

A small corner of England:  
Landscape, Objects, Memory and Remembrance 1939 to 2013



*Soldiers from 101st Airborne Division Signal Company marching to board gliders at Ramsbury Airfield on the morning of 17 September 1944 (Operation Market Garden)*  
([www.6thcorpscombatengineers.com](http://www.6thcorpscombatengineers.com))

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## Introduction

Much has been written about the industrialised nature of 20th Century war and its impact on battlefield landscapes, on material culture and the minds and bodies of those who were there, and on the generations who have followed since. In contrast, relatively little has been recorded or is known about the effect that the same hostilities have had on other parallel yet distant landscapes, on objects and memories far removed from the front-line, on the quiet backwaters of England.

Using the lens provided by modern conflict archaeology and a case study focused on the lives of those who lived in the Wiltshire village of Ramsbury and the surrounding area during the Second World War, this essay will explore the effect of modern conflict on a small corner of rural England.

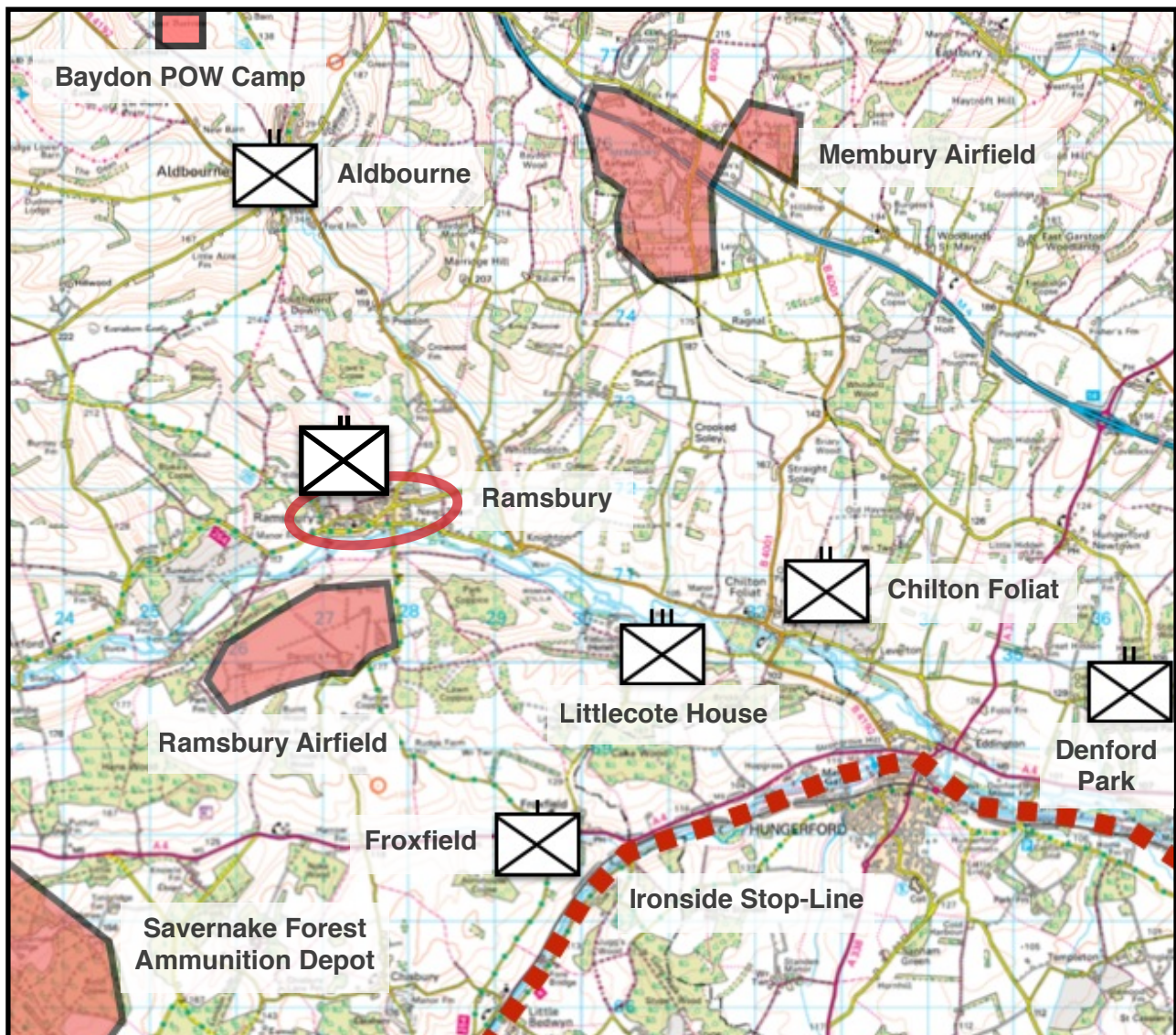
What, therefore, can the “multidisciplinary, anthropologically informed endeavour known as ‘Modern Conflict Archaeology’ ” (Saunders 2012: iix) tell us? Whilst Ramsbury’s landscape does not claim to have been ‘drenched in hot metal’ (Terraine 1996: 9), or profess to the dramatic legacy of First World War Flanders or Second World War Normandy, from the autumn of 1939 to the summer of 1945 the village was at the centre of another unique conflict landscape; a symbolic landscape which also stands as a testament to the industrial nature and scale of 20th Century warfare. This paper will substantiate the hypothesis that conflict archaeology “is not simply restricted to battlefields” (Saunders 2012: xi); and whilst subtler and of lesser magnitude, that ‘quiet’ conflict landscapes and objects also possess an innate and enduring ability to influence and change human behaviour (Pels 1998).

The paper centres on the evidence provided by Ramsbury's distinct landscape and by the objects and material artefacts which serve to illuminate the impact, then and now, of the Second World War on the area; each with an inherent ability to reveal "the world of their creators" (Saunders 2003a: 4; Taylor 2008: 297-320) and so "shape and transform the world" (Gardner 2008: 95).

## **A Village at War**

Ramsbury sits in the Kennet Valley roughly mid-way between Marlborough in the west, and Hungerford in the east. A close knit rural farming community, cut off in many respects from the bustle of 1930's British life, the village's population in 1939 stood at around 1,500. Some sixty five names are recorded on the village's war memorial to honour those who failed to return from the First World War; and the significance and implications of Prime Minister Chamberlain's announcement on 3 September 1939, that Britain was at war with Germany, would not have been lost on those old enough to remember 1918 (Day 2004: 7).

The declaration of war triggered a period of significant change for the people of Ramsbury. Over the coming months and years the local countryside would be transformed from a peaceful rural idyl into an armed camp (Figure 1). Faced initially by an influx of British soldiers to guard against an anticipated German invasion in 1940, the encampments and billets first occupied by the 42nd and 48th Infantry Divisions eventually passed, via a number of other military tenants, to the American troops of the 101st Airborne Division (Cover and Plate 1), who were based there from September 1943 until the autumn of 1944.



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Figure 1: Ramsbury and the surrounding area; showing key military sites, and the camps allocated to the US 101st Airborne Division from September 1943 to September 1944

The area quickly metamorphosed into a huge building site; focussed initially on the construction of anti-tank and pill box defences along the line of the Kennet and Avon Canal (part of the Ironside Stop-Line) (Plate 2), the effort switched in 1941 to airfield construction. Covering approximately 500 acres each, Membury and Ramsbury Airfields (Plate 3) were to become home from 1942 to the US Air Force. Alongside the 4,500 acre ammunition depot at Savernake Forest, both airfields were to play a vital role in the liberation of Europe (Day 2004, 2007 and 2011).





Plate 1: Littlecote House: home to the Regimental Headquarters of the US 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment, August 1943 to June 1944



Plate 2: Pill box overlooking the Kennet and Avon Canal (<http://www.geograph.org.uk>)

Rationing, the blackout, air-raid warnings, fear of invasion, conscription, the Home Guard, separation from loved-ones, American GIs, the sight of Italian prisoners of war working in the fields, two busy operational military airfields, and a fear of the unknown -

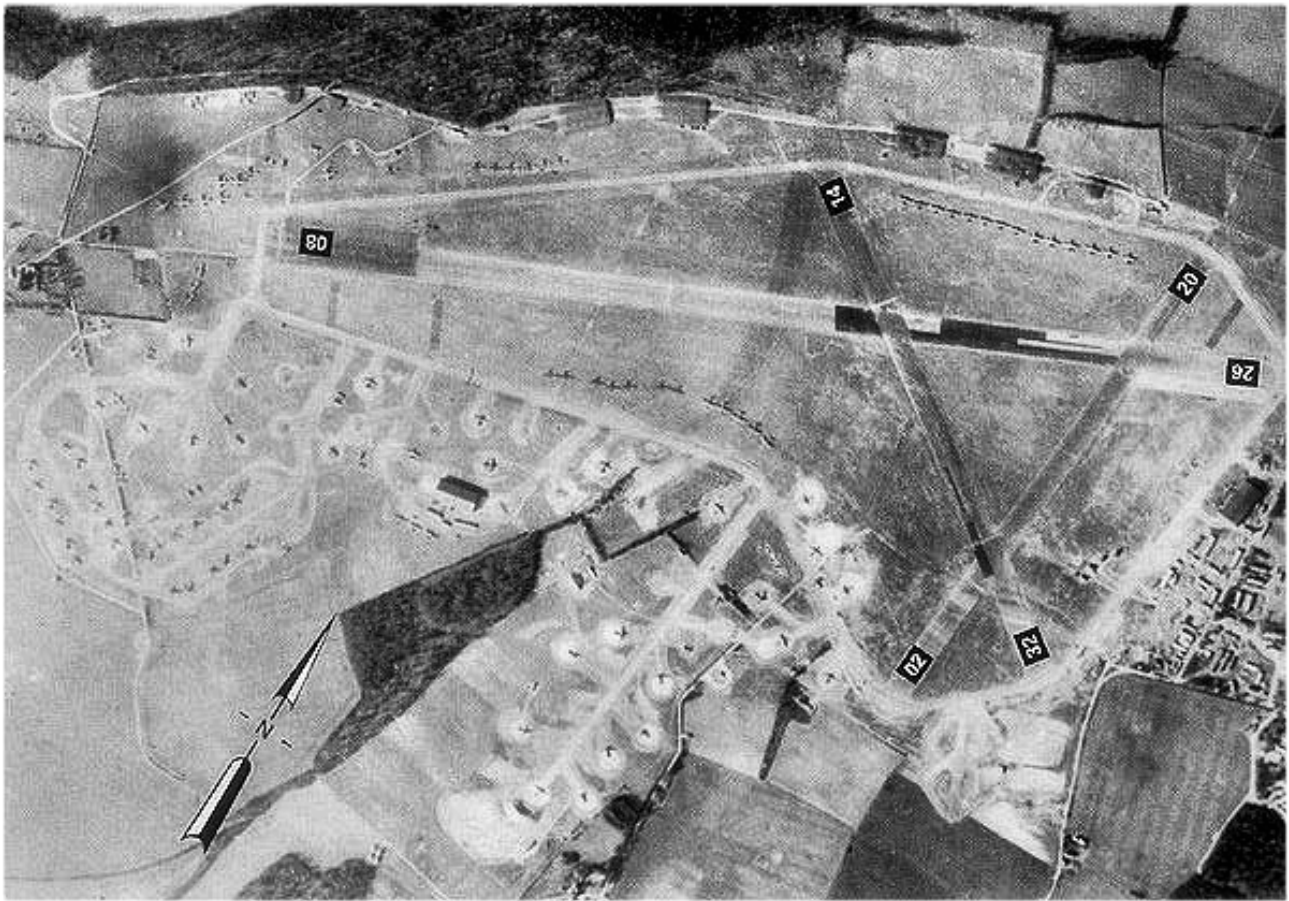


Plate 3: Aerial photograph of Ramsbury Airfield, May 1944 (<http://en.wikipedia.org>)

particularly during 1940, when Britain stood alone from Nazi occupied Europe - would all have had a significant impact on the senses of those who lived in Ramsbury and in the surrounding area.

### **A landscape of memory and meaning**

Ramsbury's historic landscape is littered with an abundance of archaeological remains: from the Iron Age hill fort which sits astride Membury Airfield's western periphery; to Ermin Way, the ancient Roman road linking *Glevum* (Gloucester) with *Calleve Atrebatum* (Silchester), which follows the route of the B4000 a few miles north of the village; to the 1940s stop-line defences lining the route of the Kennet and Avon Canal - all the material

remains of conflict, each set within a palimpsest of successive layers of memory and meaning, where “each generation inscribes its own impressions and removes some of the marks of earlier generations” (Greene 1995: 80).

Set against the long backdrop of history, landscapes embody change. To be fully appreciated, each vista needs to be viewed across a range of different yet complimentary levels. In a visual sense, a landscape is simply an area of land to be enjoyed and valued; in a conceptual sense, a landscape represents a “set of relationships between people and places which provide a context for everyday conduct”; a “framework for integrating many different forms of information and different aspects of human life” (Thomas 2012: 182). By viewing the significance and the manner in which landscapes change over time, we are better able to understand the past.

For those who live and lived there, and for those who visit, a landscape also engenders “a sense of place and belonging”; a physical setting and context for the sites, buildings, artefacts and monuments which remain and a tangible mechanism through which people connect with their past, to better understand their sense of “being” and of “being in the world” (Tilley 1994: 15). A multidisciplinary study of Ramsbury’s landscape, which has continued to evolve since 1939, reveals the complex interplay between landscape, material culture and symbology, and the implications for the lives of future generations; a palimpsest of physical, archaeological and anthropological representations which “further transform meaning” (Hirsch 1995: 22-23).



## Metamorphosis

Notwithstanding the passage of time, the area around Ramsbury is littered with evidence of its 1940s metamorphosis, and the landscape's continuing transformation.



Plate 4: RAF and USAAF Memorial,  
Membury Service Station (<http://www.sabre-roads.org.uk/>)

Motorists, breaking their journey at the M4's Membury Services, less than three miles from Ramsbury, may notice the memorial on the edge of the west-bound car park dedicated to the members of the RAF and USAAF who served at Membury Airfield between 1941 and 1947 (Plate 4); those travelling by barge-along the Kennet and Avon Canal, cannot fail to see the concrete pill boxes which mark their route; others, taking a vacation at Littlecote House, a large Elizabethan country house hotel some two miles west of the village, will leave knowing that they have slept under the same roof as the American



soldiers who parachuted into Normandy on the eve of D-Day (since immortalised by Steven Ambrose's book (Ambrose 1992) and by the *Band of Brothers* TV mini-series); elsewhere, families taking a Sunday afternoon stroll in Savernake Forest, to the west, will observe the remains of the bunkers and storage areas that mark the site of the former ammunition depot.

The more discerning traveller's attention will be drawn to other signs of 1940s conflict: a stable, home for 10 months from September 1943 to the men of the US 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment billeted in Aldbourne, since restored by the Kennet Valley War Trust; 1940s tree carvings (Plate 5); concrete roadways found in the woods to the south of Ramsbury; the memorabilia in the bar of the Blue Boar pub, Aldbourne (Plate 6); and the many plaques and memorials to British and American service personnel which date from the Second World War.



Plate 5: Tree carving by US serviceman Lester Birkey, 1944  
(<http://www.pillbox-study-group.org.uk>)

The land's metamorphosis continued after the war. Farmers were keen to return the fields to agricultural use, others wanted to develop the airfield sites and abandoned military

camps for commercial purposes or simply wished to re-plant and restore the woodland areas. Whilst there was no large scale redevelopment, there were some tensions between villagers, local and central government. Closed in 1946, by the mid-1960s Ramsbury Airfield's concrete runway had vanished under re-seeded fields and a poultry farm. Membury Airfield remains, but as a shadow of it's former self. Vacated by the military in 1947, a number of the airfield's aircraft hangars were retained by the Home Office to house Green Goddess fire engines until the 1960s when the airfield's technical accommodation was converted into an industrial park. Split by the M4 motorway in 1971, the southern half of the airfield lives on as a private airfield, and as a logistics hub for a national freight haulier. Elsewhere, the temporary barracks were torn down and the concrete pill boxes and gun emplacements, too costly to demolish, were left to return to nature.



Plate 6: 101st Airborne Division memorabilia in the bar of the Blue Boar pub, Aldbourne: a 'shrine' to the troops billeted there in 1943

A miserable time for many, in the immediate aftermath of the war memories centred on those loved ones who did not return, and on foreign battlefield landscapes. A number, following in their parents' footsteps, would have made the pilgrimage to Europe to pay their last respects at one of the many World War Two Commonwealth War Cemeteries. Whilst some recognition was given to the impact of the war on Britain's landscape and environment (Ucko and Layton 1999: 15), Ramsbury's contested landscape lay largely forgotten for almost 50 years.

D-Day's 50th Anniversary triggered a further change; stirring the memories of those who had lived through the war, and those further removed who felt connected to the momentous events of the early 1940s, or who simply wished to get a better sense of their being and their place in the world. The twenty years following 1994 were, as a consequence, marked by a series of anniversaries and reunions, by a growing demand for information, by a rise in the number of amateur history and archaeology groups, by new social media and Internet sites, and by reinvigorated acts of memory and of remembrance which continue to the present day. In the space of almost 70 years, the landscape had transformed from a period of intense military activity, through a time of regeneration and forgetfulness, to a rejuvenated era of memory and remembrance (Figure 2).

| Period       | Predominant Activity   |
|--------------|--|
| 1939-1946    | Intense military and civil defence activity; a period of large-scale construction; the landscape is transformed and subordinated to support the war effort                     |
| 1946-1994    | Post-war regeneration and reconstruction; some personal acts of remembrance in the immediate aftermath of the war; collective wartime experiences largely ignored or forgotten |
| 1994-present | Triggered by the 50th Anniversary of D-Day, a rejuvenated era of memory and remembrance  |

Figure 2: The metamorphosis of a landscape

## Objects and memory

The creation of human rather than natural action, artefacts possess the latent power to illuminate past lives through revealing an individual's "relationship to the objects that represent them" (Saunders 2004: 6). In so doing, these artefacts take on a 'social life' or agency of their own (Appadurai 1986), acquiring an intrinsic ability to "shape and transform the world" (Gardner 2008: 95); objects carried by soldiers or by those engaged in conflict possess a "unique significance" (Bagwell 2012: 46).

Unsurprisingly, given the intensity of 1940s military activity, the landscape in and around Ramsbury continues to give up artefacts dating from the Second World War. Recent discoveries (2012 to 2013) include: a box of live M1 carbine ammunition and two machine gun ammunition belts in a local garden shed; parachute clips (Plate 7), belt



Plate 7: Parachute clips found near Chilton Foliat in 2012



buckles and a bayonet handle grip in Chilton Foliat; a lettering stencil, excavated near Aldbourne; US hand grenade fragments found in a field; graffiti on a barn door; and a US jump boot heel, nailed to a farm building wall.

Each discovery is open to analysis, interpretation and reinterpretation by its finder; each has the potential to connect the new owner with their own sense of identity, their past and the landscape's heritage. Objects, designed initially to deliver or to enable the business of death and destruction, become cherished and valued; each, to a greater or lesser extent, also becomes an agent of change, building a unique social life and biography; each furnishing a better understanding of their new owner's sense of being and his or her place in the world.

Many discoveries find their way into domestic spaces as souvenirs or simple reminders of the past, others are given to museums to be displayed in context with other artefacts. Sergeant Gilbert Morton's helmet, which was discovered in the late 1960s, and again in the 1990s, provides an example of domestic use...

Sergeant Morton owes his life to his helmet (Plate 8). Parachuting with his comrades from the US 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment into Normandy on the night of 5 June 1944, he was challenged and fired on by a German soldier near Les Droueries Manor - the bullet struck his helmet. Sergeant Morton recalls "it stung so bad I thought I'd sustained a head wound. I was light headed for a few minutes but managed to pull myself together and got out fast" (Gardner and Day 2010: 136).

Extracted with his unit from France in mid-July 1944, Sergeant Morton gave his helmet as a souvenir to his English hosts, the Winchcombe family, who had provided his

billet in Ramsbury in the months running up to D-Day. The helmet languished, almost forgotten, in the Winchcombe's back garden for the next 24 years (where it was put to use as a flower pot), until it was rediscovered and rescued in 1968 by Roger Day, Mrs Winchcombe's teenage grandson. Roger cleaned and polished his new possession until he could make out the imprint of the German bullet, which nearly killed Gilbert Morton, and the helmet's recognition flashes (which were painted onto the sides of all US helmets to help soldiers identify each other in combat). Now on display in his own home, Roger



Plate 8: Sergeant Gilbert Morton's helmet

regularly uses the helmet as an aide when he talks to local children about the war. He says "the children's imagination is fired by Sergeant Morton's helmet. It gets them really interested in the war, and what it meant for the villagers and for the Americans billeted with families in Ramsbury, and what it was like to be in combat; for many, it's the highlight of my talk".

Sergeant Morton's helmet has, in effect, developed a social life of its own (Figure 3); and its ability to shape and transform the understanding of future generations is readily apparent. Once used in combat, it is now able to shed a powerful and unique light on the events of 1943 and 1944 - in a more profound and meaningful manner than any historical text. Its ability to influence and change human behaviour is however dependent on its connections with "other nodes in a network" (Knappett 2002: 101) - in this case the teachers and children in Ramsbury's school and, indirectly, their families and their friends.

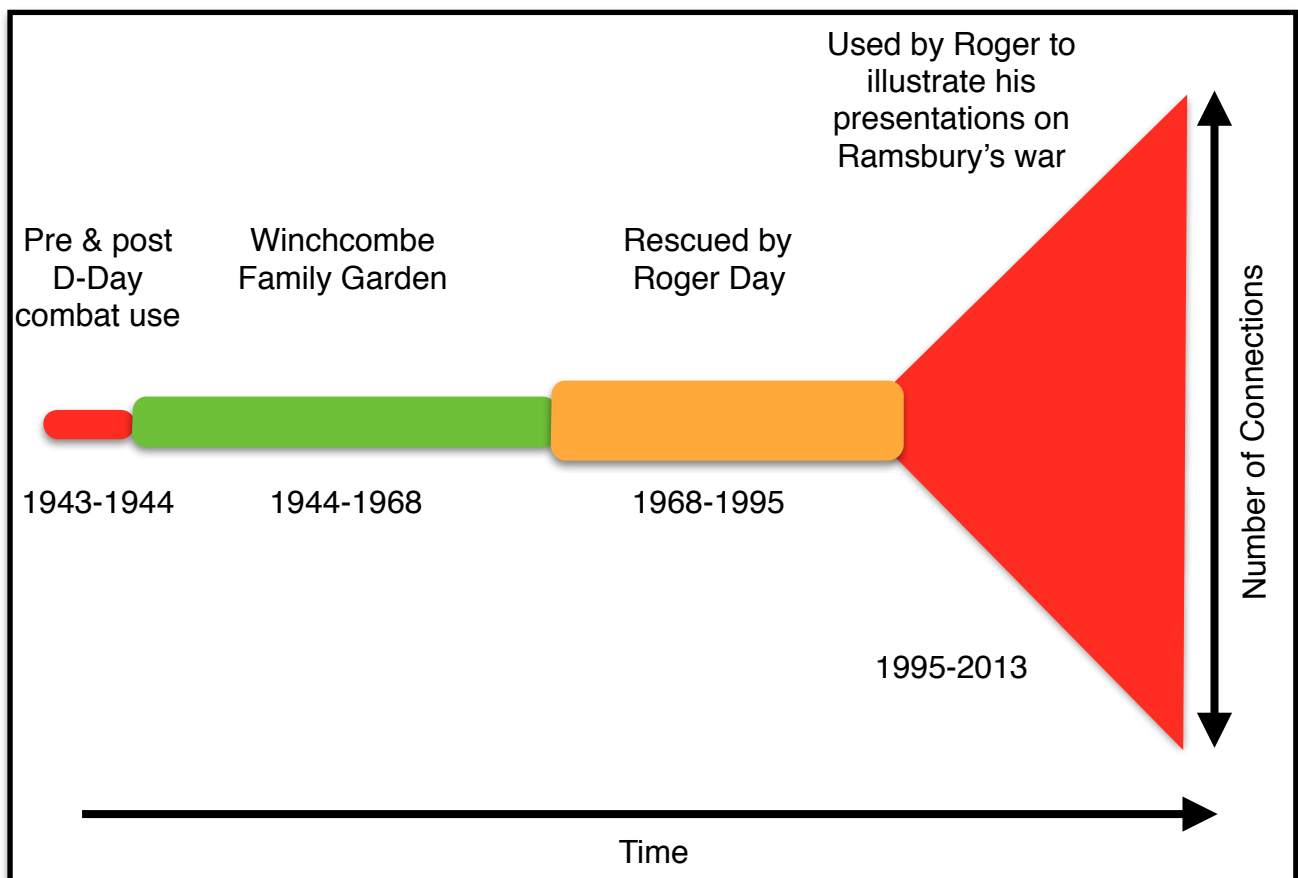


Figure 3: The 'social life' of Sergeant Gilbert Morton's helmet

Other objects have gravitated to buildings or sites within the landscape which played a significant role during the war; many of which can be found within the small museum at Littlecote House, near Ramsbury, which was requisitioned in 1939 for use as a military headquarters by a number of British, Canadian and American units. The work of

The Kennet Valley at War Trust, the museum (which sits within an evocative setting which has changed little since the war) aims to preserve the history of the area, and so act as a poignant reminder of wartime life for those both in and out of uniform.

A stable (Plates 9 and 10), used to billet British and subsequently American airborne troops in Aldbourne, also stands in the grounds of Littlecote House. Renovated in 2005, the building was moved to Littlecote as part of a larger project, which included the shipment a further six stables to America by the RAF to be displayed in the Currahee Military Museum - a memorial to the US airborne soldiers who trained at Camp Toccoa before being shipped to England in 1943.



Plates 9 and 10:  
The Aldbourne Stable  
1944 and 2013  
(courtesy of The Kennet  
Valley at War Trust)



Other, less formal, collections of Second World War memorabilia can be found in local pubs (Plate 6), a number of which are regularly visited by US and British tourists with a personal connection to the area or with those who served there during the war. In this



sense, the area's 'heritage' isn't the sole preserve of the past, nor is it simply a collection of material objects; rather, it is a physical "process of engagement, an act of communication and an act of making meaning for the present" (Smith 2006: 1); a process typified by Sergeant Morton's helmet, by Littlecote House and its museum, and by the many ad hoc collections of memorabilia which can be readily found in the area today.

## **Memory and remembrance**

The nature of Ramsbury's physical and symbolic role as a landscape of memory and remembrance, embodied through the material objects and the places described above, continues to evolve.

'Memory', one's ability to recall past experience, helps to define and shape us as human beings whilst binding us over time to others, giving both the individual and the group a unique sense of identity. Shared via a complex web of social networks, our memories of people, places and events continually evolve to form a group's collective bank of memories, many of which may not have been personally experienced (Schuman & Scott: 1989).

In contrast, 'remembrance' focuses on the specific act of commemorating or honouring others. Frequently set within a framework of rituals distinct to the individual, the group or the place, "remembrance [is] built into the fabric of everyday worlds" (Fentress and Wickham 1992; Meinig 1979) rather than "limited to public rituals". Indeed, there are "as many forms of remembrance as there are rememberers" (Marshall 2004: 38-42), each set within "a place where it can be told and retold" (Winter 1999: 40). For some, the act of remembrance will be triggered by a sight or a sound, for others by a smell, a taste or even

touch (Marshall 2004: 38-42); some may also need the added focus provided by a virtual or a real event, or the opportunity to visit a place or memorial, or simply to retrace their own foot steps.

Triggered by D-Day's 50th Anniversary, the area surrounding Ramsbury has evolved as a landscape of memory and remembrance for a diminishing group of veterans and their immediate families, a growing number of local residents (some of whom are amateur historians or World War Two enthusiasts) and a rising number of re-enactment groups and tourists. Sharing many of the traits displayed by those drawn to Normandy's beaches, their relationship with the landscape is increasingly symbolic, bolstering their memories of the past captured within family diaries or letters, in history books or through Hollywood's flamboyant lens. Whilst the overall numbers are small, examples of the increasing volume of visitors and pilgrims to the area since 1994 include US airborne veteran George Rosie, who returned to Ramsbury in 1994; former American Sergeant



Plate 11: Charles Asay with his daughter, 2003  
([www.ramsburyatwar.com](http://www.ramsburyatwar.com))



Plate 12: Ira Grube opens the Littlecote Museum, 2005  
([www.ramsburyatwar.com](http://www.ramsburyatwar.com))

Charles Asay, once billeted outside Chilton Foliat, who made a sentimental return to the area with his daughter in 2003 (Plate 11); member of the Home Guard, George Cady, who recently returned to the site of German bombing in Savernake Forest; US paratrooper Ira Grube, who opened the Littlecote House Museum in 2005 (Plate 12); and the members of the First Allied Airborne Association, a British re-enactment group formed in 1994, who regularly visit Ramsbury (Plate 13).



Plate 13: A re-enactment group preparing for 'battle'  
([www.kennetvalleyatwar.co.uk](http://www.kennetvalleyatwar.co.uk))

Drawn to the area by the landscape, its connection with the past, and 'a sense of involvement and history' (Ryan 2007: 209), interest in Ramsbury's status as a "battleless' battlefield" (Prideaux 2007: 20-21) has triggered a recent increase in the number of local Second World War monuments and memorials - each a marker of the preparations for war which took place there during the early 1940s; each stimulating and attracting the growing



interest of local residents and visitors; each connecting the area with its unique military heritage and with physical acts of remembrance. Examples include the five new memorials opened in Ramsbury since 1978 (within the Church and in the Memorial Hall, in the car park of the Red Lion public house, and on the village green); a memorial plaque in Littlecote House library marking the 60th anniversary of Operation Market Garden, unveiled in 2004 by the daughter of the 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment's 1944 commanding officer; and a range of other plaques and monuments in erstwhile billets, at aircraft crash sites and in former training areas (Plate 14).

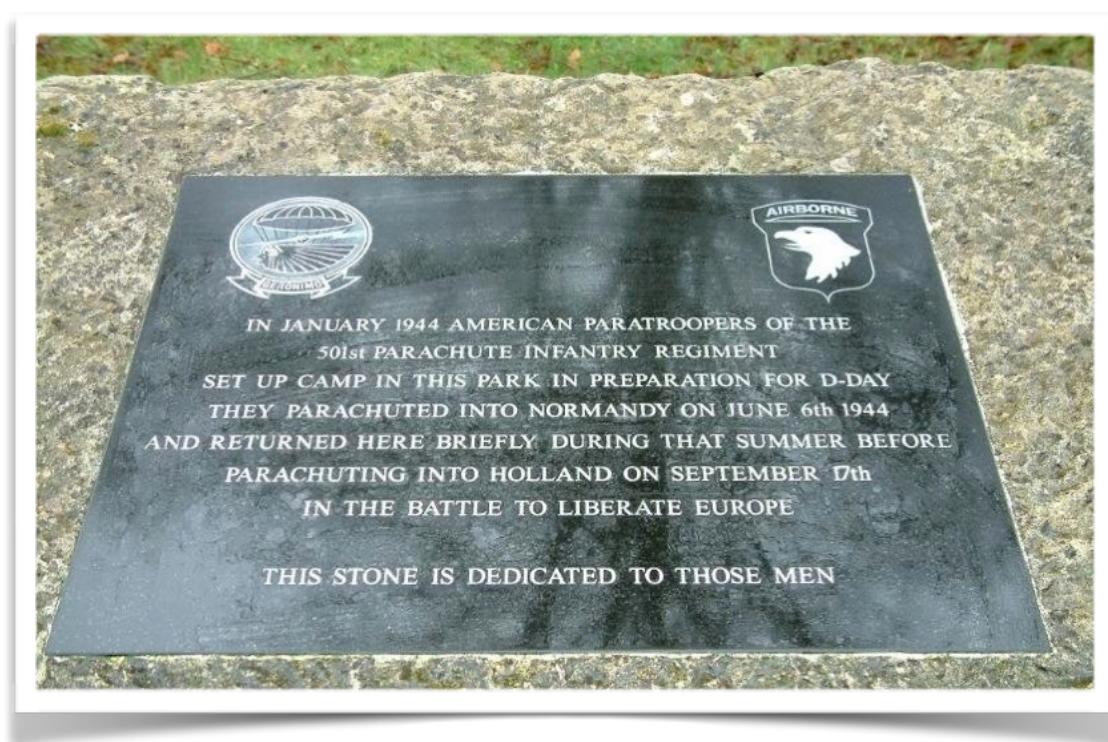


Plate 14: Memorial to the American Airborne soldiers who trained in Hampstead Park, Berkshire, in 1944 ([www.2talk.com](http://www.2talk.com))

The latest addition to the growing collection of monuments was unveiled as recently as September 2013 - a 6 foot high Portland stone memorial in the grounds of Littlecote House, engraved with the titles of the seven British units and the American Airborne Division based there between 1939 and 1945 (Plates 15 and 16). Funded by public donation, by money gifted from the Kennet Valley at War Trust and by a re-enactment



group's sponsored march, the monument serves as an example of the emergence, and growing importance, of the 'battleless' battlefield. A landscape which "in some respects achieves almost the same outcome as a physical battle, but without the damage that symbolises the usual concept of a battlefield" (Prideaux 2007: 20).



Plate 15: The unveiling of the new memorial to Allied soldiers based at Littlecote House during the Second World War, on 15 September 2013  
([blog.warnerleisurehotels.co.uk](http://blog.warnerleisurehotels.co.uk))



Plate 16: The 'Screaming Eagles' Living History Group honour guard  
([blog.warnerleisurehotels.co.uk](http://blog.warnerleisurehotels.co.uk))

The Internet and increasingly the use of social and digital media (in the form of virtual museums, on-line commemorative sites and historical discussion groups, and Second World War re-enactment group websites; particularly over the last 10 years) has also facilitated new virtual ways of "remembering and shaping collective

narratives” (Kuntsman 2010: 3). Ramsbury is well served by such sites (Figure 4), each with an ability to facilitate, mould and potentially reconstruct individual memories and group representations of past events.

| Website  | Purpose   |
|--|---|
| ‘Ramsbury at War’<br><a href="http://www.ramsburyatwar.com/">http://www.ramsburyatwar.com/</a>   | Historical website “devoted to the village of Ramsbury, it’s airfield and the surrounding area during World War 2”  |
| ‘Kennet Valley at War’<br><a href="http://www.kennetvalleyatwar.co.uk/">http://www.kennetvalleyatwar.co.uk/</a>  | Virtual museum, which aims to “educate and inform people about the history of the Kennet Valley during the Second World War”  |
| ‘514th QM Truck Regiment’<br><a href="http://www.514th.co.uk/Littlecote2008.html">http://www.514th.co.uk/Littlecote2008.html</a>                             | A Second World War re-enactment group’s website, featuring an event at Littlecote House   |
| ‘The First Allied Airborne Association’<br><a href="http://www.firstalliedairborne.co.uk/">http://www.firstalliedairborne.co.uk/</a>                         | United States Army re-enactment group website, featuring regional and national events   |
| ‘Airborne Troop Carrier’<br><a href="http://www.airbornetroopcarrier.com/">http://www.airbornetroopcarrier.com/</a>  | Website focused on providing “information about the Troop Carrier operations, the experiences of the men who flew those planes, the machines they operated”   |
| ‘The Forgotten Battalion’<br><a href="http://www.theforgottenbattalion.com/">http://www.theforgottenbattalion.com/</a>                                       | Marketing website, advertising ‘The Forgotten Battalion’ - the American 3rd Battalion, 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment, which was based in Ramsbury during World War Two  |
| ‘Warner Leisure Hotels’<br><a href="http://www.warnerleisurehotels.co.uk/">http://www.warnerleisurehotels.co.uk/</a>   | Marketing website, advertising Littlecote House Hotel   |
| ‘War History On-Line’<br><a href="http://www.warhistoryonline.com/tag/ramsbury-airfield">http://www.warhistoryonline.com/tag/ramsbury-airfield</a>           | Anglo-Dutch historical military news website and blog   |
| ‘Wiltshire Council’<br><a href="http://history.wiltshire.gov.uk/community/getcom.php?id=188">http://history.wiltshire.gov.uk/community/getcom.php?id=188</a> | Local government website, including factual ‘community history’ information   |
| Ridgeway Military and Aviation Research Group<br><a href="http://rmarg.org.uk/">http://rmarg.org.uk/</a>   | Local history and research group website, formed in 1991 to “collect, record and preserve WW2 history from the area together with other military and aviation matters”; covering Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Wiltshire |

Figure 4: New ways of remembering: examples of digital forms of remembering and commemorating the past

Elsewhere, more traditional communication methods continue to refresh, bolster and potentially reconstruct individual and collective memories of past events. Lambourn's monthly parish magazine, 'Village Views', routinely reproduces press cuttings from both the First and the Second World Wars; recording, for example, Private Robert Puffet's return home in November 1943, following his release from German captivity (Dams 2013: 33); to, more mundanely, the results of the July 1942 Home Guard Shooting Match (Dams 2012: 33). Local historian and author Roger Day's books on the history of the 6th (Marlborough) Battalion of the Wiltshire Home Guard, and on Ramsbury, Membury Airfield and Savernake Forest during the Second World War (Day 2004, 2007 and 2011), add yet another layer of understanding and memory - notably through the extensive use of villagers and veterans first hand accounts, and the use of previously unpublished photographs.

Through its portrayal of the men of Easy Company, 101st Airborne Division, in the HBO TV mini-series *Band of Brothers* (based on Stephen Ambrose's book of the same title (Ambrose 1992)), Hollywood has also contributed, on a broader canvas, to the public's collective 'memory' of events. Produced for entertainment rather than purely for historical value, much of the first episode is set in 'Ramsbury' and the surrounding area (filmed in the UK in 2000, the Buckinghamshire village of Hambleden was renamed to represent Aldbourne, whilst Hambleden Manor masqueraded as Littlecote House).

Whilst there has yet to be any evidence of any systematic development of battlefield tourism, it is clear that the preparations for war which took place in Ramsbury and the surrounding area during the Second World War are beginning to occupy an increasingly important place in the heritage of the area, in individual and collective memories of the

past, and in new, different and evolving acts of remembrance. Traditionally marked by memorials, museums and remembrance ceremonies, it is also clear that the dividing line between memory and remembrance is becoming increasingly blurred; where, for example, viewing or participating in a re-enactment event is judged by some to be an act of remembrance in its own right; where, as new artefacts are discovered and fresh personal accounts are published in print or online, individual and collective memories continue to evolve, each laying down a fresh layer of understanding and meaning for the present and for future generations.

## **Conclusions**

From the autumn of 1939 to the summer of 1945 the village of Ramsbury was at the centre of a unique conflict landscape; a 'battleless' battlefield (Prideaux 2007: 20-21) which stands alongside Flanders and Normandy in its own right as a testament to the industrial nature and scale of 20th Century warfare. Whilst subtler and of less obvious magnitude, Ramsbury's conflict landscape and artefacts nonetheless possess an innate and enduring ability to influence and change human behaviour (Pels 1998).

A 'quiet corner of England' in name only, those who lived through the difficult years of the Second World War would have literally felt the impact of the conflict on all their senses. Just imagine, for a moment, the sights, sounds and smells generated by two fully operational and active military airfields, by the many thousands of British and US soldiers based and billeted in the area, by the sheer volume of military traffic on the local roads, by the privations of the wartime diet and, for much of the War, by living adjacent to a construction site of seemingly biblical proportions.



The evidence of the area's 1940s metamorphosis, its evolution from rural backwater into an increasingly symbolic landscape - particularly evident since D-Day's 50th Anniversary - is clear; with each new discovery, monument or act of commemoration reinforcing a physical "process of engagement" with the past (Smith 2006: 1), and the opportunity for both residents and visitors to develop their personal "sense of involvement and history" (Ryan 2007: 209).

Typified by the example of Sergeant Morton's helmet, Ramsbury's wartime objects, buildings and places have developed social lives of their own; each with an innate ability to shape and transform the understanding of future generations. Used once to prepare for war, each now sheds a powerful and unique light on the events of the Second World War and, through their networked connections, each possesses the potential to influence and change human behaviour.

A palimpsest of overlapping intertwined memories set amidst a multi-vocal landscape, this 'quiet backwater' continues to evolve as a focus for memory and remembrance for an increasing number of residents, visitors, historians and military enthusiasts. Hallmarked by the growing number of memorials, annual re-enactment and commemorative events, written military histories and Internet websites, the area's "collective narrative" (Kuntsman 2010: 3) also continues to develop, and so occupy a progressively more important place in the region's heritage. Each new or interpreted memory or act of remembrance leading to a new understanding.

Whilst each area is unique, under the the lens provided by modern conflict archaeology, Ramsbury's Second World War and subsequent experience gives substance to the hypothesis that 'conflict archaeology isn't solely the preserve of battlefields'. This

being the case, it can only be a matter of time before battlefield tourism, sparked perhaps by D-Day's 70th Anniversary, starts to develop a more organised form.

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## Illustrations

Unless stated, digital photographic images are the author's.

Cover: Soldiers from 101st Airborne Division Signal Company marching to board gliders at Ramsbury Airfield on the morning of 17 September 1944 (Operation Market Garden) (<http://img.photobucket.com/albums/v230/Jeepdriver704/MarchingIII.jpg>)

Plate 1: Littlecote House: home to the Regimental Headquarters of the US 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment, August 1943 to June 1944 ([http://news.bbcimg.co.uk/media/images/69843000/jpg/\\_69843517\\_warmemorial.jpg](http://news.bbcimg.co.uk/media/images/69843000/jpg/_69843517_warmemorial.jpg))

Plate 2: Pill box overlooking the Kennet Canal ([http://s0.geograph.org.uk/geophotos/02/50/97/2509758\\_1dc23bcc.jpg](http://s0.geograph.org.uk/geophotos/02/50/97/2509758_1dc23bcc.jpg))

Plate 3: Aerial photograph of Ramsbury Airfield, May 1944 (<http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/fe/Ramsbury-may1944.png>)

Plate 4: RAF and USAAF Memorial, Membury Service Station ([http://www.sabre-roads.org.uk/wiki/images/8/85/USAAF\\_Memorial%2C\\_Membury\\_-\\_Geograph\\_-\\_1289886.jpg](http://www.sabre-roads.org.uk/wiki/images/8/85/USAAF_Memorial%2C_Membury_-_Geograph_-_1289886.jpg) )

Plate 5: Tree carving by US serviceman Lester Birkey, 1944 (<http://www.pillbox-study-group.org.uk/psgwordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/lesterbirky2.jpg>)

Plate 6: Memorabilia to the 101st Airborne Division in the bar of the Blue Boar pub, Aldbourne: a 'shrine' to the troops billeted there in 1943

Plate 7: Parachute clips found near Chilton Foliat in 2012

Plate 8: Sergeant Gilbert Morton's helmet

Plate 9: The Aldbourne Stable 1944 (courtesy of The Kennet Valley at War Trust)

Plate 10: The Aldbourne Stable 2013

Plate 11: Charles Asay with his daughter, 2003 (<http://www.ramsburyatwar.com/media/asay3.jpg>)

Plate 12: Ira Grube opens the Littlecote Museum, 2005 (<http://www.ramsburyatwar.com/media/Littlecote-Museum-Ira-&-Jea.jpg>)

Plate 13: A re-enactment group preparing for battle (<http://www.kennetvalleyatwar.co.uk/media/LaW-Attack.jpg>)

Plate 14: Memorial to the American Airborne soldiers who trained in Hampstead Park, Berkshire, in 1944 (<http://i37.photobucket.com/albums/e82/airfieldsman/PAULS%20SCANS%20TWO/thislot851.jpg>)

Plate 15: The unveiling of the new memorial to Allied soldiers based at Littlecote House during the Second World War, on 15 September 2013 (<http://warnerleisurehotelsblog.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/lc-wartime-memorial.jpg?w=620&h=465>)

Plate 16: The 'Screaming Eagles' Living History Group honour guard (<http://warnerleisurehotelsblog.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/lc-war-memorial.jpg?w=300>)

## Figures

Figure 1: Ramsbury and the surrounding area; showing key military sites, and the camps allocated to the US 101st Airborne Division from September 1943 to September 1944

Figure 2: The metamorphosis of a landscape

Figure 3: The 'social life' of Sergeant Gilbert Morton's helmet

Figure 4: New ways of remembering: examples of digital forms of remembering and commemorating the past