

This is the twenty-third of an occasional series of articles by David Stone about incidents in the history of Swanton Morley and its church

THE RAF WINDOW IN THE CHANCEL

Several times recently, visitors have asked me questions about the RAF window, so I have done my best to try to find out more about it, and I have just produced a little explanatory booklet. I am, however, very conscious that I may have got things wrong, or left out something important. So, please do take a look at the booklet and let me know if it needs altering. Here, I reproduce some extracts from the booklet.



The designer and his commission

Early in 1989, the officers and airmen of RAF Swanton Morley decided that a very appropriate way to celebrate the forthcoming 50th anniversary of the opening of the station would be to commission a new stained glass window for the chancel of All Saints' Church. This was intended to commemorate fifty years of friendship between the base and the village.

The artist chosen was Glenn Carter, who is now a Fellow of the British Society of Master Glass painters with commissions for work in over thirty secular and non-secular buildings in Britain and abroad, but at that time he was at the beginning of his career. However, he had already designed two Air Force windows. The first was a two-light window for St Mary and St Gabriel, Binbrook, Lincolnshire, which was presented to the church by RAF Binbrook when the station closed in 1989; this also commemorated a fifty year link with its neighbouring village. The second was a three-light window in St Bartholomew's, Great Gransden, Huntingdonshire. This is a memorial for 405 Squadron, Royal Canadian Air Force and it commemorates the 801 airmen from RAF Gransden Lodge who lost their lives during WWII.

It was after seeing the designs for these two windows that RAF Swanton Morley chose Glenn Carter to design their window, and he then visited All Saints to discuss his ideas with the RAF representatives and the PCC.

At the very top of the window are drawings of five aircraft that were regarded as being representative of different stages in the station's life

The Perpendicular style of the tracery of this window provided six small lights at the top of the window. These are roughly rectangular in shape and they provided an ideal opportunity to illustrate a few of the many aircraft types that operated from the base over the years. However, for some reason, only five of the six lights were utilised. The drawings themselves are more than somewhat stylised, but, reading from left to right, in the top pair of lights are the Bristol Blenheim bomber and the Cadet glider. In the row below are the Douglas Boston light bomber, the Avro Anson, an aircraft that was originally designed for coastal reconnaissance but later found many roles. There is then a gap followed by the European Fighter Aircraft.

The station's role as a bomber station lasted until about February 1944, and this period is represented by two aircraft, the Boston and the Blenheim. After that, a whole variety of squadrons occupied the airfield in quick succession. After the war finished, Swanton Morley was used by units such as the Air Navigation School and the Radio School; this period is represented by the Avro Anson. Then, from about 1953, the airfield housed various glider schools, and this period is represented by the Cadet Glider. In the last phase of its life the base housed technical units such as the Central Servicing Development Establishment (CSDE) and the Maintenance Analysis and Computing Establishment (MACE). This period is represented by what was at the time the latest RAF aircraft, the European Fighter Aircraft. At the time that the window was being designed, this aircraft was still under development, and it did not fly until March 1994, but it was regarded as representing the future of the RAF. It is now known as the Eurofighter, although the RAF call it the Typhoon.

The centre light

At the very bottom of this light is the inscription which commemorates the life and work of RAF Swanton Morley and expresses gratitude for the help and support of the village. Directly above it is the crest of RAF Swanton Morley. Rising skywards from this is the symbolic part of the window, which is dominated by the sword of St Michael. The tip of the sword rests on a green picture of the little wooden chapel which is still in use on the base today. This chapel is flanked by the crests of the two units that were on the base at the time that the window was commissioned, namely MACE and CSDE. Just above these crests, in the same pane of the window, are two more badges. These would seem to have been chosen as being representative of the diversity of the squadrons that occupied the base at various times. Those selected were the Air Signallers' School, and the United States Army Air Corps.

The two medals

Above these two badges, at the bottom of the pane above, are two medals which reinforce the fact that the warriors whom this window commemorates came in many forms. There were many acts of courage performed by personnel from this base, but two men were awarded the highest medals for bravery, the Victoria Cross and the George Cross.

The Victoria Cross was awarded to Wing Commander Hughie Idwal Edwards, an Australian of Welsh ancestry. The citation begins as follows: "Although handicapped by a physical disability resulting from a flying accident, he has repeatedly displayed gallantry of the highest order in pressing home bombing attacks from very low heights against strongly defended objectives."

Courage of a different kind was displayed by Flight Lieutenant Wilson Hodgson Charlton. In February 1941 a Junkers 88 dropped 14 bombs on the airfield but, because it was too low, they all failed to explode. As Station Armament Officer, Charlton had to deal with them. For making safe these and some 200 other bombs he was awarded the George Cross.

Wg Cdr Edwards and Flt Lt Charlton both survived the war, Edwards becoming Governor of Western Australia in 1974.