

Shifting sands reveal wartime artefacts buried for 75 years on the Sefton Coast

Part of a Second World War fighter aircraft found buried in sand dunes near Formby has been identified as an American plane that crashed in 1944.

The piece of the aircraft was found on the Sefton Coast which has the largest sand dune system in England, stretching for 20 kilometres between Liverpool and Southport. The area is home to a key variety of habitats, supporting a huge number of specialist sand dune species. It is a key area in which the Dynamic Dunescapes sand dune restoration project will be operating for the next three years.

Natural England warden Tony Meadow found the object while checking on the sheep that graze on the dunes - one of the few practical conservation site management works that continue throughout lockdown.

Tony was aware that in 1944 an American P38 lightning fighter aircraft crashed in the dunes, but no other parts of the aircraft have been recovered since the original wreckage was removed.

The crash report from 1944 details that this aircraft crashed in during a local training flight on March 18th 1944, piloted by F/O W. H. Vallee who sadly lost his life. The plane was due to land at RAF Woodvale aerodrome but was signalled by the control tower at the last minute to abort, as several typhoon aircraft were arriving to land at the same time. He turned and either performed or attempted a simulated forced landing in the dunes, which resulted in the crash. The aircraft was recorded a 'complete wreck,' when found.

To find out whether the piece found was a part of that plane, it was sent to the Lancashire Aircraft Investigation Team (LAIT), who specialise in aviation archaeology and heritage for identification and have previously had permission to search the crash site.

Eric Watkiss, from LAIT, said: *"To identify it, I've been into my archives for different aircraft manuals and searched the P38 spares manual, but there was no part number on this piece. I'm an aircraft engineer so I put two and two together and worked out that it was a part of the propeller spinner plate."*

Eric is part of the team that featured on Sky History's television programme WW2 Treasure Hunters (S1, E1), who had a recovery licence for and successfully recovered a German bomber plane shot down on nearby Banks Marsh.

Sand dunes across the country offered protection during wars and many in the UK have a fascinating military history – with stories ranging from being the site of hidden explosive factories, to being decorated as decoy towns used to deter bombers from targeting nearby settlements. And the dunes on the Sefton Coast are no exception.

Dave Mercer, Natural England senior reserve manager at Ainsdale Sand Dunes National Nature Reserve, said: *"Most of the military history of the Sefton Coast stems from the Second World War. During which, several small farms and a golf course were cleared to*

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create Woodvale aerodrome, which was used by fighter aircraft to defend Liverpool. Several aircraft crashed during the war.

“The sand dunes of the Sefton Coast are home to more relics than buried aircraft wreckage. Bombs were jettisoned onto the dunes by enemy crews who missed their target of Liverpool and were keen to return to Germany. The large Devil’s Hole blowout - a crater in the dunes exposing the sand - in Formby was thought to have been initiated by a landmine. Lights were strung out in this area to fool enemy aircraft into dropping bombs away from Liverpool.”

The sand dune site where the artefact was found is protected under 1981 SSSI Wildlife and Countryside Act and the Protection of Military Remains Act (1986).

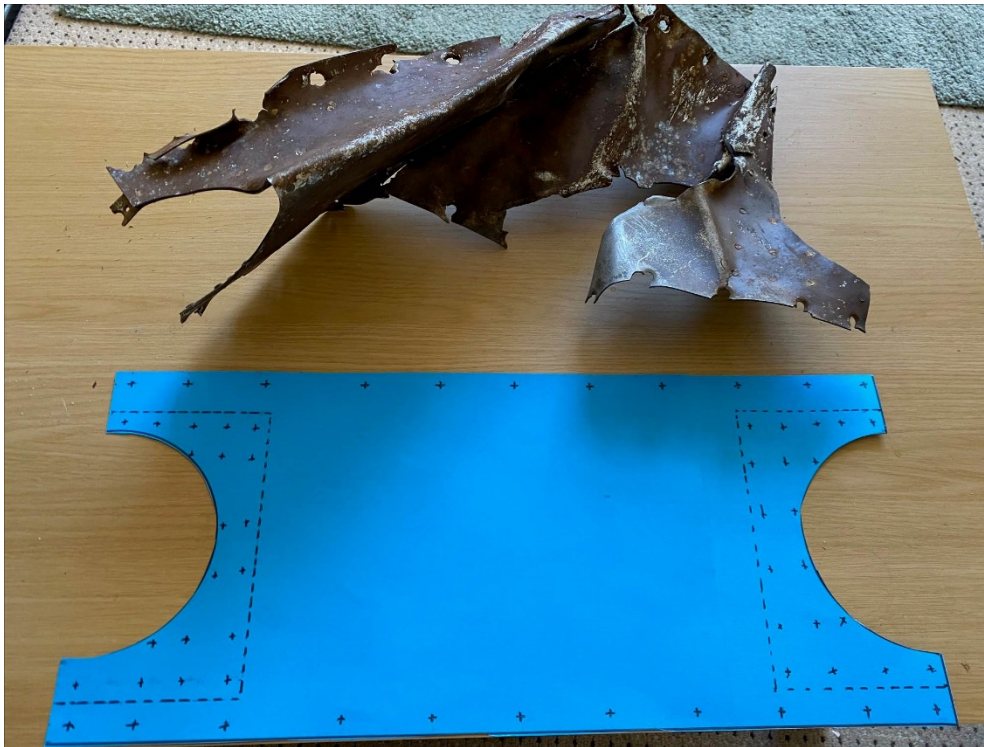
The Sefton Coast is home to a variety of dune habitats, supporting many sand dune specialist species. It is a key area of the Dynamic Dunescapes sand dune restoration project.

Dynamic Dunescapes celebrates and preserves the heritage of historic dunes as well as improving the habitats for wildlife and for communities.

It is a partnership project between Natural England, Plantlife, Natural Resources Wales, National Trust and the Wildlife Trusts. The project is funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and the EU LIFE Programme. Working across 34 sites in England and Wales, the projects aims to undertake 7,000 hectares of conservation restoration, supporting 33 important sand dune species.

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Images: Single-use



Identifying the piece of the P38 Lightning recovered on the Sefton Coast. Image: Eric Watkiss.



Devil's Hole sand dune blowout at Formby, believed to have been formed by a bomb in WW2. Image: Natalie Hunt

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Notes to editors:

Dynamic Dunescapes is a partnership project restoring sand dunes across England and Wales for the benefit of wildlife, people and communities, funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and the EU LIFE Programme. Project partners are Natural England, Plantlife, National Trust, Natural Resources Wales, Cornwall Wildlife Trust, Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust and Cumbria Wildlife Trust.

The coastal dunes of England and Wales are internationally important habitats for wildlife, listed as one of the most threatened environments in Europe for biodiversity loss. These dunes are a sanctuary to rare species like the fen orchid, natterjack toad and sand lizard. But, dune management messaging supporting dune stabilisation over many decades has meant that dunes have become overgrown with vegetation. We now realise that this is putting protected wildlife at risk. Healthy sand dunes need to be free to move and be dynamic. Many species need areas of open sand to thrive, so this project will bring life back to the dunes by creating areas of open sand. Other specialised creatures need us to improve the dune slacks, as these often water-filled dips behind the dunes are important habitats for amphibians and birds. Invasive species will also be removed from the dunes and dune grasslands, to improve conditions for rare native plants to flourish.

We will work with skilled local and national experts, and involve schools and local groups, volunteers and visitors of all ages and abilities to help rejuvenate our dunes.

For more details about Dynamic Dunescapes go to <https://www.dynamicdunescapes.co.uk/>

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