

Discover East Boldre Airfield

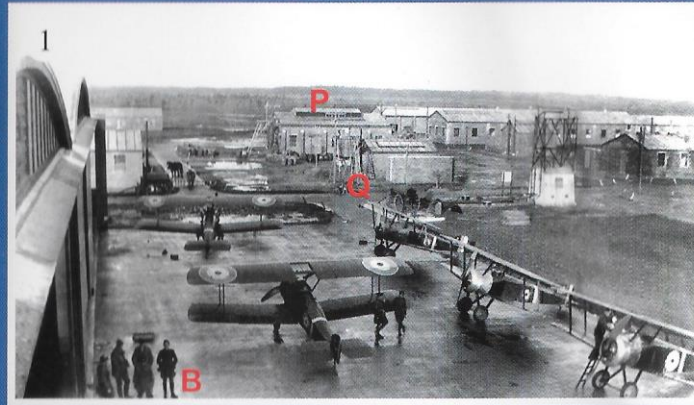
1910 – 1920

A two mile walk through the ruins
of RFC/RAF East Boldre

By Kind Permission of East Boldre Village Hall

1910 - 1920

A two mile (three km) walk through the ruins of
RFC/RAF Beaulieu

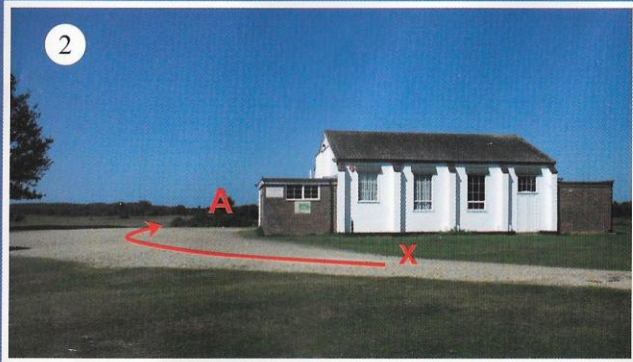


Photograph by Brian Tomlinson, circa late 1918-1919

In 1910, East Boldre became home to the New Forest School of Aviation. It was the second in the UK and the fifth worldwide. In 1915 the site was taken over by the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) as a training school for pilots. It was known as RFC Beaulieu. By 1918 it was an extensive military airfield but by the end of 1920 everything had been removed, the concrete foundations were covered over and the site was returned to pasture. The only building to survive was the Officers' Mess which is now East Boldre Village Hall. Over time the soil has eroded and many of the concrete foundations are now exposed.

The circular walk starts at East Boldre Village Hall and takes you through the Training Station to Squadron Site, then on to the BEAULIEU letters. It is an easy walk, mostly on wide, flat paths but the route follows a narrow horse trail through knee-high heather for about two-hundred metres. After prolonged rain the area around the BEAULIEU letters can become waterlogged.





Start at the village hall car park (photograph 2, point X). Before you set off, take a moment to look at the National Park information panel fixed to the village hall.

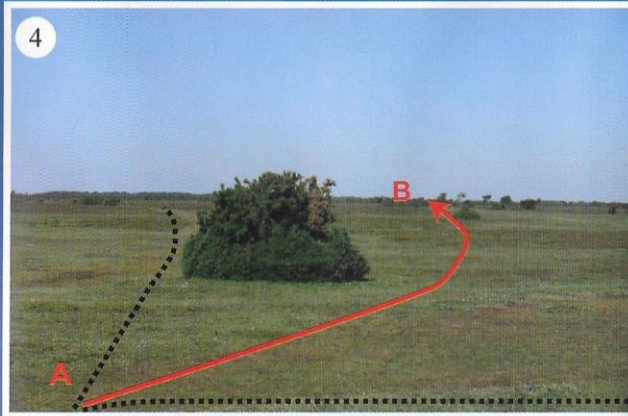
Head west, away from the road, from point X to point A, through what was the Training Station (photo 3). Notice the steel edging of the old road on the left of the path. On the right, many of the concrete foundations are overgrown.



Photograph Courtesy of the Trustees of the Royal Air Force Museum

When the gorse bushes thin out and you see open heath ahead, you are at point A on photograph 4. You will see Sway Tower on the horizon. You should never be walking directly towards the tower. Instead, follow the path that heads to the right of Sway Tower. This path will cross the airfield and gradually converge with the B3054 Lymington Road, then take you directly to point B. There were no runways, just wide, flat, open fields.

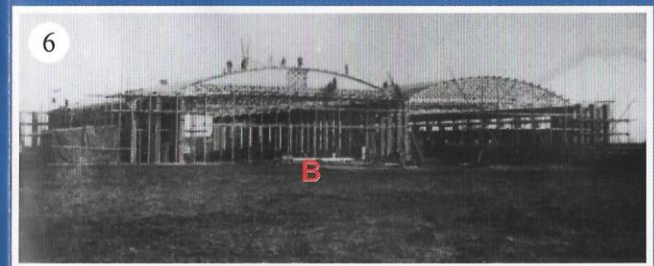
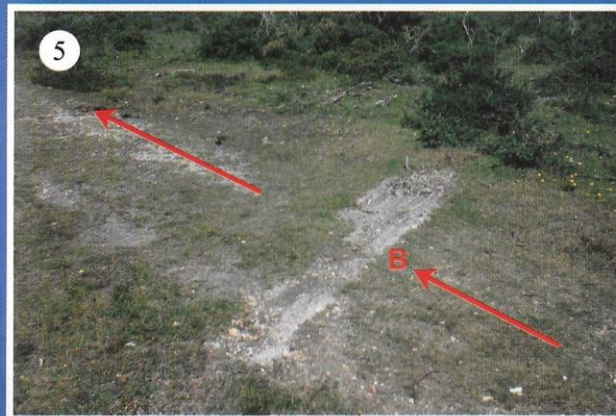
Half-way to Squadron Site, notice the remains of a small mound on the left. This was used as a target for machine gun training from stationary aircraft. After this, pilots shot at floating targets in the Solent and on Hatchet Pond.



You have reached point B when you find a line of concrete across the path (see photo 5) which extends some distance both sides of the path. You are standing at the doors of one of four large truss hangars, built as two double hangars. This is the same place as the five airmen in photo 1 were standing a century ago.

Most of the ruins are to the right (north) of the path. You can explore these after visiting the small arms firing range at point C.

Photograph 6 gives you an idea of the size of these hangars. You can judge for yourself by walking the length of the foundation. The route will take you through the hangar to the foundation of the back wall. You might want to count your paces.

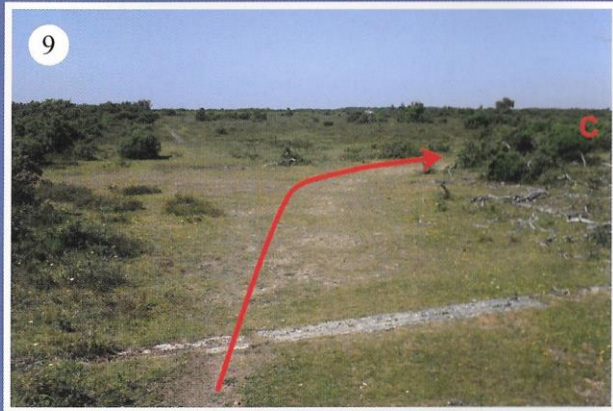


Photographs 6 and 7 show one of the double truss hangars, also known as Belfast Truss Hangars, under construction. The photos are dated 1 February 1918. The men standing on the roof gives some sense of scale.

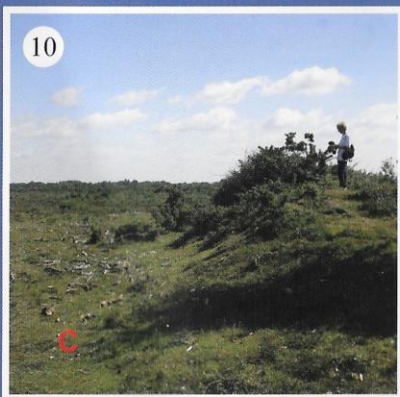
The Belfast Truss structure was first used in the mid 19th century as a means of providing a large, open working space, free from supporting pillars, using easily obtained materials. The trusses in this hangar were probably constructed from 6-inch by 1-inch planks. The design was refined and widely used by McTear & Co of Dublin up to 1905 and continued by others including D. Anderson & Co of Belfast.



Labourers were brought in from far and wide. Many were from China. In this photo they are laying power cables.

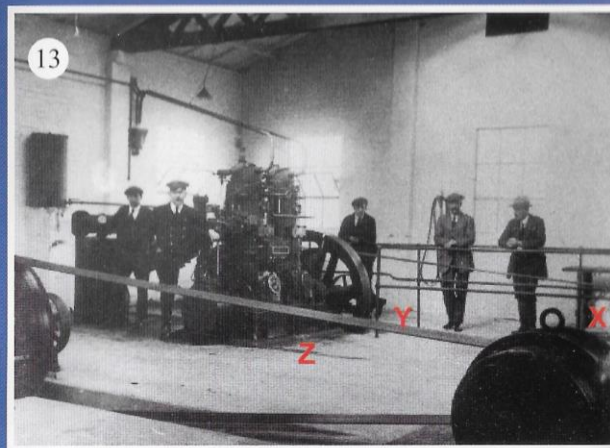
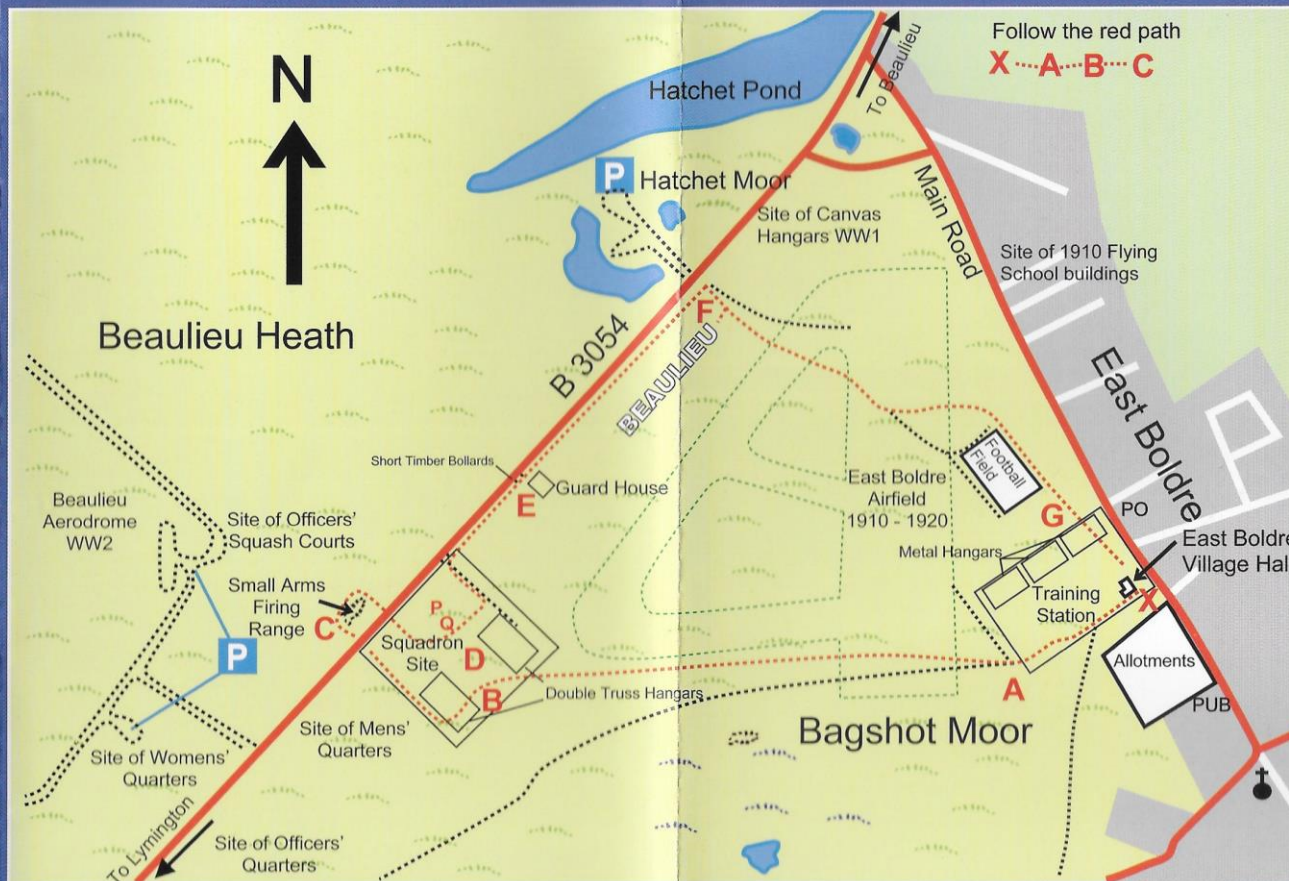


Walk through the hangar until you meet the line of concrete which formed the foundation of its back wall. Shortly after this the path bends to the right, towards the road. Cross the road. SUPERVISE CHILDREN. CROSS IN SMALL GROUPS.



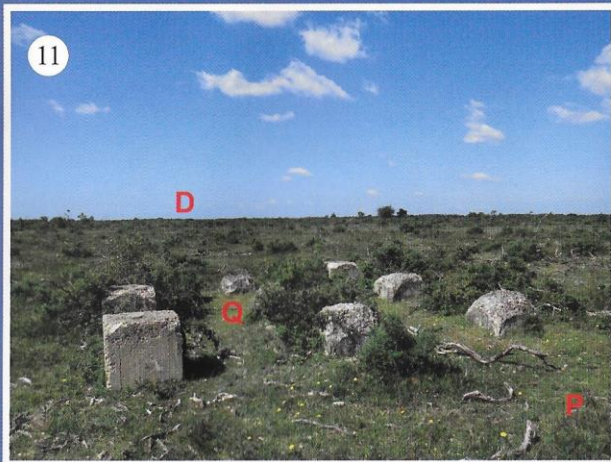
Continue a few yards to point C where you will see a mound of earth to the right of the path. This was the small arms firing range. The officers' squash courts were on the flat area to the north of the mound (away from the road). Note that small arms were fired towards Squadron Site.

Circle around the mound and cross the road again. The ruins of Squadron Site (B) are directly in front of you. The most prominent feature is the concrete supports for the raised fuel tank for the power house (photograph 11, C). You can also see the concrete bases on which the engines and generators stood (P, which is shown in more detail in photograph 14).



the buildings show just the outline suggesting they had suspended wooden floors. One foundation, however, has a solid concrete base with some timbers set into the concrete. Was this a stand for a machine or is it a cover or trap-door?

When you have finished exploring Squadron Site, make your way towards the road and follow it east towards the BEAULIEU letters (photograph 16). On the way you will find the faint outline of the Guard House (E) where miscreants might wake up with a bad hangover. To find it, look out for two short wooden bollards next to the road, which prevent vehicles from entering the forest, and a short line of bricks near the edge of the road.



Supports (G) for the power house's raised fuel tank.



The power house, circa 1918, can be seen in photograph 12 which was taken from the road. The raised fuel tank is behind the power house. A double truss hangar can be seen behind the power house. The hangar you walked through is not shown in this photograph.

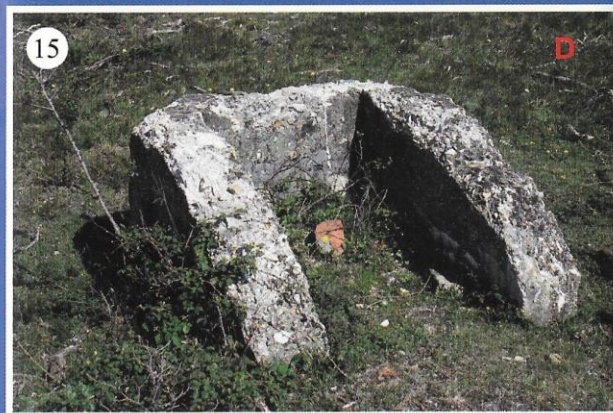
Photograph 13 shows the interior of the power house. It was taken in 1918 on the day it was first switched on. You can see one of the two engines (Z) and the large flywheel (Y) which rotated below ground level. Flexible drive belts connected the engines to the two generators (X).

The concrete mounts for the engines and generators can still be seen on the ground. Photograph 14 shows the position of one of these. The engine and the flywheel support stood on

the points marked Z. The pit in which the flywheel spun (Y) has long since filled with soil. The generator stood on the concrete block marked X. The foundations for the other engine and generator can be seen to the right of these but are not shown in this photograph.



What is the structure in photo 15? There are two of them and they might have housed a blacksmith's furnace or a stove.



There are many interesting relics in Squadron Site including the outline of sheds, workshops and dormitories, and you can find the outline of pits used by mechanics to work underneath vehicles. There is one unusual foundation to discover. Most of

Continue following the road and turn right at point F which is directly opposite Hatchet Moor car park. There are two trails. Follow the narrow trail which bears slightly right through the heather. After a hundred yards turn right towards an open area. You will not see the letters until you are almost on top of them.

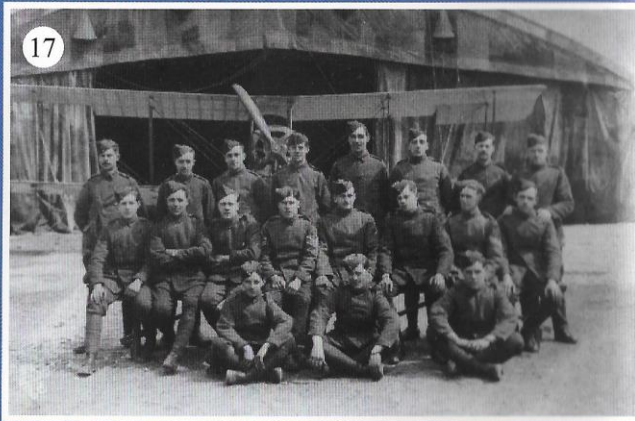


Photograph by Glenn Jones

The BEAULIEU letters are approximately 4.5 metres (15 feet) high and the whole word spreads over 33.5 metres (110 feet). No documentation on the origin of the BEAULIEU letters has been found. This feature is unique to East Boldre as no other WW1 airfield in the UK has similar markings. It is assumed, therefore, they probably date back to the 1910 New Forest School of Aviation.

During 1910, races were held at East Boldre and maps showing the circuit they flew indicate that the turning point for the return leg of the race coincides with the position of the BEAULIEU letters. The aircraft that crossed the starting line, flew around the marker and back across the starting line in the shortest time was judged to be the winner.

During 1910, a wooden pylon was erected to mark the turning point. This was built without permission and, after just a few days, the Office of the Woods ordered the pylon to be removed. The BEAULIEU letters were probably an acceptable substitute to mark the turning point in the races. During these races both altitude and speed records were broken at East Boldre.



Photograph 17 shows a canvas Bessonneau hangar situated near the BEAULIEU letters. It was designed and manufactured by the French rope and canvas manufacturer Etablissements Bessonneau, headed by Julien Bessonneau (1842–1916). The hangar, then referred to as a Bessonneau tent, was adopted by the Royal Flying Corps to house aircraft in both Great Britain and on the Western Front.

From the BEAULIEU letters, rejoin the narrow trail and follow it towards the village hall which should be visible in the distance. At point G (photograph 18) opposite the village Post Office you will see the foundation of one of the three large metal hangars on the Training Station (photograph 3). There are many other foundations to explore here.



Photograph 19 shows a Bristol Fighter outside one of these metal hangars. The photo is dated 19 July 1917.



You might like to extend your walk by visiting the war graves in St. Paul's Churchyard (photo 20). Thirty-three young airmen and civilian flying instructors lost their lives in flying accidents while training at East Boldre. Nineteen of them are buried there; seven British, nine Canadians and three Americans.

For more information about the history of the East Boldre airfields visit www.eastboldre.org



East Boldre Village Hall is available for hire. It is an ideal venue for family functions, group activities and a base station for hiking clubs. For more information and booking details see www.eastboldre.org