

Historic Baginton Aerodrome set to close in June

THE historic aerodrome at Baginton - known for many years as Coventry Airport - is finally set to close, making way for a proposed gigafactory on the site.

The airport on the southern edge of the city first opened in 1936 when Coventry Corporation decided to establish a municipal aerodrome on land they had owned since 1897.

It was an era when interest in flight was growing and the site at Baginton provided an ideal base for small, private planes. But with World War Two looming, it also provided a perfect site for aircraft production. In July 1935, when the idea of an aerodrome was first mooted, John Siddeley of Armstrong Whitworth Siddeley, was given permission to expand his aircraft production at Whitley by building a new factory at Baginton, and to use the new municipal runway for flight testing.

During the war, the aerodrome became known as RAF Baginton and is best remembered as the base of 308 Squadron, part of the Polish Air Force in exile, which lost nine men during the war, including three who lost their lives during the Coventry Blitz. Graves of nine Polish airmen can be found in the graveyard of St John the Baptist Church at Baginton.



Photo: National Transport Trust



Wizz Air flight from Coventry. Photo: Rob Hodgkins, Wikipedia CC

Aircraft production continued during the war, with hundreds of Coventry workers travelling to the site each day to expand production of Lancaster and Whitley bombers.

After the war, the aerodrome resumed its role as a municipal airport, and it became known as Coventry Airport in the 1960s, by which time its original grass runway had been replaced with a hard surface. Over the years, air shows became a regular feature, often involving vintage aircraft.

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**Season's greetings to all members and friends of
Stoke Local History Group**

There will be no meeting in January. Our next meeting takes place at Stoke Library on Friday February 6th, with the usual 10.30 start.

During its heyday, the airport operated a number of commercial passenger flights, first to the Channel Islands and later to countries such as Spain, Italy and Austria. In more recent years, Thomsonfly operated a fleet of passenger flights to Europe, and Wizz Air offered flights to Poland. But all such flights came to an end in 2008 after efforts to create a larger terminal were thwarted.

The airport's most famous moment probably came in 1982 when Pope John Paul II arrived in a helicopter and was greeted by over 300,000 people. But other moments were less celebratory.



Photo: National Transport Trust

In the mid-1990s the airport was leased to Air Atlantique which specialised in cargo and vintage aircraft flights. This led to major controversy when the firm allowed businessman Christopher Barratt-Jolley to export live veal calves from the airport. Hundreds of animal rights protesters demonstrated outside the airport gates, with police arresting over 200 people.

In December 1994, a Boeing 737, used for exporting calves, crashed near to houses in Willenhall Wood, killing all five people on board. And on February 1st 1995, Jill Phipps, an animal rights protester, was crushed to death under the wheels of a lorry carrying veal calves into Coventry Airport.

Despite these bleak episodes, thankfully rare, most Coventry folk will probably regard the airport with a good deal of affection. Toll Bar End will never seem the same without the uplifting sight of small, low-flying aircraft, swooping in to land at Baginton. And we will all miss the sight of an occasional vintage aircraft or a helicopter from the Air Ambulance Service.

Since its acquisition by Sir Peter Rigby in 2010, the airport has been slated for closure, with his company confirming this month that operations will cease on June 11th 2026.

The Rigby Group said the end of runway operations at Baginton would enable the next phase of building work to begin for Greenpower Park, the location of a proposed battery gigafactory.

Greenpower Park is a joint venture between Coventry City Council and Coventry Airport and received a £23m funding boost from the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) in January. Warwick District Council has now given approval for the next phase of the development. □



Events in January

ALTHOUGH the history group will not meet in January, there will be no shortage of events elsewhere in Coventry for those interested in history. Historic Coventry Trust will be staging several events at the Anglican Chapel at London Road Cemetery, including a talk and guided walk by Adam Wood, a regular speaker at Stoke, who will offer a session at the cemetery called '*Dead and buried: more tales of true crime*', from 4pm on Saturday January 17th (see Historic Coventry Trust website for details and booking).

Elsewhere, you can hear a special concert of medieval and renaissance music at one of Coventry's most beautiful historic venues, St Mary's Guildhall, on Sunday January 25th, beginning at 2.30pm (details from St Mary's Guildhall website).