

The Great War Hut at the start of the trail is a reconstructed barracks



Recruits to Hednesford, upon arrival, would often comment on the barren feel of the place, some even making a comparison with Siberia, or a POW camp! Even so, many regarded their time spent here with nostalgia. The National Service (RAF) Association holds reunions here, and a commemoration stone now stands at the entrance to the Camp. There is also an 'Old Comrades' book at Cannock Chase Visitor Centre.

After the war, the Camp was used both for demobilizing service personnel and preparing those remaining for overseas postings. From 1947, it was used as a training camp for young men on National Service. A Spitfire and a Meteor were placed by the camp entrance.

Due to cuts in government spending, the camp closed in 1956, with the final passing out parade of 130 recruits being held in December of that year.

RAF Hednesford Trail follows level, well-surfaced paths for most of the route and is accessible by all. The trail is a circular walk around a former RAF Second World War training camp.

RAF Hednesford was neither an operational nor a flying station during the Second World War. It was a training centre, responsible for training flight mechanics, flight riggers and fitters. These key technical support staff were essential to the war effort, enabling the RAF to successfully defend the skies over Britain.

Thousands of RAF men passed through the training centre, as well as many Royal Navy personnel of the Fleet Air Arm and women in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF). There were also a large number of Navy, Army and Air Force Institutes (NAAFI) running the social recreational facilities.

After the war, National Service was introduced in 1947 for young men between the ages of 18 and 30. About 81,500 men received their basic 6-week training at RAF Hednesford until it closed in 1956.

Shortly afterwards, the camp was home to 1200 Hungarian refugees seeking asylum following the resistance to the Soviet invasion of Hungary.

RAF Hednesford is one of a number of important military heritage sites at Cannock Chase.



Entrance to RAF Hednesford with Meteor and Spitfire, c1950s

The Camp had its own cinema (the Astra), three churches, a Jewish synagogue, a YMCA, post office, hospital, two firing ranges, dozens of sports fields, and an assault course. A camp of this size required a lot of civilian and maintenance staff, most of whom were local, making the Camp an integral part of the local community.

Aircraft and aircraft parts were kept in the training sheds for the mechanics, riggers and fitters to examine, repair, take to bits and put back together. The recruits learned the trade and gained experience of assembling and dismantling all types of aircraft including Spitfires, Fairey Battles, Gloster Meteors and Gladiators.

The instructors were a mixture of RAF personnel and civilians and the courses followed a set series of classes and workshops. The recruits often joined with some engineering skills, but needed to learn highly specialised techniques in aircraft engineering.

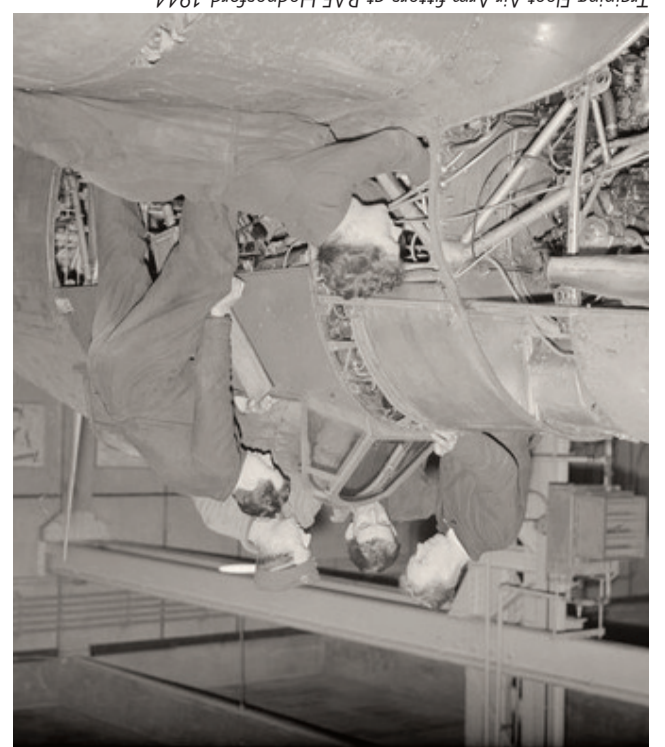
In the war years, the Camp was known as the No. 6 School of Technical Training, and many thousands of personnel from the RAF, the Navy's Fleet Air Arm and the WAAF served here, alongside the NAAFI and civilian workers.

The Camp consisted of 4 wings, which each had 2 squadrons, named A to H. These in turn held 4 flights, numbered 1 to 32, made up of 100 men each. Each wing had its own HQ, stores, NAAFI and dining hall.

The new RAF recruits invariably got off the train at Hednesford. It's no surprise that this gloomy arrival meant the camp was remembered by many as isolated, bleak and barren. Behind the high perimeter fence monotonous rows of long wooden huts stretched into the distance. Add black-outs, war-time restrictions, food rations and harsh winters, and the camp was hardly 'home from home'.



Fleet Air Arm fitters in a classroom-style training room



Training Fleet Air Arm fitters at RAF Hednesford, 1944

In the 1930s, many people believed that the outbreak of war was inevitable before the actual start of hostilities in 1939. RAF Hednesford was one of several training centres built during 1938-1939 to help counter the threat of the superior German air power.

The new RAF recruits invariably got off the train at Hednesford to Rugeley. The infamous trudge up Kitbag Hill with heavy bags was the usual welcome to RAF Hednesford. It's no surprise that this gloomy arrival meant the camp was remembered by many as isolated, bleak and barren. Behind the high perimeter fence monotonous rows of long wooden huts stretched into the distance. Add black-outs, war-time restrictions, food rations and harsh winters, and the camp was hardly 'home from home'.

Remembering RAF Hednesford



RAF Hednesford Trail



Waymarked Trail
A circular walk on level, well-surfaced paths
2 miles / 3.2 kms (1 hour)

protect · respect · enjoy

Don't approach or feed deer

Don't approach or feed farm animals

Take litter and dog waste home

No naked flames, fires or barbecues

Park only in car parks

Use sustainable transport

Only use permitted cycle tracks

Use bridleways when horse-riding

Protect wildlife by keeping to paths

Keep your dog under control

Beware - people and animals on roads

Think! Stay safe. Keep out.

Be a Chase Champion – Follow the Cannock Chase Code

Main military heritage sites on Cannock Chase

Discover more about the landscape, nature and heritage of Cannock Chase on our website or by visiting one of the visitor centres/hubs in the area.

www.cannock-chase.co.uk



Photographs by Imperial War Museum, Dave Bevington and Jim Rudge. Illustration by Dave Thompson

RAF Hednesford Trail

A circular walk on level, well-surfaced paths
2 miles (3.2 kilometres) – allow about 1 hour

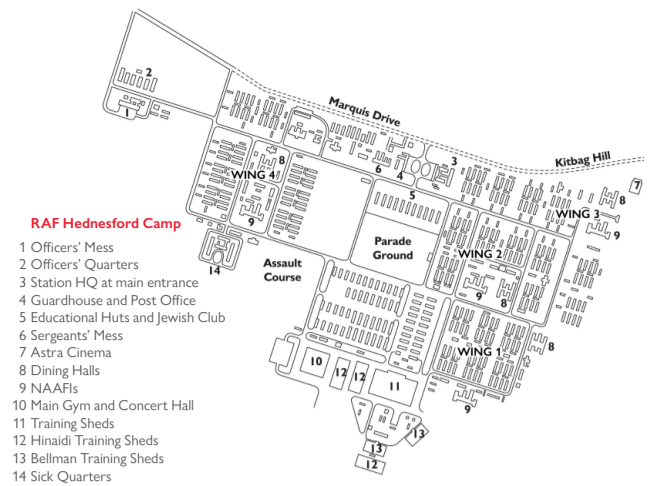
📍 Start the route at Cannock Chase Visitor Centre. Follow the RAF roundel waymarkers around the route. There are five interpretation panels on the trail to help you discover more about the story of RAF Hednesford.

👉 Take the path to the side of the Visitor Centre, with the toilet block on your right. Just behind the Visitor Centre is the Great War Hut, a reconstructed barrack hut from the Great War training camps. Go left to follow the path to Marquis Drive with the children's play area on your left.

When you get to the road (Marquis Drive), turn right and follow through the metal barrier, noticing the camp perimeter fence posts on your right. After about 200m pause at the first interpretation panel and imagine that you're a young RAF recruit at the start of the Second World War in 1939.

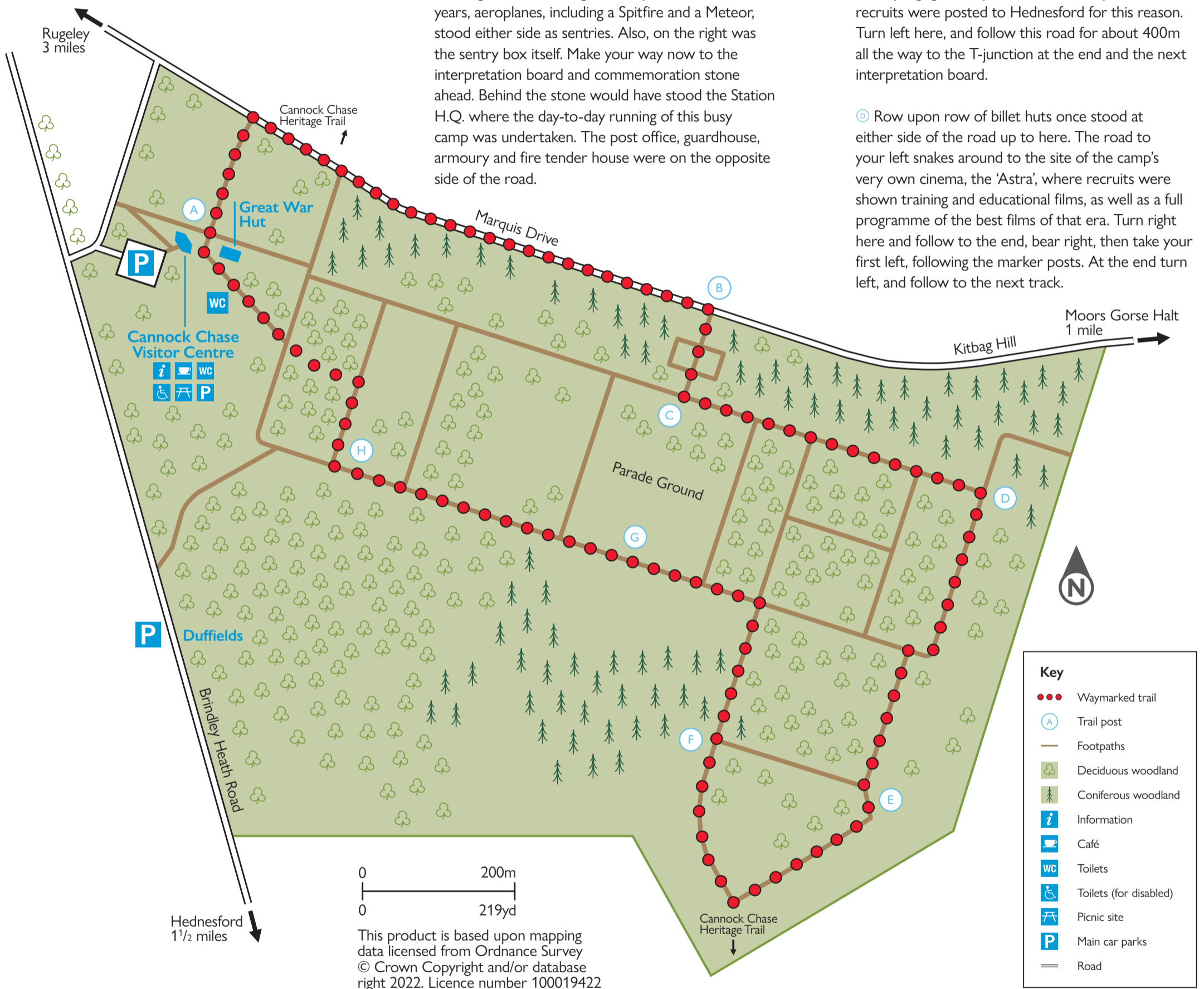
📍 After a while (300 yds) you will come across the camp entrance. The track ahead of you leads down to the Rugeley to Hednesford railway line, and the former station at Moors Gorse Halt. New recruits arriving by train would have to walk up this incline, infamously known as 'Kitbag Hill'. On your left is the turning circle for buses and other vehicles dropping off at the camp entrance, these recruits being fortunate in not having to endure the uphill struggle.

Turn right now, entering the camp, where over the years, aeroplanes, including a Spitfire and a Meteor, stood either side as sentries. Also, on the right was the sentry box itself. Make your way now to the interpretation board and commemoration stone ahead. Behind the stone would have stood the Station H.Q. where the day-to-day running of this busy camp was undertaken. The post office, guardhouse, armoury and fire tender house were on the opposite side of the road.



📍 Continue on to the T-junction, where the educational huts stood in a row, on the grass opposite. Amongst these buildings were the camp's own synagogue and Jewish club, and all Jewish RAF recruits were posted to Hednesford for this reason. Turn left here, and follow this road for about 400m all the way to the T-junction at the end and the next interpretation board.

📍 Row upon row of billet huts once stood at either side of the road up to here. The road to your left snakes around to the site of the camp's very own cinema, the 'Astra', where recruits were shown training and educational films, as well as a full programme of the best films of that era. Turn right here and follow to the end, bear right, then take your first left, following the marker posts. At the end turn left, and follow to the next track.



📍 This point gives you a chance to take in the lovely panoramic view across the valley. On the opposite side of the track, and to your left, beyond the tree line, is the area known as Moors Gorse. Take the path to your right, up to the crossroads, and turn right.

📍 Follow the track to the post (F) and the next interpretation board. The area to the left contained the Bellman and Hinaidi training sheds and hangars, where the ground crews learnt their trade. Also, on the left, in front of these buildings, stood one of the camp's Spitfires. The landscape at the southern end of the site has altered considerably, owing to the fact that the spoil from the West Cannock No. 5 Colliery was deposited here after the closure of the camp.

📍 Continue along this road to the junction, turn left, and follow to post (G) and the next interpretation board, near to the bench on your left. The large, flat, grassed area in front of you was the parade ground where recruits undertook their drill, affectionately known as 'square bashing'. At the end of their training they would take part in the 'passing out' parade. On the right-hand side was the flag staff and saluting base.

On the opposite, south side of the road were dozens of technical huts. Again, this area, including the parade ground, was built up with mining waste. The parade ground itself suffered over the years from mining subsidence, and many a story is told of recruits sliding away to one side, during icy weather!

📍 As you continue on this road, you pass through 'Goon Valley', named after the show of the time and where, on your left, the camp assault course stood. At the top of the hill, take the second track on your right. At this crossroads, down the track to the left, is the site of the camp hospital and sick quarters. This, and the billets opposite, were later used to house a total of 1200 Hungarian refugees fleeing from the uprising in 1956. The stone seen here commemorates the work done by Hungarian youngsters in 1987, on the track around the hospital site. The firing ranges for the camp, one indoor, one outdoor, were situated at the end of the road ahead. Take the track to the right, and take the first path on the left. Follow this track, past the compound gates, back to the Visitor Centre.