

## Chapter 5

# Edith Weston: A Queen's Dowry

Sue Howlett

### The Medieval Village

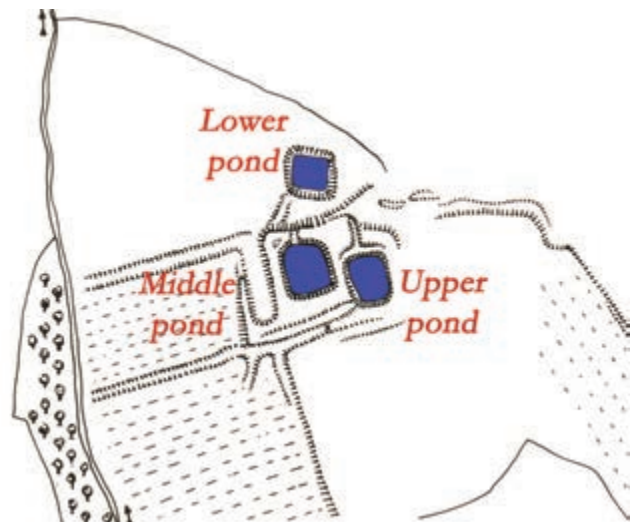
Although a significant settlement for nearly a thousand years, Edith Weston is not mentioned in Domesday Book, compiled by order of William the Conqueror in 1086. The seventeenth-century historian James Wright noted in his *History and Antiquities of the County of Rutland* (1684, 41), that the 'town' of 'Edyweston' had been one of the seven unnamed outliers, or hamlets, which belonged to the Church of Hambleton before the Norman Conquest. In the Anglo-Saxon estate which included Hambleton and its outliers, Queen Edith is recorded as having held four carucates (probably around 500 acres) before 1066. She had also been granted land in Oakham, Ridlington, Luffenham and the now deserted village of Sculthorpe, as well as property in the nearby town of Stamford, Lincolnshire.



So who was Queen Edith, remembered to this day in the village that [The Church of St Mary, Edith Weston in 1839 \(Uppingham School Archives\)](#) bears her name? In 1066 there were two Ediths with royal connections. One, known as 'Edith of the Swan-neck' was the mistress of King Harold, killed at the Battle of Hastings. Tradition relates how she searched for his body and brought it for dignified burial at Waltham Abbey, Essex. But the Edith (or Ealdgyth) who gave her name to Edith Weston was an older woman who had been married to the previous Saxon king, Edward the Confessor.

The saintly King Edward, who reigned from 1042 to 1066, was persuaded by advisers to marry the daughter of his most powerful subject, Earl Godwin of Wessex (father of the future King Harold). This proved an unhappy marriage. Edith brought a valuable dowry to the king, and she received life interest in royal estates previously granted to Queen Emma, which included a large area of Rutland. This alliance between the king and his chief rival brought only temporary peace. Six years after the marriage, in 1051, King Edward sent Earl Godwin into exile and confined Edith to a nunnery at Wherwell, Hampshire. Edith's own account of her marriage, *Vita Edwardi Regis*, explains her lack of children as due to a religious vow of celibacy made by her husband. There were probably additional reasons!

*The upper of the three fishponds at Edith Weston in 2006. This and the middle pond survive but the lower fishpond is now below the high water level of Rutland Water (SS)*



*A plan of the fishponds and enclosure boundaries of Edith Weston Priory (after Hartley)*

Among his religious benefactions, King Edward founded the new Abbey at Westminster, where he and Queen Edith were later buried. The Abbey required financial endowments, and Edward promised that after Queen Edith's death her estates in Rutland would pass to Westminster Abbey. In the event, Edith outlived her pious husband and was able to retain her Rutland landholdings until her death in 1075, when they passed to the new king, William I.

King Edward had hoped that his heir would be Duke William of Normandy, rather than Harold, son of his rival, Godwin. However, opposition to this choice forced Edward to recall Harold from exile and name him as heir to the throne. The resulting dispute led to the Battle of Hastings in 1066 and the establishment of the Norman royal dynasty.

William the Conqueror's son, William II ('Rufus'), was mysteriously killed in the New Forest in 1100, and quickly succeeded by his younger brother as King Henry I. Henry granted the manor of Edith Weston to his chamberlain, William de Tankerville, who in 1114 bestowed it on the Benedictine Abbey of St George de Boscherville, which he and his father had founded in Normandy (*VCH* II, 62). The monks of this abbey founded a small 'alien' priory

cell in Edith Weston, possibly housing only two or three monks. Their chief business was praying for the souls of the founder and collecting rents from their local tenants. During Lent and on Fridays they would consume fish from the nearby fishponds.

The church of St Mary in Edith Weston suffered major restoration in the nineteenth century, but some stonework supporting the chancel arch and north arcade survives from around 1170-95. A south aisle and arcade were built shortly afterwards, with the chancel and chancel arch being rebuilt later in the thirteenth century. In the fourteenth century the church was again extended, and the tower and spire built of Ketton stone between 1380 and 1400 (*VCH* II, 65).



Throughout the Middle Ages and beyond, monarchs received income partly in the form of regular lay subsidies, taxes imposed on their non-clerical subjects. The 1296 Lay Subsidy assessments for the Rutland parishes have been transcribed by Dr D A Postles, of Leicester University. The list for Edith Weston names forty heads of household, charged sums ranging from one shilling to 7s 5<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>d. One of these, William Fraunchhomme, appears to be a Frenchman, probably associated with the priory. Two men, Henry and Ralph, have the bynames '*ad crucem*'. This may indicate that they lived near the cross, Edith Weston's medieval market cross, of which only the base and a short section of shaft survive today.

*The tower and  
spire of St  
Mary's Church,  
Edith Weston  
(SH)*





*The remains of Edith Weston's medieval market cross (SH)*

Most of the medieval inhabitants of Edith Weston were peasants, labouring on the manorial land owned by the priory. This was divided into three open fields, known as West, South and East (or Mill) Fields, which, centuries later, were enclosed into smaller fields by an Act of Parliament of 1758 (Ryder 2006 Appendix II, 2). The eighteenth century hedgerows,

planted by new landowners, were superimposed on an earlier pattern of strips and furlongs which remained visible for more than five centuries. These ancient field systems, to the north of Edith Weston, were finally obliterated by the creation of Rutland Water.

*Left: This aerial view, taken before the Gwash valley was flooded for Rutland Water, shows part of Edith Weston village and fields to the north and west with medieval ridge and furrow. The River Gwash meanders across the top of the picture and the three medieval fishponds (ringed) can be seen to the right of centre (Anglian Water)*



During periods of war with France, the English king occasionally took Edith Weston and its priory into his own hands. In the late thirteenth century it was seized by the officers of King Henry III because the prior was abroad, presumably in France (VCH II, 62). By 1357 there was only one monk in charge of Edith Weston Priory, who clearly abused his vocation:



*The bill was, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the main close combat weapon of the English infantry. Including its handle it was about 7 feet long (RO)*

‘It was complained that he had laid aside the habit of religion and the tonsure, had neglected to say mass and the divine office, and had consumed the substance of the house in luxurious living. He had kept women in the priory, and maintained his illegitimate children from its revenues; he had cut down the trees and destroyed cottages, and driven out villeins from their homes with blows and other ill-usage’ (*VCH* I, 163-4).

By 1394 ownership of the Edith Weston priory had passed from the Abbey of St George de Boscherville to the prior and Carthusian convent of St Mary and St Anne in Coventry. In 1404 a financial arrangement was made with William Dalby of Oakham for the priory of Edith Weston to pay rent of £20 per year to the warden of the newly-founded hospital of St John the Evangelist and St Anne, in Oakham (*VCH* II, 62).

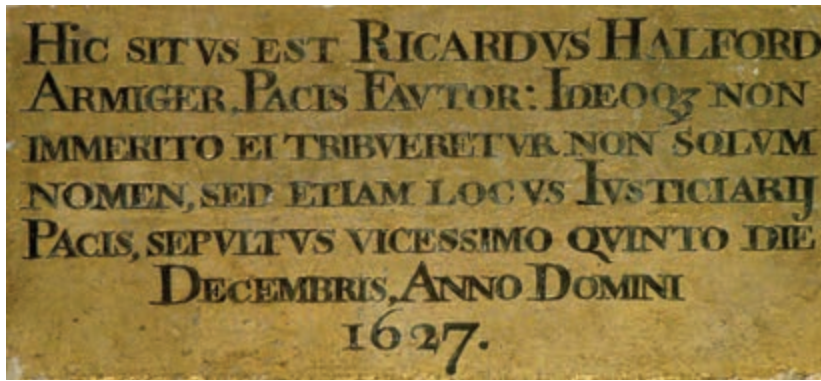
In addition to regular assessments for taxation, in 1522 King Henry VIII ordered a military survey of each county, produced in the form of muster books. These listed males over sixteen with their wealth in land and/or goods, and their potential military role in defence of the kingdom. The Rutland muster book, a rare survival, lists 30 men of ‘Ediweston’. Heading the list, ‘the Prior of the Charterhouse of Coventry is Chieff lord of the seid town’, whose land was worth 40 marks. His goods were not valued since he is listed as ‘*q.e.*’ [*quid extra*: non-resident]. The parson was Antony Bretton and the parish priest was John Richards. Virtually all the men listed were tenants ‘to the seid prior’, whether as labourers or husbandmen (small farmers). Two men were listed as able to fight if required as archers, and ten as billmen (soldiers armed with bills), although only one of these had his own weapon (Cornwall 1980, 66-7).

The Dissolution of the Monasteries, imposed by King Henry VIII, brought an end to the existence of the priory at Edith Weston. In 1550 his son, Edward VI, granted the manor to William Parr, Marquess of Northampton and brother of Queen Catherine Parr, on condition that he continued to pay the agreed yearly rent to the hospital of St John and St Anne in Oakham. Edith Weston then passed through various hands until it came into the possession of John Flore, or Flower. He was sued in the Court of Requests for failing to pay this annual rent, and was summoned before the Privy Council in 1582. The manor again changed hands, until in 1601 it was bought by Richard Halford. This family held Edith Weston until 1742, when it passed through a daughter into the Lucas family, lords of the manor until the end of the nineteenth century.

*The Halford Monument in Edith Weston Church, commemorating Richard Halford, 1627; Richard Halford, 1675; Charles Halford, 1696; Richard Halford, 1742; and the Rev Richard Lucas, 1789 (RO)*



The brass  
plaque on the  
Halford  
monument  
commemorating  
Richard  
Halford who  
died in 1627  
(RO)



## Edith Weston Hall

The original Edith Weston Hall was probably built early in the seventeenth century by the first Richard Halford. A R Traylen, in *Villages of Rutland*, records the tradition that this building contained gothic doorways, which may have come from the abandoned priory. It was not unusual for purchasers of former monastic buildings to re-use the building materials in their new country houses. The first hall was built on the north side of the church, but after the new Edith Weston Hall was built in 1830, its remains were demolished to allow enlargement of the churchyard.

Richard Halford came to Edith Weston from Welham, Leicestershire, where his elder brother, William, continued to live. By his wife, Dorothy, Richard Halford had five daughters and five sons. When he died in 1627, Edith Weston Hall passed to his son, also Richard (1594-1675). The younger Richard Halford served as Justice of the Peace, and twice as Sheriff of Rutland, in 1619 and 1631 (Wright 1684, *Additions* XI, G). By his first wife, Anne, he had two sons, Charles and John.

The younger Richard Halford seems to have avoided active involvement in the Civil War. On 10th March 1660, shortly before the Restoration of King Charles II, his son Charles's name was added to the list of Commissioners for the Militia for the County of Rutland (*JHC* 7, 1651-60, (1802), 868-71). When the new king entered his kingdom in triumph, both Richard and Charles Halford added their names to the long list of loyal royalists, signing an address of 'Humble Congratulations' to the king, with their thankful acknowledgement of God's goodness 'in so great a Blessing accomplished without effusion of blood' (*VCH* I, 200-1).

The Halfords continued to prosper under the restored monarchy. When the villages of Rutland were assessed for hearth tax in 1665, the list for Edith Weston was headed by Richard Halford Esq with a house of eleven hearths. This was six more than the next largest house, that of the Rector, Mr Halford, probably his brother (Bourne & Goode 1991, 43). In the same year Richard's son, Charles, followed in his father's footsteps by serving as Sheriff of Rutland.

Charles Halford was an acute speculator, investing £5,000 in the scheme to make the River Welland navigable at Stamford. However, he may have



regretted this as in 1696 he was petitioning Parliament against a new government tax on coal and other commodities carried by water. This had caused coal merchants, delivering ‘sea-coal’ from Newcastle to Stamford, to rely more on cheaper road transport, thus depriving Halford of valuable tonnage duty, the expected proceeds of his investment (13th January 1696, *JHC 11, 1693-7* (1803), 388-9). Charles Halford died in the same year, without seeing any resolution of his grievance.



*Edith Weston Hall from the south-east in 1908 (Hart)*

The new lord of the manor was Richard, son of Charles Halford. He is listed as one of Edith Weston’s 22 voters in the poll book of 1710, and in 1712 was assessed for land tax of £23 5s 10d. This amount was nearly one-third of the total sum paid by the landowners of ‘Edyweston’ – the next highest assessment was the £7 7s 4<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>d paid by Thomas Islip junior.

When Richard Halford died without a male heir in 1742, the manor of Edith Weston passed to Mary Halford and her husband, the Rev Richard Lucas. Confusingly, each succeeding heir to the estate was named Richard Lucas, three of whom were also Rectors of the parish. The Hall by this time was becoming dilapidated.



*Edith Weston Hall from the north-west in 1912 (Hart)*

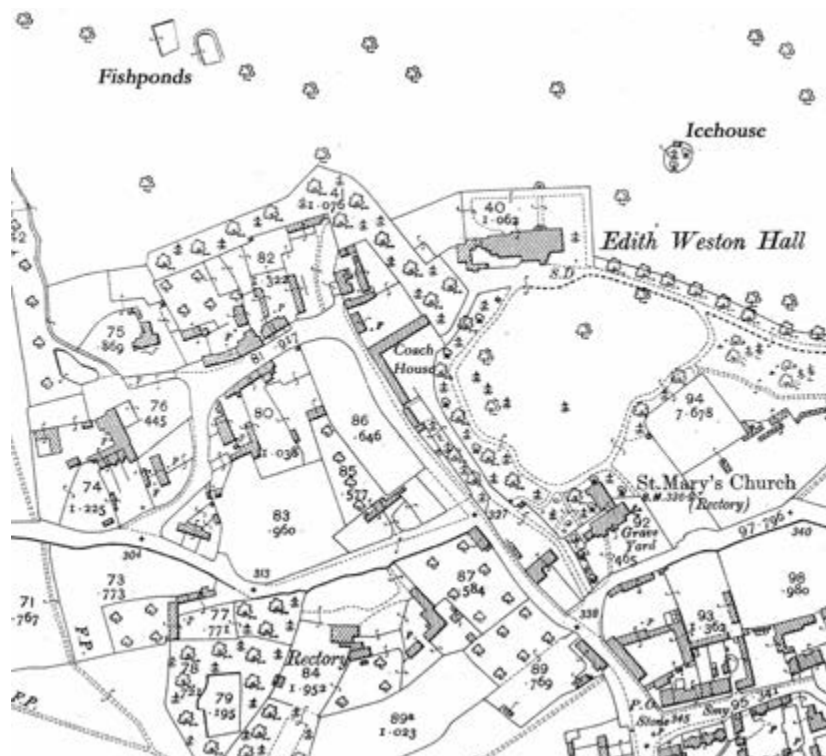
In 1830 a new Edith Weston Hall was built for the Rev Richard Lucas (Rector of Edith Weston, 1827-46). It was designed in Tudor style by the fashionable architect, Lewis Vulliamy (1791-1871), whose commissions

ranged from churches to country houses and workhouses. His work included Dorchester House (later replaced by the Dorchester Hotel) and Westonbirt, Gloucestershire, both built for the millionaire industrialist Robert Stayner Holford. At Chingford, in Essex, Vulliamy designed Friday Hill House in 1839 and the church of St Peter and St Paul in 1844 for the Rev Robert Boothby Heathcote, grandson of Sir John Heathcote, 2nd Baronet, of Normanton ([www.leevalley-online.co.uk/towns/chingford](http://www.leevalley-online.co.uk/towns/chingford); [www.thepeerage.com](http://www.thepeerage.com)). Since Mr Lucas would have been in frequent contact with the Heathcote family at neighbouring Normanton, he may well have recommended the architect to his fellow clergyman.

According to the 1841 Census, the Rev Richard Lucas was living in his new home of Edith Weston Hall with his wife, Mary. Five years later the Hall was inherited by another Richard Lucas. This namesake, however, was not a clergyman, being described as 'landowner', born in Toilethorpe thirty years previously. His wife was another Mary, and their fellow-resident at the Hall in 1851 was Richard's brother, Henry, a young officer born in Edith Weston. A tantalizing glimpse of the marriage of Richard and Mary Lucas is provided in a letter of 16th January 1849, from T K Arnold, Rector of Lyndon, to William Henry Fox Talbot, the Wiltshire polymath and early experimenter in photography.

The Lyndon clergyman writes from Hastings of his 'exile from Rutland' because of repeated bouts of asthma. As well as advising on suitable Latin lessons for his correspondent's small son, Mr Arnold reports on the well-being of a neighbouring Rutland cleric, Archdeacon T K Bonney, Rector of Normanton, and his unmarried sister, Henrietta:

*Edith Weston  
from the OS  
2nd ed 25"  
map 1904*





‘The Bonneys have both been ailing a little this year; they are seldom free from rheumatism. Mr Lucas’s [*sic*] disreputable marriage, which necessarily puts an end to all pleasant intercourse with their [Edith] Weston neighbours, is a great arrogance to them.’ (Fox Talbot Museum/Lacock Abbey Collection 06204).

One wonders what was regarded as ‘disreputable’ about Richard Lucas’s marriage, and why it made his presence unwelcome in the drawing rooms of disapproving neighbours! However, time may have mellowed these uneasy relationships, since when Archdeacon Bonney died in 1863, Richard Lucas attended the burial in Normanton churchyard.

The family name of Lucas died out in 1888, when Richard Lucas was succeeded by his brother George. The new heir had adopted the surname of Braithwaite, in order to claim an inheritance from Miss Braithwaite of Stock Park, Ulverston. George’s son, Major Ernest Lucas Braithwaite, sold the Edith Weston estate, and some of the farms were purchased by the Earl of Ancaster to add to his Normanton Estate. Edith Weston Hall and Park passed through various hands, having to be rebuilt following a serious fire in 1921. At some stage an ice-house was constructed to help preserve perishable food through the summer months.

Finally, in 1927, the restored Hall became the home of Lieutenant-Colonel Francis Henry Hardy, JP, and his wife, Lady Cicely Hardy, who continued to live there after his death (*VCH* II, 63). As Lady of the Manor, she often provided soup for the village school children to eke out their lunches of bread and cheese.

Edith Weston Hall was demolished in 1957. All that remains is one of its buildings, now converted to a house named ‘Old Hall Coach House’, a reminder for future generations of the former grandeur of Edith Weston Hall.



*The Old Hall Coach House, seen here, the ice house and the ha-ha are all that remain of Edith Weston Hall (SH)*

## The Village Community

The introduction of the national census in 1801 made it possible to record local populations at ten-year intervals. From this it can be seen that Edith Weston, in common with many rural communities, experienced a gradual increase throughout the nineteenth century. From 267 in 1801, Edith Weston's population rose to a high point of 399 in 1871. This was followed by a steady decline to 228 in 1931, as agriculture became less labour-intensive and young people moved to the towns to find work.

The 1901 Census shows that Edith Weston's population of 267 included six grazier/farmers employing 25 agricultural labourers, seven farm carters and four shepherds. The Hall provided considerable employment, with a gamekeeper, groom, coachman and seventeen domestic servants. Other occupations in the village included two road labourers, three quarry workers, three blacksmiths, four carpenters, four dressmakers, six laundresses and three teachers. Daily needs were provided by two bakers, two butchers, one grocer and two innkeepers.



*The shop of C W Weaver, grocer, in 1908 (Hart)*



*Tibbert the butcher occupied the three-storey building, formerly the Old Hall laundry (Hart)*

## Traditional Customs of Edith Weston

As with other isolated rural communities, Edith Weston's inhabitants continued to observe several traditional customs, some dating to the seventeenth century and earlier. Readers of Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native* (1878) will remember the Christmas performance of an ancient Mummers' Play, with its unlikely collection of characters: the Turkish Knight, Saint George, the Doctor, the Saracen and Father Christmas. Edith Weston, too, had its very similar Morris-Dancers' Play. The text was recorded by V B Crowther-Beynon, in 'Notes on some Edith Weston Village Institutions' (*Rutland Magazine* II, 14 & 176-80). The characters who entertained Rutland villagers were King George, the Doctor, Albert Hart, the King of Prussia, First Man and Beelzebub. It is strange to speculate on the identity of 'Albert Hart', and to note the transformation of Saint George into King George. A flavour of the drama is provided by the following speech of 'King George':

'I am King George, this Champion bold,  
With my blood and spear I won three crowns of gold,  
I fought the fiery dragon and brought him to the slaughter  
And by that means I won the King of Egypt's eldest daughter.  
I hacked him and smacked him as small as flies  
And sent him to Jamaica to make mince-pies.  
Mince pies hot and mince pies cold,  
Mince pies in the pot, nine days old.'

The Victorian residents of Edith Weston also revived on occasions a ritual described by Thomas Hardy in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), as the 'Skimmity' or 'Skimmington Ride'. Also widely known as 'Rough Music', this involved a procession through the village, led by a man wearing horns, denoting the cuckolded husband, to the door of anyone accused of adultery. Loud tin pans and trays were clashed, trumpets and whistles blown outside the offenders' windows, while their effigies might be subjected to burning or drowning. In Edith Weston the denouncement of sexual miscreants was known as 'Horn Fair' or 'Tin Panning'. For full details of this local tradition, see Chapter 30 – Extra, Extra, Read all about it!

A far-more widespread and edifying custom was the celebration of May Day, which Edith Weston regularly observed along with the majority of Rutland villages. Schoolchildren paraded round the village singing May songs at every house, finishing with a tea party which included bread and jam, plum cake and seedy cake.

## Edith Weston School

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Lucas family, as Lords of the Manor, had founded the first village school in 1852, the boys and girls being taught by separate teachers in two cottages. Twelve years later a purpose-built school was erected, and it was enlarged in 1893. In 1904 the Head Master was Mr Brown. In 1925 Miss Dolce Ellingworth moved from Empingham School to Edith Weston, which had now declined to about 40 pupils (from 55 in 1902). She taught the 'three Rs' in the morning, with history, geography, drawing, poetry and singing in the afternoon. The boys were allowed to play football or cricket, while the girls learned sewing, darning and knitting. By 1935 the number of pupils had shrunk to eleven and the school, then the smallest in Rutland, closed down.



*Edith Weston  
school children  
in 1910 (Hart)*



*Edith Weston Band  
in 1916 (Hart)*

## RAF North Luffenham

The decline in population which brought Edith Weston down to 228 in 1931, leading to the closure of the village school, rapidly underwent a sudden dramatic reversal. In 1951 the population of the village was 920, and in the next ten years it shot up to 2,064. This was not due to a miraculous increase in the birthrate but to the creation of RAF North Luffenham. Although the airfield was closer to the village centre of Edith Weston, it took its name from the nearest railway station.

Built initially as a training airfield, RAF North Luffenham opened in December 1940, with new pilots flying mainly Tiger Moth aircraft from grass runways. When the training school moved to Peterborough in 1941, 61 and 144 Squadrons were brought into Luffenham from Hemswell (Lincolnshire), which had been selected as a base for Polish bomber squadrons. Both squadrons flew Hampdens and were fully operational, much of their work being mine-laying.

No 61 Squadron, now flying Manchesters, soon transferred to a new airfield with hard runways at Woolfox Lodge. Meanwhile No 144 Squadron continued to operate from North Luffenham, successfully attacking a ship carrying the German Anti-aircraft Defence Commander for North Germany, and taking part in raids on the Renault motor works near Paris. In April 1942, No 144 Squadron transferred from Bomber to Coastal Command and torpedo work, moving north to Scotland. RAF North Luffenham then became home to No 29 Operational Training Unit, formed to provide the final stage of training for bomber crews, mainly on Wellingtons, which remained until June 1943.

It was clear that new hard runways and expanded facilities were essential for the war effort. This work was carried out by George Wimpey & Co Ltd.

*A Hampden bomber of 408 Squadron climbing out from North Luffenham (Airfield Focus)*



New accommodation was also built to house a total of 2,118 males and 311 females. The station re-opened in March 1944, to be used for the first six months by No 21 Heavy Glider Conversion Unit. North Luffenham then went back to bomber crew training, flying Lancasters, until the end of the war. Other aircraft based at the airfield included Albemarles, Balliols, Spitfires, Hurricanes, Whitleys and Horsa gliders.

Between 1939-45, Bomber Command lost a total of 60 bombers, missing or crashed in the UK, on operational flights from North Luffenham. Fifty-six of these were Hampdens, three Manchesters and one a Wellington (www.raf.mod.uk/bombercommand).

The end of the Second World War and the years of Cold War brought a change of personnel to North Luffenham and Edith Weston. In 1951 the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF), under a NATO directive, established three Sabre-equipped fighter squadrons at North Luffenham. These remained for three years, until the RAF resumed control of the station in 1954 for operational training.

*A Whitley bomber of 21 Heavy Glider Conversion Unit. This aircraft was used to tow Airspeed Horsa gliders at North Luffenham, some of which can be seen in the background (Airfield Focus)*

*A Lancaster from North Luffenham flying over Rutland (John Nowell, Zodiac Publishing)*



*A Stirling heavy bomber and its crew (John Nowell, Zodiac Publishing)*



*Above: This Armstrong Whitworth Albemarle was one of the many different types of aircraft based at North Luffenham during WWII. It was often used as a glider tug (Airfield Focus)*

*One of the Hawker Hurricanes of the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight visiting North Luffenham (AF)*



*Above: An Airspeed Horsa glider returning from a training flight from North Luffenham, clearly showing the underside yellow and black striping (Airfield Focus)*



From the *Leicester Evening Mail*, 16th June 1952:

## MORE CANADIAN JETS REACH NORTH LUFFENHAM

The high-pitched scream of five Sabre jet aircraft, circling North Luffenham airfield at 6.37 on Sunday evening [15th June 1952], was sweet music to a crowd of waiting watchers on the ground. They were the first flight of the remaining 16 aircraft of 439 Fighter Squadron, Royal Canadian Air Force, on the last lap of their 3,560-mile flight from Ottawa to Rutland.

This was a historic flight, for they were the first Canadian jets to fly the Atlantic. They were coming to join two other Sabre jet squadrons at North Luffenham that had been ferried across the Atlantic by *HMCS Magnificent*.

It was an exciting moment for those on the airstrip, who had long been scanning the horizon. Among the anxious spectators were RCAF officers, waiting to complete the official records of the long pioneer flight, a strong contingent of British and Canadian newspapermen, with a battery of Press photographers, and, most anxious of all, the wives, families and friends of the pilots.

It had been a successful but far from uneventful flight. The squadron took off from Uplands, near Ottawa, on May 30. With ideal weather all the way, they could have arrived at North Luffenham on June 2. But the weather was far from ideal. Another snag developed at Quebec, the first leg of the trip.

Weather delays:

Sqdn Ldr Cal Bricker, in command, was taken ill, and doctors diagnosed a grumbling appendix. Although an operation was not necessary, he could not undertake the jet flight, and was transferred to the North Star transport plane. Flt Lt Bill Bliss took over command.

Weather held up the flight for three days at Quebec and then they were off on the 580-mile hop to Goose Bay, Labrador, where, again, weather grounded them for eight days.

Then came 780 miles to Greenland (one day delay), a further 750 miles to Iceland and then the final 775-mile over-water trip to Kinloss, Scotland, where they arrived on Saturday.

They're off:

Weather again held them up, but the waiting crowd at Luffenham were cheered to hear on Sunday that the squadron hoped to arrive at about 3.30 pm. Another delay was announced, but at last, at about 6 pm Flt Lt. Marshall, Canadian PRO, announces 'They're off'.

There was a mad dash to the airstrip, for once airborne, the Sabres were expected to cover the last 379 miles in about 40 minutes. Horizons were scanned, and eager groups chatted impatiently. A loud roar made a group of newspapermen look round expectantly. It was not a Sabre, however, but a 350cc motorcycle that had just sprung into life under a Canadian 'Erk' learner-driver.

Aerobatics:

At about 6.30, four Sabres from the squadrons already at Luffenham, took off to act as a reception committee, and, a few minutes later roared overhead, leading in Flt Lt Bliss and four others. The remaining 16 came in, in groups of four, at five minute intervals while another flight from Luffenham gave the spectators a short, thrilling acrobatic display.

There were many happy family reunions as the pilots climbed weary, but cheerful, from the cockpits.

Mighty sore:

Although disappointed at missing the flight, Sqdn Ldr Bricker was also quite cheerful when he arrived in the North Star, with reserve pilots. He told *The Evening Mail* that he had already flown the Atlantic by jet when he was attached to the USAF. 'I'm mighty sore at this appendix of mine,' he commented.

The three squadrons, forming No 1 RCAF Fighter Wing, are the first of 11 being provided by Canada under the North Atlantic Treaty.



*Above: F-86 Sabres of No 1 RCAF Fighter Wing arrive at North Luffenham on 15th June 1952 (Airfield Focus)*



*Left: Four RCAF Sabres in formation over North Luffenham (Airfield Focus)*

*Below: RCAF 439 Squadron Sabres at North Luffenham in June 1952 (Airfield Focus)*



*Far Left: RCAF pilots – Flying Officers Ruker and Wilson – in survival suits at North Luffenham (Airfield Focus)*



*Above Left: Sabre pilot Flt Lt Dean Kelly (Airfield Focus)*

*Above Right: Jim O'Connor, formerly with No 1 Fighter Wing, RCAF, in June 2005 (Jim O'Connor)*

## A Canadian Airman Remembers

One Canadian who still remembers his time in Rutland is Jim O'Connor, now of Stratford, Ontario, Canada, who served in the Royal Canadian Air Force from 1946-66.

The RCAF Advance Party, sent to assist with the transfer of RAF North Luffenham to Canadian control, were accompanied by wives and families. However, it soon became clear that there was a serious shortage of housing in the area, so from then on any airman who wanted his family to join him in England had to pay for their travel and arrange suitable accommodation. Jim O'Connor, part of No 1 Fighter Wing, was desperate to see his new wife, Virginia, but short of the necessary funds. He recalls:

‘Within a very few days of my arrival, I got into a card game much like “Blackjack” and before more than an hour was up I had won about two hundred pounds all in cash! I had never been so lucky in my life before (or since). That money was sufficient to rent a caravan for a month, stock it with groceries as well as pay Virginia’s way to England. Virginia arrived by sea aboard the *Empress of Canada*, disembarking at Liverpool on 18th January 1952.

‘We moved out of our “large” caravan on January 1st 1953 and into the little row cottage at Edith Weston. It had one room up and one room down. There was no fireplace; the place was heated by a small, and very old, cook stove (coal fired). The floor of the lower room was made of brick which the landlady insisted be waxed and polished regularly with some rather hideous red wax. The result was that our baby’s nappies became pink coloured from her scooting around the red floor on her bottom!’

‘The place was extremely damp and cold that January and coal was still on the ration list. We were able to supplement our rationed coal supply by obtaining additional coal from the Air Base. So after a while we were able to keep the place reasonably warm and comfortable. However the coal was of a very low grade, with stones embedded in it. Every so often one of those stones would explode from the heat of the fire. It scared the hell out of us the first couple of times that it happened. It also caused our landlady and her husband, who lived in the adjoining cottage, great curiosity as to what was going on in the O’Connor cottage. Who could blame them?’

‘Many of the buildings in Edith Weston had thatched roofs and were constructed primarily of Collyweston slate [*sic*]. As Canadians in England for the first time, we had never previously seen buildings that were constructed of such materials. It was all very much like a trip through a history book for us and we considered ourselves very privileged to be made welcome by the local people. It was a wonderful experience for us which we hold in our hearts and our minds to this very day.’

Although much has changed, the thatched cottages and public house, the Wheatsheaf, still survive. Perhaps fortunately, Edith Weston’s village inn no longer lives up to the name of ‘Smokey Joe’s’ bestowed on it by Canadian servicemen in the 1950s.

‘It was just a wee pub with hardly enough room to swing a cat, but somehow there was always room for another Canadian Airman. The publican’s first name was Alf, but I cannot recall what his surname was for the life of me. The place was called “Smokey’s” because it being so small it didn’t take many patrons smoking at the same time to sort of dim the vision in the place! I always liked the “Nut Brown Ale” in bottles best. Next to that it was those little tiny bottles of Bass’s Ale. Great beer, great memories!’  
(Jim O’Connor)

*The Wheatsheaf, Edith Weston. In the 1950s it was known as ‘Smokey’s’ or ‘Smokey Joe’s’ by the Canadian servicemen based at the nearby airfield (RO)*





*A bird's eye view of North Luffenham airfield in the 1950s (Airfield Focus)*



*Below: Meteors and their crews waiting for a scramble during Operation 'Mainbrace' in 1957 at North Luffenham (Airfield Focus)*

The Royal Canadian Air Force left North Luffenham in 1955 and the station returned to the RAF, who continued to train air crews on Vampires and Meteors, one of which remained at the base entrance as a reminder of this era.



*Above Left: A formation of Meteors over Rutland (Airfield Focus)*



*Above Right: This Meteor was one of the gate guardians at RAF North Luffenham (Peter Drake)*



*Left: The other gate guardian at RAF North Luffenham was this Bloodhound missile (Peter Drake)*

## The 1960s

In June 1958 RAF North Luffenham was selected for another mission, which brought it into the front line of international tensions in the years leading up to the Cuban Missile Crisis. Following negotiations between the governments of Macmillan and Eisenhower, Rutland became home to American ‘Thor’ strategic missiles, which carried nuclear warheads.

The 1958 agreement led to the stationing of 60 Thor missiles in the United Kingdom. To be deployed under dual control and operated by the RAF, the missiles carried a 1.44 megaton warhead, and had a range of 1,500 miles. Thor was deployed at four main bases: Driffield, Hemswell, Feltwell and North Luffenham. Surrounding each main base were four satellite stations, with Bloodhound missiles deployed at each location in groups of three. All squadrons were fully manned by RAF personnel, with the warheads under the control of American custodial officers’ (Twigge and Scott, [www.history.ac.uk/ejournal/art3](http://www.history.ac.uk/ejournal/art3)).



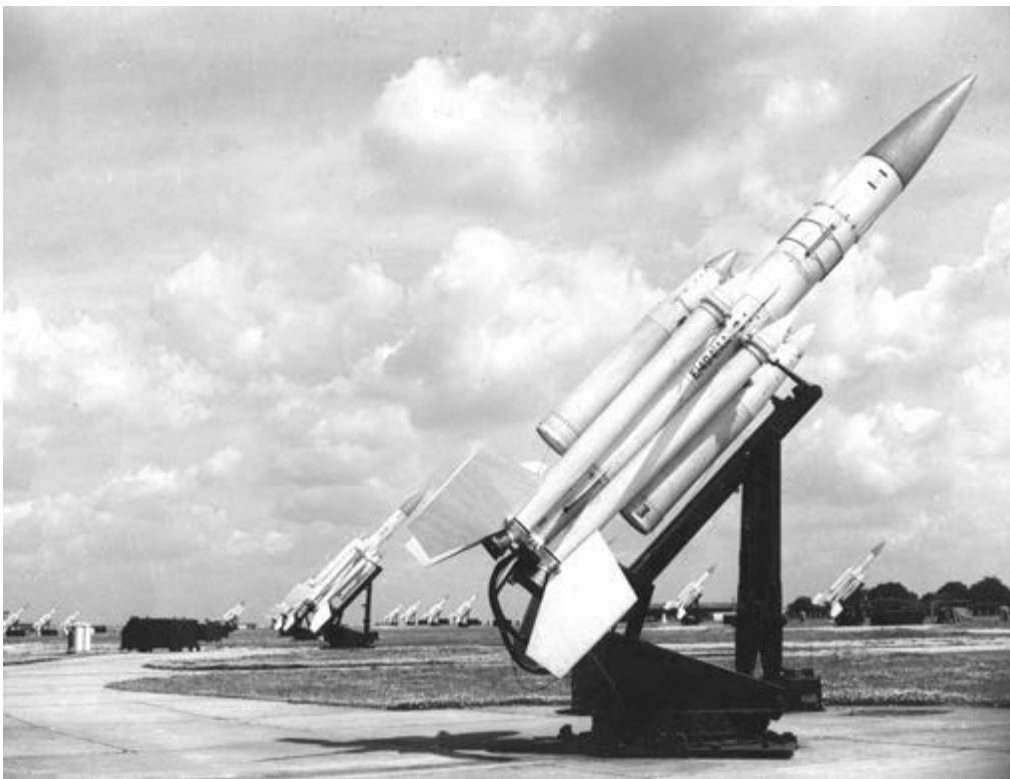
*Above Left:*  
*A Thor missile*  
*arrives at North*  
*Luffenham in 1960*  
(David Carlin)



*Above Right:*  
*A Thor missile*  
*being prepared for*  
*a practice launch*  
*at North*  
*Luffenham*  
(Airfield Focus)

The Thor missiles arrived in 1960, along with a large colony of Americans from Douglas Aircraft and the US military. These were housed in ‘Silver City’, a complex of 60 caravans, 33ft long, each with a smaller adjoining side caravan, fitted out with all modern conveniences. This period is recalled by Alan Peel Shaw, a member of the RAF Police serving at North Luffenham from 1959-63. While most RAF personnel lived in married quarters in Edith Weston, he with his wife and two young boys ‘first of all lived a hellish three or four months in a 22ft caravan at the missile site at Melton Mowbray, with no connected facilities and an Elsan toilet’. Fortunately they were then able to move into a 33ft caravan at Silver City, before obtaining married quarters in Edith Weston.

‘The two boys attended school at Edith Weston, which was very close at hand, but I don’t think my youngest son thought much of the idea, for on the first day of attendance, having had his lunch, he promptly came home, and when questioned by my wife, said it was going home time so he left . . . Entertainment wise, we were very lucky, we had a cinema on camp, there was a ten-pin bowling hall, we had all the usual functions in the various messes, such as tombola, whist, weekly dances etc, which were well attended by several hundreds at a time. I was very much involved with the RAF Motor Sport



*Bloodhound  
missiles at Woolfox  
Lodge which were  
part of the defence  
ring of four  
satellite stations  
round North  
Luffenham  
(Airfield Focus)*



*Members of  
RAF Motor  
Sports  
Association  
Kart Club at  
RAF North  
Luffenham in  
1962. Alan Peel  
Shaw centre  
row far left  
(Alan Peel  
Shaw)*

Association, having formed a Kart Club, which eventually held racing events on a quarter-mile racing circuit which we built ourselves on the perimeter track, and involved National teams, including Bruno Ferrari, a National champion, and many other well-known kart racing drivers of that time. We considered ourselves extremely privileged, to be racing against such esteemed drivers and we were justifiably proud of our circuit'

(Alan Peel Shaw).

The Thor missiles finally departed in 1964 and RAF North Luffenham became home to a succession of ground signals organisations. Edith Weston became home to many service families, including a young John Matthews, now of Gosport, who remembers:

'Life was spartan by today's standards, but we were very happy, enjoying the freedom to roam for miles around in complete safety. Fishing for minnows in the river Gwash and playing in the fields which are now flooded by the reservoir. We loved to play in the stubble in the wheat fields during harvest time. I remember the smell of the paraffin heater in Edith Weston post office, and the jolly laughter of the drinkers in the Wheatsheaf pub when sent by my mother on an errand for "20 Senior Service tipped, and a bottle of Mackeson please". Saturday morning was a real treat as we often attended the camp cinema for the matinee, tickets priced 1s 3d. We listened to the music of "The Shadows" while waiting for the red curtains to open for the performance. I attended the primary school on the camp for service



children and children from the surrounding villages. I recall our English teacher, Mr Evans, and our weekly spelling test on Friday morning . . .

I recall a very strange experience that I shared with my father. We were both out doors when we heard an unusual sounding aircraft above us. Dad looked up to the sky and said “It’s a bomber”. However, no aircraft was in sight. North Luffenham airfield was non-operational in those days. I have learned since that Lancaster aircraft operated out of North Luffenham during the war. I wonder if anybody has had a similar experience?’

The school attended by John Matthews and other children, both from the air base and from the village of Edith Weston, was headed from 1955 by John Starkey, who also became Church Warden and later President of Rutland Water Fly Fishers. His son, Ian, now of Norfolk, describes the school and their housing as being in 1940s pre-fab buildings, also used by the RAF as overflow accommodation. The site is now the Normanton Car Park for Rutland Water. Ian’s vivid memories also include the joys of fishing in the Gwash:

‘The river held several species of fish, namely Sticklebacks, Bullheads, Minnows, Gudgeon, Dace, Roach, Chub, Perch, Pike and Eels, which provided good sport for local anglers. After Normanton Fishpond was stocked in *circa* 1960, a few Trout could also be caught in the Edith Weston/Normanton stretch of the Gwash. The river supported a good selection of aquatic insects, birds and small mammals.’

*The River Gwash from Normanton Bridge in 1972, looking east (Jim Eaton)*



He also recalls the original post office, with ‘room enough for one customer at a time . . . newspapers delivered on foot by Mrs Townsend . . . and meat by Ernie Tibbert. The circus came annually to the playing fields’. Ian Starkey is one of many former residents who regret the changes which have beset Edith Weston, now surrounded by the leisure attractions of the new reservoir: ‘Let them enjoy Rutland Water, but they will never find the inner sense of well being and satisfaction that I did’.

In November 1963 the first of a succession of ground based units arrived and from this date on RAF North Luffenham was to be a non-operational airfield. The initial squadron was Radio Technical Publications. In 1964 the Station came under Signals Command, later transferring to the Maintenance Group in Logistics Command. Other units which moved to



the Station included the Ground Radio Servicing Unit, which included the Civilian Aerial Erector Unit, the Training Unit Language School, the Aviation Medicine Training Centre, Midland Radar, the Rapier Missile Trials Unit, the Training Development Support Staff, the Armament Support Unit, a unit of the Bomb Disposal Squadron, and South Midlands Wing of the Air Training Corps. The Aerial Erector Unit mentioned above was involved in building a new bell frame and re-hanging the bells at North Luffenham Church.

By 1997, all these units had moved from the Station and a formal closing down ceremony was held on 23rd October 1997, when many ex-RAF personnel attended. The RAF ensign was lowered for the last time at 12.00 hours as three Tornados and a Nimrod flew over. RAF North Luffenham finally closed on 31st December. On 31st March 1998 the site was transferred to the British Army. It is



*Above and right: RAF memorial windows at Edith Weston Church. There is another memorial window in North Luffenham Church (RO)*

now St George's Barracks and is currently occupied by the new Duke of Lancaster's Regiment.



End of an era: The RAF standard is lowered as RAF North Luffenham is officially handed over to the Army. Photo: E4907/30

## Hand-over marks end of an RAF era

RAF North Luffenham was officially handed over to the Army in an emotional ceremony on Tuesday.

The base, which has been an operational RAF station for more than 50 years, was formally closed in October last year.

It is now in the hands of the 1st Battalion the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers. Personnel from the RAF and the Army watched as the ceremony started with the lowering of the RAF ensign and unit commander's pennant.

Wg Cdr Stewart Bolam, the RAF unit commander, handed over the keys to the main gate to Army camp commander Maj Bob Broadbent.

The Army camp will now be formally known as St George's Barracks and will be home to 600 soldiers next year.

Maj Broadbent said: "It was an emotional day as some of the RAF personnel have been serving for a number of years. Everything went smoothly and the Army is now looking forward to life there."

*Rutland Times reports the handover of RAF North Luffenham to the Army on 31st March 1998*



## The Impact of Rutland Water

The pace of life around the former Gwash Valley has changed out of all recognition, although many of these changes would have occurred without the building of the reservoir. Edith Weston has also been transformed by the construction and presence of the North Luffenham air base – now St George's Barracks. The post-war school, in its prefabricated buildings, has now been replaced by a bright, modern, purpose-built school, complete with its own heated swimming pool, on the shores of Rutland Water. It serves around 120 pupils, of whom two-thirds come from service families.

During 2005, many of the present-day pupils of the two local primary schools, St Mary & St John C of E School, North Luffenham, and Edith Weston Primary School, assisted with the project to produce this book. They carried out research into the local history of their area and the impact of Rutland Water. One group of children from Edith Weston, aged seven and eight, reported:

'It was easier and quicker to get to Whitwell and Oakham from Edith Weston before the reservoir was built. Some of the roads that linked these places went straight across the valley through Hambleton, and had to be flooded when the reservoir was filled . . . People in Edith Weston have had to get used to spending more time and petrol getting to Hambleton, Oakham and Whitwell.'

The children were told that, when the reservoir was planned, 'lots of people were worried about traffic jams because of extra visitors that would come to see the new reservoir'.

When the parishes around the Gwash Valley were confronted by firm proposals to build what was then to be the 'Empingham Reservoir', there were many doubts and reservations. As well as the obvious loss of land, residents had serious concerns about noise, disruption and increased traffic involving both heavy machinery and, later, visitors' cars. Manton Parish Council expressed concerns about loss of rights of way and the ignoring of 'No through road' signs in the village. Empingham was more adversely affected, and concerned by the noise, traffic and accommodation implications of the reservoir's construction. An unexpected concern of all the surrounding parishes was a plague of non-biting midges that bred around the reservoir in 1977-78. The hopes of the then Rutland District Council that

*Pascal Risi, of  
St Mary & St  
John Church of  
England  
School, North  
Luffenham,  
who  
researched the  
construction of  
the dam  
(Pasqualino  
Risi)*





this situation would resolve itself seem to have been fulfilled, as the issue then disappears from Parish Council minutes.

In addition to these concerns, Edith Weston Parish Council addressed the issue of leisure facilities. On 14th September 1978 they issued a statement recommending that ‘any additional facilities should be confined to the present car parks and picnic areas, preferably away from Edith Weston. No additional attractions should be located in the Village to draw more visitors, as a Pursuit Centre, Sailing Club and Car Park-Picnic Area in the district was enough’. Although these wishes have been largely respected, the village and its surroundings have inevitably changed out of all recognition. Some of Edith Weston’s more fortunate home-owners now find themselves with lake-side gardens and spectacular views, while residents and visitors alike can enjoy, for a price, the adjacent attractions of the Rutland Water Golf Course and the Rutland Sailing Club. On busy summer days, parked cars (and bicycles) are testimony to the many visitors who wish to explore the delights of this traditional Rutland village.

The spectacular views across the former Gwash Valley, now submerged under Rutland Water, have transformed this once sleepy rural backwater into a thriving centre of leisure and tourism. But despite the major changes brought by the reservoir, as well as by technical progress and new patterns of work and leisure, Edith Weston remains at heart a village community. The parish church, the primary school, the village shop and public house still serve the various needs of local people, while providing treasured memories for villagers and visitors alike, into the twenty-first century.

*Edith Weston on the south shore of Rutland Water in 2006. Rutland Sailing Club is just right of centre*  
(John Nowell, Zodiac Publishing)

