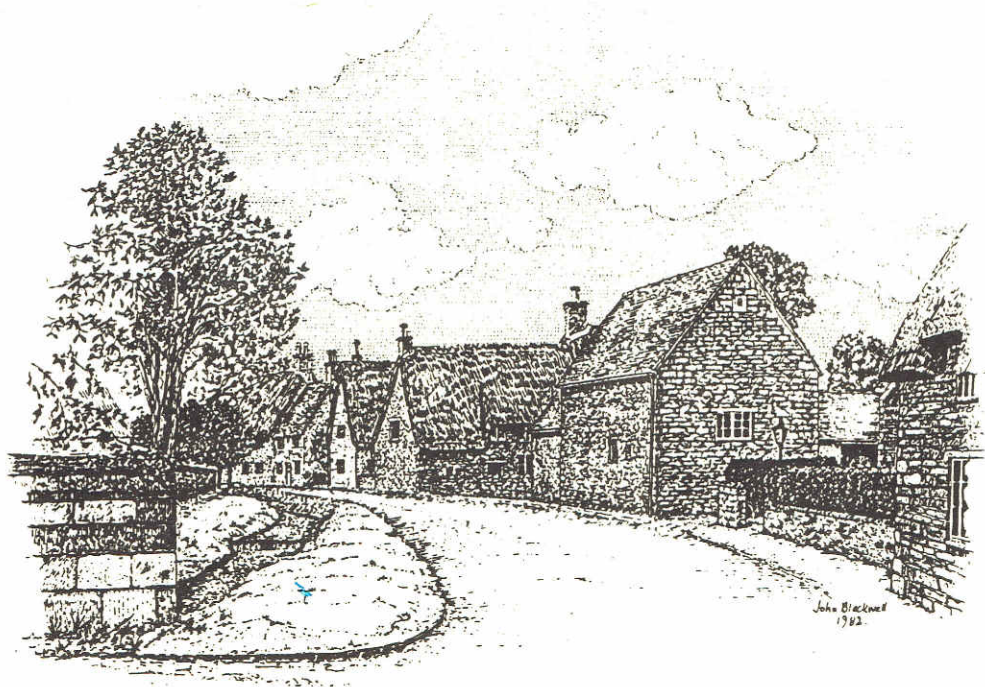


Grafton Underwood



GRAFTON UNDERWOOD

"Where oak and hornbeam grew thickly, where the shy deer sheltered and the wild boar wandered" (John W. Richards "Northamptonshire Life" Vol.1 No.7 1970).

Grafton Underwood began its life as a small cluster of huts within the vastness of the ancient forest of Rockingham. Although the forest is much diminished, the gentle countryside surrounding this charming, tranquil village is still substantially wooded. This sylvan heritage is reflected in Grafton's name which is derived from Old English meaning "homestead in the Grove" (the suffix "Underwood" was not added until comparatively recent times).

Early Settlement

Signs of Grafton's earliest inhabitants are hard to come by; heavy boulder clay deposits cloak the area obscuring any archaeological evidence which might exist. Enclosures from the prehistoric and Roman periods have, however, been detected to the west of the village but, in the absence of excavation, it is difficult to judge if these were farmsteads or animal stockades.



Figure 1
*Medieval Hunting Scene -
Once a common sight in the
forest around Grafton*

Medieval Times

Evidence, not surprisingly, is much better from the Medieval period; the banks or "pales" of the deer park created in 1343AD by Sir Simon Simeon, Lord of the Manor, still stand 5 metres wide and $\frac{1}{2}$ metre high in places forming an almost continuous bank along the western edge of Grafton Park Wood. Parks such as these were constructed to ensure a regular and plentiful supply of venison for the lord's table.

The Church

When Sir Simon was building his deer park, the church of St. James was still a relatively recent addition to the huddle of dwellings which was Grafton. This small and friendly early Norman church was a mere 250 years old by Sir Simon's day and its limestone walls must have appeared quite stark and white in contrast to their warm, mellow tones of today. It has now witnessed nearly a thousand years of history and the comings and goings of over forty generations of Graftonians.

Inside are monuments to Lords, Ladies, Knights and Earls; the Fourteenth century memorial brass of Lady Gertrude Fitzpatrick is exceptionally beautiful. An equally attractive and interesting feature is the stained glass memorial window to the United States Air Force 384th Bombardment Group depicting a "Flying Fortress" and badges of various squadrons.



Figure 2

The Church of St. James has witnessed the comings and goings of over forty generations of Graftonians

The Village

The great charm of Grafton lies in the unspoilt simplicity of its buildings with their distinct local character. Warm honey-coloured limestone cottages, mostly thatched, line the main street and have changed remarkably little since they were built in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth centuries. They are so unaltered in fact that in 1977 the village was designated a conservation area. Even the 1935 telephone kiosk, designed by Sir Giles Gilbert Scott (a type K6 for those who know about these things!) is a listed building.

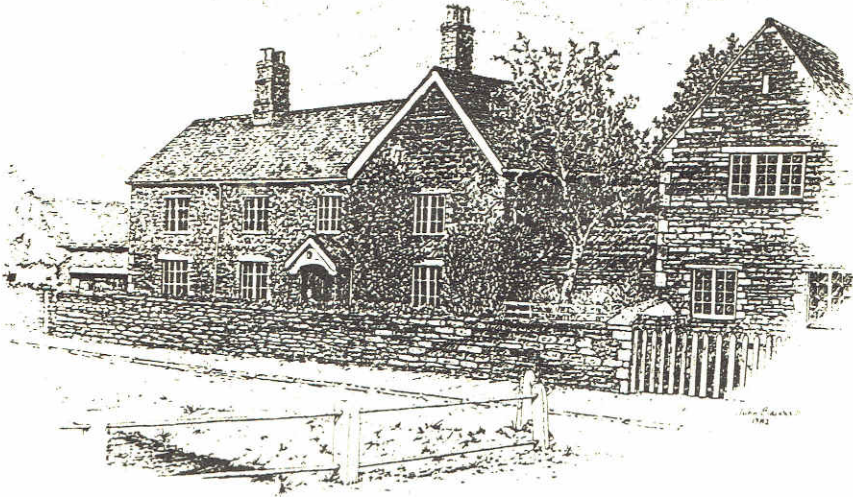


Figure 3

Warm honey-coloured limestone cottages, little changed since they were built, line the Main Street

Others include the Rectory (formerly the Manor House) dated 1653 and the Duke's Arms farmhouse (1645). This pleasant two storey limestone house with thatched roof stands gable end to the road. Grafton Park Farmhouse also in the Main Street is another notable building standing three storeys high, its front elevation is curiously asymmetrical with unequally spaced windows.

Boughton House

Not far outside the village is another house worthy of note. This is Boughton House*, home of the Dukes of Buccleuch and Queensberry and rightly has the reputation of being one of the finest historic houses in the country - some would say Europe! Starting life some 500 years ago as a small monastic building, it was transformed in the Seventeenth century into a mansion to rival the Palace of Versailles on which it was modelled. It is a treasure house containing fine works of art and a renowned collection of armour.

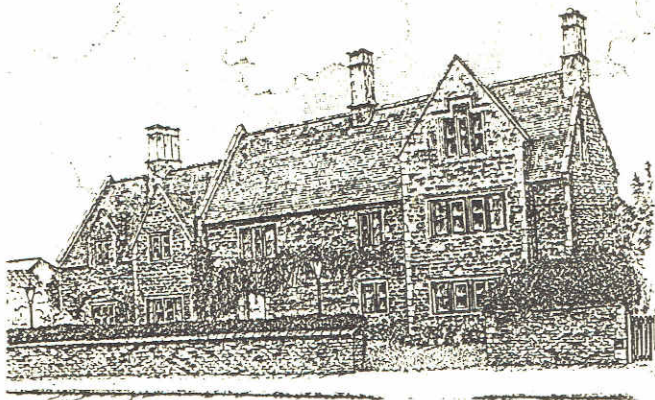


Figure 4
The former
Manor House
dates from
1653

People and Patrons

The relationship between the owners of Boughton and the people of Grafton goes back a long way. For generations, when such estates employed tens if not hundreds of people, the inhabitants of Grafton worked for the Dukes of Buccleuch and their predecessors. The relationship on the whole worked well and seems to have been very paternal; when a local woman in 1754 gave birth to a disabled child, the then Duchess took him under her wing, had him educated and installed him in the village school as its master. The boy, Thomas Carley, although having no arms, managed to write beautiful copper-

* Open to the public throughout August

plate writing with a pen held in his mouth. Evidently he ruled the school with a rod of iron - any student who thought Thomas was meek was soon disabused of the notion!

But things between villagers and their patrons did not always run smoothly as illustrated by "The Affair of Grafton Underwood Feast"! In the summer of 1618, the somewhat "puritanical" Sir Edward Montague, forbade, amongst other things, the sale of unlicensed beer (i.e. "home brew") at the annual feast fair (St. James' Day, 25th July).

The Rector of Grafton, the equally "colourful" John Williams declared it was his village and promptly countermanded the order. The Rector (after much bickering into which the King himself, Charles I, was drawn) won the day. Williams went on to become an Archbishop but, being found guilty of several "misdemeanours" was sent to the Tower! He did not languish long - with the outbreak of the Civil War he joined the Parliamentary force as commander of a castle in his native Wales "to his lasting infamy" (according to one contemporary).



Figure 5
The Old School House

Although the Civil War was to leave Grafton little affected, the role played by the village in World War II was a major one.

The Airfield

Following the involvement of the United States in the war, the British and USA governments agreed that the British Government would provide port and airfield facilities and in return the USA Government would supply Britain with arms.

An airfield was constructed just to the north of the village of Grafton, originally as a satellite airfield to the one at nearby Polebrook, and intended to be available in the event of Polebrook becoming unserviceable due to enemy action.

Built by George Wimpey & Company Limited in 1941, improvements were made throughout the period of World War II. The airfield covered approximately 500 acres and during its construction two avenues of trees were destroyed along with many hedgerows and the houses and buildings of Rectory Farm and Grafton Lodge Farm.

The airfield was bisected by the Grafton to Brigstock Road and, travelling north, the site of the airfield itself is to the left with the living domestic areas to the right. Full use was made of the natural woodland for camouflage. The living area consisted mainly of wood and canvas hut constructions, the more permanent buildings being brick built mess halls and clubs. The whole site accommodated up to 3,000 personnel and had all the facilities needed, including a hospital, cinema and chapel.

At the time of America's involvement, Grafton happened to be the first airfield available and so for the remainder of the War it was known officially as Station 106 and became an integral part of the Eighth American Army Air Force. The first unit to move in, on 12th May 1942, almost before American airpower existed in the U.K. was the 15th Bomb Squadron which had to use American built Douglas Boston twin engine bombers borrowed from the Royal Air Force.

This unit moved to Molesworth on 9th June 1942 and was followed on 6th July by the 97th Bombardment Group (H) operating the Boeing built B17 Flying Fortress. This unit dropped, on railway marshalling yards at Rouen on 17th August 1942, the first bombs carried by the Eighth Air Force Bomber Command. The 97th was withdrawn on 8th September for service in North Africa, and four days later Station 106

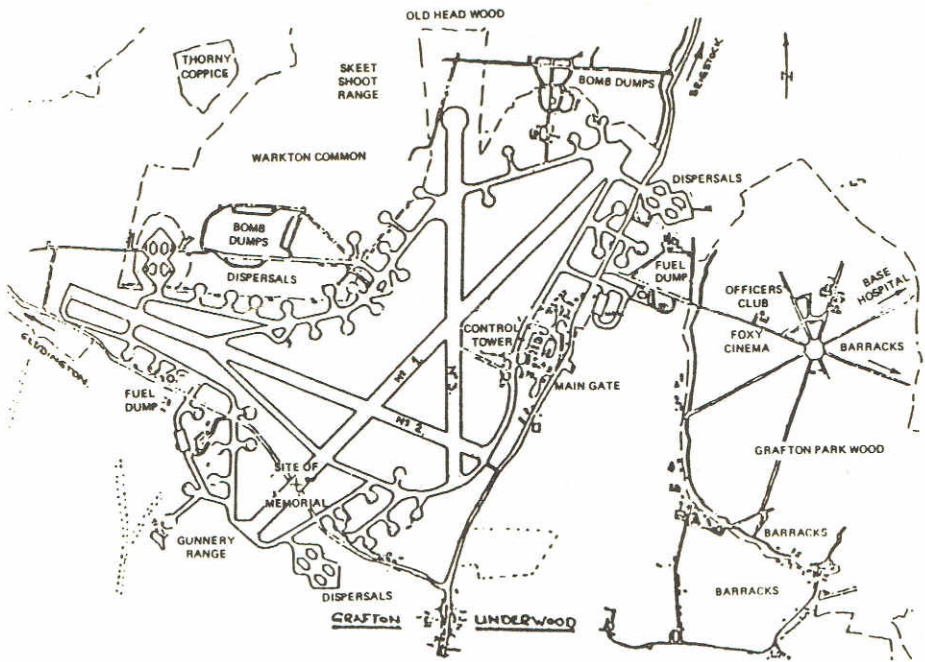


Figure 6
Plan of Airfield (courtesy of Mr. Q. Bland)

was occupied by the 305th Bombardment Group (H) pending their departure to their permanent base at Chelveston on 11th December 1942. The airfield was briefly occupied between 16th April and 2nd May 1943 by the 96th Bombardment Group (H) while waiting to move to Andrews Field in Essex.

The last unit to move into Station 106 on 25th May 1943 was the 384th Bombardment Group (H) which was to remain at Grafton until the cessation of hostilities in Europe. It was the 384th that had the distinction of dropping the last bombs carried by the Eighth Air Force Bomber Command when they bombed the Skoda works at Pilsen, Czechoslovakia.

The 384th, during its two years at Grafton, built up an enviable reputation and amongst its many achievements were two Divisional Unit Citations for Heroism and Dedication to Duty against Extreme Odds; over 1,000 personnel received the Distinguished Flying Cross. They achieved 9,348 credited sorties by their B-17 Flying Fortresses, losing 159 aircraft and 1,579 personnel, but claiming 165 enemy aircraft.

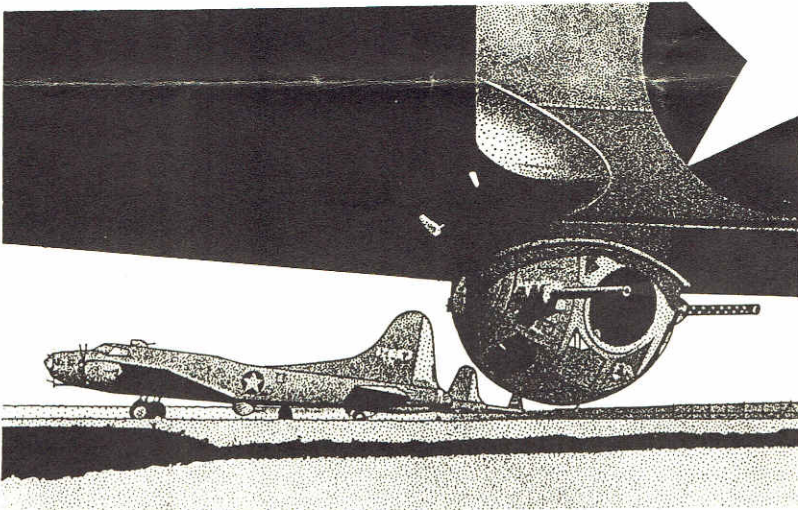


Figure 7

B17 "Flying Fortresses" stationed at Grafton flew over 9,000 missions.

American Memorials

Amongst the more permanent reminders of the 384th Bombardment Group (H) presence at Grafton in World War II is a Granite Memorial situated on the airfield, a stained glass window in the Parish Church, a Saint Christopher statue and silver chalice in the Roman Catholic Church of Saint Edward in Kettering and a Saint Christopher statue and bell in the Parish Church of Saint Peter and Saint Paul in Kettering.



Figure 8

Line drawing of the stained-glass memorial window in St. James Church, depicting a B 17 "Flying Fortress" of the type which flew from Grafton

Grafton Today

Grafton's tiny population of 99 forms a thriving, lively community. It supports a Post Office/village store which acts as a hub of the community along with the church and village hall. Concerts, theatre, flower festivals and the very popular Street Fair attract many visitors. The village also welcomes back American ex-servicemen and their families who come to visit a place which played such an important part in their lives.

Acknowledgements:-

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