

## Case study Heritage Counts 2015

Theme demonstrated by case study:	Repair and maintenance
Name of project/group:	Royal Air Force (RAF) Bicester
Location:	Oxfordshire
Duration (if applicable):	

### Short description of project:

RAF Bicester is the most complete RAF airbase from the interwar expansion period. The site consists of a technical site, which contained the flying field, hangars and other associated buildings, and a separate domestic site, where the officers and men stationed on the airfield were housed. Both sites were designated a conservation area in 2002. Between them, both sites contain 36 grade II listed buildings and a number of Scheduled Monuments.

The domestic site was in use by the Ministry of Defence (MOD) until relatively recently as offices. The buildings here were sold to a developer in 2010 and listed building consent and planning permission were granted to convert them into residential use. The technical site has not been operational for some time and there were significant concerns about the re-development of the flying field in particular for housing. This led to the conservation area being put at risk in 2008.

In late March 2013, the sale of the technical site to Bicester Heritage (BH) Ltd was completed, removing it from MOD ownership. BH Ltd worked closely with Cherwell District Council and has successfully repurposed the majority of the technical site as a 'business park for the repair of classic cars', whilst continuing to lease the flying field. BHL Ltd are now working with Historic England's South East Heritage at Risk team to repair the Scheduled Monuments on the site.

### What would have happened without this project/group?:

BHL Ltd have found a unique best fit solution for this site which has a sustainable long term future. Without their vision for what the site could become, it is likely that housing would have been the almost inevitable future for the technical site. As it stands, buildings have been put back into use for purposes as close to that for which they were originally designed as possible. For example, the 'Engine House' contains a restorer of 1920s Bentley engines, and the 'Oil Store' has an importer of specialist motor oils for classic cars trading from it. Not only have the buildings been repaired and re-used, but their original function is still legible.

Where housing has been developed on the domestic site, the developers, guided by the local authority, have respected the original layout of the buildings, and made only minor and low key new additions. Furthermore, they have managed to create some quirky

accommodation by re-using such structures as the earth sheltered de-contamination bunkers. This has meant that, despite a civilian re-use, it is still possible to read the site as having once been military domestic accommodation, and even see where special ancillary functions took place.

How did the project achieve its objectives?:

The achievement of objectives for this project is embedded in the vision and respect for the site of the new owners. A collaborative and supportive joint effort between them and the local authority officers who advised them has resulted in a site of which all parties can be proud.

What difference has it made? Main outcomes and outputs.

Overall, the site has managed to retain much of its character whilst being put to a sustainable and profitable re-use. This is a good example of how thoughtful and conscientious developers can re-purpose difficult and unusual historic sites to maximise benefit for all concerned, and how, if the initial concept is creative enough, this can be done without heavy subsidization from the public and charitable sector.

What were the main lessons learnt or challenges would anything be done differently?

For those of us involved in the regulatory aspects of planning and for the guardianship of the historic fabric of this country, the re-purposing of the RAF Bicester site is an object lesson in the benefits that can be reaped from trusting private owners and developers with a passion for a site to do right by its significance, whilst still pursuing their business objectives.

What is the future for the case study?

The next challenge to be faced by BHL Ltd is how best to care for the scheduled monuments on the technical site, which, at the moment, remain on Historic England's SE At Risk Register.

Because these are defensive structures, built to support the war effort of WW2 and not the standing stones, ruins and barrows that are more commonly thought of scheduled monuments, some of them may be capable of low-key re-use. HE will now step forward to assist BHL in considering whether this will happen, and in the meantime is offering financial and technical support to bring some of the blast shelters and pillboxes structures, which are unlikely ever to be used again for either purpose they were designed for, back into good condition.

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