

AIRCRAFT CRASH NEAR MERTON

It was a hot summers day on Friday 27th August 1971. When a double bang was heard in the sky above Merton. This was the sound of a pilot ejecting from his fighter jet. The Hawker Hunter Mk.6 was on a regular training flight from it's base at RAF Chivenor near Barnstaple. The pilots parachute opened and the ejector seat fell away from the pilot and landed in Church meadow. The aircraft by now had crashed in a field near a stream a couple of hundred yards from Moorhill Farm.

The pilot seemed at first to be drifting towards Lower Lodge but then drifted back in the direction of the village. He had to lift his legs up to avoid hitting the roof of Bowden Park Cottage, who at the time was rented by Mr Henry Gooch and his family. He then just managed to clear the roof of Myrtle Cottage and landed in the vegetable garden of the occupier Mr A.J.Luxton. Mr Luxton was actually in the garden and the silk parachute landed on top of him, which surely must have frightened the pensioner.

By now Merlin Weeks, Paul Jennings, Mr J.W.C.Hunt, and Henry Gooch were on hand to help the pilot who had suffered back injuries from the ejection, took him out of the garden and laid him on the grass bank in the shade of the monkey puzzle tree, outside the house of Mr J.Cox. All the pilot kept asking was where did the aircraft crash?. This he did in a strong Irish accent. Of course at the time no one there could tell him as they did not know themselves until later.

It seemed only minutes before the sound of a Helicopter circled Merton. It was a Westland Whirlwind search and rescue helicopter from Chivenor. The small crowd which had now gathered around the pilot made meanings to the helicopter as to where the pilot was. The bright yellow Whirlwind found the best and closest place to land was in the field directly above Trefusis Terrace. The winchman from the helicopter came to where the pilot was and helped him to his feet. Both the winchman and with help from the locals took the pilot to the helicopter. With a signal for people to move back the helicopter reved its engine and took off. It did not head straight to Chivenor or Barnstaple hospital but in the direction of where the aircraft had crashed. This was surely to satisfy the pilot to make sure no-one was hurt where it crashed.

Merlin Weeks and Paul Jennings then got on their bicycles and headed in the direction of Dunsbear where they thought the aircraft might have come down. Looking across a couple of fields they could see a lot of activity with a six-wheeled fire engine. At Dunsbear Halt, Torrington Fire Engine was parked, and Hatherliegh appliance had just arrived.

Crossing the field they met up with Micheal Jennings, Clive Weeks, (who had been fishing in ponds in the nearby Clayworks), Brian Stacey and Douglas Partridge,(who had ran down from painting a house at Pretty Top, and a host of Firemen and local farmers. A huge crater by the stream was the result of the crashed aircraft. The talk was of how Chivenor Fire engine had reached the crash-site before Torrington and Hatherleigh engines, making fun at some of these known crew. But in reality Chivenors had a lot more notice.

Before the afternoon was out the sight was cordoned off by officials, who had arrived. As youngsters the next week or so of the summer holidays was spent there watching. An excavator reached down as far as he could, lowered itself down to that level, and then dug down again. Although a lot of debris was collected, the main bulk of the aircraft remains underground. But the locals did manage to get souvenirs. Recalling it was over a week before the sight was cleared of personel.

AIRCRAFT DETAILS.

TYPE: HAWKER HUNTER F Mk 6.

CODED: XG229

SQUADRON/UNIT: No 229 OPERATIONAL CONVERSION UNIT.

BASE: ROYAL AIR FORCE CHIVENOR.

PILOT: FLYING OFFICER PETER SCOFFHAM from County Down Northern Ireland.

REASON FOR CRASH: OFFICIAL REPORT STATED CONTROLS JAMMED WHILST IN A DIVE FROM 13,000 FEET.