

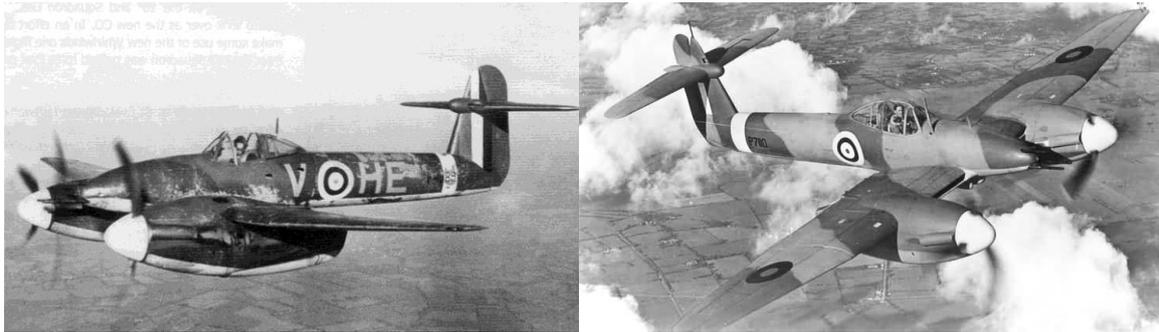
Whirlwind fighter aircraft explodes on impact with Saltford station yard – eyewitness account!

By Phil Harding

During the 1940s, Saltford was a quiet small country Somerset village with less than 2,000 residents situated between the cities of Bristol and Bath. It had its own railway station on the main GWR line between London Paddington and Bristol Temple Meads. This was an important means of transport for residents and visitors alike.

It was a sunny autumn day in October 1941 and Saltford long term resident Dave Taylor, then nine years old, was standing on the station platform watching with a friend the steam trains passing through. These included King, Castle, Hall and Manor Class locomotives.

Dave was hit by burning flying debris when a Westland Whirlwind fighter aircraft crashed into the station yard's weighbridge and exploded on impact. This factual account includes Dave's graphic eyewitness version of what happened relayed to the author of this article, Phil Harding, 70 years later.



Two Westland Whirlwind Fighter Aircraft in flight

Saltford station – an important transport facility for the community

As a young lad in the 1940s, Dave Taylor often used to catch the train from Saltford station to Oldfield Park in Bath so that he could visit his grandparents. The station was lit by gas lamps and was in constant use by those travelling to and from work or by many others visiting the River Avon that flows through Saltford to enjoy the local countryside and leisure facilities.

In addition to walking and cycling, other popular modes of transport for villagers during the war years were the buses and trams. The Bristol Omnibus Company ran green single decker buses with large bags on their roofs containing gas that was an alternative fuel used to preserve petrol supplies. As an alternative to going by bus, villagers also walked to the Globe Inn from where they could catch a tram that ran down the A4 into Bath.

The station railway sidings and yard were used for handling coal deliveries, a commonly used fuel then for heating homes. The station had a weighbridge between the main station building and the A4 road for weighing the truck loads of coal that were transferred between rail and road.

9th October 1941...

Nine year old Dave was spending the morning of a sunny October day at Saltford station with one of his friends (also called Dave). The sky was clear blue, without a cloud in sight. Dave often liked to stand on the platform to watch the steam trains bound for London or Bristol rushing through or watch them stop to allow passengers to get on or off.

On this particular day, they were both standing on the extended wooden platform on the “up” side; that is the Bath and London-bound platform that is closest to the river Avon and furthest from the A4 road. Quite a few people were on both platforms; as it was close to midday these were mainly day trippers who were either arriving or departing from visiting the river to enjoy a relaxing morning or afternoon in the glorious autumn sunshine.

Suddenly, a man standing on the footbridge that crossed the two platforms shouted out “Invasion!” and he pointed East towards Kelston Roundhill. Both boys looked towards the Roundhill and Dave saw a single parachute descending in the distance. Within seconds there was a deafening sound. It was the high pitched scream of an airplane making a sharp dive. As Dave turned his head towards this frightening noise he could see the stricken twin-engined airplane was heading straight down onto himself and his friend!

With no time to do anything else, Dave instinctively swung round as he crouched down and crossed his arms over his head to protect himself. Almost instantly there was an almighty crashing sound as the aircraft smashed into the weighbridge in the station yard behind the other platform opposite to where Dave was crouching. He turned and looked back across the track to the other platform. All he could see in front of him was a huge and overwhelming fireball with black bits of aircraft and parts of the weighbridge flying out in all directions from this fiery mass of billowing orange flames. The station’s ticket office was silhouetted black by this huge curtain of fire. Dave felt a sharp burning pain in the calf

muscle of his right leg as a small piece of burning hot metallic debris embedded itself into his flesh.

Parts of the aircraft crashed onto the track between the two platforms. Dave and his friend ran towards the end of the platform, tumbled down the steps onto the side of the railway track. As fast as they could they ran away from the scene, going up the track in the direction towards Bath. Dave was in such a rush he thought nothing of the injury to his leg.

Some 20 minutes later they started to make their way back. They crossed the fields back on to the A4 road and headed towards Saltford. When they reached close to the station yard, thick black smoke was still billowing up from the crash scene and ammunition from the mangled and burnt out wreckage was popping as it exploded. Two fire engines were in attendance. Dave and his friend made their way home and Dave's leg was attended to.



This photograph of Saltford station taken c. 1920 and published with kind permission of Akeman Press, Bath, shows the approximate location of the station weighbridge (behind the bushes) where the Westland Whirlwind fighter aircraft crashed and exploded.

A shocking aftermath for a nine year old boy...

Two days later Dave re-visited the scene. He stood and watched as cranes picked up the four cannons from the aircraft that had become embedded in the ground from the impact of the crash. As Dave looked around him he was horrified to see the pilot's severed hand that had been recovered and placed on a piece of slate roof tile.

The shock of seeing the pilot's hand made a deep impression on Dave; the realisation that he had witnessed that man's death sunk in. That and the crash itself have stayed with him constantly throughout his adult life.

The crash was caused by the mid-air collision of two RAF Westland Whirlwind fighter aircraft that were out on flight exercises. They were in a group of six returning to base when the last two Westland Whirlwinds collided.

Mercifully there was just the one fatality that day, the pilot of the Westland Whirlwind that crashed into the weighbridge pit in the station yard. His name was **Pilot Officer Ormonde Hoskins** aged 26 of 263 Squadron, flying Whirlwind P6968, operating out of RAF Charmy Down, situated just north of Bath. He died instantly on impact. Pilot Officer Hoskins' remains were buried at Laverstock, Salisbury.

The other pilot involved in the collision was **Flight Lieutenant Humphrey Coghlan** (pictured on the right of this page by his Westland Whirlwind at Charmy Down).

F/L Coghlan bailed out at 5,000 feet and it was his parachute that our eye witness, Dave Taylor, saw descending from the sky. He landed in Weston High Street (on the West side of Bath). His Westland Whirlwind crashed at Kelston.



There is no photographic record of Dave at age 9. Here he is pictured 6 years later as a Saltford Boy Scout in 1947.



A Westland Whirlwind



One of Saltford Environment Group's first community-wide activities since it was established in early 2011 was to initiate a campaign for the re-opening of Saltford station. In the course of investigating the old station's past important role within the community of Saltford this article was produced for SEG by Phil Harding. Phil is very grateful to Dave Taylor and his son Rob for their assistance in helping him produce this short publication.

This article has been republished for SEG's History of Saltford project (Online Museum) in 2015.

Phil Harding MBE

October 2011

(Republished August 2015).