservation project, backed by £4.3m from the National Lottery, will put Stow Maries Great War Aerodrome, near Maldon in Essex, firmly on the map as a major UK visitor attraction.

Stow Maries has already come a long way in the past five years, opening up buildings to the public, establishing a shop and café and increasing visitors from a handful of enthusiasts to more than 12,000 a year.

The money from the National Lottery is the largest injection of cash to date and will allow it to:

- Restore and bring back into use five buildings, four of which are on the Heritage at Risk register
- Create a purpose-built welcome centre with visitor orientation, a café and shop
- Fully restore an officers' accommodation block and use it to house a major new permanent exhibition – exploring what life was like to live as an RFC officer
- Fully restore two more accommodation buildings to enable them to host temporary exhibitions, as well as being flexible spaces for school use and income-generating private hire
- Upgrade the historic toilet block and infrastructure works, including paths, power supplies and drainage
- Deliver activities and learning including a community archaeology project, wildlife trail and oral history project
- Train volunteers, apprentices and interns and recruit for two full-time posts

Ian Flint, CEO of Stow Maries Great War Aerodrome Trust, said: “This successful application will help to ensure that Stow Maries Great War Aerodrome has the opportunity to develop into an even more professional Visitor Attraction and further energise progress on our project. This will help us keep Stow Maries where it deserves to be – on the regional, national and international heritage stage as a premier location for early military aviation history and the Great War in the air.”

Ros Kerslake, Chief Executive of the Heritage Lottery Fund, said: “Stow Maries is a remarkable place, providing a unique insight into First World War aviation. The fact that the aerodrome was largely forgotten for so many decades only adds to its mystique and appeal, but also means that surviving structures are in such well-preserved, original condition. This support from the National Lottery will help Stow Maries become the major visitor attraction it deserves to be.”

Lord Ashton of Hyde, First World War Minister said: “I am delighted that Stow Maries Great War Aerodrome has received a £4.3m grant thanks to National Lottery players. This grant will go towards preserving a rare example of a First World War aerodrome that was pivotal in protecting Britain. As we approach the final year of our centenary commemorations, it is fitting that we are making efforts to protect our First World War heritage for future generations.”

Notes to editors

Stow Maries Aerodrome was established in September 1916 as a main base for No 37 (Home Defence) Squadron, Royal Flying Corps (RFC). For two years during the First World War it played a pivotal role in helping defend against attacks by German zeppelin airships and Gotha fixed wing bombers. The squadron transitioned from the RFC to the newly independent RAF on 1 April 1918 and remained on station until 1919 when it transferred to Biggin Hill.

Thereafter the aerodrome reverted to agricultural use leaving behind a unique collection of historic buildings in their original form surrounded by wildlife. Some of the timber structures were removed or collapsed but much remained and a survey by the Royal Commission for Historic Monuments in 1997 set out the site's importance.

No other near complete First World War aerodrome remains in England. 24 of the original 49 buildings remain and all are listed Grade II*. Included are an RFC Officers' Mess, Pilots' Ready Room, Airmen's Mess, Reception Building and Squadron Headquarters. Original fixtures and fittings and the presence of the airfield and parade ground amplify the significance.

In 2007, the site was acquired by an engineering company for business use and a small museum was created in the Airmen's Mess Hall with a volunteer base established to carry out restorations and manage parts of the site. The area

became a Conservation Area in 2010 and the buildings were listed in 2012. A fundraising campaign was then established to purchase the site, led by volunteers supported by Essex County Council and Maldon Council. With funds from National Heritage Memorial Fund, the councils and English Heritage the site was acquired by the applicant in 2013.

The flight offices on the site have been fitted out by volunteers to tell the story of 37 Squadron. In 2016 a further building on the site was opened, telling an interactive history of the site including examples of how a bedroom and the Station Armoury would have looked, the history of the Women's Royal Air Force at the site and a simulated WW1 Sopwith 1½ Strutted.

The unspoiled nature of the site means that it is home to a wide range of fauna and flora including all five British owls. A biodiversity conservation plan has been produced. The site is subject to a Stewardship Scheme and the applicant works with the Woodland Trust and RSPB.

Further information

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