

BRANCH VISIT TO THE NATIONAL CONSTRUCTION COLLEGE SITE – 15th November 2019

On Friday afternoon, 15th November, in a bracing northerly wind, ten intrepid members gathered at the construction college reception at former RAF Bircham Newton for a guided tour - Friday had been recommended as it would mean that no students would be working on site, and we therefore wouldn't need Health and Safety briefings, or the wearing of high-viz jackets and hard hats!



Apparently someone had omitted to put our arrangement in the diary, but the manager of the relevant department, 'Patch' Kivlin, came to the rescue and delivered a well informed and extremely interesting running commentary on the original airfield, the changes made since its closure as an RAF base in the 1960s and its takeover by the Construction Industry Training Board. The site is the largest heavy construction training facility in Europe, at 400-plus acres (the next largest is 90 acres!) and a few years ago employed 200 people, hosting some 600 students every week. Most students will come for a week or two, return to their normal jobs to 'practise' the skills learned, and then return for a further module, and so on.

We toured around the buildings across the road from reception, including the swimming pool, which is used by many local residents and schools for swimming tuition, and then returning to the 'waterfront' - the road along the airfield side of the hangers - going into one of the hangers as well. The minibus then continued away from the road towards the boundary of the site, and again we disembarked, this time to look at a fascinating area where, in a 'dry dock', university students, "Who used to arrive not knowing one end of a hammer from the other" build a concrete structure, which is then flooded, towed through the gates, and, with a bridge support structure built on top so that the whole assembly weighs about 40 tonnes, is then floated in the water. The operation takes a week, and then another group of students repeats the process in an adjacent site while the first one is demolished, the concrete ground up, and the dry dock drained ready for the next course.

We saw at close quarters the huge cranes which dominate the skyline, and various buildings were pointed out and explained, as we continued on our journey; we were then taken across the road to the former Officers' Mess, now the hotel 'The Birches', where we used to have various Legion lunches, AGMs and Poppy Appeal award presentations. Passing the memorial (right) to the RAF personnel who lost their lives while operating from Bircham Newton, we ended the tour with a visit to the Heritage Centre (below left), which is very interesting, has been upgraded since our last visit, and is run by a dedicated small group of local volunteers.

Finally, we re-boarded the minibus in heavy rain, and drove across the site to be dropped off at the Costa café, where Patch left us, and we enjoyed large hot drinks, and complementary delicious cakes provided by the facility. A fascinating insight into a hidden gem of Norfolk, the future of which is unsure, although from what Patch told us, perhaps somewhat more promising in the near future than previously thought.



Photos: Pamela Austin