

# THE FIRST WORLD WAR AIRFIELD AT FARNINGHAM

The inadequate defence of London against German aircraft was a ring of 10 airfields

By the end of 1915 inland defences were taken over by the Royal Flying Corps and organisation improved.

Hounslow, Northolt, Hendon, Chingford, Hainault Farm, Suttons Farm (Hornchurch), Joyce Green, **Farningham** (a satellite of Joyce Green), Croydon and Wimbledon Common.



2-seater BE2C biplanes, maximum speed of 72 mph

Two planes with experienced night-flying pilots on permanent standby.

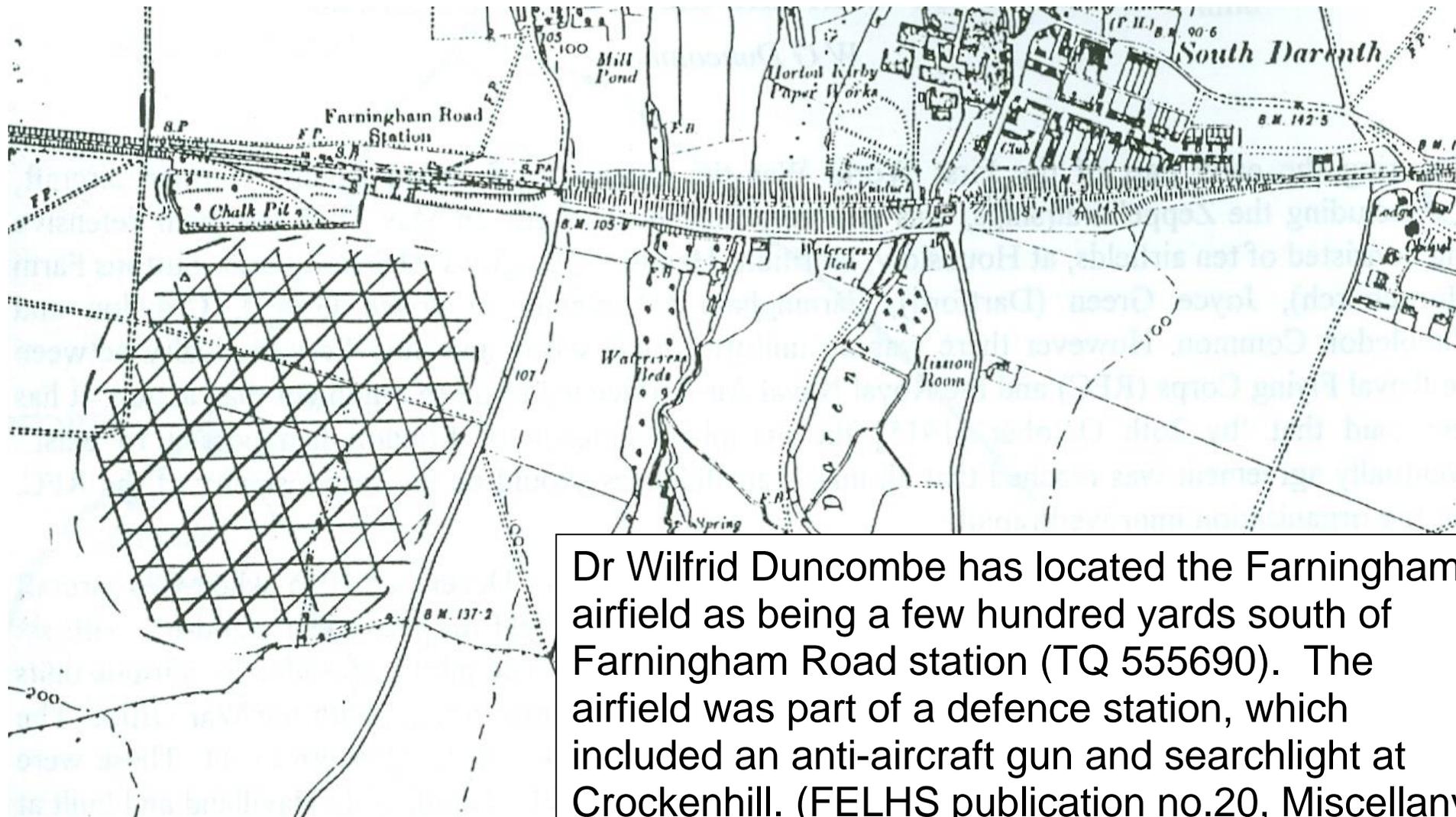
They worked in shifts and were in constant telephone contact with the War Office.

Planes used already obsolete on the Western Front.

Carried ineffective bombs, until an improved shell was introduced against inflammable hydrogen.

## FARNINGHAM AIRFIELD

The anti-aircraft and a searchlight post associated with Farningham airfield were at Crockenhill.



Dr Wilfrid Duncombe has located the Farningham airfield as being a few hundred yards south of Farningham Road station (TQ 555690). The airfield was part of a defence station, which included an anti-aircraft gun and searchlight at Crockenhill. (FELHS publication no.20, Miscellany, paper by Dr Wilfrid Duncombe)

## 3 APRIL 1916: 2nd Lt. ALFRED DE BATHE BRANDON'S EMERGENCY LANDING AT FARNINGHAM

31 March 1916 - 2nd Lt. Brandon attacked Zeppelin L15.

He missed, but its gas cells were punctured by anti-aircraft guns.

14 October 1915 - L15 had bombed the Strand & Aldwych, killing 17.

Losing height, it crashed into the sea off Margate.

First airship brought down by Home Defence.



All but one of the crew rescued alive.

1 April 1916 - Zeppelin L15 sinking off the coast of Margate

## 3 APRIL 1916: 2nd Lt. ALFRED DE BATHE BRANDON'S EMERGENCY LANDING AT FARNINGHAM

3 April 1916 - A few days later Zeppelins attacked London.

2nd Lt. Alfred de Bathe Brandon

One was L13, which was hit by anti-aircraft shells from Woolwich and Purfleet.

8/9 September 1915 - L13 inflicted widespread destruction in central London on, causing damage of over £500,000, and on 14 October 1915 it bombed Woolwich Arsenal.

2nd Lt. Brandon, sent from Joyce Green, Dartford, located the airship over Essex.

The airship's machine gunners fired on his plane, and the airship escaped in cloud. It was lucky to return home.

**Brandon brought his plane down on the Farningham airfield,** riddled with bullet holes.



## WILLIAM LEEFE ROBINSON V.C. STATIONED IN FARNINGHAM



Lieutenant William Leefe Robinson, aged 20, was stationed at Farningham from 24 December 1915 to 12 January 1916, during which time he and another pilot were billeted in the Lion Hotel. He wrote to his mother:-

We are living in this sweet little country hotel, all on our own – we are awfully comfortable here and the job is a very slack one. We are chosen for it because we are supposed to be able to fly at night, an accomplishment not every pilot can boast of I may state. There are only 20 planes in the London defence, but we are absolutely the first to receive the enemy should they come over.

## WILLIAM LEEFE ROBINSON V.C.

3 September 1916 - Lieutenant William Leefe Robinson, aged 21, was in 39 Home Defence Squadron based at Suttons Farm near Hornchurch.

11.10 p.m. - He was sent up to patrol towards Joyce Green, along the Thames and out to Farningham.

He aimed with new incendiary bullets designed to ignite the airship's hydrogen gas cells.

2.00 a.m. - After flying his BE2C for 3 hours when he intercepted the SL11, picked out by searchlights.

The bullets set the airship ablaze. It came down in Cuffley, Hertfordshire.

He became **the first airman to bring down a German airship over British soil.**

Robinson became a national hero and was awarded the Victoria Cross, the only one presented for an action in Britain.

April 1917 - he was shot down by the 'Red Baron' and taken prisoner of war.

Brutally treated because the Germans knew of his part in downing the SL11.

December 1918 - Weak and with flu, he died shortly after returning home.

## **WALTER GORDON WILSON'S FLIGHT AT FARNINGHAM AIRFIELD**

(From A Gordon Wilson's biography of his father, 'Walter Wilson (1874-1957): Portrait of an Inventor')

Far more interesting than my father's preoccupation with tanks was the little aerodrome near Franks Hall, between Farningham and South Darenth, from which immaculately dressed young men were flying BE2Cs by night to try to intercept Zeppelins. We used to go there on Sunday afternoons and every so often some distinguished residents would be given a 'flip'.

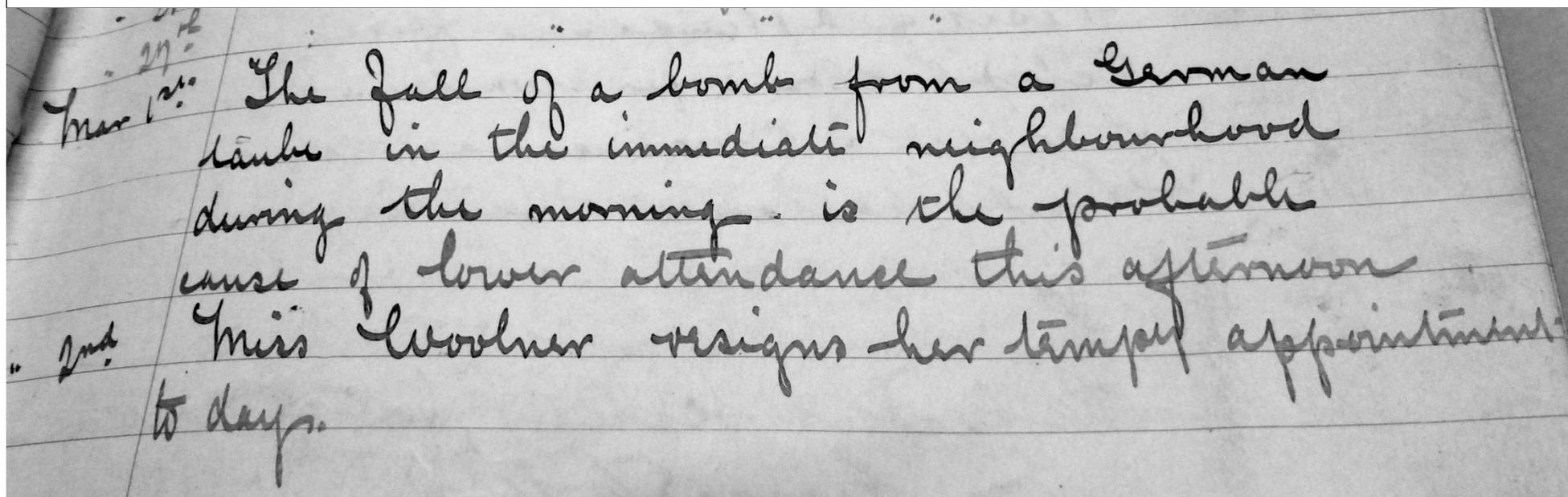
On one occasion one pilot was not able to take my father up, but another pilot took pity and pressed him to a flight. However, he was not a brilliant flyer, and after a wobbly start did some circuits around the aerodrome. – finally executing a rather violent dive at a low altitude and pulling out quite near the ground. After the pilot landed the plane with a bump he was asked what he was trying to do. He replied that he thought Major Wilson might like to do a loop and then remembered that he was not strapped in. On hearing this, the face of my mother, who had been an apprehensive spectator, was a study.

## FARNINGHAM and AIR RAIDS

5 June and 18 December 1917 enemy planes visited Dartford 21 times.

37 air raids in or near Dartford altogether during the War.

1 March 1917 - (Farningham Council School log) The fall of a German bomb from a German bomber in the immediate neighbourhood during the morning is the probable cause of low attendance this afternoon.



The fall of a bomb from a German tank in the immediate neighbourhood during the morning is the probable cause of lower attendance this afternoon.

2nd Miss Woolner resigns her temporary appointment to days.

Elsie Clements' diary throws light on this is otherwise unrecorded incident. She wrote that the bomb thought to have been dropped by a German seaplane, was in fact shrapnel from the guns at Dartford.

## FARNINGHAM and AIR RAIDS

5 June 1917 - (Farningham Parish Council minutes) Superintendent of Police of Dartford to be asked to give warning of approach of enemy aircraft in future.

Perhaps there was concern because two bi-planes had flown over, though no bombs had been dropped locally.



BUT 25 May 1917 - 21 Gotha bombers had flown up the Thames to London, turning back at Gravesend due to fog, but bombing Folkestone on way back, killing 71. No air raid warning had been given, and at a public meeting at Folkestone on 28 May a resolution was passed demanding a warning of an impending attack. (Thanks to Brian Hussey for providing the comments)

Farningham Parish Council may have been aware of this at its meeting.

## **FARNINGHAM and AIR RAIDS**

**1917 - Saturday 31 October/ Sunday 1 November:** Between 11.00 pm - 2.05 am, several bombs were dropped locally at Fawkham, Farningham, Hawley, Lanes End, and two near the railway in Bow Arrow Lane, Dartford. Erith suffered badly in this raid.

- Elsie Clements recorded bombs dropped at Speedgate (near Brands Hatch) at this time.

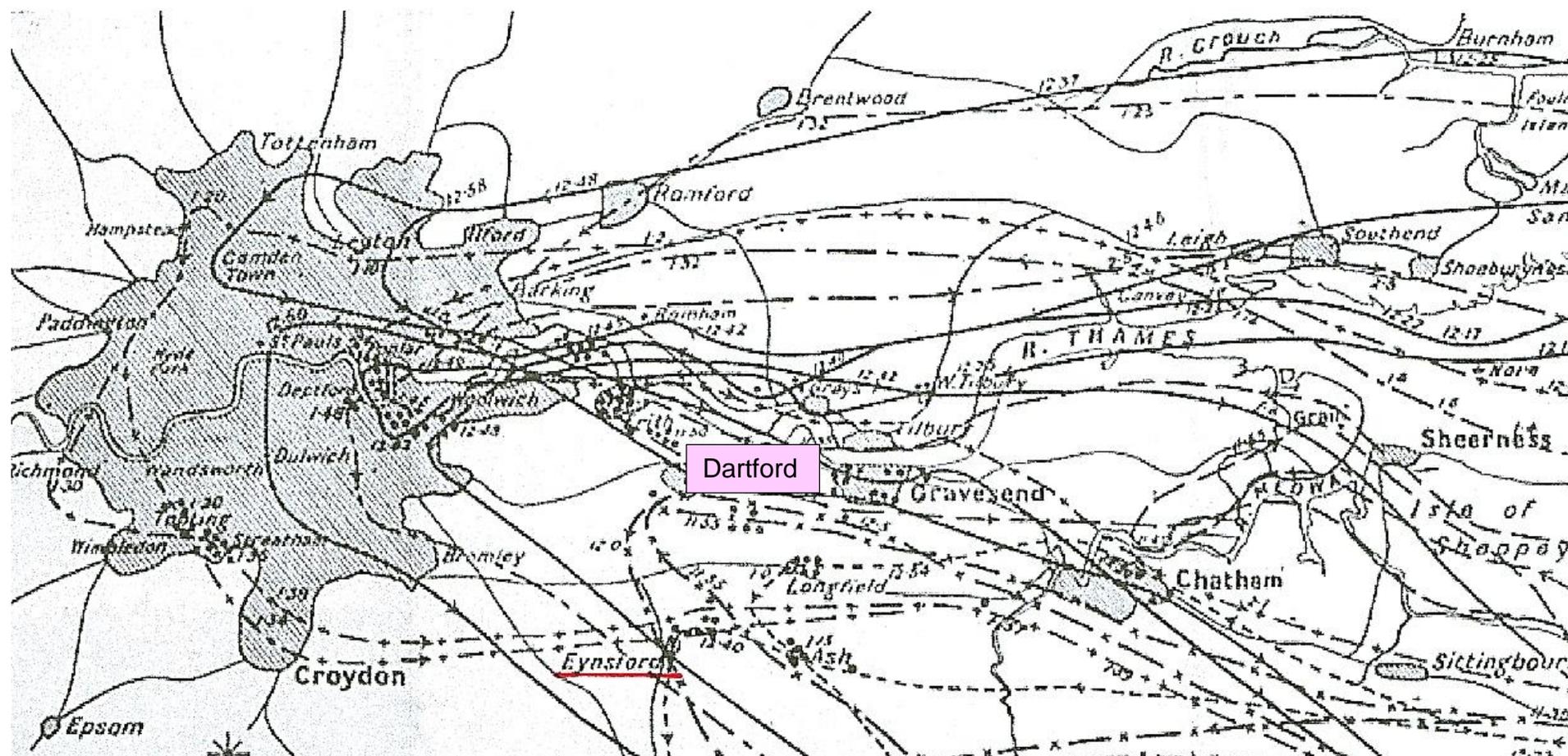
(This was a major night raid by 22 Gothas. 183 bombs fell on Kent, killing one person, and enough planes reached London to drop 85 bombs, killing 8).

**1918 - 12 March:** Farningham Parish Council requested shrapnel helmets to protect special constables on night duty during enemy air raids.

(In January and February there had been major attacks on London and anti-aircraft defences had been increased. Anti-aircraft guns used a new barrage of fire called the polygon and this fell to the ground as shrapnel, in London on 28 January injuring 11 and damaging 311 houses. With the anti-aircraft gun stationed at Wested it is understandable that Farningham Parish Council sought extra protection for those on duty outside.)

**1918 - 18 May:** The last air raid of 34 German planes was recorded, with 13 reaching London bombing Lewisham and Hither Green.

## ZEPPELIN RAID ROUTES TOWARDS LONDON



Map of routes taken by planes in a German night raid on London, 31 October/1 November 1917. Eynsford underlined in red, with several routes over Farningham. (Courtesy of Brian Hussey)

