

DORSET – THEN AND NOW FROM THE AIR

Gordon Le Pard

During the Second World War great strides were made in the field of aerial photography and photographic interpretation. Then as the allies were advancing across Europe they made a remarkable discovery. In 1940, as part of their plans for the invasion of Britain, the Germans had photographed much of southern England. Looking at these pictures it was immediately apparent how useful such images would be in the process of planning and reconstruction of Britain in the aftermath of the war. However the German photographs were not suitable, as they had been taken with a specific purpose in mind and only covered part of southern Britain: what was needed was a complete survey of the entire country.

The RAF was given the task, and completed it in a matter of months - between 1946 and '47 they photographed England, Wales and much of Scotland! The value of these pictures was immense and, since then, these surveys have been repeated on several occasions.

The sixty years since the photographs were taken has been one of massive changes in Dorset, towns and villages have grown, railways have gone and new roads have been built, in the countryside hedges have been removed, and trees have spread. The wartime infrastructure, still a feature of the landscape in 1947, has either disappeared or been altered almost beyond recognition.

The 1947 photographs have been used by professionals (including planners, archaeologists and ecologists) for many years, but have not been easily available to the wider public. In this profusely illustrated large-format volume, a selection of the photographs of Dorset are published, in many cases for the first time, alongside contemporary photographs of the same area. The changes may well fascinate, surprise and amaze – just as it is remarkable how some things remain gloriously the same.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gordon Le Pard is an archaeologist working for Dorset County Council, who has used these photographs almost on a daily basis. A few years ago he realised the value of carefully comparing old and new aerial pictures when he found that a deserted medieval village in north Dorset, which had been discovered through examination of the 1947 photographs, had not been recorded properly. It was far bigger than had been thought as the person who had discovered it hadn't noticed a tiny wisp of cloud which had hidden half of it! Gordon Le Pard is the author of several books about Dorset, including *Dorset Shipwrecks* and *Dorset and the Sea*.

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Above: Portland Bill 1947 photograph reference 1821-4051, centred on grid SY 684 693





Right: Bournemouth Pier 1947 photograph reference 1934-3030, centred on grid SZ 089 903



Below: Example of a double-page spread.

Arne
1947 photograph reference 1934-3045, centred on grid reference SY 776 689

On the 1947 photograph the most obvious feature is the group of about fifty landing craft moored along the shore of Arne Bay. These had been used during the Second World War; perhaps some of them may have been used on CDUs, but they were now surplus to requirement and were awaiting disposal. Two of them were used, in a more unconventional fashion, as harbour works. They were sunk to protect the new development at Thornworthy, the one on the left.

Across the heathland can be seen a series of oak circles, which are bomb craters. In 1940 Arne was made to resemble Poole, at night and from the air. No lights were shown to make the area look like a town under blackout. When a bombing raid began one line aimed at Poole were extinguished as fast as possible, then fire was started on Arne to look like burning buildings. Later waves of bombers would drop their bombs on the open heath and not the town. These bombs decays heath and every crater here means lives saved and buildings undamaged.

Today the clearest change is the large ball clay pit to the north, but elsewhere change has been very slight, most notably in the spread of trees. Lack of grazing on the heathland has enabled pine trees to spread away from their original plantations. Though here there are being kept in check, as much of the area is a nature reserve.

Ashmore Centred on grid reference ST 913 176

The village of Ashmore is famous for being the highest village in Dorset unless every other old village in the county but more is situated on top of a hill. The village is centred on an ancient pond, the 'High Mast' from which the village got its name. The pond can clearly be seen at the centre of the village in both photographs. It has almost been very difficult to get to Ashmore which is probably the reason it has not grown very much in the late twentieth century. Other villages have grown to provide accommodation for people who work away from the village in adjacent towns, but because of the difficulty of getting to any of the nearest towns, this has not happened here.

The surrounding countryside is remarkably unspoiled over the sixty years since the 1947 photograph was taken, there has been only a little growth of woodland and virtually all of the field boundaries are intact.

