

# THE 2<sup>nd</sup> WORLD WAR ANTI-AIRCRAFT BASE IN SUTTON PARK

Keith Hopkinson



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By Keith Hopkinson

## Introduction

On a 33-acre site in the north of Sutton Park, a large anti-aircraft base was built to defend Birmingham against the threat of German bombing during the Second World War (fig.1). The base held up to 200 personnel - initially manned by the regular army, but subsequently by the local Home Guard. After the war, the base housed homeless families - mainly ex-servicemen - until being demolished in the mid-fifties.

Whilst in operation, knowledge of the site was kept secret, and after the war, existence of the site was forgotten.

This is the story of Sutton Park's anti-aircraft base and how it came to be rediscovered.



Figure 1. The position of the Anti-Aircraft Base in the north of Sutton Park, adjacent to Streetly Lane.

## Another Park Mystery

With hundreds of thousands of visitors each year, you would have thought that in the 2400 acres of Sutton Park, the jewel in Sutton Coldfield's crown, there would be nothing left to be discovered. However there has been a series of major discoveries over the last 5 years that just reinforce the exceptional nature of the Park's history and archaeology. The rediscovery of the Anti-Aircraft base is just one these discoveries.

Our story begins just as the first rumours of Covid were coming out of China. Danny Squire, the Senior Park Ranger, had recently rediscovered what was thought to be a Second World War gun site in the woods by Streetly Lane. He had alerted Mike Hodder, retired archaeologist and author of *Sutton Park Archaeology* (M.Hodder 2013), who is the most knowledgeable authority on the Park and its history. Mike and I went to view the site in early 2020.

At the time, the site was covered in a thick stand of young silver birch. The trees had grown over the last fifty years, covering so much of the Park north of the railway line and replacing what would have previously been historic heathland. Battling through the trees, Mike and I discovered a roadway, leading from the Crown Lane park entrance, running for 100 metres to an earth banked circular feature some 20m in diameter (fig.3, photo 1). A pile of moss-covered rubble stood in the centre of the banked circle with broken bricks and pipe around, suggesting a 20<sup>th</sup> century origin. If it was a gun site, we thought it would date to around 1940, the time of the Blitz of major cities like Birmingham.

After exploring the site, Mike showed me other archaeological features in the area (figures 2&3); an earth bank (2) near the gun site (1), the site of a 2<sup>nd</sup> World War American Camp (3), two old quarries (4, a small quarry, and 5, a large quarry), a pile of broken concrete (6), some post holes (7), and finally a 5m diameter circular earthwork cut into the side of Gumslade Valley, of unknown age (8).



Figure 2. Position of archaeological features near the 'gun site'.

Mike explained the American Camp had been used by the personnel of the US Army First Base Post Office, whose operations in England were based in Sutton Coldfield at what is now the Royal Mail parcels office off Clifton Road. We noted some hut outlines on the ground that become more visible in the summer as parch marks, and a cinder and slag roadway running through the camp from a vehicle gateway off Streetly Lane. The pile of broken concrete and the post holes both looked 20<sup>th</sup> century in origin.



Figure 3. Archaeological features near the 'gun site'

When I got home, I looked at detailed Ordnance Survey maps from the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century and found that the old quarries surprisingly weren't shown before the war, thus indicating a wartime, or post war, construction. I also found a grainy aerial picture of the American Camp from the immediate post war period (figure 4) which shows the black shapes of huts and the white concrete bases of dismantled huts (a). It also shows quite clearly the roadway from the bottom of Crown Lane



to the circular gun site feature (b) and what looks like ground disturbances and straight lines (c) to the south of the camp, but too unclear to be certain of their purpose.



Figure 4. The American Camp after the war.

Note: Google suggest this photograph was taken in 1945, although, as you will see, we can now say with certainty that the photo was actually taken in the early fifties.

Later on, I was alerted to a book '*Letters for Victory*', an account of the history of the US Army First Base Post Office in Sutton Coldfield, written by Martin and Frances Collins and published in 1993 (fig.5). There were over 1.6 million US Forces personnel in Britain in the lead up to D-Day in 1944, and every letter written for them, or from them, came through the Sutton Coldfield Sorting Office. There were hundreds of US personnel involved in running this operation, and they were housed at various camps in the neighbourhood. There was a camp at Holland Road on the site of Plantsbrook School, a site on Penns Lane, and later camps at Minworth and Streetly.

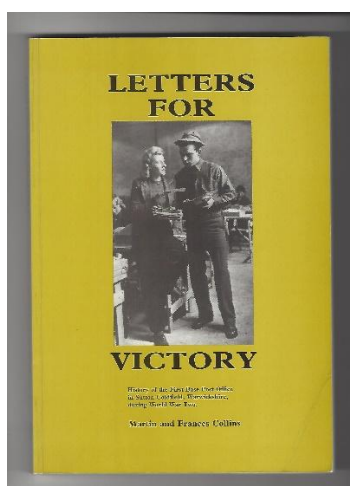
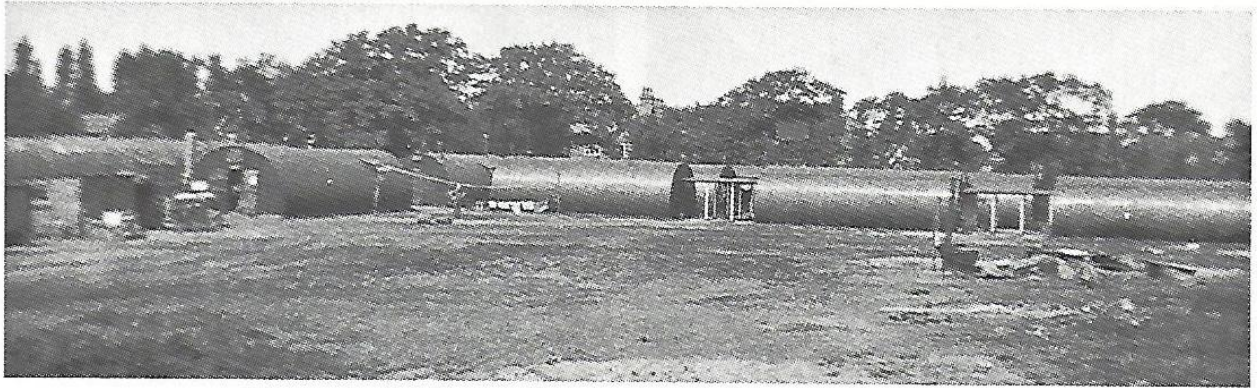


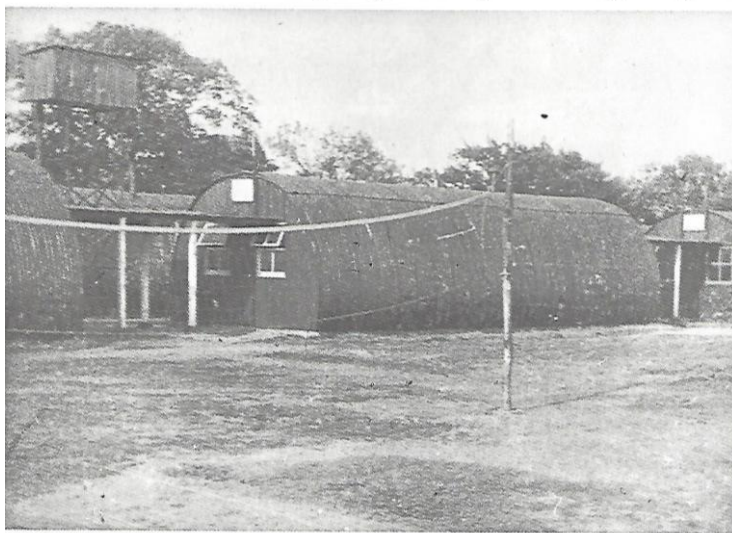
Figure 5. The book on the First Base Post Office in Sutton Coldfield '*Letters for Victory*'

The book mentions that Streetly Camp was set up around October 1944 and occupied until the end of the war in June 1945. During this short period of occupation at Streetly Camp, the US First Base Post Office had already begun moving its operations after D-Day into northern France where the majority of troops were now stationed. The number of people required in Sutton Coldfield would have significantly reduced. So why did the US Army expand into Streetly Camp so late in the war? Also, compared to the other US Camps in the area, Streetly Camp is hardly mentioned, with few anecdotes from people there at the time. Streetly Camp is also very large, with the barrack blocks

able to house around 200 personnel. So, it seemed obvious there was more to the story of Streetly Camp than the book suggested.



*Temporary buildings at Streetly camp in Sutton Park. (P. Tillar).*



*Volleyball Court at Streetly Camp. (P. Tillar).*

Figure 6. Two photographs from the book *'Letters for Victory'* showing Streetly Camp whilst still in use. Note the water tower, and the houses along Streetly Lane that can just be seen behind the treeline.

The mystery deepened as Mike and I continued to investigate the archaeology in the area. We'd noticed that on the 'gun site' roadway from Crown Lane, there were dozens of pieces of loose slag scattered around. We'd also found the roadway through the American Camp contained slag pieces, and I realised that the slag material used was the same on both roads. This meant that the two roadways were most likely constructed at the same time, and for the same purpose – but why would a US Army Post Office Camp in 1944 need a gun site to defend it?

We also carried out a detailed survey of both quarries, and found concrete, reinforcing steel, and broken bricks hidden within the undergrowth. This strongly suggested a World War 2 origin, therefore making it part of the camp – but again, why would reinforced concrete structures be built alongside a barracks? There were a variety of bricks lying around, including some marked 'Hamstead' (see fig.7). Hamstead Colliery sat between Sandwell Valley and Perry Barr, and a brickworks was built there in the late nineteenth century. The colliery and brickworks were both closed in 1965. However, after the formation of the National Coal Board in 1947, all Hamstead produced bricks were stamped 'NCB Hamstead'. Therefore the bricks we found were from before then, fitting nicely with a probable wartime use.



Figure 7. Hamstead Brick from the American Camp (left), Hamstead Colliery brickworks (bottom left), NCB Hamstead brick, post 1947 (below).



We also investigated and mapped the concrete post holes we'd found to the south of the American Camp, and the more we looked, the more post holes we found. There were a number of lines of post holes that we assumed were fence lines, with some lines of post holes at precisely 7 yard spacings and others at precisely 5 yard spacings. Some of the concrete post holes had been removed leaving just holes in the ground, presumably in a half-hearted attempt to clear the site. We assumed the area used to be a series of fenced storage compounds, but some of the angles between the lines of post holes were quite acute, meaning some of the compounds would have had pointed corners. This seemed odd.

At this point, our working theory was that the camp had an earlier purpose before it was used by the US Army Post Office. Could it have been a US Army equipment store in the build-up to D-Day? This would explain why it would have become vacant in Autumn 1944. I wrote to the US Army Records Office in Washington DC to see if they had a record of the camp. However this was during Covid, and they said they could only perform a search if we knew which division or brigade had built the camp – so at this stage this was no way forward until we could find out more information.

#### Discovering clues to Streetly Camp's origins

I turned my attention to Sutton Coldfield Library to look for information on the camp. I tried the war-time issues of the Sutton Coldfield News, but found no mention of the camp. It was when I looked at the minutes of the Sutton Council Park committee that I finally started to make progress.

The minutes cover the Park's activities over each previous financial year, and they make fascinating reading. The first relevant entry is from 31<sup>st</sup> March 1942 (fig.8). 33 acres of land near Crown Lane were requisitioned by the Military Authorities to build Streetly Camp. However, no mention is made of who the camp was for, or its purpose.

The entries for the year to 31<sup>st</sup> March 1943 and the year to 31<sup>st</sup> March 1944 (fig. 9 and fig.10) state that the military were in occupation of Streetly Camp. However, again there is no detail. The information is only slipped in at the end of a sentence, avoiding stating the purpose of the camp.

This changes in the year to 31<sup>st</sup> March 1945 (fig.11). Streetly Camp is referred to as 'The Gun Site'. The Gun Site was used by both American and British forces and *'fortunately the guns were never fired and were removed during the year in review'*. Did this refer to artillery guns being stored by the Americans in the run up to D-Day? Well, the dates of the activity certainly fitted this theory, with the



guns being taken away in the summer of 1944, after which the camp was occupied by the Americans of the US Army First Base Post Office. However, who were the British forces mentioned?

The minutes for the year to March 31<sup>st</sup> 1946 (fig.12) state that '*The Gun Site at Streetly was used both by American and British forces during the year*'.

There were no further clues in the Park Committee minutes for the years following the war. So, at this stage, we knew that the Streetly Camp was built by the Military Authorities during 1942 and occupied in late 1942 or early 1943. The camp's occupiers and its purpose were shielded from the public, although the camp had held guns. In late summer/early autumn 1944 the camp was emptied, and in October 1944 the US Army First Base Post Office moved in along with some '*British Forces*'.

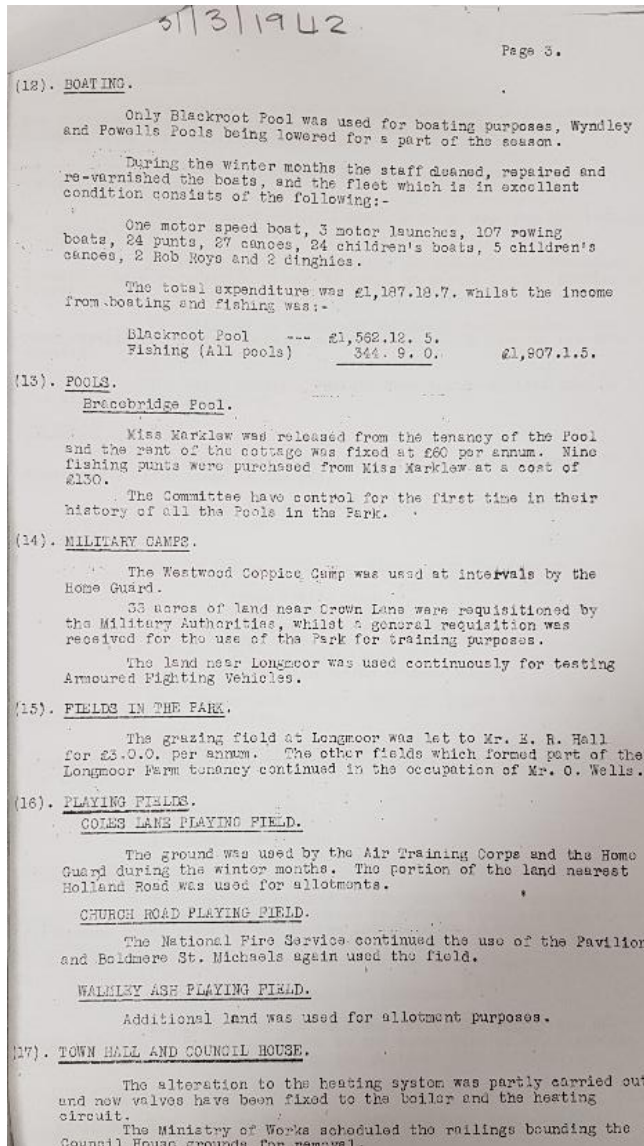


Figure 8. The 1941/1942 Park Committee minutes show an extensive fleet of boats for the Sutton Park pools. Military activity in Sutton Park is detailed, including land being set aside for Streetly Camp. Land in Longmoor Valley was used for tank and armoured vehicle testing, as it was throughout the war.

- 3 -      31/3/1943

MILITARY CAMPS, ETC.

The camp near Westwood Coppice has been used occasionally as a week-end camp by the Home Guard, and the Military are in occupation of the Camp at Streetly Lane.

The whole of the Park has been used extensively for military training.

Part of the Park has continued to be used for the testing of armoured fighting vehicles.

At Streetly the Warwickshire War Agricultural Executive Committee have requisitioned some 94 acres of ground for the growing of vegetables.

The Ministry of Works and Buildings requisitioned land at Powells and a Civil Defence camp for the Mobile Reserve has been created.

The White Cottage, Powells Pool was derequisitioned by the Military, September 1942.

BLACKROOT SAW MILL.

Permission was granted to the Civil Defence Service to construct a rifle range in the pit.

Repairs to the saw bearings have been carried out.

HOLIDAYS AT HOME.

The following Bands have played from the Pageant Site:-

- South Staffs Band.
- West Bromwich Band.
- National Fire Service Band.
- 30th (Warwicks) Home Guard Band.
- Shirley Silver Band.
- Royal Netherlands Brigade Band.

Free dances were held in July and August on the lawn adjacent to the Fire Station.

Popular concerts were sponsored by the Committee in the Town Hall, the orchestra being under the direction of Mr. Victor Fleming. The celebrities were:-

- 1) Geoffrey Dams.
- 2) Frank Titterton.
- 3) Evelyn Stevenson.

SPORTS PARK.

The committee decided to take over the maintenance of the Cricket Pitches and to let them direct to various clubs and organisations, preference being given to the Sutton Coldfield Cricket Club.

The Royal Air Force had the use of the Hockey Pitch.

Ground was taken over for allotments.

The grazing in the Park was let to Mr. Bagley and the field adjacent to "Hollyfield" was in the occupation of Mr. Richards. Hollyfield continued to be used by the National Fire Service.

Figure 9. The 1942/1943 Park Committee minutes detail the military activity in the Park. Streetly Camp is occupied. A rifle range is set up in Blackroot Quarry. 94 acres of land in the centre of Sutton Park requisitioned for growing vegetables – the first crop was during 1943.



31/3/1944

(3).

POOL AND BATHS (Cont'd).

The following table gives the figures for bathers and spectators:-

	Bathers.	Spectators.
Adults	15,652	15,913
Children	7,440	7,908
	22,992	23,821

Receipts for admission, hire of costumes, towels, etc. amounted to £393.16.0 and the expenses £720.13.11 which sum includes the remaining cost of the chlorination plant. 499.16.8

BOATING AND FISHING.

Blackroot Pool was again the only Pool used for boating and proved more popular than ever, a sum of £2,746.6.3 being received for Boating fees against £6,192.0.8 in the year 1943/44. £3,445.3.5

The amount of fees received from all Pools for fishing was £343.14.8. 357.19.0

During the winter months all the boats were overhauled and repairs carried out so far as materials would allow, and the fleet is in good condition. The Committee now own the following boats:-

1	motor speed boat.
3	motor launches.
107	rowing boats.
24	punts.
27	canoes.
24	children's boats.
5	canoes.
2	Rob Roys.
2	dinghies.
9	fishing punts. (At Bracebridge Pool).

POWELLS POOL PAVILION.

Powells Pool Pavilion continued in the occupation of the Home Guard. The White Cottage was used by the Sea Cadets, the Committee sanctioning repairs at a cost of £50, to the building.

MILITARY CAMPS, ETC.

The whole of the Park has been used extensively for military training, and for the testing of armoured fighting vehicles.

The camp near Westwood Coppice has been used occasionally by the Home Guard for week-end camps and the site in Streetly Lane is also occupied. The Civil Defence Camp near Powells has been used for a Mobile Reserve of the Civil Defence Rescue Service, and the Hollyhurst property as a Training Ground.

The Warwickshire War Agricultural Executive Committee have cultivated an area of 95 acres near Streetly Gate.

The trenches which were opened to prevent the landing of enemy planes were filled in on the instructions of the Ministry of Home Security.

Figure 10. The 1943/1944 Park Committee minutes detail again the military activity in the Park. The Streetly Camp is occupied. Trenches which were dug in the Park to prevent enemy planes landing were filled in.

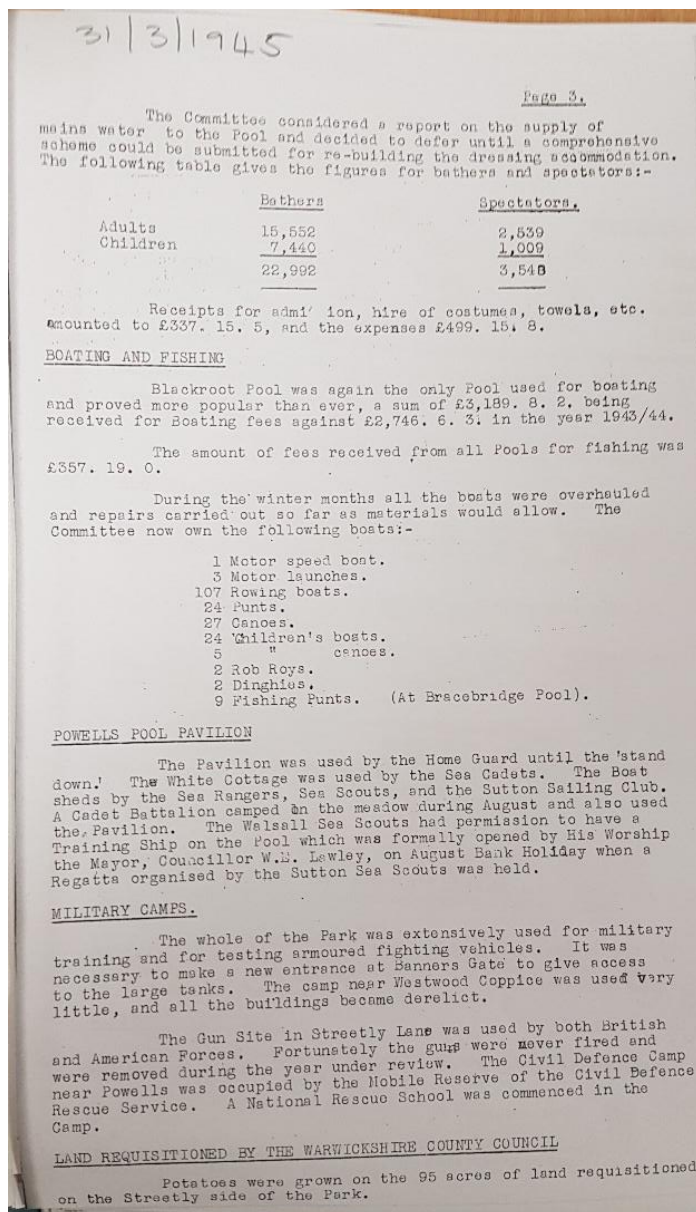


Figure 11. The 1944/1945 Park Committee minutes show a new entrance was made for large tank access into Longmoor Valley from Banners Gate (which can still be seen today – see yellow arrow, left). Streetly Camp is referred to as a Gun Site, whose guns were removed 1944/1945. Potatoes were grown in the Arena Fields

31/3/1946

(3)

KEEPERS POOL AND BATHS. Cont.

the figures of attendance:

	Bathers		Spectators.	
	1945	1944	1945	1944
Adults	16,339	15,552	3,206	2,539
Children	3,445	7,440	868	1,002
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>19,784</b>	<b>22,992</b>	<b>4,074</b>	<b>3,541</b>

Receipts for admission etc. amounted to £354. 3. 1.  
Expenses amounted to £311.13. 4.

KEEPERS WELL.

On the advice of the Medical Officer, the well at Keepers was covered.

BOATING AND FISHING.

Blackroot was the only Pool used for boating and this as in other War years proved very popular. A sum of £2,578.16.11. was received as compared with £3,189. 8. 2. in 1944.

£349. 3. 4. was received in fishing fees from all Pools as against £357.19. 0. last year.

During the closed season repairs were carried out by a firm of Boat Builders to the Motor Boats 'Foam' and 'Crusader' and to a number of rowing boats. The fleet of boats now consists of:-

2 Motor Boat	3 Motor Launches
41 Rowing Boats	2100 Punt.
1200 Canoes	1200 Children's Boats (6 miles)
5 Children's Canoes	2 Rob Roys
2 Dinghies	

POWELLS POOL AND PAVILION.

The Pool has been used by the Walsall Sea Scouts, Sutton Coldfield Sea Scouts and Sea Rangers, Sea Cadets and Sutton Sailing Club. Permission was granted for a large hut to be erected for the use of these organizations on land adjacent to the Pool.

The Pavilion was finally derequisitioned by the Military Authorities and a figure of £467.14.10. agreed for dilapidations. Work was put in hand and the renovations will be finished in time for the coming Season.

MILITARY CAMPS, etc.

The Gun Site at Streetly was used both by American and British forces during the year.

The last tank was tested in December 1945. The ground had been in continuous use from September 1940. The Tank Testing Ground, together with other land amounting to 163 acres, was requisitioned by the Warwickshire War Agricultural Executive Committee.

31/3/1946

(4) can't d.

MILITARY CAMPS, etc. Cont.

The camp at Westwood Coppice was used to house Prisoners of War, who continued in occupation until October Dismantling commenced in January 1946.

The Civil Defence Camp which had been used as a National Rescue School was taken over as a Training Centre by the National Fire Service.

The Warwickshire War Agricultural Executive Committee continued the occupation of the 95 acres of the Park near Streetly.

BANDS

The following Bands played on the Pageant Site and Powells during the Summer:-

- The Shirley Silver Band.
- The West Bromwich Borough Prize Band.
- The Birmingham City Transport Band.
- The Ladbroke Prize Band.
- The Birmingham Civil Defence Band.
- The Willenhall Silver Prize Band.

HORSE RIDING.

Only two reports were received of riders breaking the regulations.

LORRY.

An Ex-Army lorry was purchased for £178. 0. 0. for use in the Park.

DITCHING.

Advantage was taken of the Prisoner of War labour to clear many ditches in the Park.

PARK STAFF.

The Staff averaged 38 men for the year.

RECTORY PARK.

Various organizations were granted the use of Rectory Park for Cricket and Hockey. The American Forces used the ground for Baseball.

The grazing of the Park was let to Mr. W.H. Bagley who continued to occupy the old Cottage.

Hollyfield was given up by the National Fire Service and was taken over by the Home Office. The adjacent land continues in the occupation of Mr. R.H. Richards.

Cultivation of allotments continued in part of the Park.

PLAYING FIELDS.

Colehill Road.

The Maintenance Unit of the Royal Air Force used this ground for Football and the Victoria Road Boys' School also had the use of it for games.

Figure 12. The 1945/1946 Park Committee minutes show Streetly Camp was used by both American and British Forces. German Prisoners of War were held at the camp at Westwood Coppice during 1945, and were put to work clearing Park ditches. There were 38 men/wardens on the Park Staff.

However, before I was to make further progress in discovering the wartime purpose of Streetly Camp, I pieced together the post war history of the site and found that Streetly Camp had been connected to mass nationwide lawbreaking in August 1946.



## The post war history of Streetly Camp

Following the end of the war, the minutes of the Sutton Council Park Committee record that *'The gun site at Streetly Lane was unoccupied for some months until being taken over by "Squatters" in August 1946 and they have remained in occupation during the year'* (see figure 13). My first assumption was that these were opportunistic 'ne're do wells' taking advantage of the situation, however on further investigation, I discovered that this occupation was part of a little remembered national movement in August 1946.

The background to the Squatters Movement, as it became known, was a post-war housing crisis on a scale even greater than after the First World War. Along with an unprecedented demand for housing, due in part to housing destroyed by German bombing, there were acute shortages of labour, skills, and materials. A good deal of those affected by the housing shortage were returning ex-servicemen and their families.

In early July 1946, a single family that had nowhere to live occupied a hut in an abandoned anti-aircraft base in Scunthorpe. They were quickly joined by 19 other families. This was quickly followed by similar occupations of other camps in Scunthorpe, Doncaster and Sheffield. The squatters were featured on a newsreel film at the time and this publicity led to further mass occupations up and down the country.

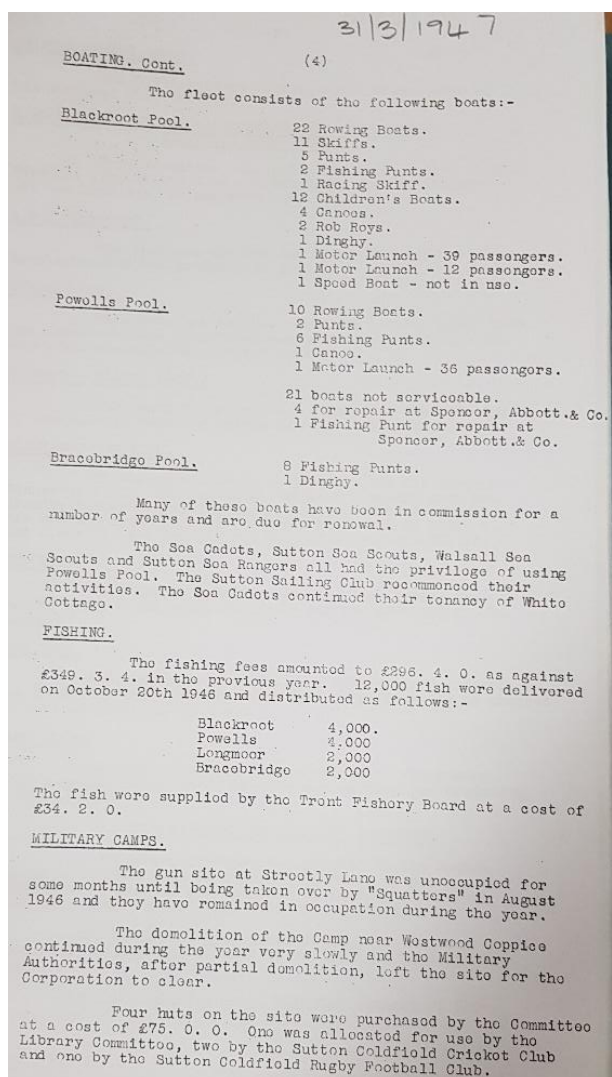


Figure 13.  
Squatters occupy  
Streetly Camp in  
August 1946.



Figure 14. The Squatters make headlines in the *Sutton Coldfield News* on 31<sup>st</sup> August 1946

By the following month over 45000 people had begun squatting in more than 1000 empty military sites. Streetly Camp was just one of these sites that were occupied by squatters in August 1946. The majority of the squatters at Streetly, mirrored throughout the country, were ex-servicemen and their families who simply had nowhere to live.

The Squatters movement made the headlines in both the local and the national press (fig.14). By early September the squattings had spread to hotels and flats. This culminated in the 'Great Sunday Squat' on the 8<sup>th</sup> September when around 1500 people occupied flats in Kensington, Pimlico and St John's Wood in central London.

At first the Government did not know how to respond to this mass law-breaking since there was considerable public support for the squatters. They were perceived as honest people simply taking action to house themselves. In the end, the Government gave everyone a mass pardon and allowed the squatters to stay whilst work was undertaken to rehouse them as soon as possible. In reality, it took another 10 years before all the squatters were rehoused up and down the country.

At Streetly Camp, even though the Government had pardoned the squatters, the Town Council ensured that they stayed at the bottom of the priority list when it came to new housing (fig.15). Three years later, only one family had been rehoused. Although another 16 families were rehoused the next year, in 1950, it was to take another five years before the last of the families were found Corporation housing. There are still people living in Sutton Coldfield today who lived in Streetly Camp at this time, and there were undoubtedly a number of babies born in the camp during the nine years of squatter occupation.



Figure 15. At the end of September, an article in the *Sutton Coldfield News* confirmed the Squatters right to be there. Health and sanitation are said to be satisfactory, however, the Sutton Town Council place the Squatters at the bottom of the list for new housing

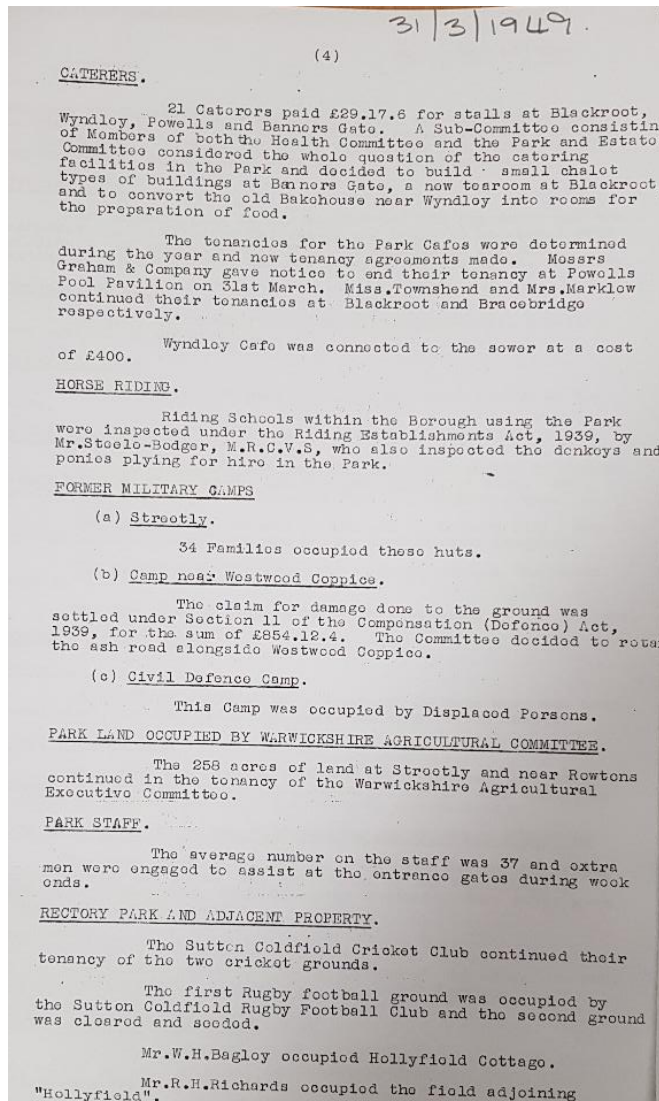


Figure 16. The Town Council Park Committee minutes show that progress to house the Streetly Camp squatters was slow.



31/3/1950

Manager and Manageress on 30th May, 1949, and the cafe opened on the 4th June. A loan of £2,000 was raised for the purchase of equipment. To give increased facilities for entertainment, additions and improvements were made to the cloakrooms.

#### Wyndley Cafe

Mr. Patrick gave up his tenancy on 30th September and the cafe was let to Mesdames Shropshall and Power at an annual rent of £104. An expenditure of £750 was sanctioned for an extension to the kitchen and for general repairs to the property.

#### Bracebridge Cafe

To give increased facilities for refreshments, a kiosk was erected in the grounds.

#### Blackroot Cafe

Improvements were made giving better ventilation to the cafe.

#### Other Park Catering

The old Bakehouse was used for the first season by former stall holders for kitchens and for preparation of food. No stalls were allowed in the Powells Pool and Wyndley areas.

One caterer was allowed to operate on Keepers Hill, one on Crystal Palace Hill and the Mobile Canteen near Longmoor.

The caterers at Blackroot were grouped around the water supply.

The tea-room in Keepers Quarry was tenanted by Mrs Andrews.

#### FORMER MILITARY CAMPS

##### Streetly

18 families occupied these huts and 19 huts have now been demolished, the tenants being allocated Corporation houses.

##### Civil Defence Camp

This camp was vacated by the Warwickshire Agricultural Executive Committee on the 31st December, 1949. The Committee decided to convert the Camp into housing accommodation.

#### PARK LAND OCCUPIED BY THE WARWICKSHIRE AGRICULTURAL COMMITTEE

The land at Streetly and the land near Rowton containing approximately 258 acres, was cultivated by the Warwickshire Agricultural Executive Committee, who intimated they would give up the land in the Autumn.

#### PARK STAFF

The average number on the staff was 37 and extra men were engaged at week-ends to assist at the entrance gates.

#### RECTORY PARK AND ADJACENT PROPERTY

The Sutton Coldfield Rugby Football Club took over the tenancy of the ground near the Coleshill Road entrance, which was cleared and seeded during 1948.

Figure 17. By 1950, some progress is being made to rehouse the Squatters

### The Gun Site

Returning to the origins of the 'Gun Site', who was Streetly Camp built for in 1942, and what was its purpose? I was about to make the discovery that would answer all these questions.

In October 2021 I had joined the Roman Road Research Association (RRRA) to further advance my knowledge of the Roman road running through Sutton Park. It can never be repeated too often that it is one of the best-preserved sections of Roman road in the country. In their archives, the RRRA have an extensive file of old maps and archaeological records of Ryknild Street, the Roman road that passes through the Park. Crucially, the archive also contains some old aerial photographs, including one from 1948 that caught my eye (fig.18). The Roman road can be seen entering the Park near the Thornhill Road/Rosemary Hill Road junction in the top left hand side of the photograph. The medieval wood boundaries of Streetly Wood and Pool Hollies can be clearly seen, and the whole of the remaining land in the Park is still heathland – how very different from today. In the top right-hand corner, though, you can see the edge of Streetly Camp.



Figure 18. The 1948 aerial photo from the RRRA archives. The Roman Road is on the left of the photo. In the top right corner of the photo the 'gun site' and the edge of Streetly Camp can be seen.



Figure 19. Detail from the 1948 aerial photo from the RRRRA archives shows the 'gun site' and the edge of Streetly Camp.

The roadway from the bottom of Crown Lane, that we first discovered in 2020, can be seen quite clearly leading to the circular 'gun site' in the centre of the photograph. The western edge of the barrack blocks are also still standing and clearly visible, and there are some concrete bases and structures just partially visible on the lower right hand edge of the photograph. The bases and structures looked to be part of something substantial but there wasn't enough visible to identify what they were. If this photograph was one of a set, maybe another was taken that would show the whole camp at this time.

In early 2022, I found out that Historic England has an aerial photo archive from the 1920s to the present day. Unfortunately, the whole department was working from home due to Covid. However, they were able to send me a spreadsheet with an index of photographs from the locality, giving dates, co-ordinates and image quality. I selected one with the same date as the RRRRA photo, March 1948, with co-ordinates that I hoped would include Streetly Camp. At £36 per photograph, I hoped that I'd selected the right one.

The photograph arrived in my inbox in February 2022, and fortunately I'd made the right selection (Fig.20). As soon as I saw the photo, I recognised what Streetly Camp had been – a large British Anti-aircraft base. Looking at the detail in the photograph (fig.21), there were eight gun platforms surrounding a central command post. Each circular gun platform had four diametrically opposing ammunition bunkers. The guns were gone but there are other site features still visible. All the barrack huts were still standing, with footpaths that can be seen linking them together – of course, there were 34 families of squatters living in these huts when this photograph was taken. Other features that can be seen in the photograph are the two quarries (in the top centre), in the largest of which appears to be the base of a building and a circular feature, and another demolished feature in the smaller quarry. At the bottom of the photograph, there is a tall concrete structure casting a long shadow which is possibly a watchtower (the remains of this is the pile of concrete rubble, item 6 in fig.2 and fig.3).





Figure 20. The March 1948 aerial photograph of the Park looking east. Four Oaks Estate and the railway line through the Park can clearly be seen. Blackroot Pool is in the top right, and Bracebridge Pool in the bottom right of the photo. Streetly Camp is in the very bottom of the photo.



Figure 21. The Streetly Anti-Aircraft Base

Although the gun platforms at Streetly haven't survived, there is an identical anti-aircraft base, built at the same time, that survives in Mautby, Norfolk (Fig.22). This base was built for 3.7-inch static anti-aircraft guns (Fig.23), identical to the guns used at Streetly.

Looking at Colin Dobinson's excellent book *Britain's Anti-aircraft Defences of the Second World War - AA Command*, there were 64 individual static anti-aircraft guns defending the city of Birmingham during the Blitz of 1940/41, including 32 static 3.7-inch guns. This was before Streetly Camp was built. By early 1944, there were 72 guns defending Birmingham, including 48 static 3.7-inch guns. The 16 additional 3.7-inch static guns indicate that two new anti-aircraft bases were built between 1942 and 1943, one of which was the base at Streetly.





Figure 22. The Anti-aircraft site at Mautby, Norfolk. This is an identical design to the Streetly site, built at the same time. The four diametrically opposite ammunition shelters can be clearly be seen, a 3.7-inch gun would have sat on a circular base in the centre of each platform. The Command Post (below right) is exactly the same as that at Streetly.







Figure 23. A 3.7-inch anti-aircraft gun of the type installed at the Streetly Base. Eight of these large guns at Streetly must really have made the windows of nearby houses rattle when they were fired.

Looking at Colin Dobinson's list of anti-aircraft sites protecting Birmingham (fig 24), he was unaware of the exact location of the Streetly site. The Streetly Base is H5 on the list, but has no name attached.

Birmingham	A	-	Coven Heath	SJ 903044
		H1	Coven Heath	SJ 902053
	B	H50	Bushberry Hill	SJ 923031
	C	H18	Merry Hill	SO 877971
	D	H51	The Elms	SJ 876013
	E	-	Wednesfield	SO 949996
		H52	Wednesfield	SJ 966000
	F	H3	Stoke Cross	SP 012945
	G	H17	Turners Hill	SO 970891
	H	H53	Mons Hill	SO 933926
	I	H6	Park Hall	SP 159904
	K	H4	Perry Park	SP 066924
	L	H10	Erdington	SP 118913
	M	H55	Sheldon	SP 147848
	N	H56	Castle Bromwich	SP 127894
	O	H9	Olton Hall	SP 152825
	P	H7	Oaklands	SP 126852
	Q	H57	Swainhurst Park	SP 091814
	R	-	Edgbaston	SP 058843
	R	H12	Kingswood Farm	SP 072781
	S	H58	Welsh House Farm	SP 018811
	T	H59	Langley Hall Farm	SP 124810
	U	H60	The Uplands	SP 036913
	-	H2	-	SJ 964078
	-	H5	-	SP 106989
	-	H11	Nuthurst	SP 130719
	-	H13	Rubery	SO 988786
	-	H14	-	<i>unresolved</i>
	-	H15	-	<i>unresolved</i>
	-	H16	-	SO 895878
	-	H19	-	<i>unresolved</i>
	-	H20	-	<i>unresolved</i>
	-	H49	Upper Penn	SO 897945
	-	H54	Warmley Ash	SP 429929
	-	H61	Castle Bromwich	SP 155915
	-	H62	Glibe Farm	SP 138883

Figure 24. List of Anti-aircraft bases protecting Birmingham, with name and location. Streetly Camp is H5 on the list, but it hasn't been identified.

There are various concrete bases, roadways and other structures dotted around the site, including a strange looking raised concrete platform, casting a shadow, together with what looks like two long ramps (fig.25). These are the remains of a ground-breaking invention made during the war and installed at Streetly Camp – a radar station for detecting incoming enemy planes. The large octagonal structure was called a gun-laying mat, or GL Mat. They were installed at anti-aircraft sites from the winter of 1940 onwards to improve the performance of radar tracking incoming enemy planes.



Figure 25. The photograph from Streetly Camp (above left) shows the remains of a GL Mat Radar station.

I found a photo of a similar site on the internet (above right). Note the octagonal outline of the mat on both sites.

The radar units used at this time were mobile units like the one shown in Fig.26. However, they were very sensitive to interference. The purpose of the large GL Mat was to neutralise any interference by surrounding the radar set with a uniform area of wire netting of known electrical properties. The mobile radar unit was wheeled up a set of concrete ramps onto a raised head-height concrete platform, before the GL Mat was built around the platform.

The metal mat was very large – 130 yards in diameter. The design was an octagonal network of strained wires set atop a forest of metal poles – 629 poles in total (fig.27 and fig.28). The wires then supported a plateau of two-inch wire netting, made by laying out rolls of mesh. The amount of material used here was immense. Each mat consumed 230 rolls of wire netting, each 4 feet wide and 50 yards in length – that's six and half miles of rolled mesh, together with ten miles of strained galvanised wires. Erecting the mat was also very labour intensive – it took 50 men around four weeks to assemble just one mat. In 1942, it is estimated that 1600 men were permanently employed building GL mats across the country. The Mark 2 unit installed at the Streetly Anti-aircraft base was claimed to be able to sense



approaching aircraft 30 miles away, track them and then direct anti-aircraft fire at a distance away of 8 miles, all to an accuracy of under 50 yards.



Figure 26. Mobile radar unit of the type used at the Streetly Anti-aircraft Site – a GL Mark 2.

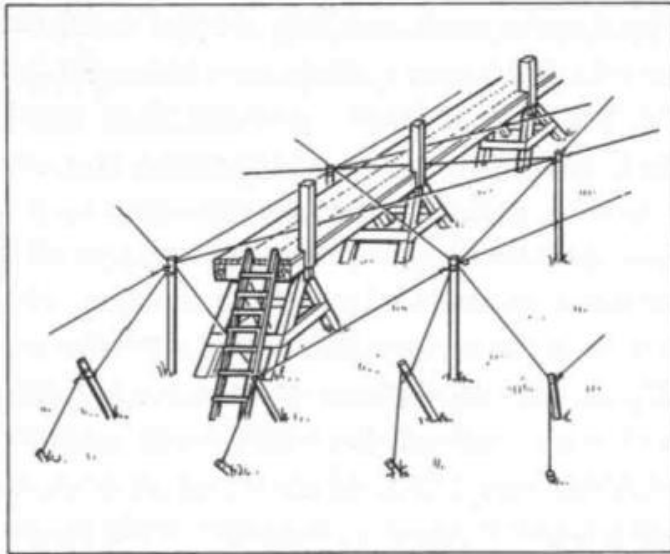


Figure 27. shows the metal posts and straining wires supporting the GL mat. Access to the radar unit was up a ladder and along a catwalk leading to the centre of the structure.

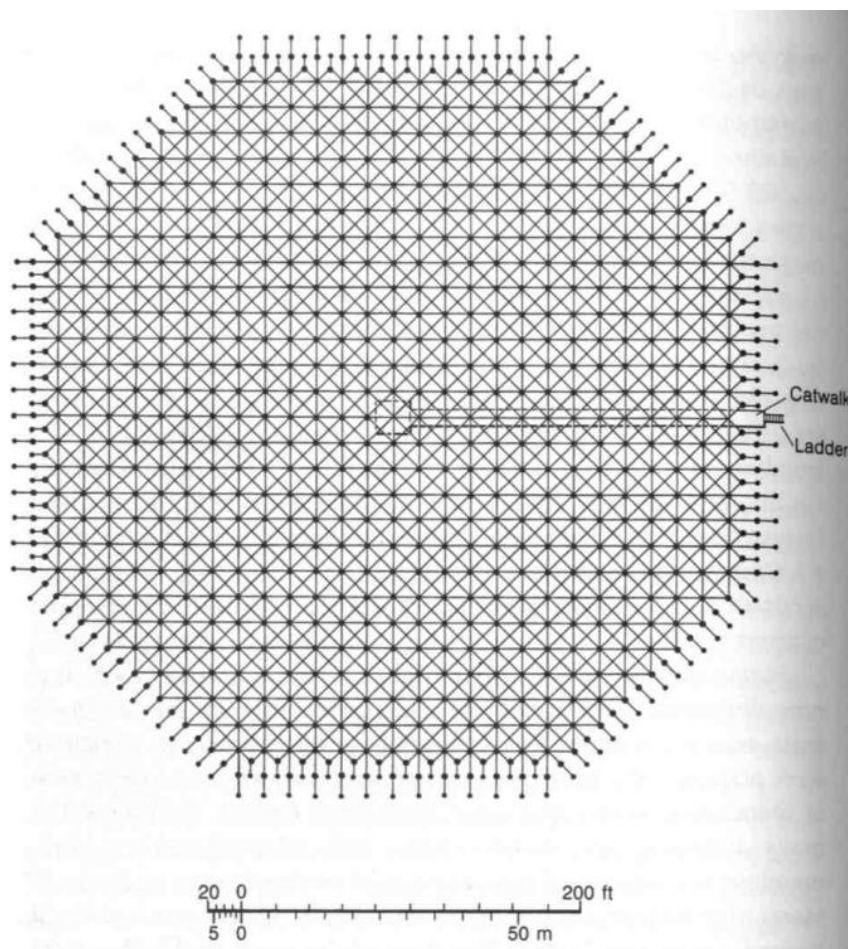


Figure 28. Aerial view of the GL mat layout. There are 629 posts set in concrete to support the mat.

The 629 posts were set in concrete to support the mat, and it is the post holes that have survived at Streetly. Although the area has been allowed to become overgrown with birch over the last 10 years, the lines of concrete post holes, and holes in the ground where the concrete has been removed, can still be traced. Spacings of either 7 yards or 5 yards were recorded during our survey, which corresponded to either following the post holes diagonally or at right angles to the above diagram. I suspect that nearly all the postholes have indeed survived at Streetly, either as holes or with the

concrete still in place. Dozens can be found in the areas clear of birch and bramble. It would be quite something if the birch were cleared and the wartime GL mat was marked out once more.

As for the eight gun platforms themselves, a number of them can still be seen as earthworks where the undergrowth has been cleared. Again, clearing the site of bramble and birch would reveal more.

### Who Manned the Guns at the Streetly Anti-Aircraft Base?

To man the guns, protect the base and look after the personnel, there were probably around 200 people on site at Streetly. They were housed in the two barrack blocks adjacent to Streetly Lane. When the H5 Anti-aircraft base opened in late 1942 or early 1943, it would have been manned by the regular army. However, that soon changed. Across the country, in the Spring of 1943, local Home Guard units were asked to take the place of the regular army (although specialist gun aiming and firing roles, and radar detection were retained as regular army positions). This move enabled thousands of regular army personnel to be released for other war duties.

The local Home Guard unit for Streetly was 'B' Company of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the South Staffordshire Home Guard based in Streetly and Little Aston. Records and memoirs of 'B' Company members of the Home Guard are published on a local website. Interestingly, none of the records or memoirs mention the name or location of the Streetly Anti-aircraft base, reflecting the wartime secrecy of the site. However, the instruction to take over the anti-aircraft base was not well received. One memoir states *"Our first intimation of impending changes comes with a call for volunteers for heavy anti-aircraft. A battery of 3.7's has been set up in the area and the Company is the nearest infantry unit. The appeal meets little success, only about four men volunteering. Despite the strenuous efforts of the C.O., summary orders are issued from 'higher up' that 100 men from the Company will be transferred compulsorily to A.A. immediately, and this wipes out the platoon"*. (There were only 120 men in 'B' Company). *"The Brigadier commanding area A.A. defences attends a parade and addresses the Company on the necessity for the transfer, sugaring the pill with exemplary skill"*.

A photograph of a platoon from 'B' Company is posted on the website (fig.29). These men lived locally, so presumably the barrack blocks at Streetly Camp became largely empty at this time. However, the Home Guard only manned the site for little over a year. The threat of further German bombing later in the war did not materialise, and so the guns were moved during the summer of 1944. Guns were needed on the south coast to combat the menace of German V1 Rockets, and this is thought to be where the guns were sent.





"A FEW OF THE OLD CROWD TAKEN EARLIER THIS YEAR (1943)"

*Back Row (L to R)*

Wood (Heavy A.A.), Cutler (ditto), Petersen (ditto), Jennens (ditto), Thompson (ditto), Collins (ditto), Richards (?cadet officer A.A.), Seedhouse (Lt. 10 N.Staffs HG), Gorman (Heavy A.A.), Gallett ("B" Coy.)

*Middle Row*

Talbot (Heavy A.A.), Brosch (Lt. 10 N.Staffs HG), MacBeth (A.A.), Carr (2/Lt. "B" Coy.), Puddepha (A.A. retired), Naylor (A.A.), Myers ("B" Coy.), Ramsay (B.S.M. A.A.), Jones ("B" Coy.), Broomhead (2/Lt. A.A.), Wild (A.A.), Perry (Mess Corporal).

*Front Row*

Blackham H.W. (A.A.), Fisher ("B" Coy.), Hall (at O.C.T.U.), Izon (A.A.), Puddepha (R.A.F.)

Figure 29. Members of No.5 Platoon, B Company, 32<sup>nd</sup> Staffordshire Battalion taken in early 1943 after the transfer to the Streetly Anti-aircraft Base. Notice nearly all the men in photograph have been transferred to AA duties. This photograph has been taken in Sutton Park in the large 'quarry' at the Streetly base. The barrack buildings are hidden from view behind the men, with the gun platforms behind and to the left.

### Clearing the Site 1956/1957

After the last of the Squatters were rehoused in 1955, the 33 acres of land around Streetly Camp was de-requisitioned and a claim made to the Government Department for reinstatement, i.e. to remove all traces of the anti-aircraft base. In 1956, the Government responded that it was prepared 'to reimburse the reasonable and necessary cost involved in re-instating' the Streetly Gun Site. A sub-committee of the Town Council was set up to direct and oversee the works, and tenders were invited. When the tenders came in, the sub-committee selected the lowest bid, that of W.H.Truslove Ltd of Coventry who bid £1437 and 2 shillings. The work was carried in late 1956 and early 1957.

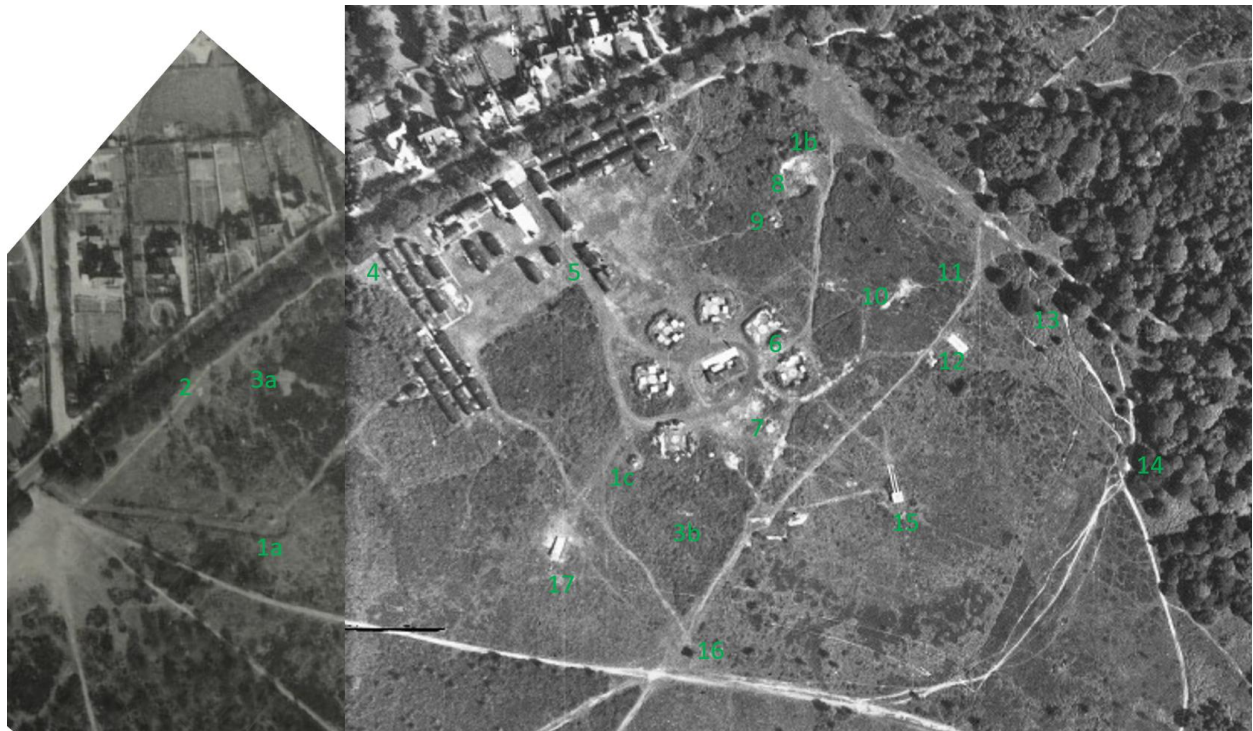
However, even in December 1956, it became clear that the sub-committee weren't doing their job properly. They hadn't bothered to check that the military plans on which the tenders were based accurately reflected what was there on the ground. The result of this was Messrs Truslove were able to come back and ask for money, which was granted. The records don't say how much this additional cost was. The sub-committee also didn't check that the work was completed satisfactorily – it wasn't.

In this case though, we can be thankful for their poor observance, as the materials left behind by Truslove have helped with the rediscovery of the Streetly Anti-Aircraft base.

#### Tracing the remains of the Streetly Anti-Aircraft Base today

Since the rediscovery of the existence of the anti-aircraft base in 2022, there have been a number of new features discovered, and expert military interpretation of what remains (see fig.30)

Figure 30. The complete layout of the anti-aircraft base in 1948, showing the position of the remains still visible and listed below.



1. The first feature investigated in 2020 was originally believed to be a Gun Site (*1a*), however it is now thought to be one of three searchlight stations at the base, situated in the west, east (*1b*), and south (*1c*). All three are circular features, with *1a* and *1b* surrounded by banked earth. The Sutton Park HAT Volunteer Group (History and Archaeological Task Force) have cleared trees from the *1a* site and roadway. A pile of bricks and rubble sits in the middle of the circular feature at *1a*. The searchlight station at *1b* is situated on the edge of the large quarry (*8*).
2. The base of an unknown building, approx. 10m by 5m, can be seen on the photo. The outline can still be seen on the ground alongside the current path.
3. The base was served by two earth latrines. The first, *3a*, can still be seen as a slight filled-in earthwork in the trees between the searchlight station and the barracks. The 1948 photo shows a well-worn path leading to the latrine from the path connecting the searchlight station to the barracks. A well-preserved earth latrine (*3b*) can still be seen just to the south of the gun emplacements. This survives as a very visible trench, 5m in length, which can also be seen on the 1948 photo. Aligned just a short distance to the west, in line with this latrine, is another cut hole, approx. 0.8m square. It is tempting to think that this was the officers' latrine separate

from that for the men! All the latrines are in open heathland so must have been surrounded by privacy screens to avoid being seen by park walkers.

4. The barrack huts of the base were gradually sold off in the fifties as they became vacant. This left concrete bases which were supposed to have been cleared by the contractor Truslove in 1956/57. However, there is at least one the concrete base (4) still there, covered in grass and bramble. There may well be others in this area of the camp. Presumably the concrete base had grown over by the time Truslove came to clear the site so he took the easy option of leaving it alone.
5. The main camp entrance from Streetly lane is in the form of a mainly cinder surfaced road (5). There is a water supply into the Park along this road, ending in a still connected stop cock 30m from the entrance on the right. This presumably carried on being used after the war, providing fresh water for the Squatters. Once the road splits with the left-hand road going to the Command Centre and the gun platforms, the right-hand fork can still be traced and contains a mostly slag surface.
6. The partial outline of two of the gun platforms have been preserved in the form of disturbed earthworks next to the path at this point (6).
7. The site of the gun platform here (7) has been cleared of brambles and bushes by the HAT Group and the outline of where the gun platform's ammunition shelters stood can be seen as earthworks.
8. The large 'quarry' (8) contains steel reinforcement bars still in situ where the remains of a building are shown in the 1948 photo. This could well be an ammunition store. In the event of an explosion here, the force of a blast would be directed upwards and outwards, and not towards the nearby barrack blocks. The circular earth bank (1b), evidence of a searchlight station, can be seen at the far end of the quarry. Various old bottles and broken wartime pottery were found scattered here.
9. The small 'quarry' (9) contains steel reinforcing bars and old bricks (including broken Hamstead Colliery bricks). It is thought that this 'quarry' was dug to provide storage either for ammunition or fuel.
10. There is a small pile of bricks and concrete here (10). Two trenches emanating from here were dug, one heading straight to the Command Centre and the other heading straight towards the radar station. The sunken lines of these trenches can still be traced. It is thought these trenches contained power cables, presumably from a generator set at the point marked 10. Truslove presumably dug up the valuable copper power cables during the site clearance.
11. The 5m diameter circular earthwork cut into the side of Gumslade Valley at this point next to the current path was initially thought to be of some antiquity, but since the rediscovery of the Anti-aircraft base it has been reinterpreted as a Lewis Gun platform built to protect this side of the base. Lewis guns could also be pointed skywards to defend against aerial attack. There is a second similar earthwork, presumably a second Lewis Gun platform, overlooking Gumslade Valley on the far side of the large 'quarry'. This earthwork has a path running across it and has suffered significant erosion.
12. Broken concrete remains of the concrete platform (12) seen in the 1948 photo are still present alongside the current path.
13. Although now covered in trees, a wartime road (13), created by a bulldozer, was formed up the side of Gumslade Valley and can still be seen here.
14. The road leads to an earthwork platform (14) cut horizontally into the sloping side of Gumslade Valley. This feature is significantly overgrown and difficult to locate.
15. A good many of the post holes of the GL mat survive, mostly still containing concrete due to Truslove not completing the site clearance effectively. The centre of the GL mat is unfortunately overgrown with young birch and it is difficult to trace the lines of post holes here. However, around the edge of the birch trees, the lines of post holes can still be traced, including some of those forming the octagonal sides of the GL mat structure.



16. The concrete structure standing in the 1948 photo here (16) is casting a long shadow. When comparing it to the shadows cast by the barrack huts, this structure could have been 3 or 4m tall. A pile of large broken concrete pieces remains here. This structure has been interpreted as a base watchtower.
17. The cinder and slag road forming the base entrance continues past the gun platforms towards the searchlight site (1c) and then angles right towards what can be seen as a concrete base (17) in the 1948 photo. The cinder and slag roadway can still be traced here, and although the concrete base has now gone, the disturbed ground where it stood can still be observed.

In the wooded areas within the boundary of the base, there are numerous pieces of concrete left behind during the camp clearance, as well as pieces of asbestos piping, possibly discarded drain pipes from the camp buildings.

### Conclusion

The rediscovery of Sutton Park's World War 2 Anti-aircraft Base will hopefully lead to the better preservation of the remains, as well as highlighting its role in protecting Birmingham during the war. The rediscovery will also hopefully lead to more stories and details of the site being remembered and recorded.

Keith Hopkinson

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