

**Currie & District
Local History Society**

CURRIE CHRONICLE
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Currie Toll 1897

Hi friends,

In late February Douglas Lowe, our Secretary, reminded me that it was time for the 'Spring' Chronicle to go to 'press'.

I have, therefore, prepared a full article on the subject of aircraft crashes on or near the Pentland Hills etc. as it is the anniversary of a major incident on Hare Hill seventy three years ago in March 1943.

On behalf of the Society, the President and Committee would like to take this opportunity to congratulate the 'C. & B. News' on celebrating the '40th Birthday' of the publication in February 2016.

It has grown in strength over all these years and is an excellent source, each month, of local news written in a most informative and professional style.

Looking forward to seeing you all again on 3rd October 2016, see enclosed Draft Syllabus.

Kind regards

Ron Dickson, Editor.

1.

HARE HILL AIR CRASH

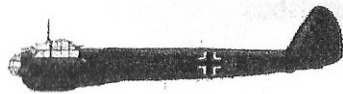
On the evening of 24th March 1943, almost 73 years to the day you may possibly be reading this article, a large number of German bombers were on their way to bomb a number of important wartime targets in central Scotland.

It was recorded at the time that bombs, mainly incendiaries, were dropped at Broughton, Eddleston, Dunfermline, Drem, Haddington and near Balerno - when Cockburn Farm was set alight.

On that particular evening a Junkers Ju 88 Bomber of the German Luftwaffe - with a crew of four on board - set off from its base in Deelen in the Netherlands. The Luftwaffe Junkers Ju 88 A-14 was the fastest of the German bombers. This twin-engined plane (see sketch) was used to great effect by the wartime German Airforce. It could be adapted for use as a medium bomber, a dive-bomber, a torpedo bomber, a reconnaissance aircraft or a night fighter. The aircraft was equipped with internal bomb bays, supplemented on later models with provision for bombs to be carried externally. Some models had rocket-assisted take-off equipment fitted because of the extra weight being carried.

The Junkers Ju 88 mission - on this particular day from maps later found on the aircraft and inspected by RAF Air Intelligence officers - indicated the sortie had been instructed to bomb a target in the Leith area. This would probably have been the Leith Docks installation.

Junkers JU 88



On that particular night the entire Edinburgh area (including the Pentland Hills) was swathed in a dense fog. The pilot of this Ju88 night bomber (coded 3E-HM) because of the atrocious weather conditions, and the UK wartime 'black-out' was unable to locate the intended target.

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The pilot, therefore, decided to return to his home base in Holland. Before doing so he wanted to jettison the heavy cargo of unused bombs and did so over farmland in East Lothian. He then turned the aircraft southwards towards the Pentland Hills which were still covered in a thick coastal fog.

It is officially recorded that at 45 minutes past midnight , on the 25th March, the Junkers Ju 88 "hit the north-west side of Hare Hill (1472ft) at a shallow angle and wreckage was scattered over the hillside for half-a mile."

All four crew members died in the crash that night. They were subsequently identified as

Oberleutnant Fritz Förster - Pilot (30)
(Equivalent RAF Rank - Flying Officer)

Pilot Förster
and his family



3.

Underoffizier Hirst Bluken - Observer (23)
(Equivalent RAF Rank - Sergeant)

Obergefreiter Heinz Kristall - Wireless Operator / Air
Gunner (21)
(Equivalent RAF Rank - Senior Aircraftsman)

Gefreiter Willi Euler - Air Gunner (21)
(Equivalent RAF Rank - Leading Aircraftsman)

After the bodies of the four Germans had been removed from the crash site they were eventually buried (with the assistance of local villagers) in Kirknewton Parish Cemetery till the War ended. In common with a number of German military personnel, who died in the UK during the Second War, their remains were reinterred, in 1962, in adjacent graves in the German Military Cemetery at Cannock Chase in Staffordshire.

A Memorial Plaque to the four young German airmen can be seen today at the north-west corner of Kirknewton Parish Church graveyard..

A few years ago a local Leith man, Kenny Walker, took a deep interest in this wartime incident. He was instrumental in erecting a 4"x4" post at the site (on Hare Hill) and had a small brass plaque inserted on the post with the names of the four young airmen inscribed. Members of Harmony A.C. (our local running club) visit the site each Armistice Sunday and lay four small wooden crosses with a red poppy attached at the memorial post.

I learnt, only recently, that the main fuselage of the German bomber was very quickly removed from the crash site on instructions from the Air Ministry. I believe it was transported through the narrow Main Street in Balerno in 1943, (much to the amazement of many villagers) to the Lanark Road. From there it was transported by heavy lorry to a scrap-metal dealer's yard at Carnwath.

(Any further information after that was placed under 'wartime wraps'!!)

4.

Below I have included a poem written by a member of the Friends of the Pentlands , Peter Harnden. Having witnessed the first air raid of the War on the Forth Rail Bridge in 1939, and, on seeing the crash site on Hare Hill for the first time, it brought back memories of the earlier raid.

This prompted him to write this delightful little poem and he has given me permission to print it below.

POPPIES

by Peter Harnden

*High on a lonely hillside
Where only walkers roam
Four young airmen perished
So many miles from home.
With many men just like them
To a service life enrolled
With hopes of high adventure
Doing all that they were told
By leaders in high office
Who would never risk the fate
Of four young German airmen
On that Junkers eight eight.
With their mission nearly over,
All their hopes were dashed
When flying low and lost in mist
Hare Hill was where it crashed.*

*As poppies grow on Flanders Field,
 We remember all who died,
 On both sides of the conflict
 And those at home who cried
 A wooden post now marks the spot
 With names of all the crew. And
 On Remembrance Sunday
 We also think of you.
 A Poppy Wreath surrounds the post
 With poppies scattered round
 A little cross each with a name
 Was planted in the ground. We
 Stood in silence, lost in thought
 While picturing the scene, As
 We paid our own small tribute, to
 Lives that might have been.*

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There have been other aircraft crashes in close proximity to the Pentland Hills. One of these was a rather sad event that took place at nearby Kirknewton Aerodrome on the Lang Whang not far from Balerno.

Coincidentally it was also in 1943 when a Bristol Beaufighter was setting off with a crew of two when it crashed on take-off and careered into a nearby ammunition dump.

Stationed at the airfield at that time was an RAF Officer, named Squadron-Leader Peter Ottewill, who saw the plane crashing. Ammunition from the plane began to explode on impact. Nevertheless despite this, and the possibility of the Beaufighter's fuel tanks liable to explode at any time, Ottewill jumped on to the aircraft's wings in an effort to rescue the trapped pilot and observer. After opening the front hatch, he struggled to release the pilot from his cockpit harness and

dragged him clear. He then returned to release the observer and managed to save him too. Having just managed to get him clear one of the petrol tanks blew up. For his bravery in saving two of his colleagues the Squadron-Leader was awarded the George Medal later that year.

When he trained as a pilot, just before the Second War started in 1938 and gained his wings, his first posting was to No. 43 Squadron, a Hawker Fury unit based at Tangmere in Sussex. This squadron was given the name - 'the Fighting Cocks' famous for its acrobatic displays in silver painted aircraft.

As coincidence would have it, I spent a year of my RAF National Service based at an airfield where a No.43 Squadron of Meteor Jets was based ....it's a small world !!

Other local air crashes include .....

(1) On 12<sup>th</sup> June 1940 a Spitfire fighter, on a routine flight, mysteriously crashed at a site near Boll O'Bere Farm on the Lang Whang

(2) Two weeks later another Spitfire crash-landed near Harperrig Reservoir having run out of fuel

(3) A de Havilland Tiger Moth of 340 Free French Squadron - flying out of Drem airfield, - crash-landed near Nethershiel Farm in Almondell Country Park, East Calder. The Bi-plane was burnt out but the crew of two escaped with slight injuries

(4) In 1960 a Gloster-Delta winged Javelin day and night fighter was on a training exercise high over the Firth of Forth when the plane developed an engine malfunction. Realising the aircraft was going to crash the pilot flew the Javelin away from the heavily populated areas around the Firth of Forth and towards the Moorfoot Hills. Sadly the aircraft flew into Bowbeat Hill (4 miles north-east of Peebles) while descending in cloud at high speed. Both the crew died instantly.

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(5) On 14<sup>th</sup> December 1942 an RAF Vickers Wellington medium bomber was on a secret test flight with five of a crew, including a 24year old RAFVR pilot. Just over an hour into the flight the aircraft experienced a critical failure of the special equipment on board. As it passed over RAF Turnhouse the aircraft stalled and started spinning towards the ground. The pilot bravely tried to land the bomber on playing fields in the Craiglockhart area of Edinburgh (Meggetland) but landed in the back garden of a house in Craiglockhart View near the Union Canal. All five crew members perished in the accident - the youngest was only 23years old.

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I think it would be appropriate to complete this article with the following

The Airman's Prayer (psalm 139:8-10)

*If I climb into Heaven, Thou art there,
If I go to Hell, Thou art there also,
If I take the wings of the morning
And remain in the uttermost parts of the sea,
Even there also shall Thy hand lead me;
And Thy right hand shall hold me.*

(Inscribed on The Runnymede Memorial)