

Hampden Plane Crash 1941

Metal detecting is not always about finding things from hundreds of years ago. As you will read in the events below, I recently found some finds that revealed a harrowing story.

The Full Story

Behind my house are two fields I have been lucky enough to gain permission to metal detect on. They were wheat in the summer and left as stubble until November. I have never been a fan of detecting on stubble, so had stayed well clear until they were disced.

On a cold and breezy day in mid November, I set out on my first outing in the first of the two fields. Several sherds of pottery (Roman and Medieval) and worked flint were collected from the surface. The only two notable finds below the surface being a Roman AE follis of Constantine depicting 2 soldiers/2 standards dating about 330AD and a medieval casket mount dating approx 1350-1450AD.

A week later I was back and decided to try my luck on the other field. Again I found lots of worked neolithic flint and lots of oyster shell fragments possibly from the Romans or medieval times.

As I climbed the hillside towards the centre of the field my detector screamed out its first find worth digging. This turned out to be the bullet from a .308 shell. Twenty yards on, the same thing happened again - another bullet. Not making too much of this I continued my path across the field. My next find was a .308 shell but after closer examination I realised there was still cordite (the propellant) sticking out and the primer was unfired. I have found live rounds before but when my next 5 or 6 finds were also unfired shells, alarm bells started to ring. The next finds turned out to be pieces of twisted aluminium, black bakelite with electrical components still attached and so on. Everything pointed towards the wreckage of a crashed aircraft. (Before I continue, its worth noting 2 finds not related to the plane, but found in the middle of the site. The first was a lead token dating from 1600-1700, and the second and far more impressive piece was the knob from a group V saxon cruciform brooch).

With the afternoon coming to an end, I returned to examine the finds in the comfort of my own home. In the next few days I started research into crashes over Branston. After cleaning up the shells, I had already narrowed it down to WWII as the date range printed on the bottom of them was 1939 - 1941. The first crash I was made aware of was 2 Lancasters that crashed head on in 1943, but this seemed too late given the dates on the bullets. By pure fortune I was discussing my finds with a colleague at work and it transpired that his brothers hobby was investigating plane crashes, and believe it or not, he had his own database of recorded events.

A couple of days later an email arrived with all recorded crash sites over/near Branston for WWII. This also included a fairly detailed map. It was evident that one matched the date on the shell cases and location almost perfectly. A Hampden 1 bomber from 44 squadron had crashed during September 1941.

Having made my Saxon find, I still wanted to work the area but I didn't conciously want to dig up more wreckage. I had got quite familiar with the signals my detector was giving out for wreckage and shells/bullets and with that in mind I set out one Sunday for another "sortie" on the field. Again more flint scatter but nothing significant. I skirted the main crash site along the sandy edge of the field and with only ½ hour of daylight left I started on a path towards home. After a few yards my detector rung out a signal of 35 on the ID scale. This was a bit higher than the shells and a bit lower than the alloy plane frame. With time short I decided not to dig and carried on for another 5 or 6 yards. Something stopped me and made

me go back, I cannot explain what, probably just curiosity, but I felt the necessity to dig around the signal. The find came out in the first spade full, a piece of shiny metal instantly recognisable as a watch bezel.

(See picture below)

What was also quite clear was a beautiful inscription on the back. My heart missed a beat when I made out the first line to be A A Watt, a name I recognised from the casualty list from the Hampden 1 bomber. This was to be my final dig of the day as curiosity got the better of me and I rushed home to check the details.

The watch was made of stainless steel and was therefore well preserved. The face and hands were missing as was the strap. Finely and beautifully engraved in the back was the following.

A A Watt
from
Salisbury Staff
1941
123563
2280

Indeed he was the pilot of the fated flight. Details as follows:

The Hampden 1 bomber was part of 44 squadron, who at that time, were based in Waddington. The aircraft took off from Waddington at 21.15, on the 7th September 1941, it was carrying a mine that was to be dropped in Kiel Bay, Germany - a mission known as "gardening". It crashed just 2 minutes later after failing to gain height. The mine and fuel tanks exploded on impact killing all 4 people on board. Details below

No	Surname	Rank	Service Number	Date of Death	Age	Regiment Service	Cemetery/Memorial Name
1	Watt, Archibald Allen	Sergeant	778354	07/09/41	26	RAF Volunteer Reserve	Waddington (St Michael) Churchyard
2	Newcombe, James Risdon	Sergeant	928443	07/09/41	21	RAF Volunteer Reserve	Dagenham (Chadwell Heath) Cemetery
3	Wimbush, Adrian Durrant	Sergeant	1164655	07/09/41	25	RAF Volunteer Reserve	Birmingham (Brandwood End) Cemetery
4	Cox, eddy Stewart	Sergeant	623823	07/09/41	Unknown	RAF	Waddington (St Michael) Churchyard

A A Watt was the pilot and the oldest known person on board the plane, quite some responsibility for a 26 year old, probably with very little training. Personal details are;

Name: Watt, archibald Allen

Initials: A A

Nationality: United Kingdom

Rank: Sergeant (Pilot)

Regiment/Service: Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve

Unit Text: 44 Sqdn.

Age: 26

Date of Death: 07/09/1941

Service Number: 778354

Additional Information: Son of Harold and Maud Watt, of Bulawayo, Southern Rhodesia.

Casualty Type: Commonwealth War Dead

Cemetery: Waddington (St. Michael) Church Yard

You will see his service number does not tie up with the numbers inscribed on the watch. There is a possibility that he may have transferred from the army to the RAF - this apparently happened frequently. He was in the RAF Volunteer Reserve, so the numbers may have been his original reserve number and unit.

I think this is the most likely explanation as the reserve squadrons had four numbers (2280). Salisbury could have been 2280 Volunteer Reserve Squadron base and also Watt's home town.

What of the watch? If I cannot trace any family (looking unlikely) the watch will go to an aviation Museum so the history of this flight and the memory of these courageous people, who gave their lives, can live on.

To close I would like to say a big thanks to Mike Warner for all the information he provided me. I am sure I would still be trying to trace the correct details even now were it not for him. Thanks also to all the WAG members for their interest and information given to me.