

1954 Meteor Crash at Lock by Colin Rudling

On the afternoon of Saturday 13th February 1954 I was at Maryland Farm with my school friend David Moffatt when baker's roundsman Alec Porter told us that a jet fighter had crashed at Lock.

We jumped on our bikes and ten minutes or so of furious peddling saw us at the scene of the accident, a large crater, on the edge of a spinney, partially filled with water. There were no big pieces of wreckage to be seen, but the whole area was littered with small bits of debris, a policeman was walking around the field putting small fragments of clothing and human remains into a sack, and I clearly remember a leather flying helmet being collected. We surreptitiously trousered some interesting bits of wreckage, but to our dismay were made to empty our pockets by the military when we returned to our bikes in the lane.

I had often wondered over the last fifty or so years what caused the crash, but I think I now have a fairly clear idea of the sequence of



Gloster Meteor 8

events that led to the disaster. Martin Mace, writing in 'Britain at War' magazine, reports that at 2.30pm two Meteor 8 jet fighters, of 600 Squadron, took off from RAF Biggin Hill on a routine "dog-fight" exercise, to be carried out between 25,000 and 30,000ft.

One of the aircraft was piloted by Pilot Officer John Robert D'Arcy, the other, the ill fated WF 754, by 24 year old Pilot Officer Michael James Bridge. The weather was fine with scattered small cumulus clouds, visibility was good.



Partridge Green Auxiliary Fire Service with their pump at the crater

The two aircraft flew in tight formation at 2,000 to 4,000ft for 20 minutes to burn off some fuel then climbed to 29,000ft. Each pilot was to take turns, in five minute spells, to be the "tail chaser".

To begin the exercise P/O D'Arcy overtook P/O Bridge "at a considerable speed", Bridge was to be the first pursuer. D'Arcy then put his aircraft into a shallow dive and was travelling at about Mach 0.76 (approx.550mph). He then climbed and turned to look for Bridge, but could neither see him nor raise him on his radio.

An ex RAF man in Worthing was observing the manoeuvres through a telescope and described seeing a puff of vapour coming from the following aircraft which then went into a diving turn, followed by a steeper dive until a wing dipped violently and the aircraft commenced a violent spin. Other witnesses on the ground saw the plane spinning down until it stabilised into a dive in an inverted position which it maintained until it struck the ground.

The subsequent Court of Enquiry found that the puff of vapour observed was the result of the sudden decompression of the cockpit when the Perspex canopy was torn away, possibly as a result of an ineffective locking mechanism; three similar failures had occurred on other

Meteors in the previous twelve months. It was thought that Pilot Officer Bridge was probably incapacitated by the damaged canopy, pieces of which were found 2,000yds from the crash site.

A recommendation was made that all RAF fighter pilots should be equipped with the new "Bone Dome" flying helmets as soon as possible. Had P/O Bridge been wearing one his chances of survival would have been greater.

According to a West Sussex County Times report, the Crawley and Horsham Hunt were just two fields away from the crash site, and the two riders first to the scene were Mr Barry Jesse of Horsebridge Common and Miss Joy Mitchell of Partridge Green; both described hearing a terrific explosion and seeing a huge sheet of flame shoot into the air.

When the Partridge Green Auxiliary Fire Service arrived they were confronted by a crater twelve feet deep which had filled with water from a nearby stream, with aviation fuel burning on the surface.

The crater was drained in an effort to find the pilot, but no remains could be found. The pilot's ejector seat was lying near the hole.