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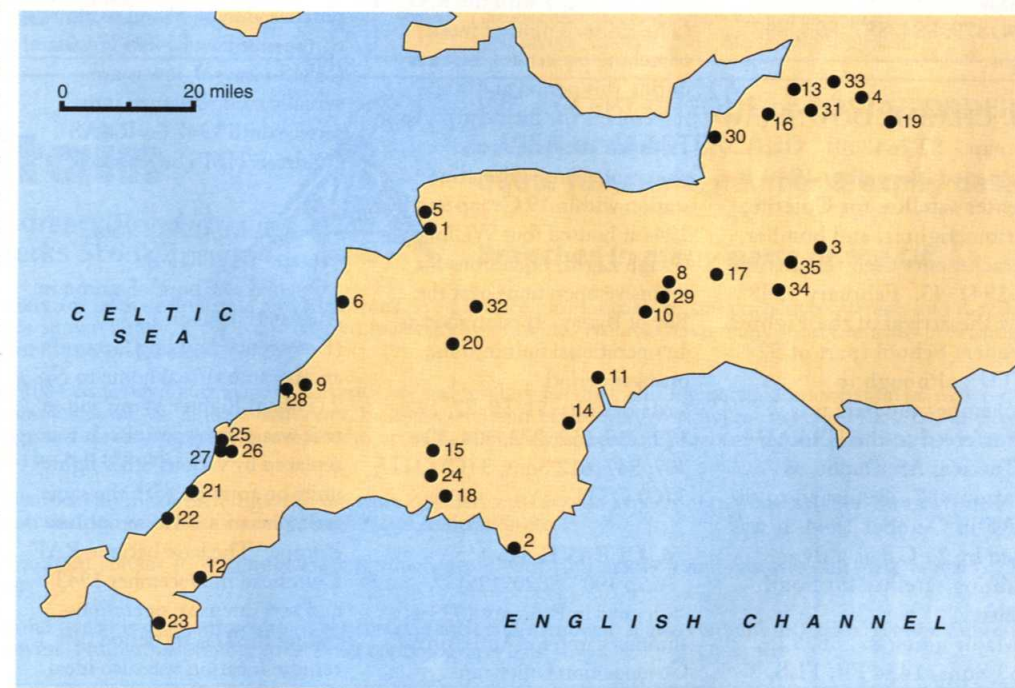
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# Airfields of SW England

*World War Two saw the rapid development of airfields in the southwest of England with roles ranging from training to long-range maritime patrol. Part One covers Avon, Somerset, Devon and Cornwall.*

**WITHOUT DOUBT** the biggest single contribution made by air power operating from the airfields covered in this article was in the maritime war against the German U-boat menace. The dark days of 1941 and 1942 saw German submarines at the height of their power and it was essential for the survival of Britain that they be curbed — one of the best times to attack them was during their transit through the Bay of Biscay en route to and from their bases in France. Many of the airfields mentioned below played a vital role in this work. Certain airfields were home to fighter squadrons used in the defence of major cities such as Plymouth, with its important naval facilities, and Bristol, with its range of industries. With the build-up and preparation for the D-Day invasion of June 1944 many airfields saw heightened activity, including use by USAAF units.

The following gazetteer of airfields covers only those active during World War Two (and it is worth noting that many were in use **BEFORE** their official opening date). It is intended only as a brief introduction to the location and basic role(s) of the airfield. Whilst a small number, such as Yeovilton and St Mawgan, are still active military airfields and others, such as Exeter, are thriving civilian airports, the vast majority have returned to the agricultural land from whence they were constructed. Even amongst these disused sites there often exists evidence of their former usage — a stretch of runway, a building or two — and many are well worth a visit in order to try to visualise the scenes of 50 years ago.



**1. BARNSTAPLE. (De)**  
(map 180 - SU505345)

A prewar private field that was requisitioned in September 1939; Short Scions were used for Army cc-operation work prior to the airfield's closure in summer 1940.

**2. BOLT HEAD. (De)**  
(map - SX713373)

Opened in 1941 as an FOB (Forward Operating Base) for fighter squadrons acting as bomber escorts to France. Semi-permanent facilities were added in 1942, including blister hangars and two Sommerfeld track runways. It was given satellite status in April 1942 but was still being used as an

FOB by Exeter squadrons for fighter escort and fighter sweeps (Rhubarbs). Intensive operations over D-Day period. Reduced to Care and Maintenance (C&M) in April 1945 and closed in 1947.

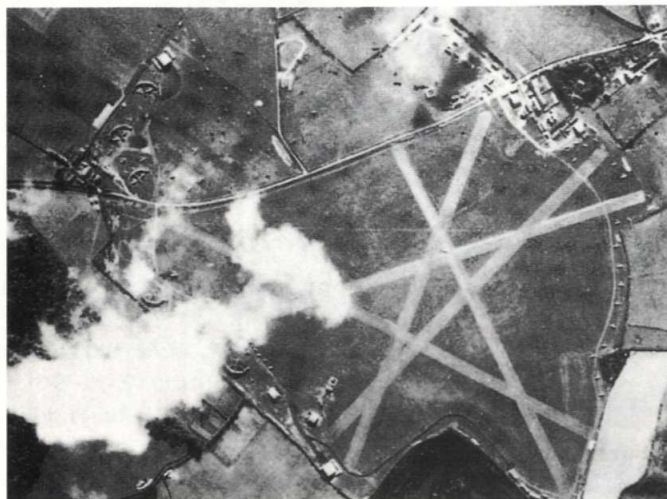
Major units: 16, 41, 133, 151, 234, 257, 263, 266, 275, 276, 310, 401, 402, 610Sqns.

**3. CHARLTON HORETHORNE. (So)**  
(map - ST643244)

Developed to be a 'secret' airfield for Exeter, it was declared redundant by the RAF before completion and when opened in May 1942 was allocated to RNAS Yeovilton. Used by target aircraft for GCI (Ground Controlled

However, with a few exceptions, they are now on private land and if you want to get a closer view than that available from a public road then it is essential to get permission from the landowner. To help the reader determine the location of the airfield, each entry listed includes a map reference for use with a 50,000 scale Ordnance Survey map (such as the Landranger series) which are easy to obtain from bookshops and some newsagents. For those who are not sure how to plot the co-ordinates there is an explanation on the side of the Landranger maps. The major units listed for each airfield cover only those that stayed at the location for a period of approximately 3 months or longer, the vast majority of operational airfields had numerous short-term deployments, many lasting no more than a few days, which it is impossible to cover in this short summary. The best single reference remains Action Stations 5 by Chris Ashworth.





Charlton Horethorne, October 10, 1944 (Ken Delve Collection)

Interception) work. In January 1943 it was named HMS *Heron II*. Fighter squadrons deployed for GCI training plus, late 1943, 780 Sqn was established as a pilot refresher unit with various aircraft. All units had gone by April 1945 ready for the return of the airfield to the RAF; subsequent use was as an ammunition store by 42 Group prior to closure in 1948.

Major units: 765, 780, 790, 794, 879, 884, 887, 893, 897 Sqn.

4. CHARMY DOWN. (Av) (map - ST764700)

Opened November 1940 as fighter satellite for Colerne; various fighter, and bomber, detachments used the airfield in 1941-43. February 1943 saw the arrival of the Fighter Leaders School (part of 52 OTU), although in November the base was transferred to the USAAF as a Tactical Air Depot, as Station 487. Returned to the RAF in October 1944, it was used by 23 GP as a flying training satellite for South Cerney.

Major units: 87, 88, 125, 263 Sqn, 1454 Flt, FLS, 3 (P) AFU, 15 (P) AFU.

5. CHIVENOR. (De) (map 180 - 492344)

This 'rebuild' of the North Devon Airport opened as RAF Chivenor in October 1940 as home to 3 (Coastal) OTU (Operational Training Unit), although this unit was replaced the following July by 5 (C) OTU. One of the most dramatic events was the landing at Chivenor in November 1941 of a lost Ju 88A-5 — which later became EE205 with the RAF. (The Editor's mother was a parachute packer at Chivenor during this period and remembers the incident!). April 1942 saw the base as an operational anti-submarine station within 19 Group and by 1944 it housed four Wellington (Leigh Light) Squadrons for intensive operations over the Bay of Biscay. It continued as an operational unit into the postwar period.

Major units: 51, 59, 77, 172, 179, 235, 252, 272, 304, 404, 407, 547, 612 Sqn, 3 (C) OTU, 5 (C) OTU.

6. CLEAVE. (Co) (map 190 - SS205125)

Opened in February 1939 as a summer camp for Anti-Aircraft Co-operation Units; rapid expansion included provision of a

catapult for Queen Bee aerial targets. The base was taken over by Fighter Command in June 1943 but remained in the AACU role until closed in May 1945.

Major units: 1 AACU, 1602, 1603, 1604, 1618 Flts, 639 Sqn.

7. CULDROSE. (Co) (map - SW675258) Although the land was

with the Meteor. By December 1944 it was part of 23 GP operating as a satellite for Stoke Orchard with a detachment of 3 Glider Training School (GTS). Reduced to C&M in July 1945.

Major units: 66, 126, 131, 165, 302, 306, 312, 313, 316, 286, 587, 610, 616, 790, 3 GTS, 24 Naval Fighter Wing.



Wellington XIII, 524 Sqn Davidstow Moor, June 1944. (Andy Thomas)

purchased in 1944 and work commenced on RNAS Heston (HMS *Chough*), it was not actually commissioned into service until 1947 (as RNAS Culdrose/HMS *Seahawk*).

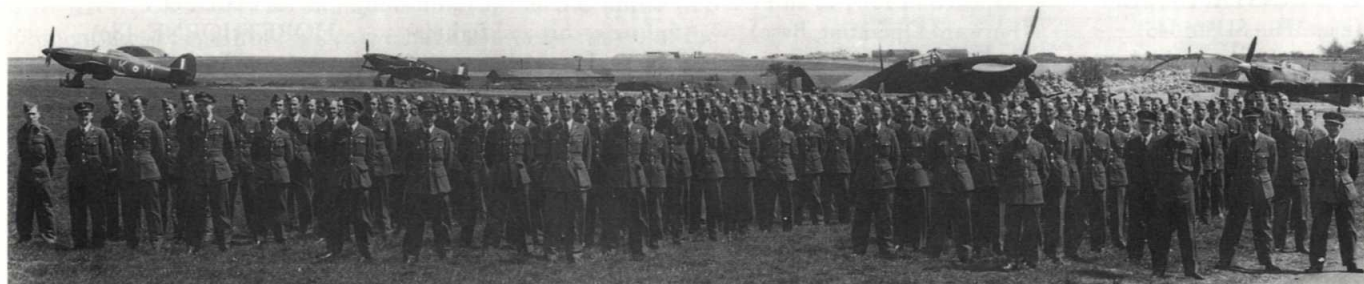
8. CULMHEAD. (So) (map - ST208154)

Opened as Church Stanton in August 1944 as an ELG (Emergency Landing Ground) and became virtual home to No 2 (Polish) Fighter Wing whose task was convoy patrols. It was replaced by various other fighter units on rotation with the same task, plus offensive sweeps into Europe. The base became RAF Culmhead in December 1943 and saw intensive operations during the *D-Day* period. Its remote location was also ideal for 616 Sqn to conduct trials

9. DAVIDSTOW MOOR. (Co) (map - SX150850)

Opened in October 1942 with a standard three-runway layout; initial use was by American B-17s in support of Operation *Torch* — by bombing *U-boat* pens at St Nazaire, along with other American detachments and, from December 1942, RAF units for ASR (Air Sea Rescue) and ASW (Anti-Submarine Warfare). By spring 1943 it was fully operational with 19 Gp for ASW ops over the Bay of Biscay. The arrival of strike Beaufighters led to the formation of 154 (GR) Wing for *D-Day* operations. Reduced to C&M September 1944.

Major units: 53, 144, 172, 236, 269, 279, 280, 304, 404, 524, 547, 612 Sqn, 44th BG, 93rd BG.



87 Sqn parade with their night fighter Hurricanes at Charmy Down, April 1942. (Ken Delve Collection)

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10. DUNKESWELL. (De) (map - 134078)

Although allocated to Fighter Command in May 1942 it was transferred to Coastal Command before completion and subsequently opened in July 1943 as a base for the US Navy's Fleet Air Wing 7 (FAW 7) undertaking ASW with Liberators. At the end of the war it was transferred back to RAF control.

Major units: VP103, VP105, VP110.

11. EXETER. (De) (map 192 - SY002938)

A prewar airport that by late 1939 had acquired a variety of unusual units, including a detachment from the Royal Aircraft Establishment (RAE) and, in June 1940, the Gunnery Research Unit. Summer 1940 saw the arrival of fighter units and a rapid expansion of both facilities and squadrons with day and night fighter units. Exeter University Air Squadron was formed in August 1941. The station was also used as an FOB by RAF and American bombers and their escorts. Transferred to USAAF control in April 1944 as Station 463 for the 440th TCG (Troop Carrier Group) on work-up for D-Day airborne operations. By January 1945 it was allocated to 23 Gp for 3 GTS, this unit staying until the end of the war.

Major units: 87, 125, 213, 247, 257, 263, 302, 307, 316, 317, 406, 536, 601, 816 Sqns, 440th TCG

12. FALMOUTH. (Co) (map - SW815334)

First used in September 1939 for flying-boat detachments on convoy escort; however, by November it was virtually under C&M, with only the occasional visitor. Closed December 1941.

Major units: 204, 209 Sqns.

13. FILTON. (Av) (map - ST595802)

Home of the Bristol Aeroplane and Engine Co and as such an important location - attacked on a number of occasions by the Luftwaffe. Operational fighter detachments were based here as well as other units. Tarmac and runways were built in 1941 and in December it was transferred



Oblique shot of Filton taken by 105 OTU in May 1944. (Ken Delve)

to 44 Gp for use as an Overseas Aircraft Preparation Unit. Major units: 263, 501, 504, 528 Sqns, OAPU/2 APU.

14. HALDON. (De) (map - SX915765)

A prewar field that was requisitioned for RNAS use, but with no significant occupation until August 1941, as *Heron II*, with detachments from Yeovilton of target-towing aircraft. Reduced to C&M in May 1943.

Major units: 761, 794 Sqns.

15. HARROWBEER. (De) (map - SX513680)

Opened in August 1941 as a fighter station for 10 Gp but it also acquired an ASR detachment. By late 1942 its usage was by fighter-bomber units on anti-ship work, two Typhoon squadrons were in place by June 1943 and more offensive ops took place over Europe. Pre D-Day the station was home to 156 (GR) Wing and 124 Wing with very intensive operations. Reduced to C&M in August but still used for comms flights. Re-opened in January 1945 as a fighter unit and used by AACU and fighter detachments.

Major units: 1, 126, 130, 175, 183, 193, 197, 257, 268, 275, 276, 302, 312, 500, 610, 691, 838 Sqns.

16. LULSGATE BOTTOM. (So) (map - ST504651)

Opened August 1940 as a Relief Landing Ground (RLG) for 10 EFTS (Elementary Flying Training School) at Weston-super-Mare but by 1941 there were plans for development into a fighter

18. MOUNT BATTEN. (De) (map - SX483533)

A long pre-1939 history as a flying-boat base continued throughout the war with Pembroke Dock as home to a number of Sunderland units.

Major units: 10 (RAAF), 95, 204, 210, 461, 2 AACU.

19. NORTH STOKE. (Av) (map - ST717687)

Lansdown racecourse at Bath was employed as an RLG by 3 FIS from 1943 to the end of the war.

Major units: 3 FIS.

20. OKEHAMPTON. (De) (map - SX575970)

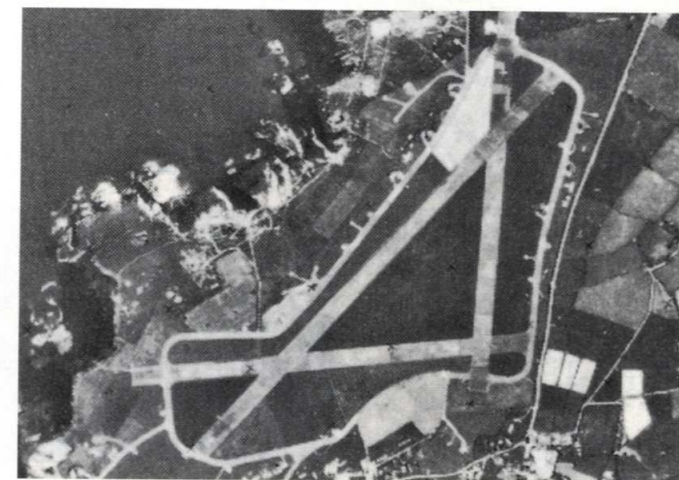
Prewar Army Co-operation field that continued in use and was gradually expanded. By May 1941 it was operating as a satellite to Weston Zoyland. Used as a spares holding establishment by 73 MU from March 1942, plus occasional use by AC detachment, including US Army Cubs.

Major units: 16, 225 Sqns.

21. PERRANPORTH. (Co) (map - SW740528)

Opened in April 1941 as a fighter satellite for Portreath and by 1942 three squadrons were in place. April 1944 saw its transfer to 19 Gp as home to three FAA squadrons involved in D-Day operations. Reduced to C&M in September, it had one small period of re-activation with 46 Gp from November 1944 to January 1945.

Major units: 19, 66, 130, 183, 234, 302, 317, 329, 340, 341, 412, 453, 610, 816, 849, 850 Sqns.



Perranporth in June 1967, runways and some dispersals still survive.

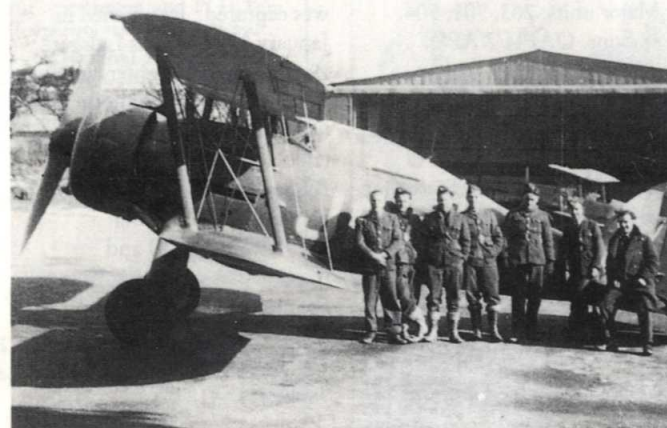




Aircrew of 235 Sqn at Portreath October 1943. (Ken Delve collection)

**22. PORTREATH. (Co)**  
(map - SW670460)  
A 10 Gp fighter base that opened in March 1941, it was also used by 2 Gp bombers as an FOB. By October 1941 it housed a detachment of the Overseas Aircraft Despatch Unit (OADU) and was used as a start point for ferrying aircraft, and complete squadrons, to the Middle East. The fighter detachments rotated on a regular basis but the major role remained that of aircraft supply. Intensive ops in 1943 over the Bay of Biscay and in early 1944 153 (GR) Wing formed for D-Day operations. By May 1945 it had gone to 44 Gp.  
Major units: 130,143, 152, 234, 235, 248, 263, 275, 276, 277, 295, 313, 414, 613, 78th FG.

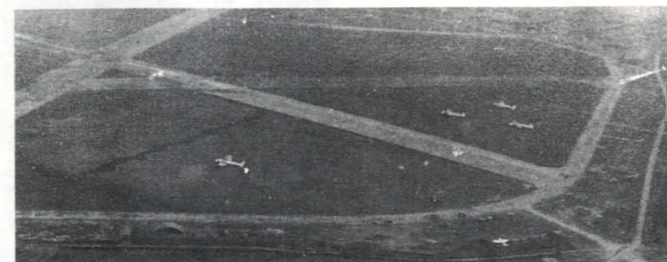
**23. PREDDANNACK. (Co)**  
(map - SW685162)  
Opened in May 1941 as a satellite for Portreath with day and night fighter units. Later, there were detachments for anti-shiping work and offensive *Rhubarbs*. Also used as a departure point for units deploying to North Africa. By 1943 it was mainly used by ASW squadrons, including Mosquitoes armed with 6-pdr cannon, as well as fighters on convoy escort. From September 1944 to the end of the war it was used by fighter squadrons for rest and re-equipment.  
Major units: 1, 33, 65, 118, 141, 151, 157, 179, 183, 222, 247, 248, 263, 264, 304, 307, 311, 349,406,456, 485, 536, 600, 604 Sqns, 1457 Flt.



No 2 AACU Gladiator at Roborough c.1940. (Andy Thomas)

**24. ROBOROUGH. (De)**  
(map 201 - SX503605)  
A grass airfield requisitioned by the Admiralty for 2 AACU, but in 1940 it was taken over as a fighter airfield, although also used by Army Co-operation aircraft. 1941 saw the return of the AACU, plus use by 19 Gp Comms Flight (the HQ being in Plymouth). Transferred to RAF control in May 1942 with the same units in residence.  
Major units: 16, 225, 247, 691, 2 AACU, 19 Gp CF, 3 APC.

**25. ST EVAL. (Co)**  
(map 200 - SW873685)  
Opened in October 1939 for Coastal Command ASW use, plus detachments of Bomber Command aircraft drafted in to help fight the U-boat war.



1942 view of St Eval with Whitleys of 502 Sqn. (Peter Green)

From summer 1940 there were fighter detachments for inshore patrols as well as a detachment from the PRU (Photographic Reconnaissance Unit). Continued development included the construction of runways and hangars. Saw an increase in ASW capability with new types, as 1942 was a critical year in the U-boat war — even OTU aircraft were deployed to help out, plus American ASW units on detachment. One of the most important ASW bases

Major units: 1 AACU, 1529 RATF, 491st Sqn.

**27. TREBELZUE. (Co)**  
(map - SW851641)  
The field was in use prewar and was requisitioned as a satellite for St Eval. Opened September 1941 but saw no significant use, so was transferred to 44 Gp for use by 2 OADU — aircraft delivery to Middle East. Little usage except by detachments from Portreath. A major rebuild and slight shift of location led to it becoming RAF St Mawgan in February 1943.

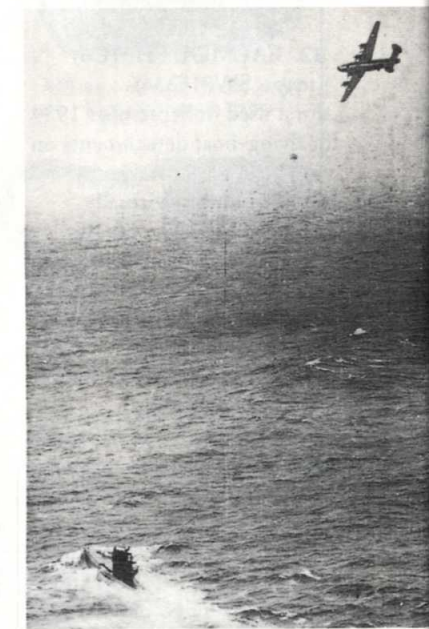
Major units: 264, 400 Sqns, 1602, 1604 Flts, 2 OADU, 1 AACU.

**28. TRELIGGA. (Co)**  
(map - SX047848)  
An FAA bombing and gunnery range that was equipped with emergency landing strips.

**29. UPPOTTERY. (De)**  
(map - ST188101)  
Planned as a medium bomber field for the USAAF and opened in February 1944, although under C&M until it became Station 462 for the 439th TCG. This unit used it for D-Day work-up; by October 1944 it was a satellite for Weston Zoyland but was being used by US Navy for ASW detachments (under 19 Gp).  
Major units: 107th, 112th, 439th TCG.

in World War Two.  
Major units: 22, 53, 58, 179, 206, 217, 223, 224, 234, 238, 247, 263, 282, 502, 543, 547, 10 OTU, 93rd BG, 6 CPF (Coastal Patrol Flight).

**26. ST MAWGAN. (Co)**  
(map 200 - SW870646)  
The first units arrived in February 1943 although the runways were not available until July. Used subsequently by USAAF Air Transport Command as a ferry post to North Africa and, from October, by two USAAF Met flights. Very busy with transit aircraft even though construction work continued into 1944. Also used by Transport Command.



The anti-submarine war, 59 Sqn Liberator and German U-boat.

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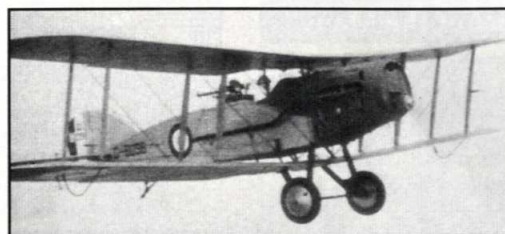
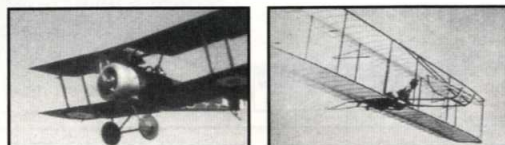
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105 OTU shot of Trebelzue May 1942 (note the Newquay name on the titling). (Ken Delve Collection)

30. WESTON-SUPER-MARE. (Av)  
(map - ST344603)

This prewar airfield was employed, under civil contract, for navigator training, although this ceased when the unit moved to South Africa. It was transferred to RAF control in May 1940 and from September 1940 to the following September was once more in the flying training role. It was also used in conjunction with the shadow factory run by the Bristol Aeroplane Co at Old Mixon, a role that continued throughout the war. From late 1942 onwards, various units came and went, including operational squadrons and trials units such as the Air Torpedo Development Unit.

Major units: 5 CANS, 5 AONS, 10 EFTS, ATDU, 286 Sqn.

31. WHITCHURCH. (Av)  
(map - ST595686)

Requisitioned by the Air Ministry and used as part of the National Air Communications system (and later, BOAC). In June 1940 a section of 3 Ferry Pilots Pool of the Air Transport Auxiliary was formed and remained for the rest of the war, primarily ferrying Bristol aircraft. The departure of the BOAC unit in November 1944 greatly reduced movements at the airfield.

32. WINKLEIGH. (De)  
(map - SS621094)  
Opened in January 1943 as a

fighter field but not really ready — or required — and so went to C&M. In October 1943 it was employed for pre *D-Day* training by USAAF detachments. First resident RAF unit arrived in April 1944 with night fighter and anti-shiping squadrons. SOE Lysanders were operating from July 1944 but by September it was back to C&M. In November 1944 it was allocated to 23 Gp as a training base for Norwegian pilots.  
Major units: 161, 286, 406, 415 Sqns.

33. YATE. (Av)  
(map - ST706830)  
The airfield of the Parnall Aircraft Co; the factory was abandoned after a series of

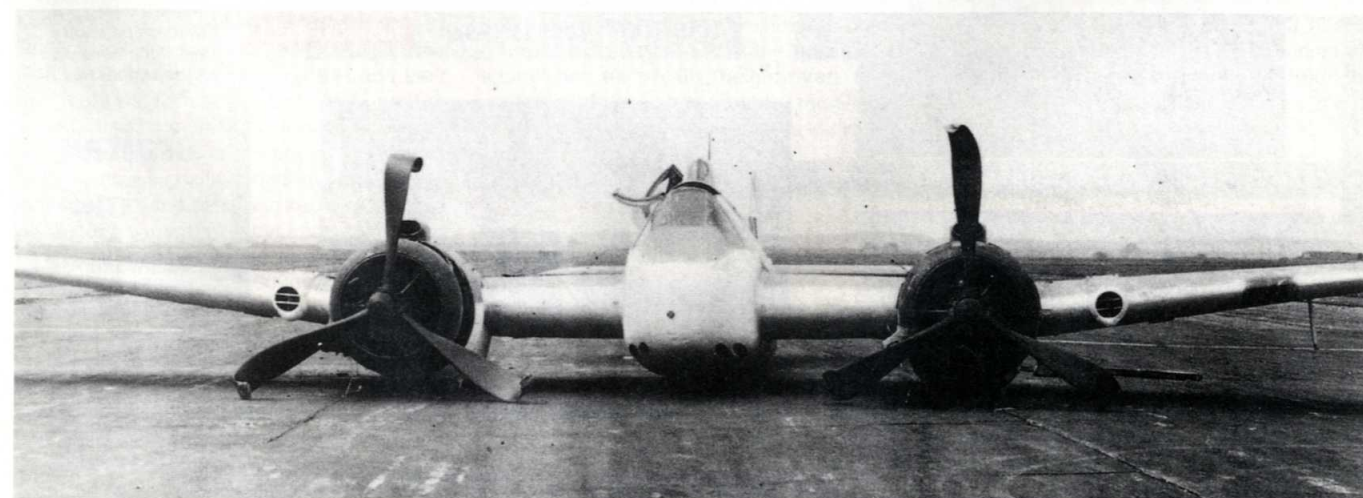
German air attacks in the first half of 1941.

34. YEOVIL. (So)  
(map - ST540158)  
Airfield for the Westland aircraft factory.

35. YEOVILTON. (So)  
(map - ST550234)  
The first units into this RNAS training base (Naval Observers School) arrived May 1940 when it was still unfinished. In June 1940 it became HMS *Heron* and the Naval Air Fighter School began to arrive. Operational units were in place from March 1941, as well as other training and trials organisations. It was also the shore base for operational Sea Hurricane squadrons. Most of these roles continued to the end of the war. From 1942 Westland acquired a part of the airfield to use for assembly and flight test of Spitfires and Seafires.

Major units: 736, 748, 750, 751, 759, 760, 787, 794, 804, 827, 1770, 1771 Sqns.

The previous parts of this airfield series were:  
Scotland - August 1995,  
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Anglia in the April issue —  
the Editor would be  
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photographs for inclusion in  
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235 Sqn Beaufighter 'Q' comes to grief at Chivenor in October 1942 when the undercarriage failed to lower. (Ken Delve Collection)

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