

## **The Bombing of Marlow - in WW2 (1)**

In the Archaeology In Marlow newsletter of April 2016 there is a very interesting article about strange circles which can be seen on Google Earth at Marlow Rugby Club. As it turns out these are caused by the Club's sprinkler system, rather than being the remains of ancient settlements or old bomb craters. This revelation came as a bit of a blow for me, for reasons I will come on to!

During the Second World War German bombs were dropped on Marlow on at least two separate occasions, once possibly in anger and once definitely not. The second occasion is very interesting. Some years ago I quite accidentally came across an article in the November 1949 Journal of Animal Ecology. Apparently in September 1940 a large quantity of bombs were dropped in a field on the north bank of the River opposite Bisham Church. The story goes that a German bomber was on a raid towards the Midlands, but hit problems and decided to return home early. Bombers would normally carry just enough fuel to return home 'empty', but a full bomb load would make it too heavy. So the bomb load was jettisoned just outside Marlow. A survey of the area in the summer of 1945 found 65 bomb craters in the field over an area of around 440 x 125 yards. The purpose of this survey was to see how old bomb craters become populated by aquatic wildlife. By September 1945 seven had become just shallow grassy hollows, and 15 had been filled in. The remaining 43 were studied for both plant and animal life. The report's author expected the craters to disappear over the coming few years, but the outline of some of them can still clearly be seen on Google Earth to this day.

I was curious as to whether the German crew had made a conscious decision not to drop the bombs on the Town, but wait until they were in open country. With this in mind I thought it would be interesting to see if there were any other bomb craters on the other side of the town as well. This is when I first noticed the circles on Marlow's Club's pitches. The AIM article dashed that idea of course! However, further downstream, in the next three riverside fields after the Rugby Club there is also a large number of strange circles in the ground, again clearly visible on Google Earth. The excellent little book 'Tales of a Riverbank', produced by the Royal Geographical Society and available in the Marlow Museum, confirms that these are also old bomb craters. This makes me wonder whether the bomber started dumping its load before reaching the Town, then stopped whilst flying over Marlow itself, only to continue dumping

bombs once clear of the populated area. Enemy bomb crews were not totally devoid of conscience, and a little bit of me hopes they avoided bombing a town which was not within their intended targets.

The other occasion when bombs were dropped, again possibly not so much in anger as self preservation, was when a group of German bombers was intercepted by Hurricanes and Spitfires over Marlow, also in 1940. This is recorded by an eye witness under the BBC's WW2 People's War initiative. Under attack the bombers dropped their load in a line from what is now Terrington Hill, through Highfield Park and Pound Lane down to the river. It is likely the bombers dropped their load more for self preservation than any specific malice against Marlow; a bomber full of bombs could explode catastrophically if hit. However one Marlovian was killed in the 'attack', a Mr Ryan who had an electrical shop on the High Street. I also know that Hitler had a list of locations which he insisted were not bombed, as he was looking forward to occupying a country with some lovely old towns and cities; whether Marlow was on this list, I don't know...but our beautiful town certainly should have been!

I have looked for any surviving evidence of this event, but most of the area concerned has since been built over and any evidence obliterated. There are some very faint circles towards the southern end of Higginson Park, but these are not clear enough to be conclusive.

However, both episodes present an enigma. Why were the bombers in both cases flying south with full bomb loads when we might have expected them to be flying north west towards the Midlands, Birmingham, Manchester or Liverpool, and only flying south once rid of their deadly load? Or had they entered UK airspace over the East Anglian coast and were taking a large circle before heading for London? It remains a bit of a mystery. If anyone can shed light on this I'd love to learn more.

For interest the two episodes can be further explored on these two web sites:

[www.jstor.org/...](http://www.jstor.org/...)

[www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/...](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/...)

*Keith Ray - Aug 2017*