

Bombing up at
Sculthorpe

Jim Baldwin



Thanks to John Biosson, Huby
Fairhead & the late Vic Rose.

Jim Baldwin has written a number of books on the history of
his home town of Fakenham and also on
RAF Sculthorpe, 50 years of watching and waiting.

There is one piece of RAF Sculthorpe's infrastructure that has often puzzled people and that, I believe was the bomb loading pit. In 1946 the RAF and the Americans ran a joint exercise 'Project Ruby.' This saw RAF and US aircraft drop surplus Earthquake and Disney* bombs on German U Boat pens. The RAF Lancaster and Lincolns had no problem with these because of their lofty undercarriages but the US B29s did not have such critical prop clearance, their squat undercarriages made them closer to the ground. To overcome this the aircraft were positioned over a pit into which the bomb had been placed so that it could be raised up into the Bombay of the aircraft. Sculthorpe was not involved with Project Ruby, the origins of the pit there go back to the end of WWII, when pits were used to bomb up the Atom bombs destined for Japan. When the first US aircraft arrived at Sculthorpe post war they had dummy Atom bombs to practice with hence the need for a pit there .

** The Disney bomb was a rocket assisted concrete-busting bomb developed by the Royal Navy even though they had no means of delivering one!*



The bomb loading pit was situated on one of the 'spectacles' at the eastern end of the airfield. The two manholes either side probably contained the operation mechanisms

When the SAC bombers moved out and the 47th BW came technology and procedures had moved on the the pit was no longer needed so it was allowed to become filled in and grass took over.



The manhole covers are still visible in2018.

The full location of the pit.





Sculthorpe's conventional wartime bomb dump lasted until the early 1950s. However, in 1946 an unspecified 'Air Ministry' building was constructed. The Americans were involved in this even though their troops had left the UK the previous year and were considered to be a foreign power! Perhaps they had identified Sculthorpe as a potential future base.

The location of this building is not known and its purpose has long since been presumed to be related to atomic weapons.



Could this be the Air Ministry building? It was not there during the war!



It was soon realised that the wartime bomb dump was inadequate and a new one was built off the north-east corner of the base. One of the iglos there still presents a high reading of radioactivity. This tells its own story!



The 47thBW B45s were bombed up in the normal way. One eyewitness recalled one being upended on its tail ready to accept an abnormal load. Since this had been sanctioned it must have been realised what a strain it would put on the airframe!



In 1958 Leander Cunningham had an episode when he had a loaded weapon in a place where he should not have been with it. Worried that he might do something silly the base and the surrounding villages were put on lockdown and Cunningham was given a one-way ticket to the USA.

