

## STANTA VISIT JULY 2015

On 30 July the Heritage Circle visited Stanta, the Stanford Training Area, near Thetford. The group was conducted around the site by Colonel Powell who gave an amusing and well informed commentary. He explained that Stanta is the third largest Ministry of Defence training area in Britain. It is located on land used for military training before 1939 in an area which had four villages and two hamlets. However, on 24 June 1942 the military met with the villagers and gave them just three weeks to pack up and leave their homes as the demands of World War II meant that soldiers had to have practised combined arms training. This integrated the use of tanks, artillery and other heavy weapons. It needed a large area and would have posed a danger to the local people but leaving their homes must have been a traumatic experience for the villagers.

There were four churches within the Stanta area but now only one is used for occasional services. St Mary's at West Tofts was dates from the 14<sup>th</sup> Century and contains a rood screen designed by Pugin in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. It has undergone recent renovation after neglect since the 1940s.

There are some traces of the original village of West Tofts still to be seen but these are brick buildings. Most of the cottages were made of clay lump and they have become hummocks as their walls disintegrated when their roofs were removed. Records from 1845 indicate that there were 182 people living in the village at that time. There were 72 children registered with the school. Of the other villages, Stanford is a live fire area where only brick buildings remain. The same is true of Tottington which was the largest village in 1942. In 1845 some 340 people lived there. Most were employed on land owned by Lord Walsingham. There is still a church in the village but it is too dangerous to approach it as there is probably live ordnance nearby.

Stanta has been used as a military training ground in all conflicts since World War II. It has an area about 20,000 acres and it can accommodate about 1,800 soldiers in three barrack areas at any one time. Soldiers and airmen train on simulated villages. There are former checkpoints similar to those used in Northern Ireland. There is a German town from the Cold War era which was adapted to be a village in Bosnia. This now has an Iraqi village and police station attached.

In a separate area of the Stanta site there is an Afghan village where all of the soldiers and airmen serving in that theatre were trained. It has enclosed compounds which would have been home to an extended family. Narrow alleyways and hidden tunnels connect compounds. The village was made a more realistic experience as 650 Afghan refugees stayed there for 12 hour shifts. In addition, 400 retired Gurkhas role played police or terrorists. The intention was to 'scare' the soldiers undergoing training so they would not be scared when in Afghanistan.

13,000 sheep graze on the grassland of Stanta and are managed by shepherds who move the animals away from dangerous areas, such as live firing. The sheep are useful for keeping the grass down and provide some income to offset the costs of Stanta.

In the 1960s much of the filming for the popular television series *'Dad's Army'* happened at Stanta. Frog Hill which overlooks a breckland landscape is familiar from the programme's opening credits.

An initially wet evening concluded with a wonderful sunset over the Norfolk Brecklands..

Gerry Gurhy