# Alconbury Airfield—
# 70 years of global history
# on your doorstep



1945







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## Alconbury Airfield

For over 70 years, RAF Alconbury, like so many sites across East Anglia, played a central part in military operations over Europe. It was an operational air base from 1938 to 1995, during which time it came under the control of both the British and American Air Forces. The legacy of that time – hangars, control centres, bunkers and huts – reflect a complex and fascinating history, intertwined with the communities that surround the airfield.

Here are the pieces of the story we have pulled together so far, but we want to add your memories and stories to help us bring the history of this special site to life. Contact Rebecca Britton on 01480 413141 or by email — rbritton@urbanandcivic.com



## RAF Alconbury 1938–42

### 1938
RAF Alconbury opens as a satellite airfield to RAF Upwood. Crews sleep under canvas, and aircraft return to Upwood for repairs and maintenance.

### 1939
Outbreak of World War Two. The station is put under the control of RAF Wyton.



A Bristol Blenheim, of the type that arrived at RAF Alconbury in 1940 with 15 and 40 Squadrons.

### 1940
**April/May**
15 Squadron and 40 Squadron move in, flying Bristol Blenheim and Fairey Battle bombers. They are involved in a number of raids over Belgium and Holland in the early summer, including a damaging raid on the Albert Canal; only 6 of 15 Squadron's 12 Blenheims return.



First RAF Victoria Cross of WWII awarded to Alconbury's Flying Officer Garland who led the attack on the Albert Canal. Charcoal and pencil sketch, 1943.

**June**
Work begins on improving the airfield. Its first watchtower is built, along with taxiways and hard standing. The runway is lengthened.



**September**
A Luftwaffe attack on the airfield takes place, with eight high explosives landing on the site.

**November**
Vickers Wellington bombers replace Alconbury's Blenheims. They saw action over a number of German cities, including Duisburg, Hanover, Cologne, Essen and Berlin. These sorties continued throughout 1941.



A Vickers Wellington in flight. Designed by Barnes Wallace, who also created the 'bouncing bomb', Wellingtons were flown out of Alconbury from November 1940.

### 1941
**March** Second Luftwaffe raid severs local telephone lines, the third drops 44 bombs.

## The arrival of the United States Army Air Force 1942–45

### 1942
By summer 1942, Alconbury aircraft had flown over 650 operational sorties by this point, at a cost of 59 Wellington and eight Blenheim bombers.

During the summer, RAF Alconbury was handed over to the USAAF. The 93rd Bombardment Group move in, flying B-24 'Liberators'. Extensive changes to the airfield with runway extension, additional hard standing, hangars and support buildings.

## 1943

**January**
The 93rd Bombardment Group was replaced by the 92nd.

**27 May**
One of the major tragedies in Alconbury's long history took place. A bomb detonated whilst loading a B-17 of the 95th Bomb Group, killing 19 and injuring a further 27 men.

**August**
482nd Group was formed, known as 'Pathfinder'. A bomb group using radar-led 'blind bombing' techniques, they used specially adapted B-17s.

**September**
Black Thursday sees the loss of 60 aircraft in the Point Blank Raids effectively writing off the 92nd.



'Teggie Ann', one of the USAAF B-24s based at Alconbury, pictured during service.

## 1944

Abbots Ripton Strategic Air Depot (now the USAF base) became operational.

Radar-enabled USAAF bombers and reconnaissance aircraft from Alconbury continue to have a central role in events in Europe. Mosquito surveillance craft photograph the Normandy beaches prior to D-Day, while raids on Berlin are launched from Alconbury in the closing months of the war.

## 1945

Victory in Europe declared on 8 May. The gradual wind-down of RAF Alconbury from a war footing begins. The USAAF leave the site, and hand it back to RAF in October.

←Alconbury was the first USAAF station to be visited by King George VI, inspecting Col Timberlake's Liberator 'Teggie Ann'.

# The Cold War era 1945–91

## 1945

Until 1951, RAF Alconbury sits in a mothballed state, with the Royal Air Force using it as a site for the storage, distribution and dismantling of munitions.

## 1947

United States Air Force (USAF) is created.

## 1948

Berlin Blockade: The Soviet government closes land routes into Berlin to the Allied nations, in an attempt to give the Soviet Union effective control over the city. The Berlin Airlift undermines the blockade and the episode forms the first major tension point of the Cold War.

## 1949

**April** North Atlantic Treaty signed, leading to the formation of NATO, and a general agreement of mutual defence between a number of nations in Europe and North America.

## 1950

Invasion of South Korea by North Korea, with support from fellow Communist nations, China and the USSR. Tensions rise between western democratic nations, and the emerging Communist Bloc.

## 1951

The USAF, having decided that there was now suitably pressing need to provide a military presence in Europe, are allocated RAF Alconbury for use as an airbase.



## 1953

**June** The USAFE (United States Airforce in Europe) officially move in to Alconbury, although the airfield is not, at this stage, ready for occupation and use.

## 1953–55

Construction of a number of buildings on the site, including the Control Tower, which still stands, and the bomb dump. The watchtowers surrounding the area originally known as 'The Peninsular Site', are of a recognised American design of the early 1950s.



## 1955

**May**
The Warsaw Pact is signed, creating a formal agreement of mutual defence between eight nations of the Communist Bloc, including the Soviet Union, East Germany, Poland and Czechoslovakia.

**September**
USAFE begin to fly from Alconbury. The 86th Bombardment Squadron move in, flying B-45A Tornados.

## 1958

47th Bombardment Squadron began to fly B-66 'Destroyers' out of Alconbury.

## 1959

**December** Construction of the Parachute Loft, to replace a rudimentary one of linked Nissen Huts.



USAF B-66 Destroyer, as flown from Alconbury from 1958 until around 1966.

## 1965
RF-4C (F-4) Phantoms begin to arrive at Alconbury, flown by the 10th Tactical Reconnaissance Wing, already present at Alconbury.

## 1980
Construction of the Hardened Aircraft Shelters at Alconbury, to protect the F-4 Phantom IIIs and F-5 Tiger IIs at the base.

## 1982
Arrival of U-2 Reconnaissance aircraft at Alconbury with the 17th Tactical Reconnaissance Wing. Remodelling of the northern section of the airbase begins, providing new concrete aprons and taxiways to accommodate the new aircraft.



McDonnell Douglas F-4 Phantom at the Alconbury airshow in 1983, shortly after the construction of the HASs.

## 1983
Construction of special 'extra-wide' Hardened Aircraft Shelters, to protect U-2 planes from nuclear attack.



## 1988
Construction begins on the Avionics Building, officially known as Building 210. Said to have cost about £75 million to build, it was designed to withstand a direct nuclear attack and built to process the photography produced by reconnaissance missions. It had its own power plant, communications facilities, air supply, and decontamination facility.



## 1989
Construction of five 'Ready Sheds', undefended hangars, for maintenance and storage of U-2 aircraft. The main runway is also overhauled.

Fall of the Berlin Wall, the symbolic end of the Cold War.





## 1990
The Gulf War, which began in August following the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq, extended Alconbury's usage. U-2/TR-1s and A-10s were deployed from the base to Saudi Arabia.

## 1993
It is announced that as part of the wind-down of USAFE, Alconbury will be returned to the Ministry of Defence.

## 1995
**September** USAFE leave the base for good, ending the airfield's 57 years of near-continuous use.

## Cold War to brownfield
Alconbury's current role as a commercial site began after the Americans handed back their Cold War air base to the Ministry of Defence.

## 1997
The site was acquired by Prologis in a joint venture with BAA Lynton, with a plan to create a freight interchange. Their planning application for B8 use – the class of planning consent that permits warehousing and distribution – was called in for inquiry.

## 2003
Secretary of State John Prescott, gave consent for 7 million sq ft of B8.

## 2007
Prologis obtained a temporary consent to use the site's buildings for B8 and light industrial (B1/B2) uses.

## 2009
Urban&Civic acquired the site in 2009 and obtained an extension to the temporary consents until 2015 while development proposals for the future are prepared.

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