

High Wycombe's Contribution to Aviation

by David Scott and Ian Simmons

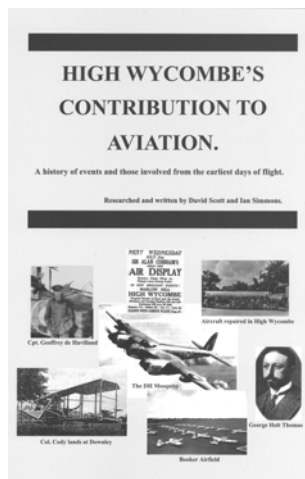
Until I read this book, I had no idea that High Wycombe and the wider Wycombe District had played such a significant role in the development of aviation in a variety of aspects. Our authors have carried out much detailed research, uncovering a tremendous amount of information about aircraft production and operation in the district.

It was Dave Scott, one of the co-authors, who instigated the search for the birthplace of Geoffrey de Havilland, later Sir Geoffrey, who established the renowned aircraft company bearing his name. It transpired that he was born in 1882 at Terriers House in Amersham Road, Terriers, opposite the 'Beech Tree' pub. A WDC commemorative plaque was later affixed to the house with due ceremony, appropriately including a fly-past. The de Havilland company produced some notable aircraft carrying the DH prefix, including the Mosquito fighter/bomber in WWII and the Comet airliner in post-war years.

An early flying visit to the district was made by Colonel Samuel Franklin Cody (not Buffalo Bill) who made a forced landing in Downley in September 1912. He was the first person in Britain to fly a powered aircraft, in 1908. His landing caused great excitement locally, and prompted a mayoral visit.

It was in the 1914-1918 war that High Wycombe people became fully aware of the aeroplane and its potential. The furniture manufacturing industry had the necessary skills and equipment for making and assembling wooden aircraft parts, and many of the well-known companies were involved in their mass-production. Bucks Free Press adverts of the period show a continual demand for skilled workers.

In the inter-war years, demand for aircraft declined and local industry mostly moved back to furniture making. However, during the 1930s public interest in aircraft was stimulated by regular visits by Sir Alan Cobham's Flying Circus. This operated from what is now Wycombe High School playing field at the top of Marlow Hill, then Whincup's Farm. Members of the public were invited to take a flight to view the district for, I understand, five shillings (25p) per child. Many of us will know of and appreciate Ronald Goodearl's aerial photos of the locality taken during such flights. Significantly, in early 1939, a German Graf Zeppelin airship flew over High Wycombe, probably taking reconnaissance photographs, and soon after the outbreak of WWII on 3



September of that year the RAF took over an airstrip on a farm at Booker renaming it RAF Booker, now Wycombe Air Park. The final chapter of the book recounts the story of Booker Airfield.

The outbreak of war seriously affected the local furniture industry. Demand for furniture dropped, but by mid-1940 many firms were back into the production of aircraft parts, notably for the largely wood-constructed Mosquito aircraft, but also in other materials. Assembly of fuselages was undertaken, even at Davenport

Vernon's garage in High Wycombe High Street, where Argos now trades! The book contains a chapter devoted to photographs and other information showing the extent of wartime work undertaken by Wycombe factories.

High Wycombe and its locality were closely involved in the operation and control of the armed forces, notably the RAF and USAAF, both during and after WWII. Deep shelters for RAF Bomber Command were built in the beech woods at Walters Ash, and for US 8th Army Air Force Headquarters, codenamed 'Pinetree', in the grounds of Wycombe Abbey School, which had been requisitioned in 1942 at short notice. At both sites trees provided natural camouflage. Generally, the USAAF operated by day and the RAF by night. Peak performance by the US 8th Army Air Force was reached towards the end of 1944 when around 3000 bombers and fighters were despatched on a single mission. Since the end of WWII there have been several reorganisations of command structure and upgrading of facilities at both sites, but, at the time of publication of this book, final closure of the US base in Dawes Hill Lane was expected by the end of 2007.

Hughenden Manor was also requisitioned by the Air Ministry during WWII. Codenamed 'Hillside', it was used as a top-secret intelligence and map-making facility, being fed with photoreconnaissance information from Benson and Medmenham. The facts about Hillside have only recently come to light. After WWII, in 1946, the Air Ministry moved out and the property was made over to the National Trust.

This book, dedicated to the craftsmen and

women of the High Wycombe furniture industry, is full of interest to local people. We owe a debt of gratitude to the authors for their research and for this publication.

(High Wycombe's Contribution to Aviation, published by WDC; price £10; profits to Thames Valley & Chilterns Air Ambulance.)

John Gore

Copies of this book are available for purchase at Wycombe Museum and at the Tourist Information Centre in Paul's Row. Alternatively, contact our member Ian Simmons at 154 New Road, High Wycombe, HP12 4LA or on 01494 531912 (post & packing £2.50).

Postscript (19 January 2008):

This book has now been allocated ISBN 978-0-9558241-0-4.