



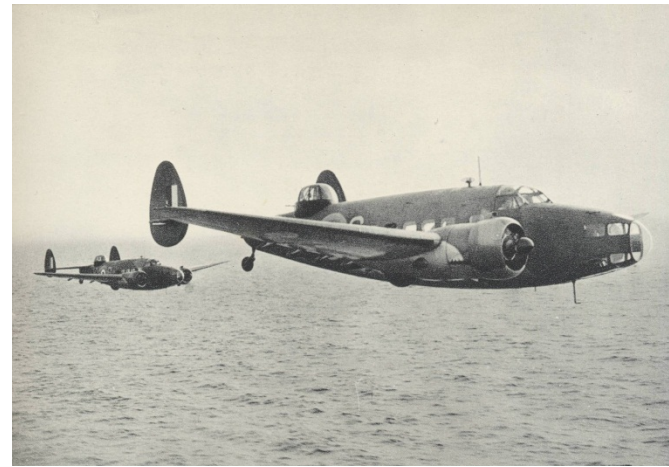
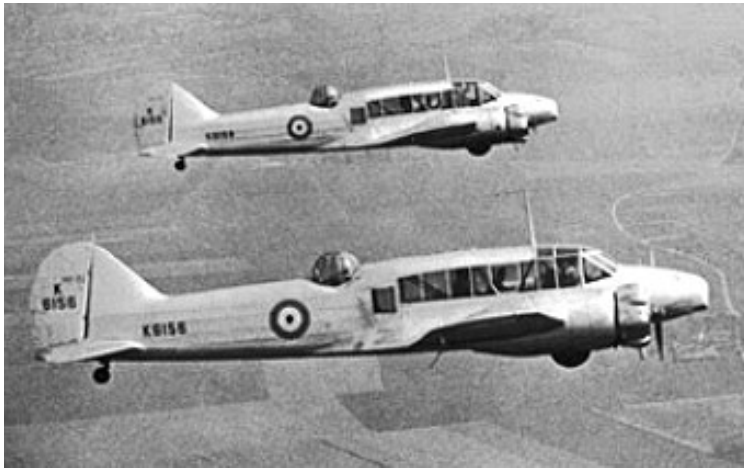
Lost on Easby Moor

The last flight of Lockheed Hudson NR-E

Shortly after 4:00am on Sunday, 11 February 1940, a 22 Squadron Lockheed Hudson aircraft from Thornaby crashed outside Great Ayton. This describes the crash, the people involved, and explains the reason for the accident.



220 Squadron of Coastal Command moved to Thornaby Aerodrome in August 1939. They had previously been stationed at Bircham Newton in Norfolk, where the above photograph was taken. The squadron was formed in the Aegean, and hence the squadron motto "We observe unseen" is written in Greek on their badge.



The Squadron had brought their aging Avro Ansons (above left) from Bircham Newton, but soon after their arrival at Thornaby they began re-equipping with Lockheed Hudsons (above right). The Lockheed Hudson was a specially adapted version of the Lockheed Electra. Large windows were cut into the front of the fuselage for observation and bomb-aiming, machine guns were fitted in the nose, and a gun turret added towards the rear.

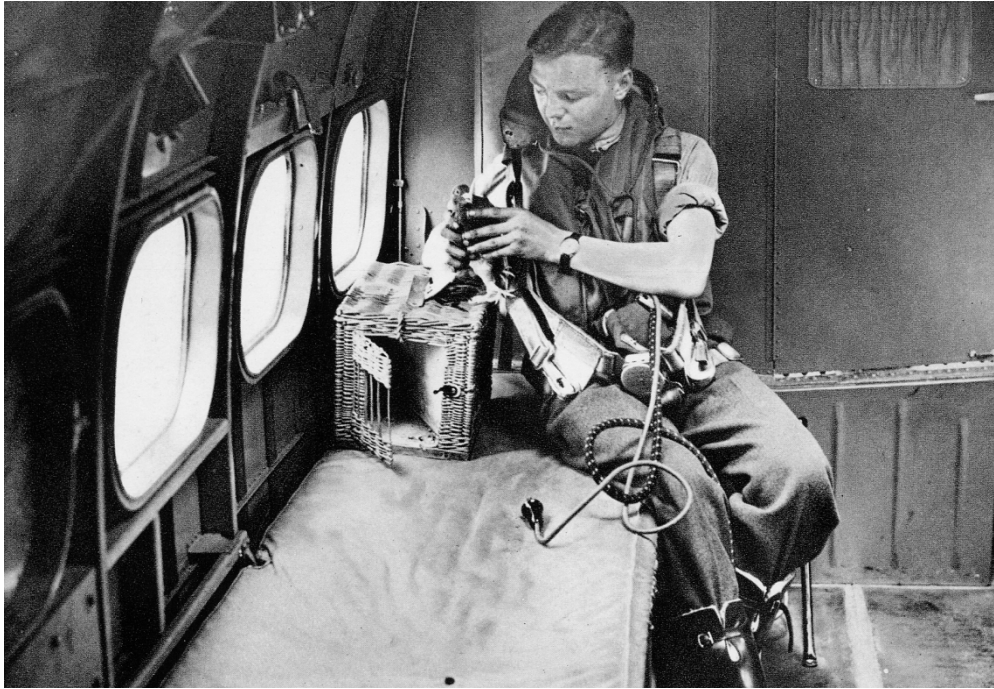
The Hudson took some getting used to, but was greatly superior to the old Anson. Particular care was required during take-off and landing, and there were many accidents. Some 43% of the RAF's Mk 1 Hudson aircraft were lost through crashes during take-off and landing.



There were four crew members in a Lockheed Hudson. The first pilot (an officer or sergeant), the second pilot who also acted as navigator and bomb aimer (a sergeant), the wireless operator and an air gunner. The photograph above shows a typical crew, note the air gunner with the basket of pigeons and the gun turret, likened to an egg sitting on the top of the fuselage. The large access door, a feature of the Electra passenger plane, was unusual for a military aircraft.

Hudsons came over from the Lockheed factory in America to Thornaby, where a Boulton Paul gun turret was fitted. The photograph on the right shows an air gunner climbing into the gun turret of a Lockheed Hudson by standing on the Elsan toilet. The four small bombs on the left are submarine markers. If a submarine was spotted it would dive out of sight but, by dropping one of these markers which spread aluminium powder on the surface of the water, the position of the submarine could be seen. These marker bombs played an important part in the crash of Hudson NR-E at Great Ayton.





The front section of the 14-seat passenger compartment of the original Electra was partitioned-off to form a radio compartment immediately behind the cockpit. The remaining space was empty, apart from a bed, shown above, and the Elsan toilet. Both of these features were hitherto unheard of in a military aircraft.

Also shown in the above photograph is the basket with two homing pigeons, carried by Coastal Command aircraft for use in case of radio failure or the need for secret communications. The pigeons were supplied by local pigeon breeders.

Life at Thornaby Aerodrome



Most of 220 squadron's duties consisted of patrols over the North Sea, flying out on a fixed bearing and returning on a parallel course, so-called "kipper patrols".

These were usually uneventful. The photograph shown here was taken on such a patrol on 4 January 1940 by the same four-man crew involved in the Great Ayton crash.

The winter of 1939-40 was very hard. Thornaby Aerodrome was non-operational for days on end, as shown by the extracts from the official Thornaby Station records shown overleaf.

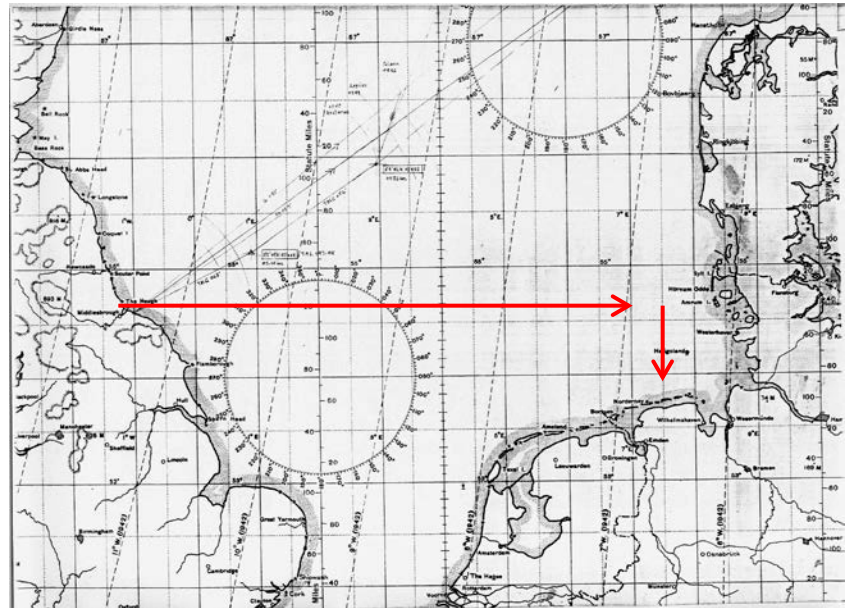
Thornaby weather records for the first days of February 1940

- 1st** Snow in night, snow and sleet in the day, runways rolled, aircraft possible to take-off by 08:55.
- 2nd** Overcast, intermittent snow all day, frost.
- 3rd** Slight snow, thaw by late evening.
- 4th** Rain and drizzle.
- 5th** Drizzle followed by day of continuous fog.
- 6th** Fog throughout day, but thaw continued.
- 7th** Continuous moderate rain, fog overnight. Ice cleared from runways, salt spread.
- 8th** Drizzle, fog. Thaw continued but Aerodrome still unfit for service.
- 9th** Aerodrome nearly clear of water. East to West runway once more serviceable.
- 10th** Temperature below freezing for most of the day. Gentle southerly breezes all day. Varying amounts of low cloud were experienced until early afternoon.
- 11th** Visibility was very good at mid-day and moderate to good during the rest of the day. Light westerly breezes gave place during the morning to North Easterlies which brought snow showers during the afternoon. Throughout the daylight hours and the early evening there was 10/10 low cloud which broke towards late evening. Temperature was below freezing point all day. The Aerodrome was frozen over.
- 12th** Heavy snow.



Preparing a Lockheed Hudson for operations by loading the four 250 pound bombs. The twin Browning machine guns, mounted just in front of the windscreen, can be seen, also the large area of window cut into the front of the fuselage.

On Friday 9 February 1940, there were reports of German minesweepers operating off the Danish coast. With the improving weather, a special night patrol of three Hudsons was planned to fly due east from Thornaby to Horns Reef, then sweep south into the Heligoland Bight. There they would mount a low-level bombing attack on the enemy ships at first light.



The pilots of the three aircraft were Flying Officer Parker in Hudson NR-E, Sergeant Culver in Hudson NR-A and Pilot Officer Petrie in NR-X. Tom Parker, the patrol leader, took off in darkness at 0410 hours, followed by the other two aircraft at one minute intervals.



Hudson NR-E was in difficulties from the start, unable to climb and on the brink of stalling. Mrs Ellen Robson, who was living at Southbrook Farm directly under the normal flight path of aircraft taking off from Thornaby Aerodrome, recalled:

“I can just remember it was a different noise because it was lower when it came in than they usually were. I think that’s why we wakened up because it was quite close to the house. We used to get up about six to half past, but it did waken us up earlier.”

Michael Bell, who was a pupil at the Ayton School at the time, recalled:

“There was some lads in the Friends’ School Sanatorium on the night of the crash. They had to sleep with the window open. One of the lads there heard two planes go overhead and then another on struggling and then going quiet.”

At about 4:10am the Hudson hit the escarpment of Easby Moor, scraped up the hillside and ended up in a clump of larch trees. One crew member escaped, but the other three were killed outright.



The aircraft hit the hillside of Easby Moor at a glancing angle, skidding up the slope, through a dry stone wall at the top and finally coming to rest in a group of larch trees. The gap can still be seen to this day, and is exactly 60 feet wide, the wingspan of the Hudson.

Three of the crew perished. The fourth, the air gunner, miraculously survived with relatively minor injuries.

There was a second survivor: one of the two homing pigeons, named Polly.





The crew of Lockheed Hudson NR-E in the early hours of Sunday 11 February 1940, pictured above from left to right, were:

First Pilot	Flying Officer Tom Parker from Bedford
Second Pilot	Sergeant Harold Bleksley from Cardiff
Wireless operator	Corporal Norman Drury from Norfolk
Air gunner	Leading Aircraftman Atholl Barker from Bradford

Tom Parker had two brothers; one also joined the RAF and lost his life, the other enlisted in the army, survived and became head of British Rail as Sir Peter Parker, shown on the right.





When they failed to make contact with their leader, the other two Hudsons set off on their easterly course. The weather was appalling. Two hours after take-off, Sergeant Culver turned back, but Pilot Officer Petrie completed the operation, reporting that the sea was frozen for a distance of 40 miles from the coastline. There was no sign of enemy shipping activity. He returned to Thornaby at 0912 hours.

Atholl Barker was initially unconscious, but came to and crawled down the hillside in search of help. He was found by William Hodgson, tenant farmer at Borough Green Farm, Low Easby around 6:00am. William and his wife Alice are shown on the right.

Their son, Billy Hodgson, below, remembers his father pushing the injured airman into the kitchen with his shot-gun, not knowing whether he was friend or foe. Billy was sent to raise the alarm, Alice made a cup of tea.



Bill Smith, from Easby Grove Farm, was at the crash site later that morning, and helped recover the three bodies. He recalled:

“The crew were in a terrible state. If they hadn’t been in their uniforms I don’t think we could have carried them down the hillside.”

Barker's amazing escape

It was not until after the publication of the book *Lost on Easby Moor*, in 2003, that the truth behind Atholl Barker's escape came to light. Leading Aircraftman Albert Guy of 608 Squadron had been stationed at Thornaby. Some time after the crash, he was waiting to see the Thornaby Station Medical Officer. There was only one other person waiting, a short man with bandages around his ankles. It was Atholl Barker, who related his story to Albert Guy. Albert remembered it thus:

"He (Barker) was lying on the pull-down bed before going into his turret. He was unaware that anything was wrong with the aircraft. Then there was an almighty bang and he found himself on the ground amidst some debris from the plane. He just saw the remains of the aircraft disappear over the crest of the hill."



It seems likely that the Hudson hit this exposed rock-face, near the summit, breaking off a large piece of stone which lies there to this day. This would have ripped a hole in the fuselage. Presumably Barker then rolled off the bed, fell through the gap in the floor of the rear compartment, and landed relatively softly in the snow-covered heather.

Why were the other crewmen so badly injured?

At first sight it may seem unusual that the crew who died in the crash, Tom Parker, Harold Bleksley and Norman Drury, were so badly injured. The Hudson was still largely intact when it came to rest in the larch trees, having lost most of its forward momentum as it skidded up the hillside. There was no fire.

The explanation probably lies with something said by Reginald Shepherd, a Local Defence Volunteer, who was at the site that morning. “The blokes had silver hair. I said to my mate they were old folks to have in an aeroplane with their silver hair.”

The silver in their hair could have come from one or more of the submarine marker bombs. If these had exploded in the confined space of the aircraft interior, the effect would have been catastrophic.

The cause of the crash

There was an official, rather sketchy, enquiry into the accident. This stated that Hudson NR-E:

“Flew into hillside soon after take-off due to formation of frost on inside of windscreen and windows.”

This is unlikely to be true since the Hudson had a cockpit heater and it would have been easy for the pilot to clear the inside of the windscreen. The source of this theory was Atholl Barker. He had given various versions of events, initially saying he remembered nothing but later, when interviewed in North Ormesby Hospital, had mentioned the icing of windows obscuring vision.

The true cause emerged later when another Hudson was almost lost in similar circumstances. A more thorough investigation showed it was icing on the wings. Even a thin coating of ice significantly reduced lift. The Hudson would not climb or manoeuvre. At Thornaby the Hudsons were kept outside, and the weather was below freezing. As a result of this later enquiry, wings were sprayed with de-icing fluid, a practice continued to this day.

The two survivors

Atholl Barker suffered medical problems for some time after the crash. He spent time at Winterton Hospital, Sedgefield and was interviewed at a Medical Board in November. He recovered and in October 1942 was promoted to Pilot Officer. Six months later he was a Flying Officer on Liberators, stationed at Reykjavik (right). He transferred to Bomber Command in 1943. On 22 November 1943 the RAF assembled the greatest force yet sent to Berlin. Flying Officer Barker was in the rear turret of 7 Squadron's Lancaster MG-G. Only 11 of the 469 Lancasters failed to return home; MG-G was shot down over Hannover where Atholl Barker is buried.

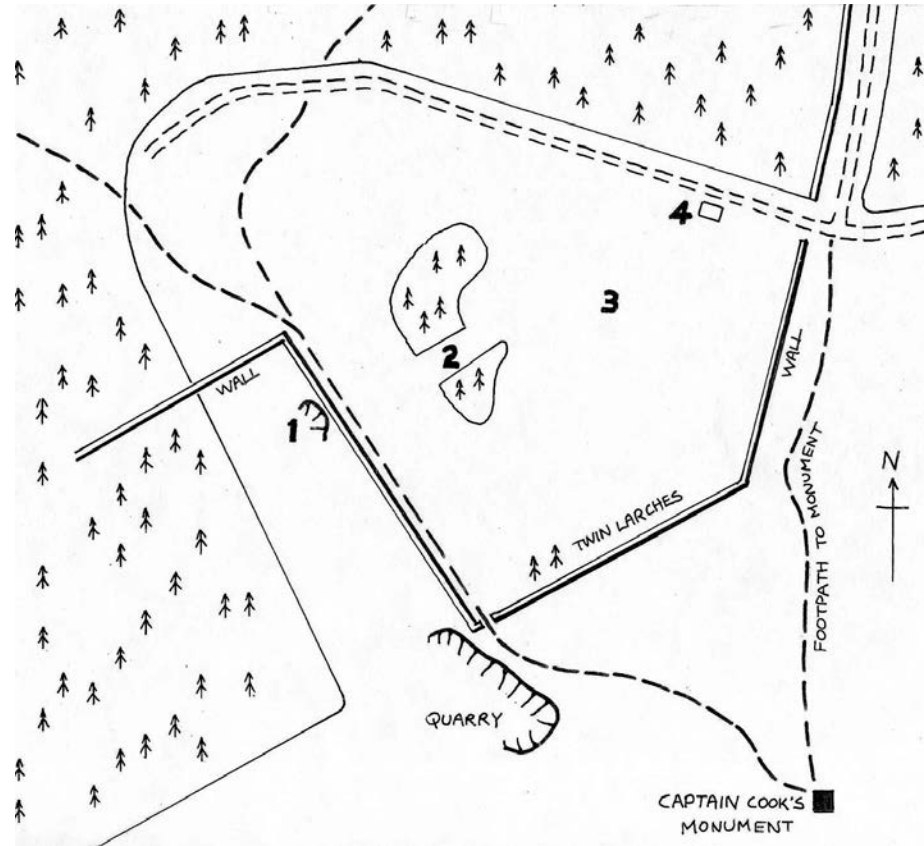


Polly the pigeon was owned by Eddie Hartas of Middlesbrough. She was brought back to him with broken legs, but he nursed her back to health. Unable to take part in competitive flying, her offspring were highly successful. Eddie's son, Gordon, is pictured on the right with one of Polly's descendants.



What can be seen at the site today

- 1) Area of exposed sandstone, the presumed point of impact when the bottom of the fuselage was ripped out.
- 2) Gap 60 feet wide cut through the existing larch plantation.
- 3) Site of two shallow craters, probably where the two engines, which detached from the wings during the crash, hit the ground.
- 4) Fenced-off crater where the Hudson's bombs were later blown up.



Remembering the loss of life

In 2003 the Great Ayton Community Archaeology Project had a commemorative plaque mounted at the side of the well-used footpath leading to Captain Cook's Monument. The Plaque was dedicated at a service conducted by the Reverend Paul Peverell of Great Ayton and the Padre from RAF Leeming Bar. Tom Parker is buried in Thornaby Cemetery, Harold Bleksley in Bristol, and Norman Drury in Norfolk. What was left of the Hudson was removed by the RAF and parts used as spares.





This has been based on *Lost on Easby Moor, the last flight of Hudson NR-E*, Ian Pearce, Great Ayton Community Archaeology Project, 2003.

Acknowledgements are due to the Parker, Bleksley and Drury families, to former members of 220 Squadron, local historians of Thornaby Aerodrome, Great Ayton residents, the National Archives at Kew, and many others.