Rescued from obscurity, a unique fragment of Norfolk's wartime history has been restored to its former glory as a monument to a special trans-Atlantic relationship. Steve Snelling reports.

t was a garden ornament like no other, a curiously eccentric relic of war bizarrely transposed to a Norfolk country cottage and a peaceful resting place camouflaged by pots of primroses and

Not that Janet Adams knew anything about its origins. She had no idea how it came to be there, no idea where it came from and, certainly, no idea that the elaborately decorated slab of stone was, in its own weird and wonderful way, an enduring symbol of a grand trans-Atlantic

As a child of the Sixties growing up in rural Bedingham, the cartoon-style image of the cigar-chomping, bomb-toting black buzzard was merely a mysterious but familiar presence to be seen from the

"Looking back, it was a strange thing to have in your garden," admits Janet. "It's quite a warlike thing and vet it never seemed wildly aggressive in appearance as it always seemed to be surrounded by mum's plant

"It was just a feature of the path between the house and some sheds.

And because it was there as long as we were there we just took it for granted. It was only when friends or visitors came to see us that it became a bit of a talking

Now, half a century after her family's first encounter with the garden oddity, the comical bird and its lethal

bomb load is a talking point all over again, having been rescued, restored and returned to its original home – the former United States Army Air Force base at

Thorpe Abbotts Last weekend Janet made the sentimental journey from Weymouth where she now lives to unveil the striking new exhibit at the 100th Bomb Group Memorial Museum the inlaid insignia of the 351st Bomb

And it was there that she was reunited with the man who was instrumental after the Americans returned home at the in ensuring a fading fragment of the end of the war," he recalled.

Squadron that had for so long adorned her familv's garden path

county's wartime heritage was not just preserved for posterity but repatriated to

Arthur Snelling had grown up watching the sky over Norwich filled with vast armadas of American bombers. He had regularly cycled from his home in Thorpe Hamlet to see the ungainly, bulbous-shaped Liberators take off and land at Rackheath. And the experiences had left him with a lasting fascination for all things Eighth Air Force and an abiding admiration for the young crews who brought a thrill of excitement to an austere, ration-fed childhood

Fast forward to the 1970s when he was working as a maintenance foreman at Laurence, Scott & Electromotors. One amazing of his colleagues was Janet's father, toolmaker turned foreman supervisor Ken Adams who, as a sideline, used to sell

eggs from his Bedingham smallholding to his city workmates.

"At some point after that," recalled 81-year-old Arthur, "Ken invited me out to his home. Pear Trees, as it was called, seemed to me an idyllic place. It was wild. rambling and natural. As well as the chickens, there were pigs and orchards scattered about the place.

But there was also something he hadn't bargained for. "As he was taking me around the garden I suddenly saw the slab of concrete decorated with what was clearly some kind of American air force insignia," he

recalled. "Being interested in militaria and especially anything to do with the Yanks, I cheekily asked if I could

"Ken, who'd always liked it without really knowing much about it, said 'no'. But I never forgot it and it became a

standing joke between us." Intrigued by the emblem and the mystery of how it came to be there, Arthur did some digging of his own. "All I knew was that it was there when Ken bought the cottage in the early 1960s and was thought to have been brought there by the previous owner

to see it there, embedded in the

concrete pathway... but with a little clean there was

insignia of

the 351st.

when and at what point it found its way to Bedingham. Many of those questions were still unanswered when, in November 2009, Ken died. Determined that the possibly mistaking unique remnant of Thorpe Abbott's wartime history should not be lost, Arthur approached Ken's daughter Janet that it was and son Richard and discussed the matter

Both agreed that it should be saved and, f possible, taken back to the 351st Bomb Squadron's original base.

"My first inclination was that it might

have come from Hardwick, which was

one of the former US bases nearest to

Bedingham, but I eventually found out

that none of the squadron insignia there

And there the matter rested, frustratingly

inresolved, until a chance visit to the

100th Bomb Group Memorial Museum

at Thorpe Abbotts near Dickleburgh in

south Norfolk. There, in one of the display

cabinets in the renovated control tower,

he had his Eureka moment when he saw

a leather flying jacket emblazoned with

precisely the same emblem that he'd seen

"I'd managed to identify it," said Arthur,

"but beyond that there were still a lot of

questions, including who created it and

and photographed 12 miles away.

matched the design in Ken's garden."

"We felt sure that's what out father would have wanted," said Janet.

"He wouldn't have wished to move it while he was alive, but we were certain that he'd have been delighted to think it was going to the place where that

Contact was made with Ron Batley, curator and one of the trustees of the 100th Bomb Group Memorial Museum,

and the following year a group of volunteers carried out the tricky task of safely removing the slab from its cottage garden home where it was thought to have lain for more than 60 years.

"It was amazing to see it there, embedded in the concrete pathway," recalled Ron. "By then, it was pretty well covered in green lichen and moss, but with a little bit of a clean there was no mistaking that it was the insignia of the 351st.'

Moving it wasn't easy. The inlaid slab measured some four feet square and was about two and a half inches thick and great care had to be taken to raise and then transport it while keeping it intact.

Having successfully accomplished that particular mission, the museum volunteers then had the daunting job of restoring the squadron emblem to its former glory and deciding how and where to display it as well as researching its mysterious history.

Ron made no bones about the fact that he was sceptical as to whether it dated back to the war or, indeed, had ever been sited on the base. "We couldn't believe that something quite so elaborate as this was made on the base during the war," he explained. "Of course, there were signs on wooden boards that incorporated the badge, but this was rather a work of art and required someone with skills in stone masonry to have done it.

"It just seemed too incredible that something like it could have been made with all the coloured stone and inlays while a war was going on."

And there were other good reasons to question its wartime vintage. Ron was one of the original group of volunteers

ago. As a boy growing up after the war, the old base had been his playground and it remained a source of fascination long after he'd followed his father into working on Sir Rupert Mann's Thelverton estate where the airfield was situated.

In the years since he helped transform the base's dilapidated control tower into a popular visitor attraction, Ron had spoken with hundreds of former airmen from the 'Bloody Hundredth' and seen thousands of wartime photographs, but never had he seen a single image or heard talk of the

"Everything about it, the artistry and the fact no one had ever mentioned it, led us to think that perhaps somebody locally had created it after the war" added Ron. "Maybe someone had got hold of an old air force squadron badge, liked the design and replicated it in stone. Or, at least,

that's what we imagined." To be on the safe side, however, they decided to spread the research net wider. While volunteers carried out restoration work on the emblem, an appeal for information was published in the 100th Bomb Group veterans' newsletter in the **United States**

The response was swift and surprising. David R Hamilton, who had served with the 351st Bomb Squadron at Thorpe Abbotts, confirmed that the insignia did indeed, date back to the second world war - and what's more he had the faded photograph to prove it.

The picture showed what looks like two American servicemen propping up the great decorated stone slab, with the squadron insignia plainly visible. It was taken in the spring of 1945 and David thought it had been sited "near the www.100bgmus.org.uk

orderly room". Back at Thorpe Abbotts the decision was taken to create a special brick-pillared stand complete with covering to protect the unique emblem and to celebrate its discovery and recovery by giving it pride of place, facing the wartime control tower that houses so many of the 100th Bomb Group's artefacts.

Questions, of course, still remain and research is on-going as to how the stone came to be dug up and transported crosscountry to Bedingham, "Perhaps," said Ron, "it was taken by someone who was involved in the demolition of parts of the base after the war, possibly even the owner of the cottage who lived there before the Adams family. Hopefully, somebody out there will know the answer and let us former location.

For now, though, he is merely happy to think that another piece of Thorpe Abbotts' wartime history has been successfully saved and preserved for posterity. "It never ceases to amaze me that even after all these years we are still making such exciting finds and still discovering new information about the base," said Ron. "But this one was really quite astonishing. It's amazing to think that something of this quality was made on the base at that time. But now we know it clearly was. It's back where it belongs."

The 100th Bomb Group Memorial Museum, Common Road, Dickleburgh, IP21 4PH, is open weekends and bank holidays from now until October 31 (10am-5pm), It is also open Wednesdays from May to September Admission is free. For more information about the museum and events visit:

Main picture: **Group Memorial** Museum curator Ron Batley at the former second world war airfield

with the newly-

Far left: Reunited: Janet Adams and Arthur Snelling at the unveiling of squadron emblem restored to its

Above right: Photos from the Group who were based at Thorpe Abbotts with their B17 Flying



Mission of remembrance

◆ Thorpe Abbott's 100th Bomb Group Memorial Museum is a monument not just to American sacrifice but to one small Norfolk community's determination to remember a special relationship in war and

 It is entirely voluntary run and dates back to a visit made almost 35 years ago by aviation history enthusiast Mike Harvey Introduced to Ron Batley, who had grown up with stories of the 'Bloody Hundredth' and was working on the Thelverton estate.

he floated the idea of restoring the base's wartime control

"I remember thinking it was a crazy idea," recalled Ron. "The tower was pretty beat up; the render was off,

SIMON FINLAY

windows rusted. doors hanging off And we hadn't got two ha'pennies to rub together. But despite all of

that we thought it was worth a try." ◆ With the support of the landowner, Sir Rupert Mann, who let them have the site for 999 years at a peppercorn rent, they began work and within four years the eum was officially opened

Since then it has expanded to include a

visitor centre and a further building to house more exhibits.

◆ It remains the only surviving control museum in Norfolk dedicated to airmer who flew and serviced the Flying Fortresses of the 3rd US Air Division and attracts some 6,000-7,000 people each

• "We've tried to keep the place as authentic as possible," said Ron, 66. "We don't go in for hi-tech displays. We try to keep it personal, try to tell the human story and visitors

seem to respond to that. atmosphere here and I think they're right."

 Entirely manned and run by around 20 trustées and volunteer anxious to recruit more people to help the

"Most of the volunteers here are retired people," said Ron, "and our biggest concern, collectively, is who is going to come along and carry on what we have started because it's important to ensure that we remember what happened here during the war.

"We can't just let it slip away," he nsisted. "It needs to be preserved for future generations to see what sacrifices were made by these young Americans.

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