

A visit to Stow Maries Great World War Aerodrome

Four Men's group members, two Howards, Tony and Rex recently went to visit Europe's largest surviving World War One aerodrome on a reconnaissance mission for a planned EHHS society visit in the autumn.

Stow Maries is in attractive countryside situated near Malden in Essex. Howard Whisker our chairman and intrepid trip leader worked on this patch of the country some years ago and knows the highways and byways, which avoids a motorway experience (at least on our trip). En route he had found a picturesque place for coffee. Howard should produce his own guidebook!

How often when you park at an attraction are you greeted in a friendly and immediately informative way by the (Volunteer) CEO?! We were. As a small group of four our purpose was to have an enjoyable and informative half-day trip, but also to establish the potential and arrangements for a future party visit.

The boss sent us on our way with some informative tips. There was as it happened a large party visiting that day, maybe forty people split into two groups each with a well-informed guide. We four were free to look around informally and in each hanger or display area there were guides for that particular area.

Stoke Maries aerodrome was established in September 1916. 37(Home Defence) Squadron Royal Flying Corps, later RAF, were based on the site during the latter half of World War One. The informative guidebook tells us that it was built in 1916 "to protect the capital and the Home Front". Gotha bombers were attacking London; on one occasion 22 were found to be heading for London. The brave airman from Stow Maries, in their attractive but flimsy aircraft took to the skies. At its height 219 personnel and 16 aircraft were based here and launched 81 sorties.

There is much to see. By 1919 three hangers housed the aircraft at Stow Maries. There are plans to replicate these hangers in the future. Currently there are spacious temporary hangers with plenty to see within them. Also available to view are the Squadron office and Museum, the Communications Room, Ambulance, Blacksmith's shed (!) and Motor Transport Sheds with some vehicles from that era. The site has its own Water tower, pilots' 'Ready Room', and Mess and Mess hall café. These are open to visitors to take coffee or lunch. The Airmen's mess, as you would expect, was and is the centre of social activity on the aerodrome.

There is a moving memorial to those Stow Maries that lost their lives. On such occasions as Remembrance day a service and memorial event is held.

The site reverted to farming use after the war but in the last decade what is left has been purchased, smartened up and there is an extensive restoration project in place, clearly constrained by funding and volunteers available. A bit like Archaeological sites in such Pompeii or Paphos, there is much to see but much more to discover. This is not to say that there is not plenty of great interest to see now! The buildings are rare survivors, the largest group of RFC buildings on a WW1 aerodrome in the country.

On a regular visit you can see two categories of aircraft, the WW1 ones described with affection by the guides based in their hangers and those more recent that still fly in and out of the airfield on event days on their large flat grass runway.

For those visitors who want to learn more to enhance their visit the museum section is very well worth spending time at or do buy I suggest the excellent guidebook or a memento at the Aerodrome shop, which was very busy when we visited on a weekday.

We are arranging a society trip as mentioned and I commend this unique and historic aerodrome to you. You will not fail to enjoy your day. There will be a well-organised outing with other interesting places on the agenda and frequent refreshment opportunities. Speak to Howard W or Rex

Rex Bourne

June 2019