

## **Report for the January 2015 meeting of the Malvern Civic Society**

On Friday 9 January Clive Hooper, Chairman, welcomed a packed audience to the first monthly meeting of 2015. The speaker for the main talk was Dennis Williams, who gave a fascinating, illustrated tour of the history and development of research activities at Defford Airfield in Worcestershire, focusing in particular on the period from 1941 to 1957. The rate of technological change in the 1940s was very apparent from this talk.

With a lifelong interest in aviation, Dennis had learnt to fly and had been a scientist at RSRE/QinetiQ until 2005 when he had then returned to university to train to become an archaeologist. He works for Worcestershire Archive and Archaeology Service and is the custodian of the RAF Defford Museum at Croome, which the National Trust opened in September 2014.

Although there is now very little evidence that the Royal Air Force was at Defford, the eastern area has the clear outline of an airfield. RAF Defford was built for Bomber Command's No. 23 Operational Training Unit, which carried out the final stage of training for bomber crews before they were deployed over Europe in the Second World War. Crew members were trained all over the world and then brought together at RAF Pershore. Defford was chosen as a satellite aerodrome for Pershore and took two years to construct.

Dennis observed that the radar development stories of both Malvern and Defford are intertwined. He covered the origins of radar and then explained the important role of the Telecommunications Research Establishment in radar development and why it moved from Dorset to Malvern College in 1942. As a result of the advances made in radar research, by the end of 1935 we could detect aircraft at a range of 40 miles and by the outbreak of war that coverage had increased considerably. The purpose of RAF Defford itself was airborne testing of radar and electronic systems. Examples of the types of improvements that were made included centimetric radar, tested at Malvern, which Dennis pointed out is the same technology operating at the back of domestic microwave ovens! In the context of war against the German U-boat threat, the developments in this technology meant an improvement in detection and navigation devices for Britain. All these advances in technology were not without casualties, of which Dennis gave several examples where British planes had crashed during trials. Dennis covered the types of aircraft that came to Defford, showing how they had been developed and trialled, for example the Avro Ashton which was evaluated successfully but then written off when fire broke out on board. The only positive side of too many technical defects had been that this meant a good source of overtime for the personnel! The Vickers Valiant had spelt the death knell for Defford as it was impossible for its size and weight to land there.

RAF Defford had active sports and social entertainment for over 2,500 service personnel who were based there, including dance bands and a theatre group which performed. In the post-war time of 1947 onwards a new station commander was able to introduce civilianisation, with a few hundred service

personnel remaining by then, to be run down to only forty-five. Veterans used to reunite and formed the Defford Airfield Heritage Group to formalise reunions and commemorate the work done there and in July 2015 a heritage weekend will be held. Of the original buildings, the station sick quarters survive and were purchased by the National Trust. One of these buildings has become the RAF Defford Museum. For more information on the group, please see:  
<https://deffordairfieldheritagegroup.wordpress.com/news/>

A short talk then followed by David Waring, who gave an overview of the work of the Malvern Food Bank, which was set up recently. He explained why we have one in Malvern, how it works and gave us some statistics. Three years ago “Churches Together” in Malvern had considered what could be done to assist families in need, who were turning to the Lyttelton Well for help. Foodstuffs were mostly raised via the local churches and then the food bank was set up as a charity and registered with HMRC. An appeal for volunteers led to seventy people coming forward. There are no paid staff. After an initial assessment, a family can have food vouchers to exchange for up to three food parcels. This is emergency food only, so as to help clients get over a crisis. The food bank operates from an industrial unit in Spring Lane South and vouchers can also be redeemed at Lyttelton Well. Since it started, 1,300 adults and children have been helped, and over 70% have redeemed just one voucher, which proves that the situations are not recurring. However, there is no sign yet of the food bank being able to close.