

Design and Conservation

Cherwell District and South Northamptonshire Councils

Design Advice

Application Number	18/01333/F
Applicant's Name	Bicester Heritage
Application Title	New Technical Site
Application Type	Full application
Location	RAF Bicester
Case Officer	Maria Philpot

1. Context

This advice is in response to the above planning application dated 24 July 2018 and the series of accompanying site plans, revised building plans and elevations, and supporting materials showing the proposal for the new technical site. The application proposal has developed through a process of pre-app meetings and detailed feedback, including heritage advice.

Bicester airfield is a significant historic site. In the later 1990s Historic England (HE) assessed the site to be the most complete airfield of the interwar period, following a detailed thematic survey of military airfields. It has been designated as a conservation area and has many listed buildings and scheduled monuments. Historic England's assessment of the site is as follows:

RAF Bicester is primarily of significance as the most complete and unaltered Trenchard era bomber base in the country and (along with West Rainham in Norfolk) the best-preserved bomber base predating 1945. All other bases have undergone a high degree of change and most now bear little resemblance to their original form, but Bicester is like a time capsule. The reason so many buildings at Bicester are listed, while very similar buildings elsewhere are not, is that the base as a whole was recognised as an exemplar; a unique place where it is possible to experience at first-hand what it would have been like to live and work on an interwar airbase. [HE masterplan pre-app letter dated 14.5.2018]

English Heritage's earlier *Survey of Military Aviation Sites and Structures* document which formed the basis of airfield's Listing recommendations in 1999/2000, confirmed that:

[I]t [Bicester] retains, better than any other airbase in Britain, the layout and fabric relating to both pre-1930s military aviation and the development of Britain's strategic bomber force up to 1939. The grass flying field still survives with its 1939 boundaries largely intact, bounded by a group of bomb stores built in 1938/9 and airfield defences built in the early stages of the Second World War (EH document, 2000, Bicester airfield overview).

The airfield as a whole has been the focus of considerable research and assessment to underpin the protection afforded to the site, including a report on its historic significance, The Conservation Area Appraisal, Listing and Scheduling designations, the Planning Brief, and the Heritage Partnership Agreement.

The site was bought in 2013 by Bicester Heritage from the MOD, following the mothballing of the site in 1994. Over the last five years the airfield has seen substantial investment in its historic fabric and revitalisation of the site, with the renovation of existing buildings and the successful launch of a historic motor industry hub.

To date, the focus of Bicester Heritage has been on the refurbishment of the historic technical site and the existing buildings therein. In 2015 The Cherwell Local Plan Part 1 was adopted. Policy 8 establishes the principle of further development at RAF Bicester; however, this is tempered by the need to balance any development opportunities against the significance of the site's heritage.

The Council has worked closely with Bicester Heritage on the developments to date and has adopted a Heritage Partnership Agreement for the site. Bicester Heritage has conserved and developed the historic site to a high standard, securing the longer-term viability of many historic airfield buildings. Heritage site protection is extensive including the Conservation Area, individually Listed Buildings, Scheduled Monuments and other non-designated heritage assets. These are considered further below in respect of the proposed development.

2. Historic context of the proposed technical site

The airfield's historic technical site is laid out according to the trident footprint developed during the 1920s when Lord Trenchard was the head of the RAF, and the bomber was deemed the most effective form of deterrent. Bicester was developed and used by bomber squadrons during the interwar period, and during the war used for training. Whilst additional buildings were added during the 1930s expansion-period as the threat from Nazi Germany grew (and it was anticipated that Bicester would be an operational station), the core of the technical site is legible as that envisaged during the Trenchardian era. The airfield site also includes the original 1920s flying field, which was extended further to the east in early 1940. At that time the concrete perimeter track was also laid. The airfield's domestic site is also well-preserved, and lays to the west of the technical site and flying field. In addition to buildings, the airfield also retains its bomb stores, airfield defences and air-raid shelters.

The area of the new technical site is to the immediate south of the existing, earlier technical site, its heritage assets considered further below. This area occupies the south-western side of the historic site. The proposed new site at its western side is near the roundabout on Skimmingdish Lane, the latter forming the boundary to the immediate south (it is aligned north-west to south-east along this side of the airfield). The Lane then runs along to the airfield's south gate, further to the east. The main entrance to the airfield technical site is just to the north-east of the roundabout. Vegetation currently screens views into the southern side of the airfield and proposed new technical site as one travels along Skimmingdish Lane, in either direction, and views from the roundabout area.

The airfield's four hangers are to the north, north-east and east of the new technical site, the nearest being Building 137, the A-type hanger. The airfield's two A-types were built in the late 1920s as part of the original Trenchardian trident layout and are of especial historic interest because of their completeness and rarity. The larger C-type hangers were added during the 1930s expansion, as was the fort-type Watch Office.

There is only one historic building within the proposed new technical site, Building 143, a gas defence centre. Immediately adjacent to the new site to the west is Building 144, the Works Service Building. Building 146 to the west of the proposed site is near the main entrance and originally served as the Operations Block. This is outside of the proposed development. There were several smaller buildings in this area which have been removed since the Second World War, thus setting a historic precedent.

Historically, Skimmingdish Lane was slightly further to the north and formed the original southern boundary of the airfield, but was later re-aligned to its present course. There were no airfield technical buildings to the immediate south of the earlier Skimmingdish Lane alignment during its interwar and wartime usage, other than those built quite further to the south for aircraft dispersal. Given this, only proposed Buildings / units C, D and E are within the area of the historic airfield site: proposed buildings A, B, F, G and H are therefore outwith the pre-war airfield boundary to this area.

Several wartime defensive structures are contained within the proposed new technical site development area: two air-raid shelters and a blast-shelter (with an open top). These three structures within the Conservation Area are not Scheduled Monuments. The airfield's original pyrotechnic store site is to the south side of the proposed development area, near to the disused entrance road into the site – e.g. to its immediate west. A surrounding concrete wall and hardstanding area is all that remains of this store. This structure is not Listed but is within the Conservation Area.

3. The New Technical Site proposal

The proposal is to create a new technical site area comprising eight individual units (Buildings A-H). The new technical site takes account of and partly reinstates the earlier Skimmingdish Lane alignment in its site layout. The proposed units are oriented so that their longer elevations are broadly parallel with the modern Skimmingdish Lane, these generally either facing south-west towards the Lane, and north-east onto the earlier technical site area. The main roof ridges are mostly aligned to run parallel with Skimmingdish Lane.

No two units are alike and all have footprints of differing sizes and shapes, these designed to work with the grain of the development plot and heritage and other site constraints. They are spaced to create a varied spatial layout, though are concentrated compared with the historic site to the north, where spaces between buildings are more generous. These new units are mostly of double-storey height with a mezzanine component, coupled with a lower height element. These are double-pitched roofed units, of differing heights, with valley roofs in several instances. The buildings vary in height, the taller ones being c. 8.1m to ridges, and c. 6.1m to eaves. The 'Indicative cross-sections showing heights' drawing (9900-F) best illustrates these differing building heights in relation to extant historic buildings, including Building 137 (A-type hanger).

The units themselves are of consistent design and style, despite differing massing. The predominant material for walling and roofing is corrugated metal sheeting. Brickwork is used for gable-ends to the double-pitched roofing of the higher elements of each unit, and in some instances, the brick-walling – e.g. units C and G. The intersection of walling with eaves and verges to the metalled units appears to be flush, with no over-sailing roofing. Fenestration is varied, as are doors into units. Rooflights are incorporated into the buildings, those visible to the exterior echoing earlier skylight designs within the historic site. Windows are small, of either three-light horizontal design, or single squarer units. The colour palette is confirmed including dark grey / black for the corrugated metal cladding, and grey, dark grey and green for other surface treatments. These are guided by the previous colour palette set out in the Heritage Partnership Agreement. The drawings do not include details of external workshop signage, lighting or other fixtures.

Surface treatments between and around the units are of tarmac, grasscrete, hardstandings, species-rich grass, and other grasses. Bunding is proposed for boundary treatments to the south side of the site fronting onto Skimmingdish Lane. Existing trees will be retained to this same area so that there is mature screening between Skimmingdish Lane and the south-west facing elevations of the proposed units.

4. Heritage assessment and advice

The key heritage constraints for the proposed new technical site is the Conservation Area which covers the site as a whole, and the setting of Listed Buildings (the nearest being Buildings 146 and 147; Building 137 (hanger); and slightly further to the north, Buildings 130, 131 and 135. There is a defended air-raid shelter to the south-east corner of Building 137 (A-type hanger), which is included in the Scheduled Ancient Monument designation for the site (constraint areas 3 and 4: List entry number 1021455). There are also other non-designated heritage assets (buildings), as below.

The key heritage considerations of the proposed new technical site are the impact upon:

- The Conservation Area;
- The setting of the Conservation Area from outside the site;
- Buildings 130, 131 and 135 (Listed);
- Building 136 (not Listed, but making a positive contribution);
- Building 137 (A-type hanger, Listed) and especially its south-western elevation;
- Building 143 (not Listed, but making a positive contribution);
- Building 144 (not Listed, but making a positive contribution);
- Buildings 146 and 147 (Listed);
- The defended air-raid shelter at south-east of Building 137 (scheduled monument); and
- The pyrotechnic store to the south of the site (to south-east corner of Building / unit A)

These are now considered in turn.

- **The Conservation Area**

The proposed site is to the south-west side of the airfield, and is only partly within its original historic boundary. Three buildings / units are proposed to the north side of the earlier alignment of Skimmingdish Lane, and five to the south of it. Tree and other proposed screening will obscure views of the new technical site from within the area of the original technical site, with the result that depending upon season, the new buildings will be glimpsed, depending upon position. This will be especially the case from more deeply within the original site, and especially when looking south-west from the northern area. This said, screening is less evident to eastern side near Building 137 (hanger) and if standing in the vicinity of Building 136 for instance, the proposed buildings will be more obvious.

The proposed buildings / units' elevations which will be most obvious from within the historic site are:

- *Building C*: the north-east facing elevation, facing onto Building 137's south-west elevation;
- *Building D*: the north-east elevation facing onto Buildings 135 and 136, though there is some tree-screening; and also, the north-west elevation facing onto the road into the site adjacent to Building 143;
- *Building E*: the south-east facing elevation which will be partly visible from the area of Building 135; and the north-west facing elevations to its three wall planes as these face towards Building 144;
- *Building G*: its north-facing elevations may be glimpsed from the main site entrance and Building 146 (Listed building); and
- *Building H*: the north-east facing elevation, which although screened, may be visible from Building 146 (Listed building);

The other proposed buildings / unit are of less concern in respect of their impact upon the Conservation Area and heritage assets.

In respect of the above buildings, very detailed discussions were held with Bicester Heritage to seek to agree revisions to the use of brick-gabbling and walling to mitigate harm to the setting and character of heritage assets. Officers considered that brick-gables and wall-planes should be deployed so as to best mitigate the potential harm to specific Listed Buildings and the Conservation Area. Bicester Heritage was concerned that this approach might result in pastiche, preferring a consistent approach across all new units which could be read as modern additions to the site. Following further discussions, the unit designs were revised as proposed. From a heritage perspective it is considered that additional fine-tuning of the designs remains possible so as to make best use of brickwork where elevations are visible, as confirmed above. Additional details concerning unit eaves / verge treatments, external signage, lighting and other fixtures, would be valuable to confirm how

elevations would be animated, especially where extensive planes of corrugated metal clad walling would be visible.

The designs as proposed are however considered to constitute less than substantial harm to the character and setting of heritage assets (Listed Buildings, buildings making a positive contribution, and the Conservation Area as viewed from within the site).

- **The setting of the Conservation Area from outside the site**

The key views will be a) from Skimmingdish Lane looking north-east; b) also along Skimmingdish Lane if heading towards the roundabout, where Building 137 is the most obvious structure; and c) at the roundabout itself, near (and once into) the site's main entrance. Assessing these in turn, it is considered that because of bunding and vegetational screening there will be limited impact upon the appearance and setting of the Conservation Area from Skimmingdish Lane (points a and b), provided the road is not dualled – the buildings will also be set back from the Lane. In respect of point c, screening will again obscure views into the historic site from here, and only Building G may be visible. Please see comment above regarding its more sensitive elevations.

Were Skimmingdish Lane to be dualled at a future time this would necessitate the removal and / or thinning of the current tree-screening along the south-western boundary of the technical site, in which case the south-west facing elevations of the proposed units, and the technical site as a whole, would be more visible from the road. Noted above, these aspects have been discussed with Bicester Heritage in terms of unit design, so as to mitigate harm to setting through the use of brick-work to gables and wall-planes.

- **Buildings 130, 131 and 135** (Listed)
- **Building 136** (not Listed, but making a positive contribution)
- **Building 137** (A-type hanger, Listed) and especially its south-western elevation
- **Building 143** (not Listed, but making a positive contribution)
- **Building 144** (not Listed, but making a positive contribution)
- **Buildings 146 and 147** (Listed)

Please refer to the advice above (Conservation Area) in respect of those proposed buildings and detailed discussions undertaken to arrive at the unit designs as proposed.

- **The defended air-raid shelter** at south-east of Building 137 (scheduled monument)

Because of the distance between the south-east corner of Building C and this asset, it is considered that there is little impact upon the setting of the SAM. However, it is recommended that Historic England is consulted for their advice.

- **The pyrotechnic store**

This was a previously unidentified feature in earlier site assessments. Following a site appraisal Bicester Heritage were asked to consider retaining part of the structure as proposed in their planning statement. This proposal is supported in heritage terms.

Conclusions

It is considered that the less than substantial harm to the setting and character of the identified heritage assets (Listed Buildings, buildings making a positive contribution, Conservation Area, pyrotechnic store) will be outweighed by the public benefits of developing the technical site (NPPF, para. 196). The new technical site's wider value in contributing to ongoing conservation costs of the historic airfield into the future is also an important consideration.

Officer

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Date

11 December 2018