

SIXTY YEARS AGO - THE STORY OF TWO AVIATION DISASTERS

by Philip Toms

Introduction

This year marks the sixtieth anniversaries of two tragic air disasters that befell our area. This article describes what happened through selections from contemporary newspaper reports and eye witness statements, etc., together with a contribution written specially for this Journal by Keith Hayward. The major part is centred on the mid-air collision of July 1948 - Britain's worst air disaster at the time.

January 1948

On 6 January 1948 a Vickers 610 Viking 1B operated by British European Airways en-route from Glasgow attempted to land in limited visibility and heavy rain at Northolt airport. After two or three failed approaches the plane struck trees and crashed into a ploughed field, narrowly missing high-tension cables, at about nine o'clock in the evening. It was carrying 14 passengers and a crew of four. The pilot, Captain William Morton, died and all the crew together with five of the passengers were detained in Hillingdon County Hospital.

The aircraft was completely wrecked: the wreckage came to rest some 150 yards away from a row of modern semi-detached houses. Residents of Ladygate Lane and Breakspear Road were startled by the roar of engines as the plane crossed the fields and described how they had jumped to their windows when the crash of its sudden fall was heard. 'Faint cries in shrill terms came across the fields, and the men jumped for their coats and dashed through the ploughed fields of Farmer Whittington's farm, called Crow's Nest, to find ... the Viking ... with its left wing half buried in the earth and body broken open.'

'When helpers arrived on the scene passengers and crew were slowly trying to get clear of the entanglements ... one of them, Steward Laddy, standing upright in his white coat which was about the only visible

evidence of living persons in the darkness'. Afterwards, it was said that he was almost as calm as when he was serving a meal in his cabin.

On the following morning Ladygate Lane had rarely been so busy with cars and pedestrians which had come from all quarters to see the crashed plane.¹

July 1948

At 11.40am (GMT) on Sunday 4 July 1948 a Swedish DC-6 airliner left Copenhagen on a flight to Northolt Airport carrying a crew of seven and 25 passengers. She entered the Metropolitan Control Zone over Luton Beacon flying in cloud at 5000 feet at about 2.19pm and thereafter remained under the control of the Northolt Control Authorities. At 2.48pm she was cleared down to an altitude of 2500 feet and at 2.59pm decided owing to deterioration in the weather conditions not to land but to go to Amsterdam. The Control Authorities were informed of this and at 3pm a message was sent to her from Northolt over the radio telephone that she was cleared out of the Zone via Stapleford at 2500 feet. This message does not appear to have reached the crew of the aircraft.

On the same day, at 7.25am., a York aircraft operated by RAF Transport Command left Luqa in Malta on a flight to Northolt Airport. On board was a crew of six and one passenger, Sir Edward Gent. At about 2.32pm it entered the Metropolitan Control Zone at Woodley Beacon flying at 5000 feet and thereafter it remained under the control of the Northolt Control Authorities. After arrival over Northolt she was told to remain at 5000 feet as there were aircraft in circuit below her but at 2.54pm she was informed that she was clear to descend to 3000 feet and instructed to call at 3000 feet.

At 2.56pm Northolt acknowledged the last message received from the York, viz "Roger

3000 feet". This may have been either a notification from the York that she had reached 3000 feet or an acknowledgement by her of Northolt's message that she was clear to descend to 3000 feet.

Shortly after 3pm (GMT) / 4pm (local time) the two aircraft collided in mid-air in dense cloud about four and a quarter miles NNW from the centre of Northolt Airport. There were no survivors.

The wreckage was spread far and wide with the main wreckage of the York falling into Battlers Wells Wood while that of the DC-6 came down in Copse Wood. Parts of both aircraft fell close to Mount Vernon Hospital.²

See **Fig.1**

The collision

The sound of the collision was heard by three people who were at Northwood Golf Club at the time:

Mr G.S. Hearn, the Club Secretary, heard the sound of the collision but thought it had come from a single aircraft. A few seconds later he saw one aircraft emerge from low cloud and watched for about ten seconds before it struck the ground and caught fire.

Mr T.H. Boone compared the sound of the collision to that of an anti-aircraft shell exploding in the air over Mount Vernon Hospital. He saw nothing until a tail of an aircraft fell through the cloud. He heard the roar of engines almost due west and within a second or so of seeing the tailplane recognised the York minus its tail spiralling down in a southerly direction. He saw only one aircraft and in his opinion the clouds were too low for anyone to have seen the aircraft collide.

Mr P.H. Forbes White, an Assistant Master at Harrow School and previously a Squadron Leader during the war, described what he saw and heard while standing on the eighth green of the course: "The weather was very bad, it had been raining heavily but there had been a slight improvement. At the time, the cloud had recently lifted slightly and I estimated cloud base at 10/10th 400ft. I had been aware of aircraft in the vicinity but was

unable to see them owing to the cloud. I heard a crash in the clouds, the noise of which seemed to me in a NW direction and my impression was that it was very close. Almost immediately afterwards I saw in a westerly direction a four-engined aircraft break cloud and apparently going vertically down. It went out of site behind some trees, followed by what appeared to be an engine falling a little to the north of the aircraft, and almost immediately I heard the noise of the aircraft hitting the ground. A few seconds later I heard a similar, but apparently more distant crash, which to me seemed to be more NW than the first, I did not see what caused the second crash. It was my impression at the time that the aircraft I saw was a Skymaster."

Two observers were in the Ducks Hill Road area:

Mrs H. Ford lived at Ashby Cottage in Ducks Hill Lane: "About four or five minutes past four on Sunday July 4 I saw through my kitchen window a plane flying NE about 300 yards west of the house and very low. Almost immediately after I heard what appeared to be a bomb or very heavy thunder in the form of a series of bangs which rattled our windows and cracked three of them..."³

Dr. A. Drucker lived in Ducks Hill Road. He was standing in his back garden when he heard... "a terrific explosion overhead. I looked up and there was a large aeroplane which I could only distinguish dimly because of the low rain clouds. A moment later it crashed into the woods near my house. There was a burst of flame and pieces of the machine were scattered in all directions. I and other people in the house ran through the woods to the aircraft, but so fiercely was it burning we could do nothing."⁴

And another two people were close to Battlers Wood:

Mr J.L. Bluff, an engineer at Mount Vernon Hospital, was standing on the Harefield Road: "As I reached Lockwell House drive I heard two muffled reports, like claps of thunder in the distance, but which came from directly overhead; this was followed by a series of sharp reports like an engine

backfiring. I looked up and saw a dark shape in the cloud immediately following this, I saw parts of an aircraft with Red, White and Blue markings falling out of the clouds and which landed in a potato field adjoining my cottage ... At the same time I heard a 'whirring noise' going in the direction of Shrubbs Corner and Battlers-Wells Farm. I could hear the noise of heavy objects hitting the ground in the vicinity and a dinghy landed some four to five yards from me on the road, it inflated after striking the ground".

Mr Bob Edwards was at Peach Cottage and almost opposite Battlers Wood in which the York crashed. He was at the back of the house when he heard a bang. "Looking up I saw an aeroplane coming out of a cloud. It had no tail and seemed to be coming straight towards the three cottages in one of which I live. But it shot over the top and crashed into the wood with a terrific bang, which was followed by smaller bangs and a dense cloud of smoke".⁴

The scenes on the ground

Within a few minutes Uxbridge fire brigade and firemen from Ruislip arrived on the scene. It was obvious that there was little hope of rescuing any of the occupants because both aircraft were burning fiercely. Station Officer C.J. Full of Uxbridge said of the DC-6, "To me it did not look as if there could possibly be any survivors. We were able to put the flames out very quickly, however, and, thinking that some of the occupants might have jumped before the machine reached the ground, I asked some people and some boy scouts to search the woods. But all they brought back were a few bits of wreckage"⁴. See **Fig. 2**.

Mr J.G. McGrohan described his involvement at Copse Wood in a letter dated 11 July 1948³.

'... I am a motor fitter and was working with my brother on his car in a shed in Mr Poulter's Farm in Ducks Hill Road. I had just finished timing his engine when we heard two very loud booms. They were not as has been stated explosions but rather more like two big hollow objects banged together. We

both rushed out through the side doors facing west and my brother shouted "look out its got us." He had seen the Swedish plane driving out of low rain clouds and coming straight at us. I saw it then and it was coming in a great arc from SSW. Its angle of flight was fairly easy but it was very low and slowly rolling port wing (red) over starboard (green). The direction of arc was to starboard. The forward speed was terrific. It seemed to just miss Poulter's Farm, passed over our shed just to the North, over a housetop and across the road (Ducks Hill). The starboard wing was still dropping at this point and all the engines were running at peak revs. The plane seemed intact, the wing engines and fuselage looked OK but part of the tail dropped off and fell into Ducks Hill Road. It lost horizontal flight at once and the nose went down. She plunged the last few feet into the fringe of Copse Wood east of Ducks Hill Road. I should say that the starboard wing struck first and she cart wheeled over to the position we found her tail. She blew up at once with a tremendous roar and at that moment I spotted the York going down across a little valley. She was going in upward jerks but of course it must be remembered that we stood quite a distance away. I shouted to my brother "Look Bill there goes another big one; my God this is a major disaster". The York was travelling in a WNW direction almost at right angles to the original line of flight of the Swedish plane. She seemed to me to glide into the covered slope. She struck and at once blew up with a loud roar. We could plainly see the dull red flames and black smoke roaring to the sky from the point she crashed. To return to the Swedish plane, it seemed to be the port tail plane minus the elevator that dropped off but I could not be altogether certain on that point. It seemed to me that the Swedish pilot was fighting to get the plane up over the trees, he was thrashing hell out of the engines. He might even have managed to drop her down on the Lido if he could have held her up and kept on the circle he was turning on.

All this happened in a number of seconds and both of us rushed down the farm drive

towards the crashed Swedish plane. I spotted three people running behind us from the farm house and stopped. I shouted "Have you a telephone?" They replied "yes". I then said "Call the fire brigade quick". One of them turned back to do so.

We rushed out into the road and the woman from the farm showed us a quick way into the woods. What a terrible sight met us; we drove our way through the blazing trees. Fire was raging everywhere, we found several bodies even at that early stage roasted, we tried to drag them clear but were driven back by several minor explosions. From the terrible injuries most of them had received they had died in the smash.

When we found we could do very little about moving them we tried to beat out the fire that was consuming them with anything that came to hand. By this time we had bags of helpers including a young doctor who had sprung from nowhere. When we first got to the scene there wasn't another living soul there, not even a cry for help. So ... I can vouch for it that my brother was actually the first there and I was only two jumps behind him. We did our best and when we knew we could no more we spread out and searched the surrounding woods in case some poor soul had been flung clear and was laying injured. We of course found nobody but we did collect a fair amount of odds and ends together, letters etc...'

Lastly, Keith Hayward (who is the current Chairman of the Chiltern Aviation Society and Hon. Consultant Archivist of BA Archives and Museum) looks back to that Sunday in July 1948 in this memoir relating to the York:

'It was a miserable, wet, heavy low-cloud day in the London area and as a member of the 1st Ruislip Scout Group (one of Doctor Max Wilson's lads from pre-war Cubbing days) I was camping at the Ruislip Mad Bess Wood site for the weekend along with a few fellow Rover scouts.

By mid afternoon we were getting rather wet and depressed and had decided to pack up early due to the inclement weather and so

commenced striking down our tents and stowing our gear.

Around 4pm we heard a multi-engined aircraft in the vicinity, in cloud, which we assumed was in the circuit for Northolt. Suddenly there was a rending bang - like a car crash - then a short silence followed by the roar of four Rolls Royce Merlins at full power then a sickening crump.

We looked at each other. "My God, it sounds like its crashed" I exclaimed, and straight away two of us started running north through Mad Bess Wood in the direction the sound had come from. We emerged from the wood, crossed a field or two and some fences, and headed towards Battler's Wells Wood, Harefield, being challenged by a farmer in the distance en route.

Wearing shorts, plimsolls and yellow cycling capes, ripped by brambles and soaked by rain we eventually saw a pyre of black oily smoke rising high above the trees. We rushed to the area and there in a small clearing in Battler's Wells Wood was the blazing fuselage of an Avro York four engined transport aircraft, easily identified by the familiar row of round cabin windows and square fuselage. See **Fig. 3**. Inside was a black unidentifiable huddle at the front end.

At that time I was completing my National Service in the RAF, based at the London Air Traffic Control Centre at RAF Uxbridge (Hillingdon House) and I ran to a house in Northwood Road, Harefield, to ask if I could telephone the Duty Controller. The lady of the house nearly passed out when she saw the wet, blood marked apparition at her door but she agreed to my request. When I rang through I was told that they had lost contact with two aircraft in the vicinity and hadn't realised that they had collided.

The aircraft we had found was an RAF Transport Command Avro York (MW248) whilst apparently the other machine involved was a Swedish Airlines Douglass DC-6 four engined airliner (registration SE-BDA) which fell in Copse Wood, just off Duck's Hill, Ruislip, breaking apart and grotesquely scattering some of its doomed occupants in the trees. We were thankful we hadn't come

across that gruesome sight - ours had been bad enough.'

The Enquiry

The main problem for the Enquiry was to determine how the two aircraft came to be at the same altitude at a time when theoretically the York was flying at an altitude of not less than 3000 feet and the DC-6 was flying at an altitude of 2500 feet.

It was found that both aircraft were in sound airworthy condition and that the weather conditions could be discounted. Therefore, the cause was likely to be human fallibility on the part of those responsible for the control of the aircraft from the ground or the flight of the aircraft in the air. Three errors of detail or bad practice at Ground Control were noted, no evidence of errors in the Swedish aircraft were found, and it was concluded that there was no evidence that failure to adhere to the proper radio routine and procedures on the York had created a hazard for herself or the Swedish plane.

The Enquiry made recommendations regarding air/ground communication systems and operations. But the main conclusion was that the minimum height separation of 500 feet at Northolt provided an inadequate margin of safety. The main recommendation was therefore that the normal minimum height separation between aircraft under control of the Metropolitan Control Zone in Instrument Flight Rules conditions should be increased from 500 to 1000 feet.²

The Swedish aircraft

The Swedish airliner SE-BDA was a Douglas DC-6 - the type being known as 'Cloudmaster' - a low-wing all metal monoplane powered by four engines with a wing span of 117 feet 6 inches and an overall length of 101 feet 6 inches. Her speed immediately before the collision would have been about 200mph.

Flight Captain Bruno Kullgren was one of the most experienced pilots on the London route and had made at least 40 landings at Northolt in the previous month. Radio operator Lars

Forsberg had made a similar number of flights to London. Other members of the crew were Flight Captain Leif Lindblad, Flight Navigator Paul Palson, Flight Mechanic Olle Asburg and stewardesses Eva Fredin and Ragnhild Slettengren.

Among the passengers was Count Stig Thott, friend of King Gustav and Master of the Royal Hunt. He was also Sweden's largest and richest landowner; Gordon Newman and his wife, he was a radio operator in the British Legation in Helsinki; Douglas Pobjoy, well-known before and just after the war in aircraft circles as a designer of lightweight radial engines.

The RAF aircraft

The York Aircraft MOYAU-RAFAIR 248 was a standard York Mark 1 aircraft fitted with four Rolls Royce Merlin engines. It had a wing span of 102 feet and an overall length of 78 feet 6 inches.

The crew were Flight Lieutenant J.K. Nowrie, of Motherwell; Flight Lieutenant G.R. Coates; Flight Lieutenant C. Ingleby, of Ilford; Flight Lieutenant W.T. Trotman, Signaller H.G. Lewis; and Engineer J.I. Rees.

The sole passenger was Sir Edward Gent. He had been Governor and Commander-in-Chief of the Malayan Union since 1946, and High Commissioner for the Federation of Malaya since February 1948. He was returning to London to attend constitutional talks on the future of the territory.

The sixtieth anniversary

Earlier this year Simon Wilkins, of Co Meath, Ireland, contacted the RNELHS, for his grandfather Flight Lieutenant Cyril Ingleby had met his death in the accident and he was eager that there should be a proper commemoration. Eileen Bowlt was able to put him in contact with Keith Hayward who was on the site at the time (see above).

In July 2008 members of the Ingleby family returned to the scene and laid flowers next to still blackened tree stumps. Following a Memory Lane feature ⁵ in the local

newspaper several local people have since visited the site and are looking after the rose that was planted. A bench seat may be placed close by for people when they visit.

Epilogue

By Simon Wilkins

An after dinner conversation about family history over the Christmas holidays prompted my mother to get out her newspaper clippings from the *Daily Express* and *Derby Evening Telegraph* dated 5 July 1948, describing Britain's worst ever air disaster which had occurred the previous day, claiming the lives of 39 people including her father F/Lt Cyril Ingleby D.F.C. on board RAF Avro York MW248 as it collided in mid-air with an Scandinavian Airlines DC6 near Northolt.

From early in my childhood I was aware of the broader circumstances surrounding my grandfather's death. My proud grandmother kept his photograph on permanent display in her flat and I can recall countless times when she took out his RAF flight log books, wartime photographs and his medal collection including his prized Distinguished Flying Cross which he was awarded for gallantry during WWII to show to my brother and I when we went to visit.

My grandfather, like many other young men, left his peacetime job (as a Storekeeper at International Combustion in Derby) and enlisted due to the outbreak of war. In September 1939 he started his basic training as a Wireless Operator and in June 1940 he flew for the first time gaining experience in Wellington Bombers as well as Ansons, Whitworths and Fairy Battles. In September 1940 he was posted to Bomber Command's 149 Squadron based at Mildenhall and began his first tour of duty as part of a Wellington crew. Over the next eight months he flew 27 bombing sorties over enemy territory before his planned first tour of 30 sorties ended abruptly when his plane crashed shortly after take-off. He was one of only two survivors and was hospitalised.

After recuperation and some time spent as a trainer in an Operational Training Unit he was posted to 75(NZ) Squadron at Feltwell and

started his second tour. Between March and July 1942 he participated in 32 bombing sorties including the mass raids over Rostock and the historic '1000 bomber' raids over Cologne and Bremen. Following his two bomber tours he joined 233 Squadron of Transport Command. He went on to participate in the Normandy landings on 6 June 1944 when his Dakota was towing gliders over Caen. When Operation Market Garden (the invasion of Europe) started on 17 September 1944 his aeroplane was tasked with dropping Paratroops over Arnhem and during the following days returned three times to resupply troops from the air. On 24 March 1945 he participated in the last major airborne operation of the war when his aircraft towed gliders as the Allies crossed the Rheine. In 1946 he was given a Far-East posting as Wireless Operator on the personal aircraft of General Adrian Carton de Wiart, Churchill's representative to Chang Kai Shek, Nationalist leader of the then divided China.

His eight year career had seen him participate in most of WWII's major airborne operations, he had survived three crashes, one previous mid-air collision and 19 hours adrift at sea after his plane had been forced to ditch. After surviving these close encounters with death it was sadly ironic that he died following a freak peace-time accident and this irony was further reinforced as I began to find out more about the other men killed along with him.

As we read the *Express* and *Evening Telegraph* articles my mother said that she would like to identify the location of the crash site and to visit it. I decided that I would find it and started by searching newspaper archives and trawling the internet. By chance I came across a web posting from Tony Trotman-Beasty seeking information about his father F/Lt Bill Trotman D.F.C., describing how he had been killed in an air-crash near Northolt in July 1948. I guessed immediately that I had found the family of one of my grandfather's crew.

I managed to contact Tony and we started to correspond, sharing the information we each had, explaining the family backgrounds and the hardship that the deaths had caused each of our families. The similarities were uncanny as Tony recounted his story.

At the time of the crash my mother was just eight years old and her brother Roger was just six. Tony's brother Chris was only two years old and Tony was born just 16 days after the crash and one can only try to imagine just how awful this must have been for their mother.

Bill Trotman joined the RAF in 1940 as soon as he was old enough after giving up his job as a Librarian and went on to complete two tours as a Navigator in Bomber Command mainly with the elite Pathfinders in Halifax bombers. Information Tony provided also enabled me to find New Zealander Reg Coates, now a resident of Australia, and the nephew of F/Lt George Reginald Coates D.F.C., the pilot of the York. Reg was born three years after his uncle's death and named after him. F/Lt Coates had, like many of his compatriots, travelled half way around the world to fight the common enemy and was another experienced, decorated war veteran. Incredibly, his co-pilot F/Lt Jack Nowrie was the fourth member of the York's crew of six with a D.F.C. The crew was completed by Wireless Operator, Harold Lewis and Engineer, John Rees. The seventh and final man onboard was their passenger, Sir Edward Gent, British High Commissioner to Malaya.

Continued investigations resulted in contact with Northolt Airport historian Sgt. Mark Bristow and although he could not help directly Mark recommended that I contact the RNELHS.

References

- ¹ *Middlesex Advertiser & County Gazette* 9/1/1948 p8
- ² Report of the Court Investigation of the accident to the Swedish aircraft SE-BDA on 4 July 1948. HMSO. Cmd. 7609
- ³ Collision between Swedish DC6 aircraft SE-BDA and RAF York aircraft MW248; over Northwood, Middx, 4 July 1948: investigation and report of Court investigation. BT217/2233
- ⁴ *Times* 5/7/1948 p4
- ⁵ Families return to spot of a British air disaster now almost forgotten. *Ruislip & Northwood Gazette*, 9/7/2008 p24

The January 1948 crash

Air crash near Ruislip. *Times*, 7/1/1948 p4.

Northolt 'plane crashes in ploughed field. *Middlesex Advertiser & County Gazette*, 9/1/1948 p8.

Accident to Viking aircraft G-AHPK: Ruislip near Northolt Airport, 6 Jan 1948: report by Chief Inspector of Accidents. BT217/2115 [This file could not be consulted as it was marked as missing at the National Archives when this article was written.]

Mark's advice put me in touch with Eileen Bowlt and remarkably after our initial exchanges, Eileen informed me that she had found an eye-witness to the crash in Keith Hayward.

My research had enabled me to establish with a degree of confidence the general location of the final resting place of the York. So on bright Saturday afternoon in June 2008 we met Eileen and Keith in Ruislip and our group set off for Battlers Wells Farm hoping to find the crash site. To our surprise, in the woods to the rear of the farm complex we were able to find several broken and blackened tree stumps, a sixty year old natural monument to the last flight of RAF 99 Squadron Avro York MW248. We laid flowers and planted a white rose bush as a mark of our permanent remembrance of my grandfather F/Lt Cyril Ingleby D.F.C. and the other brave men who died with him.

In July 1948 Cyril Ingleby was laid to rest in Derby and Bill Trotman was buried in Bridlington, Yorkshire. The remains of Reg Coates made the long journey back to Auckland, New Zealand where they were buried at Howick. The accident involving RAF Avro York MW248 and SAS DC6 SE-BDA remains to this day, the last occurrence of a mid-air collision in British air-space.

The July 1948 collision

Collision between Swedish DC6 aircraft SE-BDA and RAF York aircraft MW248; over Northwood, Mddx, 4 July 1948: control aspects. BT217/2259

Accident to Swedish aircraft SE-BDA; Northolt, Mddx, 4 July 1948: report of Court investigation. BT217/2351

The day Northwood's woods burned, by A W J G Ord-Hume. Propliner nd.

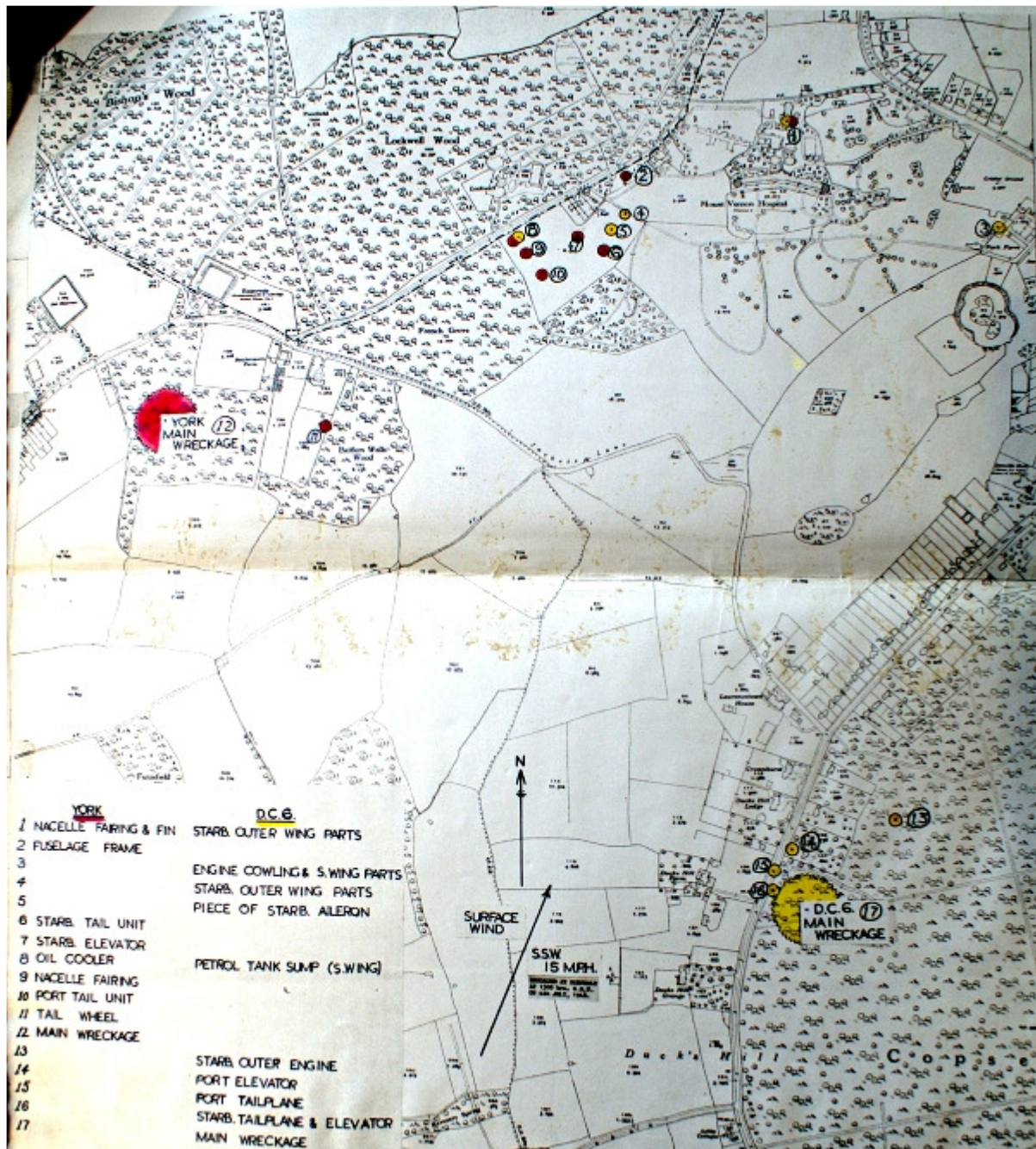


Fig. 1 - Wreckage Distribution



Fig. 2 - DC-6. Main wreckage remains of rear fuselage



Fig. 3 - York. Fuselage showing damage to starboard side