

Royal Ordnance Factory

Ranskill

Lound, Nottinghamshire

Workforce Memories

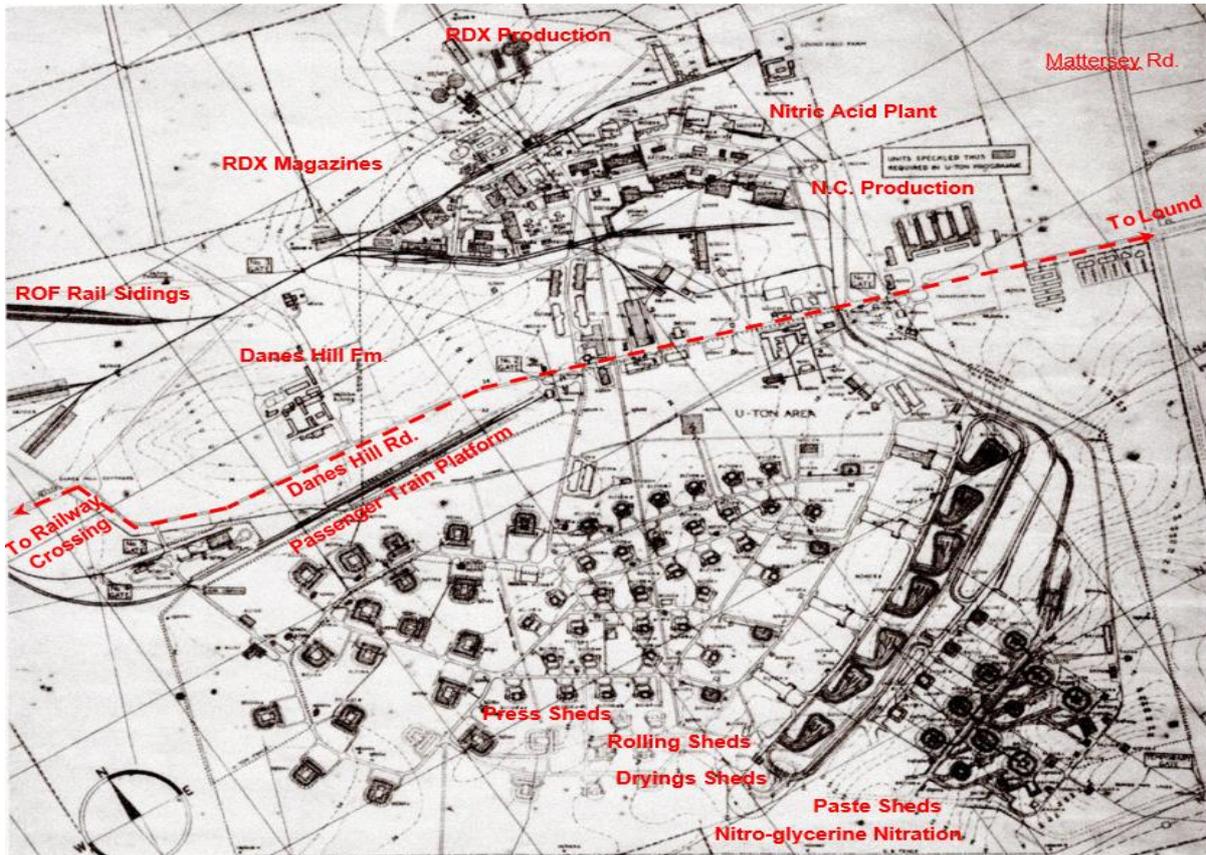
In 1939 to increase the production of solventless cordite for WW2 alongside R.O.F. (*Royal Ordnance Factory*) at Wrexham and Bishopton a new production site was urgently needed. (*cordite is a family of smokeless propellants developed and produced in the UK since 1889 to replace gunpowder as a projectile propellant*).

A suitable site was required and for safety reasons in the event of an explosion, it must be far from populated and industrial areas. It also required good road and rail access together with an accessible labour force. This site also needed a supply of cooling water, so a nearby river was essential.

Ministry of Works Surveys indicated a suitable site near Retford at Danes Hill between Lound and Ranskill being the perfect location.

The land requisition covered 517 acres south of, and 366 acres north of the road between Lound and Torworth and within an electrified security fence a factory area of 450 acres. In addition, 6.8 acres adjacent to the River Idle at Bellmoor for a water settling lagoon, 13 acres at Ranskill for a hostel, 12 acres at Lound crossroads for staff bungalows (*6 for the Fire Brigade and Police, 8 for senior staff*) and 40 acres at Mattersey Thorpe.

To house the workforce from outside the area for married couples' bungalows were built on a 40-acre site at Mattersey Thorpe. Single personnel were housed in hostels and social buildings on a 13-acre site at Ranskill, while staff requiring accommodation were put up in two houses in Lound, 'Highfield House' and 'White Lodge'.



Layout of R.O.F. Site

As the village school on the Mattersey Road was directly opposite the factory and within the danger area it was acquired and used by contractors. The school classes were moved to the local village halls. After the war, the school was used as a hostel for displaced persons and later by the Women's Land Army.

The public were excluded from the site so 'stopping up' orders were made to close the Lound to Torworth road together with the footpath from Manor Farm in Sutton diagonally across the site to Danes Hill Farm.

For the construction of the factory much of the material came by rail, the nearest delivery point being Ranskill Station.

Road access to Ranskill Station and the R.O.F. site was vital. As Danes Hill Farm was central, Bridge Road (beach tree avenue past the traveller's site) was extended to join Common Lane at Ranskill and to the station. Owing to heavy main line traffic over the level

crossing further land adjoining the Ranskill sidings was taken, giving



direct access connection from the main line north bound at Ranskill and south bound at Torworth into the eight goods and two passenger sidings and into the factory. (*train sidings were adjacent to current landfill site*).

Danes Hills Farmhouse



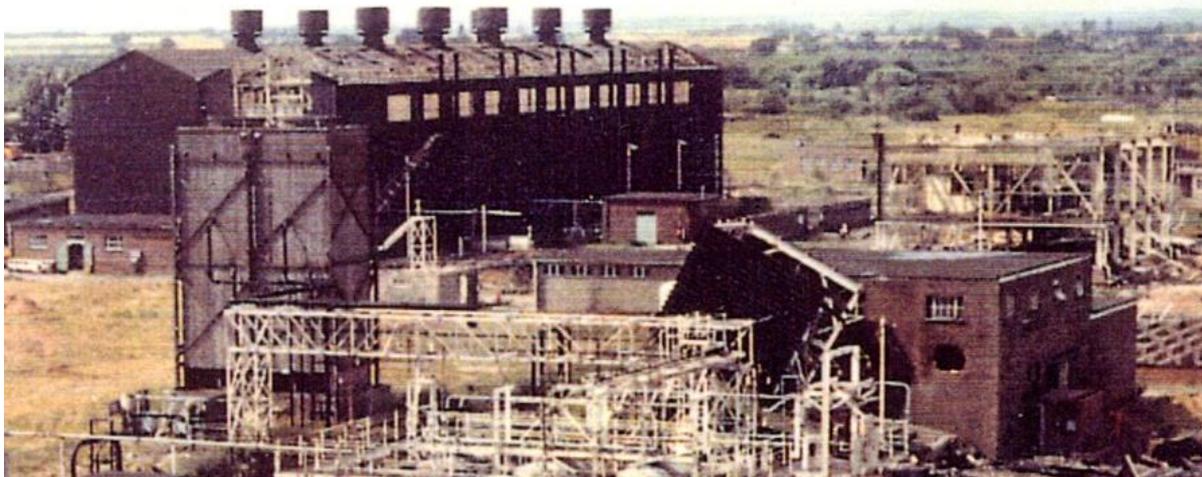
Aerial View with Danes Hill Crossroad Bungalows/Mattersey Road on the Right

Once the plant had been constructed, it could produce 300 tons a week of soventless cordite of different diameters to suit the many types of military weapons in use.

The factory comprised of six main areas. To the north were administration, workshop, acid production and rail sidings. To the

south were cordite, magazines, rolling sheds, main canteen, laundry, surgery, and passenger platform.

The process was continuous with three shifts, seven days a week and required a workforce of around 4000, the majority being women. Two trains per shift transported workers to and from nearby towns and buses from local villages.



Acid Production Building prior to being demolished in the 1980's

Construction of the R.O.F. took place in 1940 to 1941, with production starting later that year until its closure in July 1945. The acid plant was restarted in 1949 to 1950 for some oleum (*oleum is an important intermediate in the manufacture of sulfuric acid*).

The site remained unused until 1947 when a lease was granted to British Rail for the use of the rail sidings and buildings for carriage and wagon repair and breakdowns. The Torworth road had remained closed to the public following pressure from local councils until 1954. Further lease of the land and buildings went to: H Owen (*North Road Sand & Gravel Co.*), to the west of the site Kingsway Concrete Co. 1958, Brooklyn Westbrick 1963, Cufflin Holdings 1969, British Marco 1975.

In 1963 following the 'Suez' crisis a plant for making RDX (*an explosive more energetic than TNT*) was installed on an area of 86 acres to the north of the existing site and utilising existing factory services.

Three million gallons of water a day to the plant came from a pumping station next to the River Idle at Bellmoor. This was connected to two 15" underground mains to two large overhead tanks of 30,000 gallons situated at the highest point between Sutton and Danes Hill crossroads.

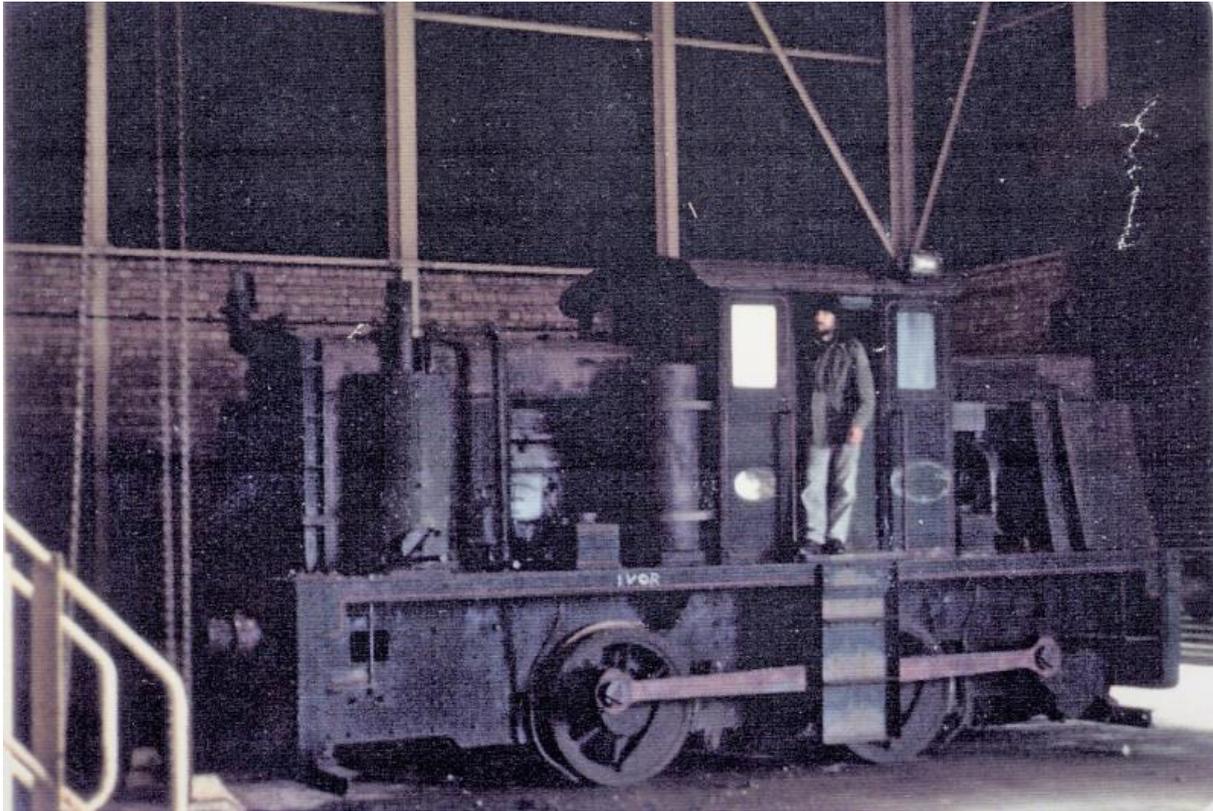


Photo of some of the Workforce

Workers were not allowed to wear jewellery and had special clothing and felt shoes to prevent sparks. Wages were high (£9/wk.) because of the many dangerous substances being used. (e.g. Sulphuric and Nitric Acid).

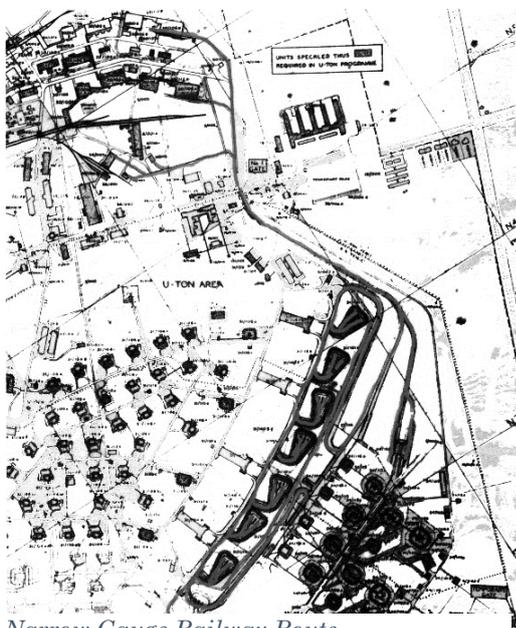
Part of the process was Nitro-glycerine which was used to make cordite sheets. The 20lb. sheets were passed repeatedly between steel rolls which were operated by two girls. One working the rolling machine the other on watch ready to pull the 200-gallon water drencher chain if she saw a spark or heard unusual noises. If the chain was pulled, the force of the water would push the girl to the floor giving her time to crawl away. Fortunately, during cordite production no major explosions occurred due to good supervision.

However, some accidents and explosions did happen, the serious of these being acid burns on hands, arms and face. Headaches were common or being overcome by acid fumes.



Special Narrow Gauge Steam Engine

To move equipment and people around the site a light gauge railway system was used. However, to prevent any explosions from sparks the steam locomotive had no fire nor boiler but was powered by a stored charge of steam. Unfortunately, it is reported on one occasion the engine derailed and turned over fatally scalding the driver.



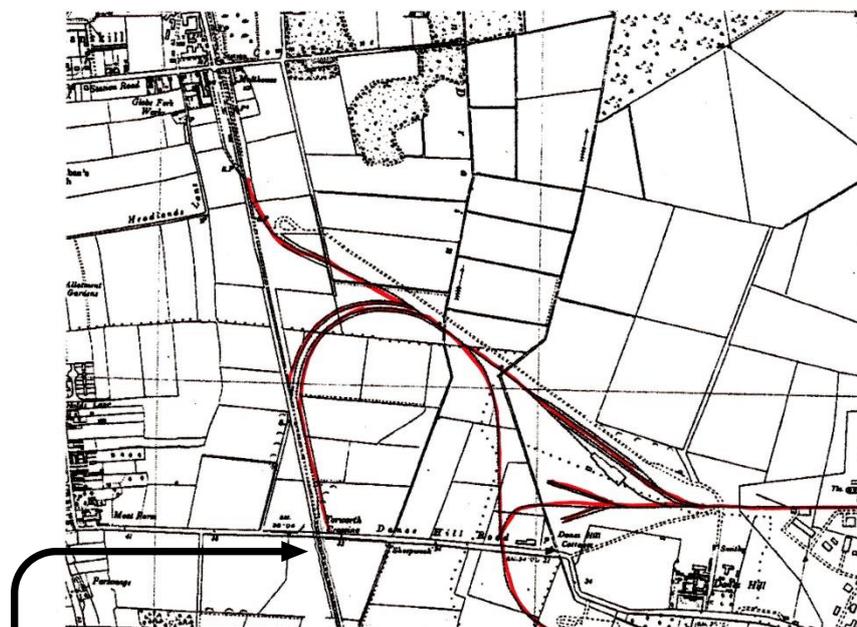
Narrow Gauge Railway Route

Fire engines and ambulances were always on standby. For supervisors to get around 37 bicycles were used on site. Meals from the canteen were transported around the site by a Morris van and two cars were always on call to take senior staff to appointments in other towns and R.O.F sites. These were driven by girls seconded from M.T.C. (*Mechanisation Transport Corps*) to the R.O.F.

Alongside the workers were 700 prisoners of war in a special camp on the site. They did basic work and wore a black uniform with yellow diamonds on the back.

Main Line Steam Trains

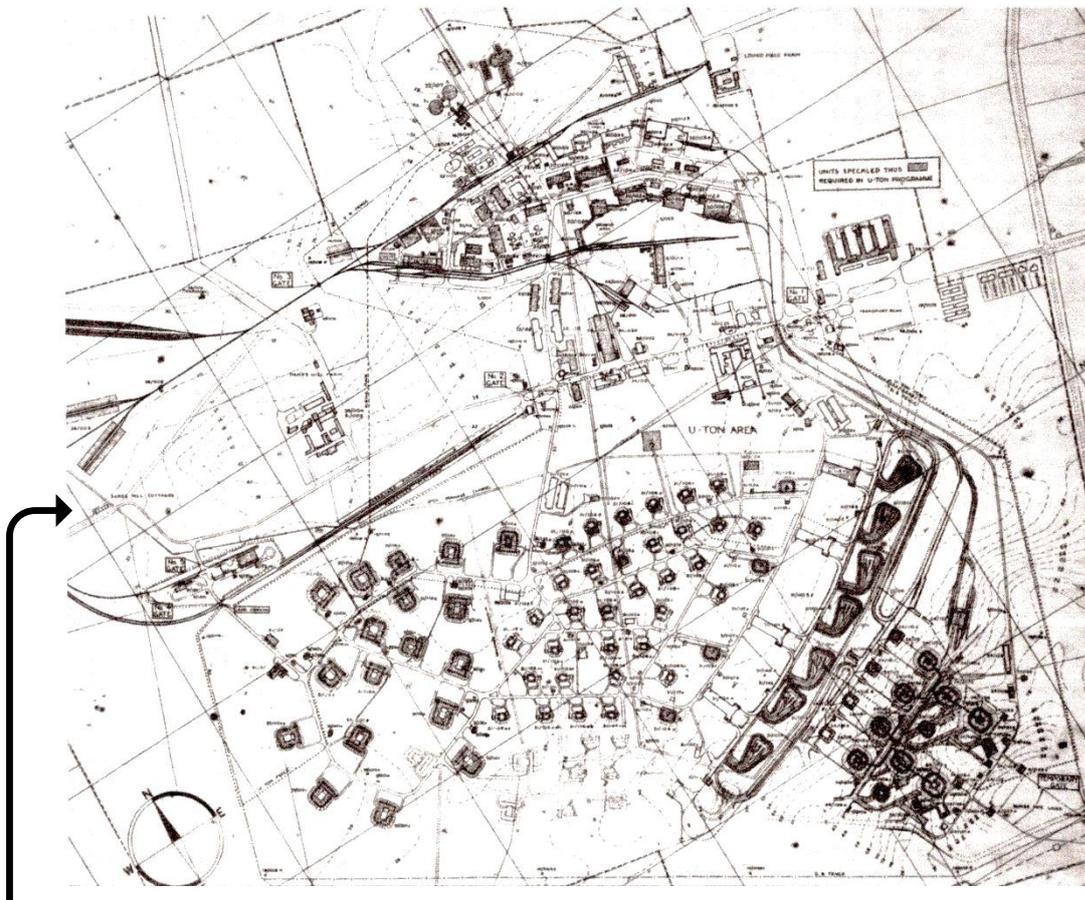
To transport goods to and from the R.O.F. site during its construction and operation in the war years a good rail system was required. The road system at that time was slow and very limiting on the size of cargo. There also needed to be good passenger links with local towns and cities to bring in the large workforce of mainly women on a 24/7 shift system. The site selection was partly due to good rail links already established in the area and to connect with the rest of the country. The east coastline was privately built in 1840 with a cargo and passenger station built at Ranskill and opened in 1852. The R.O.F. did not use this well-established station. The rail loops coming to the R.O.F. site left the main line between the Torworth crossing and the Ranskill crossing (site of old station). The loop from the south line came into what is now, Dans Hill Lakes reserve on the north side of the road where the entrance posts are still in place. The footpath partly follows the old-line route. The loop coming from the northern line has totally gone. Ranskill fishing lakes are now where the line used to be. Both these lines then met up and proceeded to a large land drain where today, only a small amount of its bridge remains.



Railway Line Crossing at Torworth

The lines separate again, one to the large goods station with its seven-line wide yard which was located where the land fill site stands now. The other line heads for the passenger station on the south side of the road in a concrete works. The line crossed the road through the building salvage yard, coming into Danes Hill Lakes south side next to the car park. The line split again, one line turning left into the R.O.F. site while the line to the passenger station carried on out of the back of Danes Hill Lakes until it reached the 100 yards long platform of the station with 5 lines width. The position of these lines can be found by checking for the ashes dropped from the train's fireboxes and by the small banks used to level up the rails.

PS. To see pictures of Ranskill rail station before it was demolished, go to the internet and search 'Ranskill Station'.



Danes Hill Cottages

In 1975 responsibility of the R.O.F. site passed to the MOD and was later taken over by Nottinghamshire County Council. In 1976 a squadron of RTC (*Reserve Training Corps*) used the site for a short

time. Finally, in the late 1970's and early 1980's the site was decontaminated and dismantled. The large buildings on the north side together with the large water storage tanks adjacent to the Mathersey road were demolished. All surface bunkers on the south were levelled. Where possible land being returned to farming. The old gravel pits on the west were landscaped (*Danes Hill Lakes*). The south side was also landscaped and planted with conifer trees. In the 1990's the north west area, (*train sidings from Torworth and gun cotton sheds*) was turned into a Nottinghamshire County Council land-fill disposal site.

Today, the only remains visible is one of eight railway yards, the beach tree avenue up to the demolished Danes Hill Farm (*west of the travellers site*), buildings occupied by a concrete and brick works (*one of the six canteens serving 3000 meals a day*), a metal recycling dealer, Danes Hills lake nature reserve, brick storage company, pump house lagoon adjacent to the River Idle, bungalows on the Mathersey Road which were occupied by senior staff and finally, an old water hydrant rescued from the site and on display in a front garden on Town Street. Can you find it in the village?

Workforce Memories of Ranskill Royal Ordnance Factory

Decontamination and Dismantling Process



Looking South with the Water Towers in the Distance



One of the Two Water Towers Standing



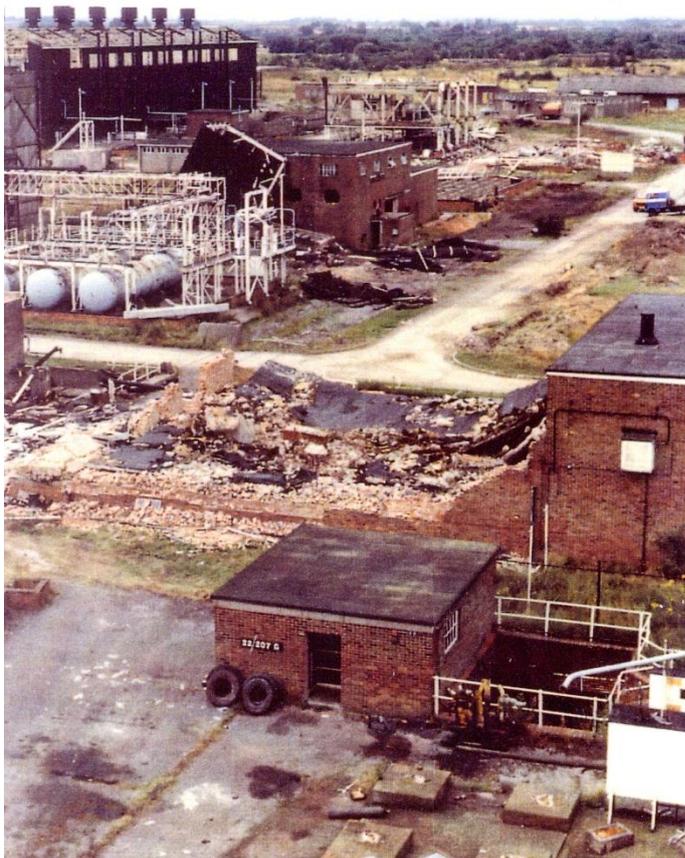
Acid Production Building with Roof Vents



Railway siding



A Network of Ditches and Roadways



Demolition of the R.O.F Buildings

The site covered around 1000 acres and had a network of ditches, trenches together with many roadways.

Pipes carried water and acid substances around the site, including acid sludge to several settling lagoons.



Ground Level Bunkers

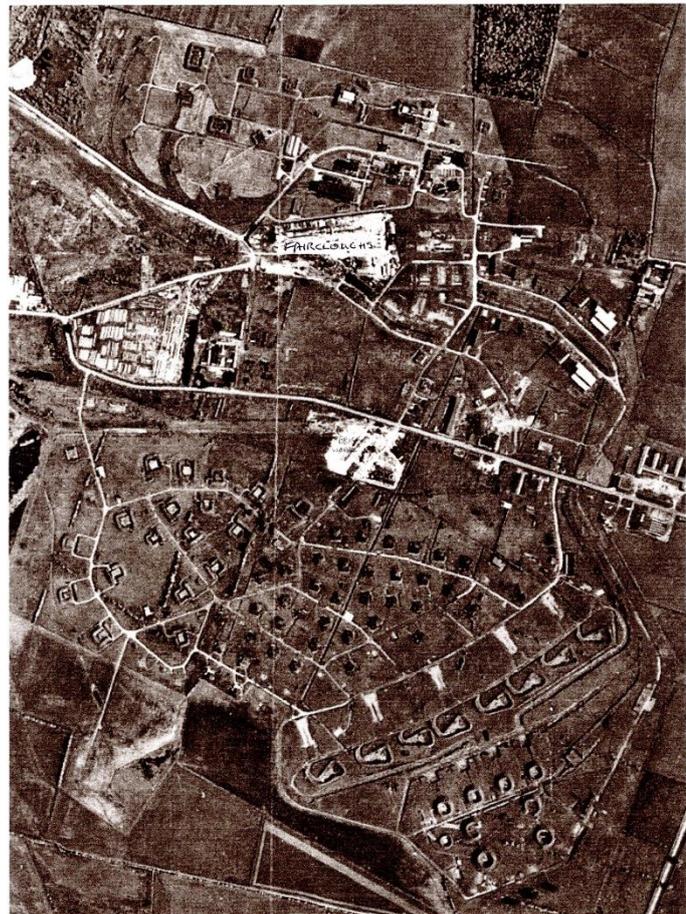


Bunkers were Connected by Baffle Doors



One of Many Water Hydrants on site

From 1970, the complete site was decommissioned and demolished. Most returned to agricultural land or small businesses using some of the old buildings. Today, unless aware, you would not know that Ranskill was one of many Royal Ordnance Factories around the UK.



R.O.F. Site in 1970 Prior to Decommissioning

Compiled by Alan Jones, September 2020