

# Air Operations at Barmby Moor in World War One

by John Nottingham and Jeff Peck

***Acknowledgements:** These notes are based on elements of the late Geoffrey Simmonds's book 'East Riding Airfields 1915-1920' and which, with the quotations, are included with the permission of Crecy Publishing Ltd ([www.crecy.co.uk](http://www.crecy.co.uk)). Further information comes from Bernard Ross, Jean Dawes and John Gibson of Barmby Moor, plus several other good folk in the local area and in Canada who kindly allowed us to tap into their long-term memory banks.*

During World War One, the government established a number of Home Defence (HD) Squadrons, specifically to counter the night raids by German Zeppelin airships. The squadrons were drawn from both the Royal Flying Corps and the Royal Naval Air Service which amalgamated to become the Royal Air Force on 1<sup>st</sup> April 1918.

Initially, existing 2-seat reconnaissance and light bomber aircraft types such as the [BE2C](#) were used in this new night-fighter rôle but, later, some types were rebuilt as single-seat fighters, without an observer, but with an additional fuel tank to extend the machine's range and endurance.

A number of these HD squadrons were based at airfields in North Lincolnshire and in the East Riding, the nearest to Pocklington being on the Westwood at Beverley. Various '2nd Class night landing grounds' were also established as alternate places of refuge in case low cloud or poor visibility at the base airfields forced returning aircraft to divert elsewhere.

The specifications for all 2nd class landing grounds permitted "surface irregularities or obstructions which hamper approaches from certain directions". Indeed, the only concession to flying operations was that, whenever night flying was notified, "Farmland ... was to be cleared of livestock or other obstructions" !

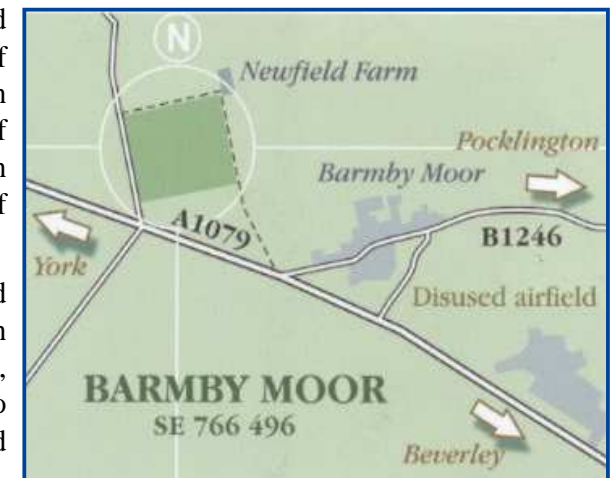
Geoffrey Simmonds listed one of the relief landing grounds, commissioned in April 1916, as being sited to the north-west of Barmby Moor village, bounded by Lottings Lane to the east and an unnamed lane to the west (now Feoffee Common Lane).

Unfortunately, there are conflicting accounts of the precise location of this site to the north-west, with further references to another landing strip being in Hodsow Field, to the east of the village. So this article aims to record all reported information and, from that, attempts to deduce the most likely whereabouts of the landing site(s) near Barmby Moor. The various options are illustrated on the composite map on page 4.

The same area was also subjected to a [Zeppelin raid](#) in September 1916 when 24 bombs were dropped near the village and at Frog Hall – fortunately all on open ground. So to complete the local area picture, the reported locations of the bomb craters are also depicted on the map on page 4.

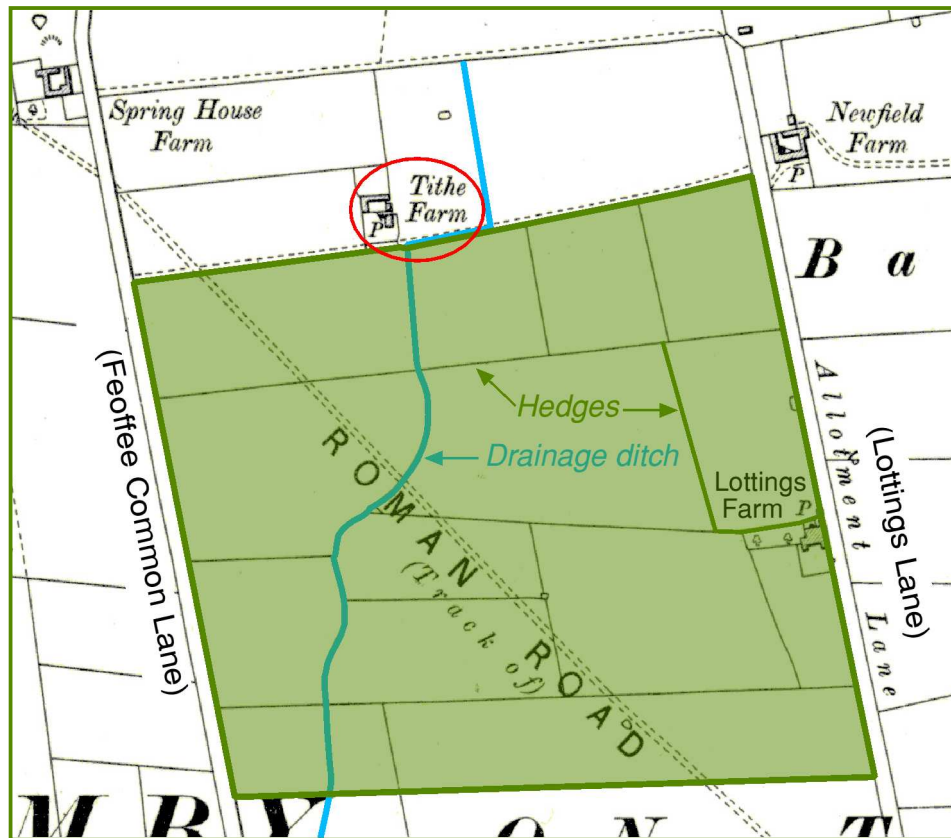
Geoffrey Simmonds placed the landing ground about half a mile north of the main road, comprising an area of some 56 acres and with an aircraft operating area of 580 × 430 yards.

The map reference and accompanying illustration in his book, reproduced here, indicates it as being sited to the south-west of Newfield Farm.

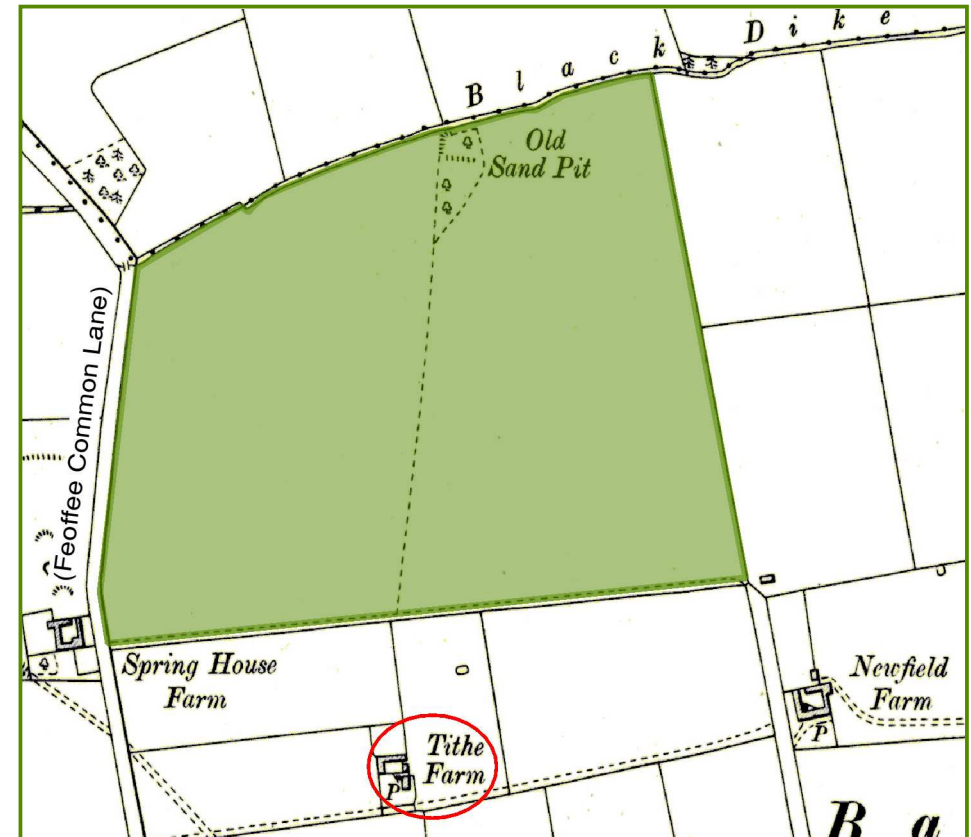


However, contemporary Ordnance Survey maps show this projected location to be problematic, on two counts. First, a substantial drainage ditch ran through the area, from Tithe Farm in the north down to the crossroads with the main road, Feoffee Common Lane and Sutton Lane. (The ditch is now culverted under the present garage.)

Second, numerous field boundary hedges sub-divided the site. The hedges were set out originally in the Barmby Moor enclosure of 1783 and those near Lottings Farm still exist, with the remainder reportedly not being removed until the 1960s, so during WW1 there would be no adequate landing and take-off run available in the area illustrated.



The problem may well be resolved by two credible, local reports that the Tithe Farm landing ground was to the *north* of the farmhouse, on a 59 acre area of open common land, crossed by a footpath but without significant obstructions.

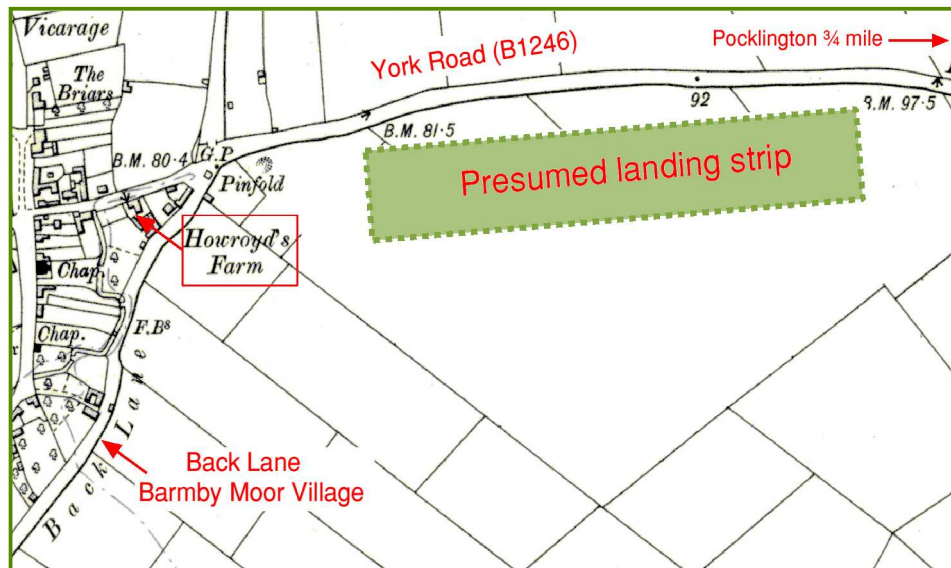


Based on this conflicting information, we cannot be absolutely certain whether the landing ground was to the south or to the north of Tithe Farm but, on balance, we conclude it was most likely to the north. It is still “*about half a mile north of the main road*” and is of the right area. Furthermore, being common land, it is more likely to have been clear of natural and man-made obstructions such as hedges which would impede aircraft operations.

Simmonds states that no aircraft were based at the designated relief landing ground at Barmby Moor and there were no hangars or other dedicated buildings on the site, although there are a couple of local reports of support equipment being stored in one of the outbuildings at Tithe Farm. Another mentions a fuel bowser being left at the farm after WW1.

During our researches, an account came in from a resident of Barmby Moor in the 1930s, now living in Canada, to the effect that his father – who during WW1 had been a worker at Howroyd's Farm at the east end of the village – had shown him where an aircraft was being serviced. It had seemingly arrived the previous night, so was perhaps an HD aircraft diverted to Barmby Moor. Where the aircraft had landed, and later took off, was reportedly on Howroyd's Farm land in Hodsow Field (later part of the WW2 airfield), and alongside the then York Road between Pocklington and Barmby Moor.

This incident was also recalled by another one-time village resident, an elderly lady whose uncle had been the farm bailiff. So although undocumented, both accounts seem to tie in with the presumed area outlined on the following graphic.



This poses several questions: Had the aircraft been on an air defence mission and then diverted to Barmby Moor? But why had it landed alongside York Road and not near Tithe Farm? Was it so low on fuel that it had to land, just a mile short of its intended destination? Or was the pilot not able to locate the rather isolated Tithe Farm landing strip, perhaps in conditions of very poor visibility? (Arguably more likely.) Only the pilot's post-flight report can tell us.

Simmonds reports that flying activity by HD squadron aircraft in the Barmby Moor area was most likely infrequent. Nevertheless, on the night of 5/6<sup>th</sup> August 1918, during the last Zeppelin raid of the war, a Bristol F2B aircraft left Elsham Wold airfield in North Lincolnshire at 2345 hrs, failed to find any target and, in the confusion, the pilot and observer were themselves fired upon, probably by another HD squadron aircraft "testing its guns".

They were unable to return to Elsham, reportedly due to low cloud, but the pilot successfully diverted to Barmby Moor and landed safely at 0150 hrs.

All this may seem very Heath Robinson but we need to appreciate that night flying – let alone the notion of night fighters – was very much in its infancy in WW1. To take off in the dark, to climb to high level in a freezing, open cockpit, to attempt to find an unlit and near-invisible enemy airship, then most likely having to descend through cloud, only to run into the all too common problem of fog or low cloud on return to base, and necessarily having to divert to – and locate – an unfamiliar and poorly-lit landing ground elsewhere, without navigation or landing aids, and with only the most rudimentary of flying instruments, demanded skills and courage of the very highest order.

For all their limitations, the various projected landing strips at Barmby Moor were however only 60-80 feet above sea level, unlike Elsham Wold airfield which could well be in cloud at 300 feet, and which could make the crucial difference between disaster and a relatively safe diversion and landing.

The Barmby Moor landing ground was finally closed to air activity in June 1919.

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Location of landing ground according to local reports (see page 2)

Location of landing ground recorded by Geoffrey Simmonds (see page 1)

Reported location of landing strip east of Barmby Moor (see page 3)

Reported locations of craters from bombs dropped by a Zeppelin airship on 25/26 Sep 1916 (see page 1)

The 1909 Ordnance Survey 6" map is reproduced by permission of the National Library of Scotland [www.maps.nls.uk/](http://www.maps.nls.uk/)