



Guide to the New Forest World War 2 Airfields

Routes to Follow

Prepared by Steve Williams

Introduction

Driving through the New Forest's lush and tranquil scenery today, it is hard to imagine that during the early to mid-1940s the forest was progressively militarised, as Britain defended itself from threatened invasion, and then prepared to launch what became known as D Day in June of 1944. By May 1944 there were a staggering 2,876,000 troops together with their vehicles and equipment in Southern England preparing for D Day. Many of these were in the New Forest as the trees provided ideal cover as well as the forest's proximity to major ports such as Southampton and Poole.

The World War 2 Airfields

At the start of World War 2 there were only two active airfields in the New Forest. There was the sea plane base at Calshot, and the civilian airport at Christchurch, both on the periphery of the forest. This was a blessing during the Battle of Britain, as it saved the forest from much of the bombing suffered by major ports and airfields across Southern England. However, the Battle of Britain provided the stimulus to build many new airfields across the South of England. Four permanent concrete runway airfields were built in the New Forest. These were:

- **RAF Stoney Cross**, (USAAF Station AAF 452)
- **RAF Ibsley**, (USAAF Station AAF 347)
- **RAF Holmsley South** (USAAF Station AAF 455)
- **RAF Beaulieu** (USAAF Station AAF 408)

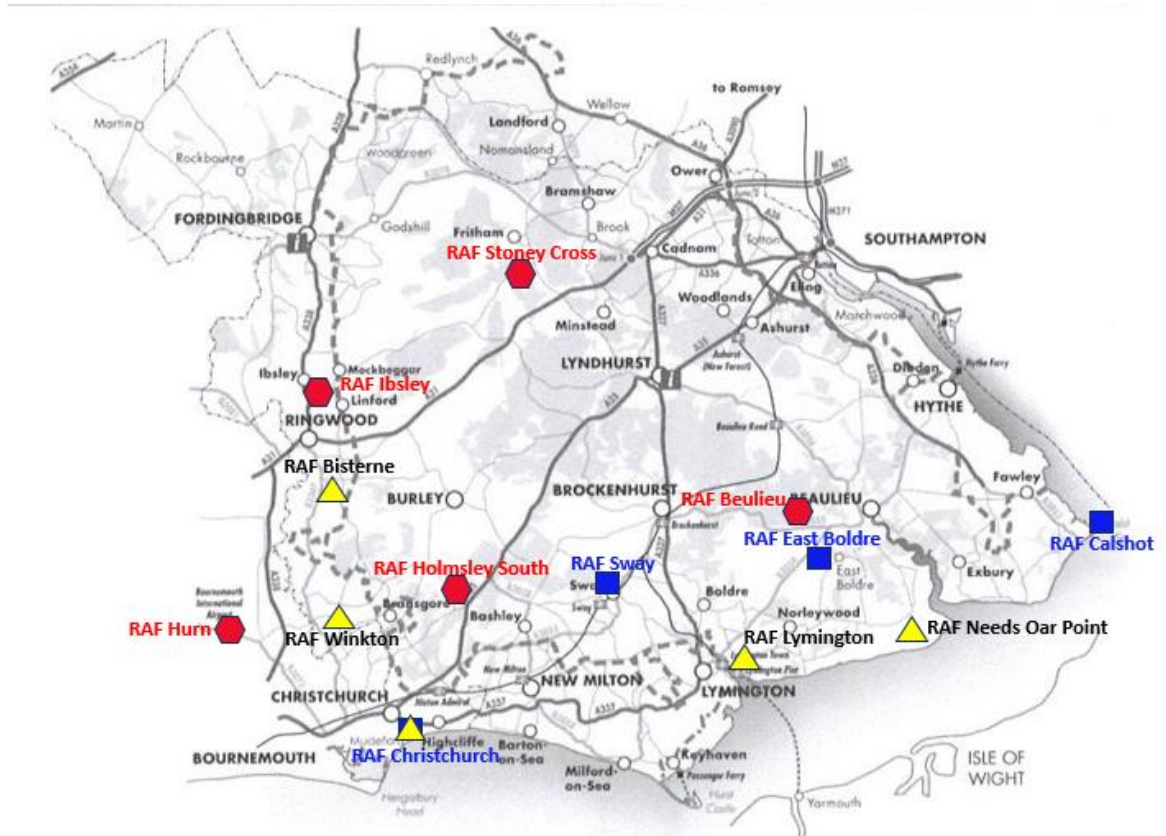
As part of the preparation for D Day, a chain of Advanced Landing Grounds (ALG) were built rapidly on agricultural land along the South Coast. Four of these were in the New Forest:

- **RAF Winkton** (USAAF Station AAF 414)
- **RAF Lymington** (USAAF Station AAF 551)
- **RAF Needs Oar Point**
- **RAF Bisterne** (USAAF Station AAF 415).

Four additional airfields were either further developed or built around the periphery of the New Forest. These were:

- **RAF Christchurch** Advanced Landing Ground (USAAF Station AAF 416) developed from the former civilian airfield to the east of Christchurch, just outside the New Forest, which opened in 1926 and became an aircraft manufacturing site as well as an important research and development site.
- **RAF Hurn** (USAAF Station AAF 492) was another of the permanent concrete runway airfields, just outside the New Forest boundary.

- **RAF Calshot**, the seaplane base at the mouth of Southampton Water, the origins of which go back as far as 1913. Calshot was the UK's most important seaplane and flying boat base, and it continued in this role during the War. The base also developed and operated air sea rescue craft.
- **RAF Sway Emergency Landing Ground**, a short-lived Emergency Landing Ground, associated with RAF Christchurch

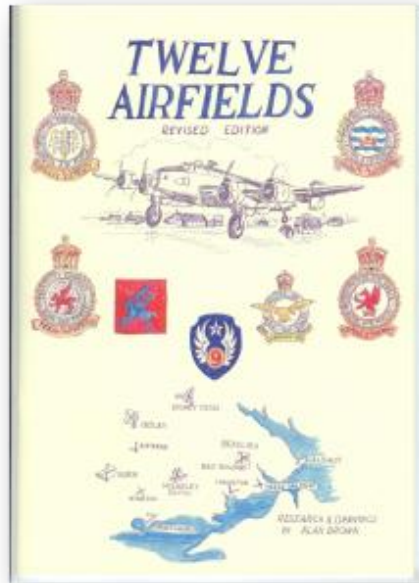


Together, these airfields were home to around 25,000 service personnel supported by approximately 10,000 civilian staff. They played a major role during the build-up and execution of Operation Overlord, what we know as D Day. In the few weeks after D Day many British and US squadrons moved to airfields and Advanced Landing Grounds built on liberated land in France, to continue providing support to the advancing troops. This meant that the New Forest Advanced Landing Grounds were no longer required, with most of the other airfields closed soon after the end of the war.

Please remember that these airfields were built nearly eighty years ago and all except RAF Hurn were closed by the 1960s. The Advanced Landing Grounds were returned to agricultural use in 1944/45. Much has changed since these were operational airfields and, in some cases, the land has been put to very different use. For example, Christchurch is now a housing and retail development and Ibsley is gravel workings and now lakes. This means that for some former airfields there is little to see, other than the space that they once occupied. However, if you know where to look, there are still the remains of runways, taxi ways, aircraft dispersal and buildings to be found. Please be sure to recognise that the former Advanced Landing Grounds were on agricultural land which is still farmed today and as such is private land.

Alan Browns Book

A good overview of each of the World War 2 airfields can be found in Alan Brown's book, Twelve Airfields, so I have not repeated this information in these directions. These notes compliment Alan's book and, for consistency, use the same airfield location sketches that Alan prepared for the book. You will get more out of your visit to the airfields, if you have this book to hand. The book is available from East Boldre Village Hall. (eastboldre.org)



For those with a particular interest, there is a wealth of more detailed information available. I have included a number in the Useful Links and Downloads sections of my website, nfw2airfields.info.

The Birth of the Guides

As a former private pilot and long time aviation enthusiast, I developed an interest in the World War 2 Airfields in the New Forest. I stress that I am an enthusiast not a historian so my guides and articles are written for enthusiasts or those looking to find out more about this aspect of the New Forest heritage.

I have often been asked, "What is the best route to take to visit all the airfields?" This of course depends upon where you would like to start from and what interests you have. You can rush from one to another and see them all in a day, however, to do them justice, I would suggest at least two days to visit them all and if you enjoy walking the ground, you could well focus on just one airfield a day.

The purpose of the guide is to provide you with driving directions between the airfield locations. Where one exists, I have used the information board, memorial or a convenient road junction as the target point for each airfield. Where there is no such obvious target, I have provided directions to a convenient place to view the former airfield.

To provide a more complete tour of the Aviation Heritage of the New Forest, my routes contain some optional detours to other aviation related points of interest:

- **The Signals Research and Development Establishment** at Christchurch and Steamer Point
- **RAF Sopley**, a radar station and post war air traffic control training establishment, where the domestic site emergency generator building is now home to the FONFA Heritage Centre
- **The Ashley Walk bombing range** near Godshill
- **The D-Day memorial and Mulbury Harbour construction site** at Lepe

- **RFC / RAF East Boldre**, a World War One Royal Flying Corps training establishment that closed in 1918.
- **Purbeck Radar**, the research and development establishment at Worth Matravers that was responsible for the development of both ground and aircraft based radar during 1941 /42.

I have mention some of the many tea rooms and pubs that I have visited, should you be looking for a break, something to eat or drink or a toilet during your exploration. Please remember that these places have differing opening hours and can get very busy, so you are advised to call ahead or go to their website to check opening times and to book if necessary.

There are many different routes available between the Airfields. I have prepared two routes that each provide a leisurely drive and allow time for some exploration. It is possible to combine both routes into one busy day, but this allows little time to explore. Some of the airfields have great walks, details of which are on the Hampshire and New Forest WWII website or the Go New Forest website. If you enjoy these walks, you may use the routes for local directions as you make multiple visits. The two routes are:

Route One starts at Christchurch and goes via Holmsley South, Winkton, Hurn, Bisterne, and Ibsley ending at Stoney Cross.

Route Two starts at Calshot and goes via Beulieu, Needs Oar Point, Lymington ending at Sway.

I have provided **What3Words** addresses for all key points. If you have not used these, and would like to give them a go, download the **What3Words** app and then copy or type the three words as written, with the dots, into the input box at the top of the screen. Press Navigate. If you have a maps app such as Google Maps, you will be given a choice of using Maps or the **What3Words** app. The route offered may not always be the same as the route in these directions, but the destination should be!

I have included reference to existing websites and articles for those who are interested in more in-depth research about the airfields. Most of these can be accessed via the Downloads or Useful Links sections of my website nfww2airfields.info The website also contains access to Wikipedia and the New Forest Knowledge website for an overview article for each airfield.

Walking the New Forest

There are many enjoyable walks that include one or more of the New Forest Airfields. This guide provides details of some of them. <https://newforestcarparkwalks.wordpress.com>

I am very grateful to John Levesley and Marc Highway for their encouragement and permission to include some of their photographs and links to their excellent articles in the guides and on my website and to East Boldre Village Hall for permission to include sketches from Alan Brown's Twelve Airfields book.

Thank you for using my Guides to the New Forest World War 2 Airfields, I hope that you enjoyed exploring the New Forest and its aviation heritage.

If you have any feedback and comments, please drop me an email at nfww2airfields@gmail.com