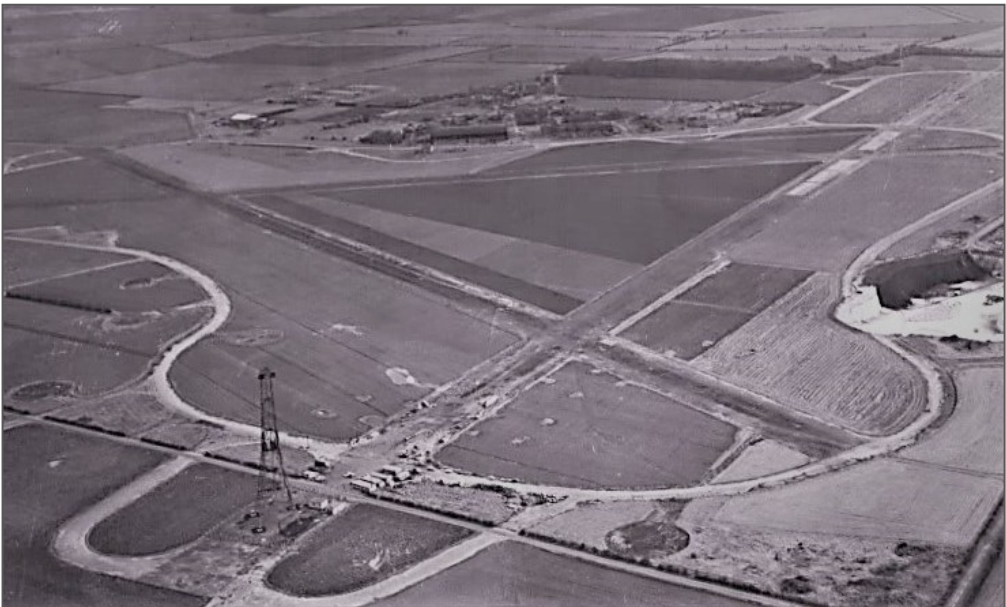


Elsham Wolds: The Early Days

About a month after Bob Dylan was born in May 1941, RAF staff started to arrive at Elsham Wolds. Group Captain Hugh Constantine (later Air Chief Marshal) was posted from the Central Flying School to take charge of the new Station on 29 June. He found there was no running water or electricity, the contractors still working and many of the buildings incomplete. The airfield was under command, but unfinished and without aircraft.

In 1939, with the shadow of war darkening, former airfield sites had been surveyed to assess their potential for development. Elsham Wolds was one deemed suitable and construction had begun in 1940. A factor in this choice was rail communications and the proximity of Barnetby station. There was also a station at Elsham, albeit 1½ miles (2.4 km) from the village and even further from the airfield.

The new site was west of the fields where a smaller World War I landing ground had existed. In the winter of 1916/17, William Leef Robinson had flown from there for a short time with 33 Squadron. Before his posting north from 39 Squadron, he'd been the first airman to down a Zeppelin over the UK, whilst on patrol from Sutton's Farm near Hornchurch, Essex. For this Robinson was awarded a VC and is the only holder of the honour to have flown from Elsham Wolds. /-



An aerial view of the former airfield looking east, taken in the 1970s. The alignment of the runways is clear, with the longest running south-east from the radio mast (No. 1 on map) in the foreground. The perimeter road and some dispersals can be seen, with the remaining Technical buildings towards the top of the photo. The current Anglian Water plant (and Memorial Garden) had yet to appear - south west of the runway intersection nearest the mast

-/ Twenty five years on, fresh concrete formed the ubiquitous 'A' pattern of runways on the plateaued Wold. The longest, sometimes referred to as the 'no wind' one, was 6,000ft (1.8km) long and ran south-eastwards parallel to Middlegate Lane, from the present radio mast - near the current Anglian Water plant).

To the east of the site was a "J" type hanger (the most visible present day remains, pictured right: see map), with billets and other technical or admin buildings behind.



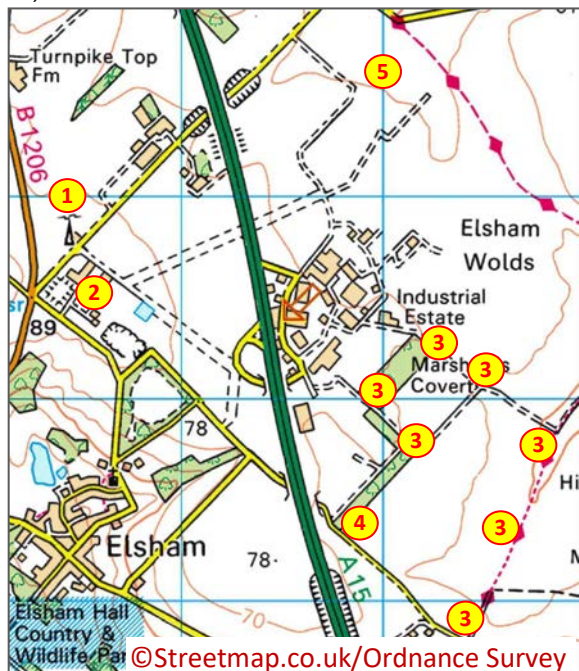
In 1942, two other hangars would be added, along with the facilities required for a greater number of larger aircraft and personnel as Bomber Command grew in strength and ability. Three more "T" hangars followed in 1944, further east.

The extent of the airfield is indicated on a more contemporary map, below (blue squares are 1km each side).

MAP KEY

- 1) Radio Mast (with symbol)
- 2) Memorial Garden & Water Treatment Plant
- 3) Location of Quarters
- 4) Station Hospital
- 5) Bomb Stores

NB: Outline of Runways shown by widely-spaced dotted lines, with approx. location of the remaining Hangar indicated by arrow.



When July 1941 began, 103 Squadron was nearing the end of its time at RAF Newton. They flew five operations to objectives in Germany and two smaller scale attacks on ports in occupied France and the Netherlands. Shortly after dawn on 11 July 1941, P/O Lund RNZAF came back from Cologne at 05:35. His was the last of 11 aircraft to land, a few hours after two had returned from Boulogne. /-

-/ The same day, the crews moved to Lincolnshire with their Vickers Wellingtons to join the new Station Commander and his personnel.

As David Fell notes on his website, “There were mixed feelings about the move as Newton was a well-equipped and happy station.” One reason was that Nottingham, with its friendly pubs, had been within easy reach and popular with the Squadron. Their new home had primitive accommodation and, they were to find, was often wet and windy, making it particularly uncomfortable in cold weather.

After becoming acquainted with their surroundings, “six machines were detailed to attack the docks at Bremen” on 14 July. The first aircraft despatched in earnest was that with New Zealander Lund, at the controls.

Six more night operations and one by day were completed by the end of the month. Although only five or six (even as few as one!) aircraft participated in these, losses were ever present and two aircraft had ‘failed to return’.

The first was piloted by Sgt John Bucknole on the 24 July daylight attack of the battle cruiser ‘Gniesau’ lying at Brest. Approaching the target, his aircraft was attacked by a Me109 fighter which set one engine on fire. His Wellington was last seen at 8,000ft losing height. The crew are commemorated on the Runnymede Memorial, with the exception of co-pilot Sgt George Beckwith, who is buried at the Kerfautras cemetery, in Brest.



Lancaster ED888 (“Mother of them All”) taking off from Elsham. It flew with 103 and 576 Squadrons, completing over 140 operations in 20 months during 1943 and 1944: the most by a Bomber Command aircraft. The Technical Area is in the

That night (the last ‘op’ of July) Mervyn Lund and his crew took-off for Emden on their second trip from Elsham. The next morning they were “missing” and remained so for over 70 years, until Dutch researchers traced the aircraft. This allowed their graves in the cemetery at Leeuwarden, marked as ‘unknown’, to be identified and rededicated at a ceremony in September 2015.