



History of the RAF Cosford Boy Entrants

- Extracted from the History of RAF Cosford, which was published at Cosford in 1978 and authorised by Group Captain Smith, Station Commander.

The RAF aimed to concentrate the training of all Boy Entrants at Cosford. So on 15 May 1950 an advance party of 2 officers, 18 NCOs and 65 boys arrived from RAF Locking, and 94 boys from RAF Kirkham, and finally on 23 May the 285 boys of the new entry (No 10) arrived, bringing the total strength of No 1 Wing to 806.

The instruction of Boy Entrants at Cosford commenced on 23 May 1950. Initially No 2 S of TT trained boys as mechanics in the following trades: Airframe, engine, electrical, instrument, armament, radio and telegraphic. The courses lasted for 18 months. During the first 3 months of his course, the Boy Entrant spent much of his time behind a desk (if not a bumper!) as his academic knowledge was brought up to the required standard. In fact, formal education accounted for 20% of all instruction that the Boy Entrant received at Cosford. As the Boy Entrant progressed the emphasis switched from academics to technical instruction. In addition, the boys were taught General Service Knowledge and Service Discipline, and underwent Ground Defence Training. Physical Education and Sport were also an important feature of the time-table, while on the moral side, attendance at Church services was compulsory.

Considerable emphasis was placed on character training. To this end annual summer camps and various expeditions were held. The first summer camp was held at RAF North Coates on the Lincolnshire coast and was attended by No's 10, 11 and 12 Entries. Two years later the camp was at RAF Millom in Cumbria, where the boys, joined by Boy Entrants from RAF Compton Bassett and RAF Yatesbury, spent 2 weeks under canvas participating in various beach activities, climbing, hill-walking, industrial visits and night time defence exercises.

As part of his training each Boy Entrant had to choose 2 sports to concentrate on, one of which had to be a team game. In at least one of the 2 sports, the boy would receive organised coaching. In addition, each boy had to choose 2 hobbies or pastimes. One of the most popular of these was the Boy Entrant Band, which soon became well established and a familiar sight at both internal and external ceremonial occasions.

Many of the sports and hobbies were organised under the auspices of the Cosford Association. The Association, which had originated in the pre-war apprentice days, had been quickly revived. Its purpose was defined as existing 'to promote any desirable activity whereby Boy Entrants of No 2 S of TT may employ their spare time, and to ensure the resources are used to the best advantage'. The Commandant was the President of the Association and each Section had an officer in charge. By 1953, the Cosford Association had the following sections: Aircraft recognition, archery, art, athletics, badminton, basketball, baking, church fellowship, cricket, cross-country running, cycling, fencing, gliding, handicrafts, hockey, judo, lawn tennis, model aircraft, model engineering, mountaineering, music circle, photography, radio and television, riding, road-walking, rugby, sailing, scouting, shooting, soccer, stamp collecting, swimming, table-tennis, theatre club and winter sports.

As some of the boys had already completed a major part of their training before being relocated at Cosford, passing-out parades soon started to take place. The first to graduate were No 6 Entry whose passing out parade on 14 September 1950 was reviewed by Air Marshal Sir John Whitworth-Jones, KCB, CBE, AOCinC Technical Training Command. A pattern was set which was to last until passing out of No 51 Entry, 15 years later.

The Boy Entrants were involved in external as well as internal ceremonial duties. An early high-light in 1953 was a route-lining duty for 65 boys from Cosford on part of the route of the Coronation procession. The Boy Entrant Band took the brunt of the ceremonial duties. As early as August 1951 they were being complemented for their 'excellent performance' at the opening of the West Midlands Wing ATC Headquarters. While in 1953 the band played at a host of functions to celebrate the Coronation. In addition, for many years in the 1950s the boys' trumpet band played for the assembling audiences at the Royal Tournament.

By July 1951, the strength of the Boy Entrants at Cosford had increased to around the thousand mark, and No 2 Wing was established to help cope with the increasing numbers and to take over completely the electrical, armament and instrument trades. Also in 1951 a number of boys from No 13 Entry were selected to go to RAF Halton as aircraft apprentices. A precedent was set and from then on a number of boys from each entry were offered apprenticeships.

The Boy Entrant Scheme was attracting a considerable amount of favourable attention and on 8 January 1952 Mr Nigel Bruce the Under Secretary for State for Air accompanied by Sir Edward Boyle MP his Parliamentary Private Secretary visited the station to inspect the school. This was followed by visits by senior officers of the other services, and on 29 June 1952 a Colonel Hamilton USAF visited Cosford to look at the school with a view to introducing a similar scheme in America.

In October 1952 all the Boy Entrants from RAF Yatesbury and RAF Compton Bassett were transferred to Cosford. This greatly increased the accommodation problem and training task and by 1953 the number of Boy Entrants at Cosford was approaching 2,000. Expansion continued and in February 1954 a new cooks training section was opened by Air Marshal Sir Victor E Groom, KCVO, KBE, CB, DFC, AOCinC Technical Training Command, thus making training in the trade of cook available at Cosford. Boys of No 20 Entry were the first to take advantage of this new facility. By now the number of boys under training at Cosford was approaching 2,500.

During October, 1954 Cosford was featured by the BBC. The television programme 'Garrison Theatre' was staged in the Concert Hall, and a 30 minute radio programme 'High School of the Air' featuring the life and work of Boy Entrants at Cosford was broadcast. The resultant publicity gave Boy Entrant recruiting a considerable boost. In January 1955 Cosford was on film again when Pathe News covered the Passing Out of No 19 Entry which was reviewed by Air Chief Marshal Sir Basil E Embry KBE, DSO, AFC, Commander Allied Air Forces Central EUROPE.

The pass out of No 21 Entry in July 1955 saw the first presentation of the Victor Groom Ceremonial Stick. This award initiated by Air Marshal Sir Victor E Groom KCVO, KBE, CB, DFC, was awarded to the Boy Entrant of each entry adjudged to be 'of the best all round merit and parade ability'. The first recipient was Flight Sergeant Boy Entrant Coates of No 21 Entry. The award has continued to be made up to the present day at apprentice graduations.

The number of Boy Entrants at Cosford peaked in 1955. In August of that year a further school was opened at RAF St Athan and Cosford lost Boy Entrant training in the trades of airframe, engine, armament, electrical and instrument mechanics. This departure left air radar, air wireless, ground wireless, telegraphists 2 and cook 2 training at Cosford and reduced the number of boys to around 1,500. However, the numbers soon started to increase again as training for Boy Entrants as Clerk Accounts, Clerk General Duties, and Supplier was introduced. Further expansion of the scheme in January 1959 resulted in training for the catering clerical and supplier trades being transferred to

RAF Hereford. Despite this move, the numbers at Cosford continue to increase again, reaching 2,000 by the end of 1960. At this time training was offered for Boy Entrants at Cosford in the trades of airborne weapons, air radio, ground weapons, telegraphist 2, photographic 2 and nursing attendant.

Character training for Boy Entrants received a boost with the introduction of the Duke of Edinburgh's Award Scheme in 1957. The four-fold aim of the scheme to promote good citizenship to encourage useful leisure time hobbies and to provide standards to test personal fitness and initiative and incentive: fitted in extremely well with the training the boys had already been receiving at Cosford. Three levels of award were given: The first series (Bronze) at 14+ the second series (Silver) at 15+ and the third series (Gold) at 16+. To receive an award at each level a boy had to obtain a pass in each of the 4 sections - rescue and public service training, pursuits (hobbies), expeditions and fitness. Cosford's early success in the scheme developed rapidly and a passing out of No 46 Entry in December 1963, the Commandant was able to report that 56 members of the entry had received silver awards and 2 had gained gold awards. Character training was further developed by various expeditions.

In 1961, 12 Boy Entrants and 12 permanent staff mounted the first RAF school expedition outside the UK when they spent a fortnight climbing, tracking and camping in the French Pyrenees's. Another new departure in 1961 was the school's involvement with 'Ten Tors'. After a pilot scheme in 1960, the first 'open' Ten Tors was held in 1961 and Cosford entered 4 teams. The object of the exercise was to carry out a 50 mile expedition over the wilds of Dartmoor between 0700 hours on Saturday 20 May and 1900 hours on Sunday 21 May with a compulsory night stop from 2200 hours to 0600 hours. The 4 Cosford teams whose average was 17 competed in the Senior Class which had an upper age limit of 20. 50% of the teams in this class failed to finish and only Cosford and one other youth school had 100% success. This early success has been followed by further participation by Cosford trainees in every Ten Tors up to the present day.

Life with the Boy Entrants had its amusing incidents. Drill instruction in particular had its moments. One instructor (Sgt Joliffe!) had desperately been striving to teach his squad the position of attention and stated 'The feet should be at 45 degrees' 'Fahrenheit or Centigrade, Sergeant?' came back the query. Mealtimes too provide their share of stories. On asking for 'Any complaints' one Orderly Officer was told 'The sausages are funny, Sir' 'Well laugh at them then' came back the snappy reply. Back on the drill square one instructor regularly informed his squad, when teaching them turning at the halt, that they were 'like a shower of sparrows with tin wings trying to make a forced landing on a corrugated iron roof'.

Although the training of Boy Entrants dominated Cosford during the 1950s and early 1960s, there were other aspects to the work and life of the station. For one year, from October 1950, No 12 School of Recruit Training was located at Cosford. The intake of the school was directly linked to the needs of No 22 Group and usually consisted of 100 men per month from RAF Cardington and a small number of national service recruits from RAF Padgate. Boy Entrants from the school provided guards-of-honour and performed other ceremonial duties while they were at Cosford. In 1951, the school was involved in a joint services training venture when detachments of recruits in trades of airframe and engine mechanics were sent to the Royal Naval Air Station Bramcote. However, the life of the school at Cosford was short and disbandment came on 1 October 1951 with all personnel being transferred to No 11 School of Recruit Training.

A major change on the airfield occurred in 1956 with the closure of No 9 Maintenance Unit. Its place was taken by No 236 MU which was concerned with the receipt and issue of service mechanical transport. This unit was to remain at Cosford for 10 years. Another change on the airfield in 1959 was the establishment of an air experience flight, primarily to give air experience to ATC cadets, although this was soon expanded to include Boy Entrants. This flight replaced the old station flight which with an odd assortment of Tiger Moths, Ansons and Chipmunks and had provided some air experience for Boy Entrants in the early and mid - 1950s.

During the 1950s the station held an annual 'At Home' day to the public in September to mark the anniversary of the Battle of Britain. The day was one of the highlights of the Cosford year with thousands of visitors pouring on to the camp. The events on each occasion were similar and can be exemplified by considering the 1959 'At Home' day which also marked the 21st anniversary of the opening of Cosford. On this occasion, the displays included a static aircraft park of Auster, Beverley, Provost and Vampire aircraft, an exhibition hangar showing off the work and equipment used in the training of the Boy Entrants, a performance by the Boy Entrants Gymnastic Team and of course by the Boy Entrant Pipe and Trumpet Band. Finally, there was the flying display in which Provost, Meteor, Chipmunk, Spitfire, Valiant, Hunter, Varsity, Auster, Vampire, Javelin, Victor, Comet Vulcan and Canberra aircraft all took part. The attendance at the 1959 'At Home' day was 42,000.

To the East of the A41 RAF Cosford Hospital was a busy regional military hospital during this period, serving units of the RAF and other services in Western England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The hospital was equipped with 275 beds and had a busy workload. In the 12 months up to September 1959, 5,900 in-patients, of whom 4,400 were servicemen, were accepted. In the same period, Service out-patients number 9,300 with 7,400 civilian out-patients. Although the buildings were already obsolete, the hospital was extremely well equipped and pioneered several innovations for the services particularly in the field of welfare - Cosford was the first service hospital to be equipped with TV sets in the wards with the sound piped to individual earphones, and Cosford was also the first RAF hospital to provide a telephone trolley service for patients and radio call up devices for its staff.

In January 1963 Boy Entrants at Cosford numbered 1,799 out of total station strength of 3,437. However, change was on the way and the major alteration of the RAF trade structure in 1964 marked the end of the Boy Entrant Scheme. The demise of the scheme was as rapid as its rise 14 years earlier, and a major chapter in Cosford's history came to a close with pass out of the last Boy Entrant Entry No 51 in July 1965. Appropriately No 51 Entry proved to be the most successful of all the Boy Entrant courses at Cosford with 140, from the original 142 boys who started training graduating. The last of over 13,000 Boy Entrants marked their departure from Cosford with a parade of the highest quality.

*I was but a child when I took the Queen's Shilling
But becoming a Boy Entrant was most thrilling
We polished, blanched, marched and saluted
Always immaculate on Parade and well booted*

*I look back fondly with those days in my heart
We were proud of our entry and looked smart
Being young then was mostly happiness and wit
Though we had to take from the DIs all sorts of*

*In the autumn of our years we now shed some tears
Toasting those boys who have sadly left us with beers
Eighteen months at Cosford left a lasting impression
Especially now ageing recalling all those Padres Lessons.*

- Boy Entrant Keats, all Entries.

