

MAGPIE CAMERAS SEE HURRICANE UNEARTHED FROM A WATERY 'TOMB'

On September 30, 1940, when the German air offensive was reaching the last stages of the Battle of Britain, the people of Ightham were watching a furious battle in the clouds above their heads.

A crowd of Spitfires, Hurricanes and Messerschmitts were locked in combat and bullets were showering down on the rooftops. The day had just begun. At 9.43 precisely, one of the British planes peeled off and commenced to drop from the sky.

With engine screaming, it plunged into a small wood near the foot of Ightham hill with a terrific thud.

Watchers were relieved to see a parachute blossom from the spot in the sky from where the plane commenced its final plunge earthwards. They followed its progress until it disappeared behind the horizon in the direction of Seal.

Within a few minutes, another British plane peeled off and, after a terrifying descent, righted itself, attempted a landing, missed an army camp and alighted in a field only 100 yards from where the first had gone into the ground.

The plane was alight and burning fiercely. Although would-be rescuers ran to the spot and tried to open the cockpit hood with poles, the pilot died in the flames.

Last Friday, members of the Halstead War Museum brought the first plane to light once more from its grave some 20 feet below the surface.

DIFFICULT DIG

With them were members of the television team from Magpie who were filming the dig for their nationwide programme for children. It will be shown on TV in September of this year during battle of Britain programmes.

The dig was one of the most difficult ever to be undertaken by the museum, for the plane had landed on a spot where several underground streams laced the ground.

It was only through the enthusiasm of Mr. M. W. Pocock of Kemsing who provided the special digging machinery that the aircraft was recovered.

It was a Hurricane which was still entombed, almost complete though badly shattered, with the familiar Merlin engine associated with the two famous battle fighters of that day.

The Merlin was recovered complete with reduction gear and propeller unit from a mass of clay and water, with its gearwheels and moving parts still bright and shining and dripping with the oil which flowed through its vital parts 30 years ago.

Roger Morris, the driver of the excavator had never before attempted an archaeological dig, and was barely impressed with his assignment until the first piece of aeroplane appeared in his bucket. From that time, he was "hooked." By the time the Merlin came out he was an addict.

EARLY DISCOVERY

The plane parts were so covered with a glutinous covering of clay and water that until they had been washed, they were difficult to identify, but while the cameras of the Magpie team turned, they resolved into recognisable parts.

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One of the early discoveries was the complete cockpit hood cover which, when unfolded, was as perfect and waterproof as the day it went into the ground.

Tony Bastable, known to many younger TV viewers as the leading light on the Magpie programme, was fascinated, as were the rest of the team.

Despite the fact that during the whole dig there was a steady downpour, they groped and sorted the muddy exhibits as they came out with an enthusiasm worth watching.

By the time the plane came to light, the small party had swelled by one member – Mr. George Bastable who lived close by.

I asked him what his interest was and he said: "I saw this one come down. It came from a great height and smacked straight into the ground. I came to this spot a short time after the crash but the police would not allow any civilians near. I heard that the pilot had baled out safely.

PILOT DIED

"There was another one which came down only ten minutes later about 100 yards away. It was alight when we first saw it and was heading for the camp.

The pilot, seeing he would hit the camp, went round again and managed to put the plane down in the field next to the camp but by then the flames had gained such a hold that we could not get near him.

"He died as we tried to get the cockpit top off with poles. We discovered afterwards that he had been injured in the neck."

The Magpie team of researchers, headed by Helen Best, had been given the names of two pilots who baled out that day in the vicinity and about that time.

They are now making inquiries to discover their whereabouts. One has been traced to Durham, the other to Canada, and the Canadian Embassy is endeavouring to locate him in time for him to appear on the September programme.

Mr. R. Summers who lives near Ightham Church told me, this week, that on the occasion of this particular crash, he was working at the Ightham brick works.

HANDLE SEVERED

"A lot of people thought I had found the pilot of this aircraft, but it wasn't so. I picked up one of the crew of a Lancaster which crashed between here and Borough Green. The air force came from West Malling and took him and his parachute away. I cannot remember where this one landed but I heard he came down in Seal.

"I particularly remember that week because I was cutting firewood outside my home when a bullet came down and hit the billhook I was using. It severed the handle completely from the hook and left it in my hand."

Mr. Frank Arthur, who lives at Elim Cottage, Ightham, was more specific. He told me: "I lived in the cottage which was only 100 yards away from where the Hurricane came down.

"Some of the burning ammunition set light to a small havrick I had at the top of the garden, and I and my son went and put the flames out. The plane went in so deep that when they came to see it

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they just took one look and left it where it had gone in. The pilot was a Canadian and he landed in Seal."

Mr. G. B. Chapman, of High Street, Seal, an old friend of the Chronicle, remembers an allied pilot landing by parachute at the top of Seal Hill near the turning to Waterden.

"He was in shorts and was hiding under a tree when they discovered him. He told his rescuers 'I thought I'd better keep a bit quiet in case you thought I was one of those'," said Mr. Chapman.

He said that this pilot was very tall and looked like a long bit of string. He is uncertain whether this was the Ightham pilot, but is hot on the trail to confirm or deny it.