

TAKING FLIGHT

Charlie Waite on disused airfields

My father, Rex Waite, never told me very much about what he did in the war. Perhaps he knew that I would not take it in. He was middle-aged when I was born and so was a rather distant figure throughout my childhood, but one of whom I am immensely proud. The crowning achievement of his career was his brainchild, the Berlin Airlift – a way of getting food and fuel to western occupied sectors of Berlin. And an award for charity is given in his name at RAF Cranwell Training College each year – he was in the first intake in 1918. That's why, when I think of England's strengths as a nation, I think not only of its beautiful landscape, but also its people and its history – my father and the airfields of Lincolnshire.

Travelling up to Lincolnshire on a blustery January day, it was impossible not to be struck by the light – a result of the flat fields and vast sky that made the county perfect for the many airfields built here in the lead up to World War II. I found it quite hard to pin down an exact figure for the number operational in Lincolnshire throughout the war. But of those that were used, I believe only four remain. What seems obvious from this is not only how important Lincolnshire was in maintaining our country's defences, but also how the end of the war and the changing demands of modern warfare forced the county's landscape to adapt and evolve.

I was lucky enough to get fine weather on my visit. But as you drive on to the disused concrete runway at RAF Metheringham – wartime home to 106 and 110 Squadrons – it is not hard to imagine the thoughts of young pilots setting off on dangerous night missions to face enemy fighters, frostbite and frozen weaponry. The land, while perfect for runways, attracts fog.

And for a returning pilot, exhausted and strained to breaking point, the frequently appalling visibility must have required a superhuman effort.

Apart from the memorial to the Dambusters at Woodhall Spa, I was surprised to find only a few small reminders of the past. There are a small number of roadside plaques – names engraved on the flecked granite; there is an image of a Lancaster bomber painted on to a swinging village sign, and the walls of a pub covered entirely with photographs of smiling faces with their planes. And on a trip from airfield to airfield, it is just the odd spot of grass-fringed, fractured concrete that betrays signs of its turbulent history.

There seemed to be little left of my icon. But perhaps it is this physical lack of evidence that, in some paradoxical way, speaks volumes about Lincolnshire's relatively recent past. The overgrown grass may disguise its scars, but the passing of some 65 years does little to drown out the voices of a thousand crews and the deep grumble of their bombers still hanging in the Lincolnshire air.

In fact, one visit to RAF Cranwell is enough to see that my icon is not just a patch of land carved out of the countryside. It is an icon of many faces. When I think of these disused airfields, I think of the young pilots who have passed, and continue to pass, through its doors. I think of the photograph of my father that hangs on the wall there – his face looking out from the 'Class of 1920'. I think of the Lancaster itself and the people – the inventors, aviators and servicemen – who have helped shape and defend this delightful country. Without such inspirational people, the countryside would be a lonely place.

