

Aylsham

Friendly Invasion Walking Tour



Visit Aylsham



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During WW2 more than 300,000 Americans settled into airbases scattered across East Anglia.

This 'Friendly Invasion' had the biggest impact on the landscape, culture, and people of East Anglia since the Norman Conquest.

This enjoyable and self-guided tour in our historic market town takes about 60 minutes, with many inviting shops,

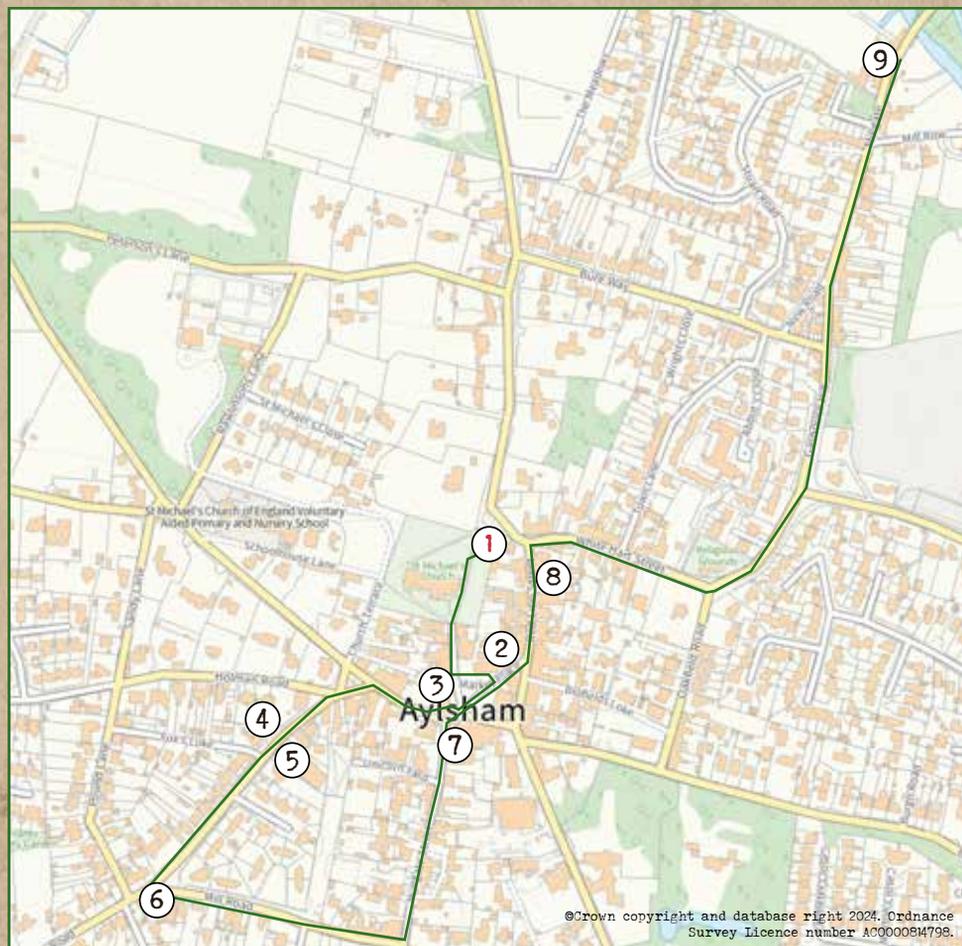
and places to eat and drink along the way. Start at 1 and follow the numbers, with each point described on the following pages.

Beyond Aylsham

There are two more locations where you can find evidence of the Friendly Invasion era.

- The RAF Oulton Museum at Blickling
- RAF Oulton Airfield site

You can reach these by car or bicycle, with more information and a map towards the end of this leaflet.



- ① Aylsham Heritage Centre & War Memorial
- ② Town Hall
- ③ The Black Boys
- ④ County Cinema
- ⑤ The Drill Hall
- ⑥ British Restaurant
- ⑦ The Library
- ⑧ Bonds Fish and Chip Shop (still in business!)
- ⑨ The Anchor, Millgate (private home)

Photos courtesy of RAF Oulton Museum and Aylsham Heritage Museum.

Welcome to Aylsham

Aylsham is a vibrant market town and was first established in Anglo-Saxon times. The River Bure was the main form of transport for centuries, until the railways arrived in the 1800s, when the town had two stations.

During WW2, thirteen RAF Stations were within 15 miles of Aylsham and for two years until 1945, thousands of servicemen and women from the USA and the Commonwealth and their British counterparts, would visit Aylsham during their off-duty hours.

START

We recommend you start in the Aylsham Heritage Centre (in the Churchyard) or in the Market Place.

1. Aylsham Heritage Centre

In this small, but perfectly formed, museum in the former Parish Rooms next to the war memorial, you will find rich information on Aylsham's history to help you get a feel for the town to understand the impact of the scale of the invasion and what it was like for some 2,500 locals to suddenly experience the 'invasion' of up to 2,500 personnel from RAF Oulton, let alone those from further afield.

Open Mar to Nov: Mon 10.30 - 1pm; Tues to Fri 10.30 - 3.30; First Sat of the month 10.30 - 1pm. www.aylshamheritage.com

WALK>> with the church in front of you, walk to the left through the churchyard, to reach the heart of Aylsham with the Town Hall in the Market Place.

2. The Town Hall and Market Place

This is the busy heart of Aylsham, which has always been a place for people to meet and trade, and mark major events. Ursula Warren remembers, "Red Cross dances, held in the Town Hall, were much more fun. The band sat on the platform blaring out 'In the Mood' and, more sentimentally, with 'We'll Meet Again'. These dances were very popular as, during the war, Aylsham was full of airmen stationed at Oulton, and soldiers from the Welsh Regiment from the Drill Hall.



The St Faiths & Aylsham Wings for Victory Week was in May 1943 and included A Grand Dance in the Town Hall with Music by Aylsham Rhythm Makers Dance Orchestra. Civilians were charged more than forces personnel, to come in.

WALK>> turn around and you will see the Black Boys Inn.

War was never far away 4th May 1942 Pilot Officer Bob Wright was killed when his Westland Whirlwind fighter broke up in mid-air and crashed at Abbots Hall Farm.

3. The Black Boys Inn

This public house opened in 1538 and hosted Horatio Nelson in 1792 amongst other famous guests. It has been a major focal point in the town for meetings, sales, dances and celebrations for centuries.

During World War II, it was popular with servicemen, however shortages of beer towards the end of the war, meant it would often close for a few days at a time.

When VE Day was declared in 1945, the Black Boys opened its doors and the residents and servicemen celebrated in the Market Place with dancing through the front to the back of the building and out again.

At the heart of celebrations the Proclamation of Peace after the Napoleonic Wars, a ball was held in its Assembly Room, for 200 Aylsham residents.



WALK>> past the inn along Penfold Street on the left hand side of the inn towards the Market Cross, and turn left onto Cawston Road to reach the original cinema building, next door to the Fire Station.

4. The County Cinema

The late John Pumphrey recalls "Around the early months of the war – a film entitled 'The Lion has Wings!' was shown at the cinema and I remember a particular scene. It was when an RAF officer put a question to another: 'Are we prepared? The reply came without the slightest hesitation: We were never better prepared!' Pumphrey added, with hindsight, in a film to boost morale there was no better reply – better still if the question had not been asked!"



"The height of teenage sophistication was to be escorted there by a pilot. My mother, of course, took me and brought me home from the cinema and sat as chaperone through all the dances."
Ursula Warren

WALK>> turn around and you will see the Drill Hall on the opposite of the road to the County Cinema.

5. The Drill Hall

The Drill Hall has been used since the early 1900s, including WW2, by local army units and was the site of events and parties.



WALK>> carry on along Cawston Road and turn left into Mill Road and the old chapel that used to be the British Restaurant is on the other side of the road opposite the Friendship Hall.



6. British Restaurant

The chapel on the corner of Mill Road was the British Restaurant, which helped feed families which had run out of ration coupons. These were set up by the Ministry of Food and run by local committees on a non-profit making basis.

Winston Churchill chose the name British Restaurants (an improvement on Community Feeding Centres!). Families could expect a hot and nutritious meal set at 9d or less, a very low price. It often included meat, potatoes and vegetables as part of a three-course meal. Potatoes were used as a substitute for bread.

By the 25 November 1942, 2,651 main meals had been served, on average 127 per day. The British Restaurant closed in March 1945. Today it is a Masonic Hall.

WALK>> carry on along Mill Road until it turns to the right then turn left along Hungate Street and the library is on the left shortly before the Market Place.



7. The Library

The library contains information on the 8th Air Force in East Anglia.

WALK>> across the Market Place past the Town Hall on your left and into Red Lion Street. Bonds Fish & Chip Shop is part way down on the right.

8. Bonds Fish and Chip shop

Known as Granville Bond in the 1940s this fish and chip shop had a very good 'war'. Throughout the time that the army and air force were stationed here, many billeted with families in the town, the shop was frying every day, often until 11 at night.

Fights often broke out between army and air force personnel, sometimes in the shop itself, then spilling out into the street.



L.A.C.W. Hazel Southgate remembers:
"If we had to go into Aylsham for any reason, we were always asked to bring back fish and chips ... Officially we were not supposed to do this. One time I had loaded up with parcels of fish and chips under the seat of the van when some fairly senior officer asked me for a lift ... I thought here we go, put the window down and hoped for the best. The officer said 'Isn't there a terrible smell of fish and chips in this town. I don't know how people can put up with it'. I agreed it was disgusting and headed for camp with all speed. There was no further comment."

WALK or DRIVE>> It's a 10 - 15 minute walk to the building which was once the Anchor by Bure Bridge on Millgate.

9. The Anchor Millgate

Canadian pilot, Murray Peden, above, enlisted in the Royal Canadian Airforce in 1941 and was posted to Oulton between May 1944 and June 1945, flying operations throughout when Allies were pushing across Europe towards Berlin.

Peden chanced upon the Anchor on his second day at Oulton. The inn soon became his crew's second 'headquarters'. Ena Spink was in charge who, to Peden's delight, usually had a good supply of fine bottled beer, such as Steward & Patteson's Light Ale, and a stack of Bing Crosby records.

The former inn is now known as Bridge House and is a private dwelling.

Peden and his friends were warmly welcomed by locals and they said they felt more a part of the community than in any other of their postings. Locals were keen to strike up conversations and soon, they were all on first name terms, playing darts. The crew were invited to local homes and, in return, locals were invited to parties at the mess.

WALK>> back to the top of Red Lion Street where this walking tour ends. Don't miss the lovely shops and eateries on Red Lion Street.



Beyond Aylsham

There are two more locations which you can reach by car or bicycle.

The RAF Oulton Museum
It's worth spending time here to discover the story of the airfield and more. It's also an opportunity to visit Blickling Hall and Estate, a magnificent National Trust property. Entry to the museum is free. Car parking charges only apply for non National Trust members.

RAF Oulton Airfield
About 10 minutes' drive on from Blickling is a quiet spot on a country lane, surrounded by working farmland. There are a few signs left that this was once a hectic WWII airfield.



RAF Oulton Museum at the Blickling Estate

This National Trust estate has significant historic connections with the USA and the Friendly Invasion. The last Lord Lothian was ambassador to the US (1939-40) and RAF personnel were billeted in the Hall and on the estate, transforming life for estate staff.

Blickling Hall and the Buckinghamshire Arms [NR11 6NF] are located on the Blickling Road, signposted off the A150.



Philip Kerr, 11th Marquess
of Lothian

L.A.C.W. Joyce Palmer: "The Bucks was a regular meeting place for WAAFs, airmen and aircrew and, as I played the piano fairly well, was never short of a pint or two of beer".



Blickling Hall was requisitioned for the RAF in 1940 to provide additional accommodation for those who could not be billeted at RAF Oulton.

Two RAF Airmen and two WAAF sites were created around the periphery of Blickling Hall. Officers were billeted in the Hall and some Non-Commissioned Officers were billeted in the east wing of the Hall (now the RAF Oulton Museum). There was a NAAFI and a pub ('The Bucks'). Station transport was on hand to carry air and ground crew two miles to RAF Oulton.

L.A.W.C. Kathryn Reid: "We were invited to an American celebration dance [at the Samson & Hercules] in Norwich. We had transport there and on arrival each given a rose which made us feel very feminine surprise, surprise, the band was Glen Miller's making the evening wonderful and unforgettable."

L.A.C.W. Hazel Southgate recalls: "There were dances on camp in the Sergeant's Mess and in dance Halls in Aylsham and Fakenham. With all the different serving men, British, Yanks, Canadians, Polish etc., these jolly dances didn't always end peacefully - especially when the 8th Army soldiers came to the area to wait for D-Day".

RAF Oulton Airfield

RAF Oulton opened as a grass airfield in June 1940 for several squadrons of 2 Group flying medium-sized bombers attacking enemy factories, ports and shipping.

By May 1944 RAF Oulton had upgraded to concrete runways at which point it was taken over by RAF 100 (Bomber Support) Group, whose primary role was to carry out top secret enemy radio and radar countermeasures.

At the same time the Americans of the 1699 Conversion Unit (tasked to train the RAF to fly and maintain American aircraft) and 803rd Bomb Squadron moved into RAF Oulton with 214 Squadron from RAF Sculthorpe.

RAF Oulton was unique in that RAF 214 Squadron crewed American B-17 Fortresses and (slightly later) RAF 223 Squadron crewed B-24 Liberators.

May 1944 was when the Friendly Invasion became an experience for locals in Aylsham.

"They came with the Fortresses, a great bunch of guys, especially when they brought cigs, chocs, doughnuts and Jive! Pity they stayed only a few months, leaving a small number behind to help with the maintenance of the aircraft, Still, it had been nice seeing them".
L.A.C.W. Vi Lancashire



"It [must] be said ... the Americans were 'trigger happy' ... in the early days ... the American billets were on a rise across the road from British Aircrew billets [at RAF Oulton] and one night, after some celebrations, they were firing live ammunition which was ricocheting off British Nissen huts – much to the indignation of our aircrews!"
L.A.C.W. Hazel Southgate



Lieutenant Colonel Clayton A. Scott, Commanding Officer 803rd Bomb Squadron with Group Captain G. C. Dickens, Station Commander, pictured together at RAF Oulton.



Captain George E. Paris, Operations Officer, 2nd in command, 803rd Bomb Squadron.

Victory in Europe

Tuesday, 8 May 1945 saw the end of war in Europe and this was marked by a military parade in the Market Place.

But the war was not over in the Far East and some locals remained as POWs of the Japanese.

Suddenly, USAAF personnel were going home, some to prepare for war against Japan.

The Friendly Invasion came to an end, with the rapid departure of thousands of personnel, leaving the town a quieter place, full of memories.

WW2 historic places to visit nearby

Other WW2 historic places to visit nearby City of Norwich Aviation Museum on part of what was RAF Horsham St Faith (8th Air Force Station123).

www.cnam.org.uk

RAF Coltishall Heritage Centre - in the old Guardroom
www.rafcoltishallheritagecentre.co.uk/



Aylsham ARP Wardens.



Aylsham Observer corps.



Building the pill box in the Market Place.

In memory

To the many service personnel who gave their lives during World War Two.

With thanks

This Aylsham Friendly Invasion Walking Tour was compiled and written with the help of the volunteers involved in the following organisations.

Aylsham Heritage Centre
Aylsham Local History Society
Aylsham Town Archive
Blickling Estate, National Trust
RAF Oulton Museum at Blickling Estate

Source of quotes

- Action Stations Revisited, The Complete History of Britain's military airfields: No. 1 Eastern England by Michael J F Bowyer.
- A Thousand Shall Fall by Murray Peden DFC.
- A New History of Aylsham Public Houses edited by Maggie Vaughan-Lewis.

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