

As celebrations to mark the 70th anniversary of the Battle Of Britain begin, NORMAN MILLER heads to Lincolnshire, the spiritual headquarters of Bomber Command, to join its new aviation trail

THE GHOSTS of heroes haunt the lush earth of Lincolnshire in their thousands, the air crew of Bomber Command who died turning the tide of war. "Bomber County", as it is known, is a place of vast skies and immense horizons, its low expanses dotted with ancient red-brick villages and steeples.

By the end of the war, nearly 50 bases operated in a county whose flatness, well-drained land and location made it perfect to launch bombing raids. Casualties were terrible. More than 55,000 bomber crew died and the odds of surviving a "tour" of 30 missions was as low as one in four.

Now a new aviation trail is linking an evocative selection of Bomber County's memorials. You could base yourself somewhere like Horncastle, with its antique shops and market town bustle, but a more appropriate spot is Petwood Hotel in Woodhall Spa. It's a pretty village tucked between idyllic woods and the River Witham but the hotel, all Edwardian elegance and formal gardens, is itself a link on the trail.

Having provided the officers' mess for the 617 "Dambuster" Squadron and others, its wartime memories are displayed around wood-pannelled spaces. You can dine where mission leader Guy Gibson and his fellow airmen ate and drank (Gibson was killed in 1944).

At nearby East Kirkby Airfield the memories are sharper still. Home to one of the last few Lancasters in the world, the old airfield also boasts Lincolnshire Aviation Heritage Centre, with compelling displays in the original control tower and the vast hangar. The old NAAFI hut is now an atmospheric café with model aircraft suspended from the ceiling.

The pinnacle of a visit here is a half-hour ride in a Lancaster Bomber whose imposing machine-gun bristling presence belies its name "Just Jane". A Lancaster is a reverse Tardis,

big outside, shockingly cramped inside. Crammed in where seven young airmen once sat and with the air full of evocative smells, adrenaline and the mighty roar of four Merlin engines, I marvelled at the bravery and endurance of the crews; eight freezing hours each night being attacked by German fighters and flak.

A few miles on, the RAF base at Coningsby is home to the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight, a collection of Spitfires, Hurricanes and Britain's last flying Lancaster which can be viewed on guided tours co-ordinated by its visitor centre. Here, I learned how debriefing staff had to force traumatised, exhausted aircrew to gulp mugs of rum on landing to "loosen their tongues" enough to recount the things they had gone through.

Smaller stops on the trail also leave their mark. At the tiny Cranwell Aviation Heritage Centre, near North Raueby, volunteer Les Denham, snowy-haired but still ramrod straight, quietly talks about vital ground duties during the war. This personal touch augments some fascinating displays on such things as the story of Sir James Martin, the Briton who designed the

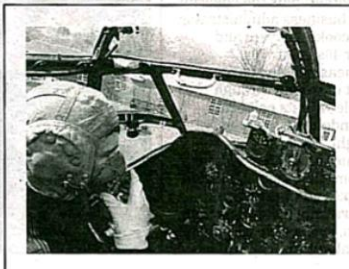
'Flying' in shadow of air heroes



modern ejector seat. There is even a flight simulator: I crashed my plane twice. My final stop was RAF Digby, on the edge of Scopwick, whose village cemetery honours the many Canadian bomber crew who flew from here.

I came to this still-operational base to visit the Sector Ops Museum, built around the world's last remaining Second World War "operations" room. This fascinating underground bunker co-ordinated interceptions of incoming German attacks, yet narrowly escaped demolition after the war and lay empty for decades. There is a panoply of evocative displays and exhibits, from scale models to uniforms of the era and the amazing room from which the RAF battle with the Luftwaffe was directed.

Just before returning to Petwood, I ventured into the woods around the hotel to peek at one of Britain's most charming cinemas. The Kinema In The



BOMBS AWAY: Experience being inside the cockpit of the 'Just Jane' at East Kirkby

Woods has nestled amid the trees since the Twenties and still entertains RAF crews and members of the public with contemporary and classic films, including an annual showing of *The Dam Busters*. Sadly, I just missed an appearance by the organist who still plays during intermissions.

That night I slept soundly in a beautiful room overlooking a picturesque landscape, one that, thanks to the heroic bomber crews who flew from the airfields all around, remains green, pleasant and free.

● GETTING THERE:

The Petwood Hotel (01526 352 411/www.petwood.co.uk) offers doubles from £145 per night (two sharing), B&B. Village Limits (01526 353 312/www.villagelimits.co.uk) offers doubles from £55 per night (two sharing), B&B. Lincolnshire Aviation Heritage Centre (01790 763 207/www.lincsaviation.co.uk) offers a two-and-a-half-hour Lancaster Ride experience for £200pp. Price includes certificate signed by the pilot, admission to the museum and a tour around the aircraft. Visit Lincolnshire: 01522 526 450/www.visitlincolnshire.com