Flame Across Britain Part 4 – By Simon Wilson

The village of Eakring can be found between Ollerton and Southwell in North Nottinghamshire. It is an ancient settlement and its name is thought to come from the Old Norse *eik-hringr*, meaning "the circle of oak trees". Nothing about it says that it was once a small but important part of the war effort.

However, between 1939 and 1945 it was home to a little-known part of Britain's war efforts. In the late 1930s, exploration work by the D'Arcy Exploration Co, part of Anglo-Iranian Oil (later BP), established that there was a significant oilfield in the area. It is hard to imagine now, though if you are old enough you may remember the "nodding donkeys" (*left*), in the fields by the A1 in North Nottinghamshire.

The oilfield was not a total surprise as oil exploration, starting in 1915, had discovered several oil deposits, and sunk 11 wells, including Britain's first mainland oil well at Hardstoft in Derbyshire. Production started in1918 and ended in most of the wells in 1921 though Hardstoft No 1 would stay in production until July 1945.

Initial attention was drawn to Nocton, near Lincoln but it would only achieve limited production in 1943-44. More promising signs were found at Eakring and oil was found on 6 June 1939, 2,800 feet south of the parish church. Further fields were discovered at Duke's Wood (*left*, adjacent to Eakring), Caunton and Kelham Hills. These fields were said to be comparable in size to the fields discovered in mid-America. Oil was found in Derbyshire, Lincolnshire, Lancashire and Scotland, but the Nottingham oilfields contributed the majority of the production. In 1943, according to one set of figures, Nottinghamshire produced 90% of the crude oil that came from the UK.

I have previously mentioned that we had plenty of fuel to burn at various times of the war, fuelling flame traps and FIDO, but at other times, under pressure from U-Boat blockade, low fuel stocks would become more important. The Petroleum Warfare Department (PWD) wrote to D'Arcy in July 1941, telling them that "in the present emergency every ton of oil produced in this country is a direct contribution to the national war effort".

U-Boats, bombing of oil storage facilities in the UK and the efforts of the Afrika Corps combined to produce a situation where the UK was 2 million barrels below its projected safe limit for reserves, and aviation spirit was in short supply. In August 1942 things reached crisis point. Supplies could go up and down according to the successes of the U-Boats but in general, oil imports fell by about one fifth in 1942, the hardest time of the war in the Atlantic

There were severe restrictions imposed by the lack of experienced drillers. The exploration companies did not have many men and even combing out Canadian Engineer units did not provide enough skilled men. Anglo-Iranian called in men from overseas, but they couldn't spare many as they were already working flat out to supply oil from their existing fields.

Eventually, Philip Southwell, managing director of D'Arcy Exploration, was sent to America to source skilled men and specialised equipment. He got off to a bad start when four companies turned them down when asked for help, but Southwell pursued one of the chairmen to his home and knocked on his door on a Sunday morning. The Chairman answered the door in his pyjamas. Eventually two of the companies, Noble Drilling and Fain-Porter Drilling, agreed to help. They supplied equipment at cost price and recruited 42 drillers, who sailed for the UK on the Queen Elizabeth in March 1943. Two managers had already sailed in February.

With four new rigs designed for sinking wells rather than exploration work, and the experience and working practices of the Americans, the drillers were able to start sinking wells. The British took three weeks to drill a well, the Americans took 5-7 days.

The American drillers were billeted in the monastery at Kelham, on the banks of the River Trent. Locals heard many rumours, including that they were actors for a Western, and that John Wayne would be along shortly. This proved to be untrue. They were also sometimes suspected of being spies whilst out working, due to their strange accents and clothes.

By September 1943 Geoffrey Lloyd was able to note that the crisis was over, citing increased American supplies, anti-U-Boat measures and fast tankers as the main reasons – Nottinghamshire oil played little part in the improvement.

The Americans sank 106 wells, 94 of them producing oil. The contract came to an end in March 1944 and the drillers returned home, apart from two. One stayed to marry a local publican's daughter. The second, Herman **Douthit,** (left), fell from a drilling mast and was killed on November 13 1943. His funeral service was held in Kelham Church and his body was interred with full military honours in the military cemetery at Goodwood, Surrey. It was subsequently transferred to the American Military Cemetery at Madingley (*above right*).

The labour force during the wartime oil extraction, was 1,200, and most of them had never seen an oil well until the Labour Exchange sent them to Eakring. Many of them were unfit for military service, and a third of them were under 18 or over 60. The infrastructure included 25 miles of road, 13 miles of pipeline and a set of permanent rail sidings to support the project.

One of the enduring myths about the oil from the Nottingham fields was that it yielded 100 octane aviation fuel, and that helped us win the Battle of Britain. I don't want to get into a discussion of the benefits of 100 octane fuel, as it's a completely different subject, but the Nottingham oil deposits were producing very little oil by 1940 and were unlikely to have been significant during the Battle of Britain. In any event, Eakring oil was refined to produce motor spirit, light diesel, white spirit, lubricating oil and fuel oil for furnaces, but not 100 octane aviation fuel.

Although the oilfield was not the Top Secret it is sometimes said to have been, it hadn't been widely reported until September 1944, when Geoffrey Lloyd, in his capacity as Secretary for Petroleum and Chairman of the British Oil Control Board, hosted an open day to pay tribute to the work of everybody involved in producing 300,000 tons of oil during the war.

It sounds a lot, but even at peak it was approximately 0.8% of our fuel usage, and the Scottish shale oil production operation (which had been running since the 1850s) comfortably out-produced the midland oilfields, even in 1943, the peak year for crude oil production.

What contribution did the oilfields make? In truth, the production and saved some tanker space, but it was not a significant proportion of the total fuel needed to support the war. Even with the shale oil, British production never came to more than 2.3% of our needs.

So, what remains today? Kelham Hall still stands on the banks of the Trent. It is a hotel these days, having spent many years as the offices of Newark & Sherwood District Council. A small Civil War star

fort can still be seen on the Newark side of the river, a reminder of a much earlier war (though it grows less obvious with the passing years).

There is no longer a museum to the oilfields, though I believe the contents are still in storage. However, you can still visit the Duke's Wood at Eakring and amongst the trees and flowers (is a nature reserve these days) you will find a number of nodding donkeys and a seven-foot statue of an American roughneck - *The Oil Patch Warrior* (*left*, a resin copy – the original was moved to Rufford Park for security reasons).

The original statue was installed in 1991 and Nobles financed a trip for 14 surviving oilmen to attend the unveiling. Ten years later another cast was made and installed in Memorial Square, Ardmore, Oklahoma to commemorate the cooperation between nations.