

Museum in the Making

Aviation heritage is now a multi-million-dollar global phenomenon, but half a century ago things were very different. At its peak in the 1930s Warwickshire had 45 airfields and landing grounds within its boundaries and the region made a massive contribution to manufacturing in both world wars.

Coventry alone could boast an output of more than 14,000 aircraft. Yet in the 1960s there was little or no evidence of this great industrial heritage: it was as though it had never happened.

Britain's grassroots preservation movement was still in its infancy when Roger Smith, a 19-year-old apprentice draughtsman at Dunlop Aviation, founded the Midland Aircraft Preservation

Society (MAPS) five decades ago. A classified advertisement in the *Coventry Evening Telegraph* invited enthusiasts to a meeting on May 24, 1967, at which 17 founder members agreed to join forces to foster the area's heritage.

Significantly, many of them were already active with projects of their own. Carl Butler had two Mosscafts, MA.1 G-AFHA and MA.2 G-AFJV; John Coggins had a collection of Percival Prentices; Ken Wooley had Foster Wickner Wicko G-AFJB; and Roy Nerou had Klemm L.25 G-AAHW, among others. They were followed by the likes of Joe Wood and Don Burgoyne, both of whom had built and 'flown' Mignet 'Flying Fleas' G-AEBT and G-AECN, respectively, in the mid-1930s.

First steps

With no fewer than 3,530 Royal Aircraft Factory RE.8s built in Coventry during World War One - nearly 90% of the total - it's fitting that the new society's first acquisition should be a propeller from the famed observation biplane. Carried through the city's streets, it caused quite a stir reminiscent of a medieval passion play!

The newly formed MAPS attracted others with links to the locality's past. James Rowe's family farm at Stratford-upon-Avon had served as a landing ground for the town during the 1920s and 1930s. In August 1967 he donated the remains of Parnall Pixie III G-EBJG, which took part in the Lympe Light Aeroplane Trials

in both 1924 and 1926.

MAPS had its first airframe, and one with local provenance, G-EBJG having flown from a field near Nuneaton from 1935. James continued to support the society, a converted pigsty on his farm being used as a store until 1988.

At first, the generosity of donors content to pass on redundant airframes was the main method of gaining potential exhibits, and several gliders found their way into the growing collection - including relatively familiar types, such as the Slingsby Cadet and Grunau Baby, while the experimental Nyborg TGN.III sailplane was a true one-off.

The priority was to raise funds and attract new members by visiting airshows with a sales and



Top right

Founder members of MAPS with their first aircraft, Parnall Pixie III G-EBJG, in August 1967. Left to right: Roger Smith, Dave Phillips, Gordon Riley, Mick Abbey and Rick Clarke.

COURTESY COVENTRY EVENING TELEGRAPH

Above

The BBC TV studios at Pebble Mill, Birmingham, on November 26, 1973. Left to right: Spitfire replica, Humber Monoplane, Meteor F4 and Flying Flea. MAURICE BUTLER



To celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Midland Air Museum, **John Berkeley** describes how this pioneering collection got started

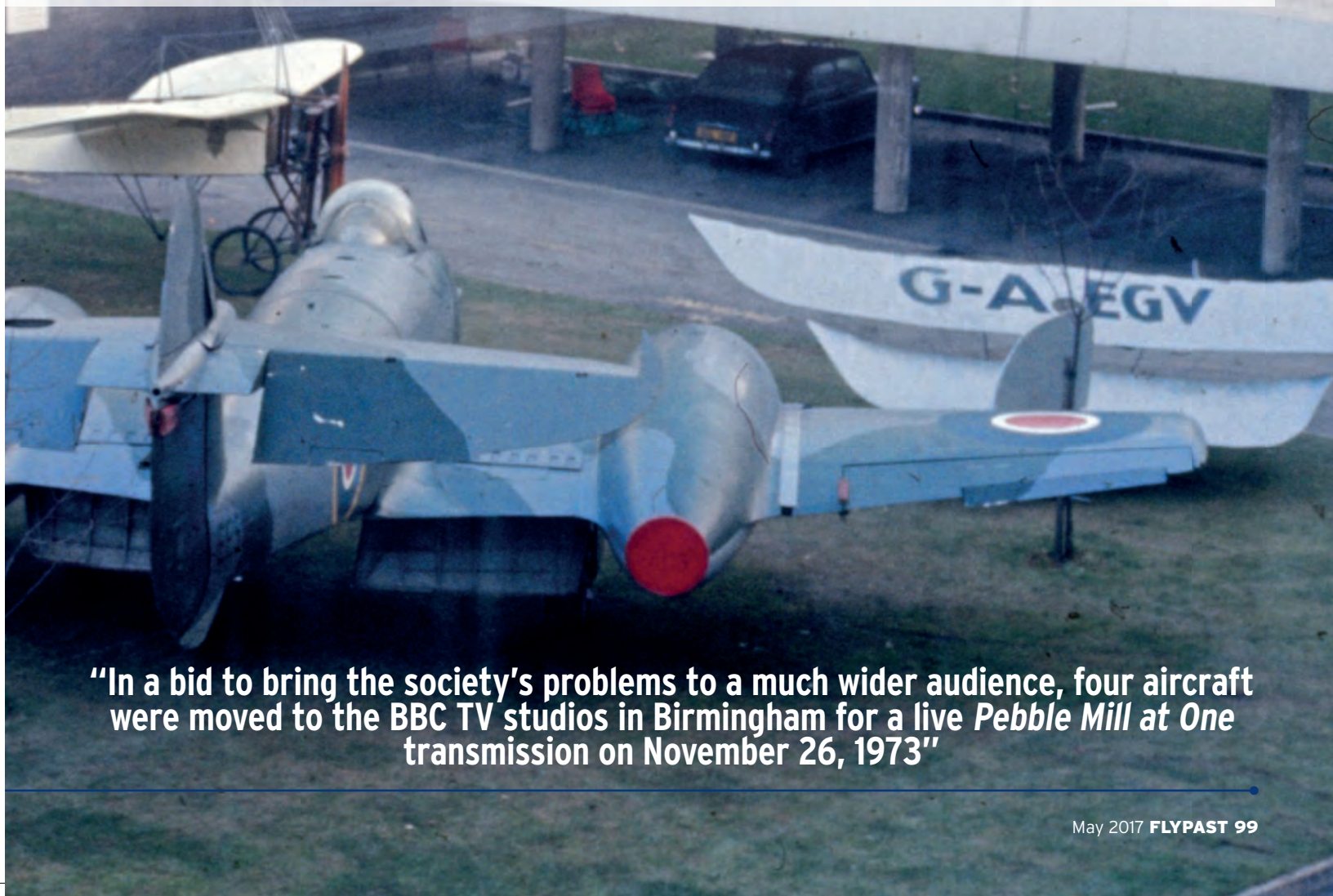
followed soon after, still in its wartime camouflage and gathering dust in a Royal Aircraft Establishment hangar at Lasham, Hampshire. At £175, and with dismantling and transport costs to cover, the search began for a sponsor. Fortunately, the Birmingham telephone directory turned up a car dealership in Moseley named Meteor Ford - and, freshly repainted, EE531 became the centrepiece of a forecourt display in the summer of 1973.

Neither of the two jets had been declared surplus by the MoD. The Vampire and the Meteor were the oldest surviving operational examples of their breed in the UK, and an important step had been taken towards the future direction of the museum.

publicity stand. Society chairman Bob Ogden bought the wings of Flying Flea G-AEGV, discovered in a garage in Northampton, and donated them to MAPS. Members built a new fuselage and the aircraft became the ideal travelling exhibit, capable of being transported in a van.

After five years MAPS decided to take a more proactive approach towards acquisitions. The first 'target' was de Havilland Vampire F.1 VF301, serving as a 'gate guardian' at Debden in Essex. The procedure back then was to contact the Ministry of Defence (MoD) office in Harrogate and

express an interest. A response would come by post with a fixed price, probably based on the aircraft's empty weight. No competitive tendering, just a simple 'take it or leave it' transaction and, in the case of VF301, an asking price of £100! Gloster Meteor F.4 EE531



"In a bid to bring the society's problems to a much wider audience, four aircraft were moved to the BBC TV studios in Birmingham for a live *Pebble Mill at One* transmission on November 26, 1973"

Dismantling the Vampire F1 at Debden in March 1973. GORDON RILEY



'Flying Flea' G-AEGV in the MAPS workshop in Coventry. VIA ROGER SMITH



The Meteor F4 on display with a Ford dealership sponsor in Moseley, Birmingham, during August 1973. GORDON RILEY

Finding a home

Having accumulated nine engines and 15 airframes – some more complete than others – a permanent base became an urgent need during those first five years. Lock-up garages and converted pigsties were simply no longer fit for purpose.

Many possibilities had been explored, as far afield as Halfpenny Green (now Wolverhampton Airport) and the old Stratford aerodrome. Lord Brooke at Warwick Castle offered the use of a small site in the town centre, but it would have provided no scope for expansion.

Thanks to Roger Smith being employed there as a surveyor, the National Agricultural Centre at Stoneleigh near Kenilworth came to the rescue. In August 1972, MAPS displayed several aircraft and engines at the first Town and

Country Festival. Following the event, the society was offered storage and workshop facilities on the site, an arrangement that lasted for the next five years. Without it MAPS could not have continued to expand and develop.

In a bid to bring the society's problems to a much wider audience, four aircraft were moved to the BBC TV studios in Birmingham for a live *Pebble Mill at One* transmission on November 26, 1973. Disappointingly, although the switchboard was jammed with offers of help, none came from within the Midlands.

Then, after strenuous canvassing, Coventry City councillors commissioned a report on the society's proposal to establish a museum at Coventry Airport. The project won approval and the council formally transferred

its responsibility for recording and preserving the city's aviation heritage to MAPS. This was the start of a unique affiliation that played a vital role in its future, supported by individual councillors, a succession of Lord Mayors and the local press.

The original site on the edge of the airport was small but afforded an uninterrupted view of the main runway. It was opened to the public as the Midland Air Museum (MAM) for the first time on April 2, 1978.

College graduates

MAM's long-term objectives included establishing a museum centred on the life and work of Sir Frank Whittle; and creating a broad, well-balanced collection throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

Early in its existence the College of Aeronautics at Cranfield (now

Cranfield University) had amassed a remarkable variety of airframes, some of which had already found their way into major museums. Thanks almost entirely to the generosity of Professor Denis Howe, a stream of aircraft and major components transferred to Coventry.

Among them were all that remained of several early British jets, such as the outer wing of Gloster E1/44 TX150 and the cockpit canopy of the sole Supermarine 545, XA181. The cost, 44 years ago, was £15!

Parts from a BAC TSR.2, Bristol 188 XF923, Meteor F.1 EE223 and others followed, together with more substantial acquisitions: the first was Fairey Ultra-Light Helicopter G-APJJ, the last of six produced from 1955. Like the Flea, this diminutive



A unique Whittle W2B-type engine discovered under a tarpaulin in a Coventry scrapyard in April 1975, where it had lain for 30 years. VIA AUTHOR

rotorcraft was an ideal travelling exhibit.

The Flettner FI 282B Kolibri of 1941 was the world's first helicopter to enter operational service, and Cranfield's example, 'CJ+SN', the 20th prototype, was almost certainly the sole survivor. Although generally complete back in 1945, shortage of space at Cranfield led to the removal of its rear fuselage and cropping of its intermeshing rotor blades.

When collected in May 1975, only the bare forward fuselage frame on its undercarriage remained, together with the all-important rotor head.

Because of the Flettner's significance and rarity, every effort was made to return it to Germany to be professionally restored and exhibited. With Cranfield's full agreement, enquiries began in 1976 with the aim of arranging an exchange for one of the top priorities on our 'wants' list.

Four German collections were

anxious to negotiate a deal but, unfortunately, none were able to offer something suitable.

A third Cranfield airframe presented a different challenge. The sole Midlands-built Boulton Paul P.111A delta-wing jet, VT935, posed a real problem. Although having a span of only 25ft 8in (7.82m), it couldn't be dismantled.

Various means were explored, including slinging it beneath a USAF Sikorsky HH-3E 'Jolly Green Giant' helicopter - but, eventually, permission was granted for a dawn move along the M1 and M45 motorways on a Sunday in July 1975.

Special relationship

From the early 1970s, former French Air Force aircraft funded under the US Mutual Defense Assistance Program were ferried to Sculthorpe in Norfolk for scrapping. Along with several other organisations, MAM applied for one of each type on offer: Dassault Mystère



A brace of Lightnings - F6 XR771 and T.55 ZF598. VIA AUTHOR



Lorry-bound, the Boulton Paul P.111A negotiating a roundabout close to Coventry Airport, July 13, 1975. VIA AUTHOR

Midland's Humming Bird

The F1 282B V20 under test at
Holtenu, 1944. KURT LASTIG VIA STEVEN
COATES



The 20th prototype Flettner F1 282B Kolibri (Humming Bird) was used for trials, including shipboard development flying, at Kiel's Holtenu airfield in northern Germany. It was captured at Travemünde, eastwards along the Baltic coast near Lübeck, in mid-1945, moved to Britain by July and issued to the College of Aeronautics at Cranfield on August 1, 1946. In cut-down form it transferred to the Midland Air Museum in May 1975.



Space restrictions at Cranfield meant that the F1 282 was stripped down, but the all-important intermeshing rotors were retained. VIA STEVEN COATES

Powered by the unique Coventry-built Double Mamba, Fairey Gannet T.2 XA508 arrived at MAM on September 26, 1982. COVENTRY CRANE HIRE



IVA, Lockheed T-33A and North American F-100 Super Sabre. They were to be held on indefinite loan from what was then the USAF Museum.

Despite the engineering team's previous experience, dismantling 10-ton F-100D 54-2174 with none of the specific equipment required proved quite a challenge. After the three-hour journey to Sculthorpe, one of the specially made tools broke - so it was back to Coventry to make a new one in a school workshop. Eventually the fuselage arrived safely in March 1978, followed by the wings a month later.

Following in May and June 1979 respectively were T-33A 51-4419 and Mystère IVA 70, and in March 1981 Kaman HH-43B Huskie 62-4535, with intermeshing rotors like the F1 282, arrived from Woodbridge, Suffolk.

New-found friends at the US Defense Property Disposal Service asked if we would be interested in a US Army U-6A, otherwise known as the de Havilland Canada Beaver. It had been operated on intelligence-gathering missions along the Berlin Wall. Ramstein Air Force Base kindly offered to ship the Beaver from Mannheim inside a Boeing CH-47 Chinook as a 'training exercise' - which, as a means of transport, was hard to beat.

In March 1982, the special relationship strengthened further when it was agreed that the then Defense Security Assistance Agency would assist with other surplus aircraft on the same terms. Ten years later, that support, aided by Tom Brewer from Dayton, Ohio's National Museum of the USAF, had led to the arrival of no fewer than 11 aircraft and one cockpit section,

Squeezing Gloster Javelin FAW.5 XA699 under the bridge at Cosford, heading for the museum, September 19, 1981. VIA AUTHOR





with three other airframes awaiting collection – more than any other UK museum.

In January 1986, a Royal Danish Air Force Lockheed F-104G Starfighter became available. It flew in on April 30, 1987 as cargo inside an RDAF Lockheed C-130 Hercules. Once again, the museum's central location on an operational airport proved invaluable. Not every offer could be taken up, however, and a former Pakistan Air Force North American F-86 Sabre at Peshawar proved just a little too far away.

Research meanwhile revealed that batches of RAF Hunter F.6s had been funded by the US. One of them, Coventry-built XF382, was located at Brawdy in Wales and quickly dismantled during November 1986, before being brought to Coventry.

Across Europe, the USAF had used retired jets for battle damage repair training. In 1991 MAM expressed an interest in three McDonnell types: Voodoo TF-101B 56-0312 at Alconbury and Phantom F-4Cs 63-7414 at Woodbridge and 63-7699 at Upper Heyford. The fact that '699 was also a genuine Vietnam 'MiG-killer' was a great bonus.

Understandably, they were not in the best condition, but the museum believed this might be the only opportunity to preserve such aircraft in Britain. In due course, MAM acquired all three, together with the forward fuselage of F-101B 57-0270 for conversion to a 'hands-on' exhibit.

Community project

As a voluntary organisation, the museum's most important and valuable resource was its members. But by the early 1980s the sheer pace of development demanded additional manpower. Thankfully, the Thatcher Government had introduced the Community Programme, providing temporary work for the long-term unemployed. In 1983, the first of three such schemes began, MAM employing 20 people on a mix of site work and restoration.

It was the start of a seven-year partnership, a unique collaboration that finally led to the opening of a dedicated aircraft restoration workshop at Edgwick in Coventry city centre in 1985, largely staffed by a team made redundant with the closure of Hawker Siddeley's facility at Bitteswell, near Lutterworth.

The first project was former Southend Historic Aircraft Museum Saab J29F 29640, which included some re-skinning. The Meteor F.4 came next – the start of a 12-month restoration – followed by Coventry-built Hawker Sea Hawk FGA.6 WV797.

The Edgwick team's final task was Percival Prentice T.1 VS632, which had come from Chelsea College at Shoreham, Sussex, in 1982. Its wings had been removed outboard of the undercarriage, but MAM obtained replacements.

An event in Coventry city centre in 1981 to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the maiden flight of

Britain's first jet, the Gloster E28/39, provided an opportunity to launch an appeal for funds to erect a hangar/workshop at MAM.

Jet pioneer

After the festivities, the then Lord Mayor confessed he had no idea that Sir Frank Whittle had been born in Coventry – which showed how much effort would be needed to win public recognition for the 'Father of the Jet Engine' and create a permanent and fitting tribute to him. It was left to Roger Smith to have a commemorative plaque erected at Whittle's birthplace.

The museum's Blériot-based Humber Monoplane replica had been installed as the centrepiece of the terminal at Birmingham Airport in October 1984. During the preparations, MAM developed an excellent relationship with the airport's owners, West Midlands County Council (WMCC).

At a meeting with WMCC in December 1985 the museum applied for financial support to create the Sir Frank Whittle Jet Heritage Centre. To everyone's great relief, on April 2, 1986, just a few hours before WMCC ceased to exist, a cheque for £110,000 was handed over – worth half-a-million pounds at today's rates. At long last, MAM's ambitious aim could be realised.

Back in 1976 the museum plot had been a mere 150 x 180 yards (137 x 164m) but a decade later it had moved to an adjacent 4.5-acre site. A construction contract for the Whittle

building was signed on October 30, 1986, with completion plans for the following February.

The Sir Frank Whittle Jet Heritage Centre was designed to provide a clean, uncluttered exhibition space for the Meteor, Vampire, T-33 and J29, complemented by engines and other relevant exhibits. With the benefit of hindsight, it's now clear that the little Boulton Paul delta, which contributed much to aerodynamic and control system research, should also have been accommodated within it.

Sir Frank Whittle had given his blessing to the project back in 1981, with five of his contemporaries, Sir Rolf Dudley-Williams, Sir Arnold Hall, Sir Stanley Hooker, Sir Arthur Marshall and Lord Kings Norton, agreeing to be patrons of the fund-raising appeal. The official opening was conducted by Lord Kings Norton, former chairman and managing director of Power Jets.

At the end of its first quarter-century, the Midland Air Museum had a collection of nearly 50 aeroplanes, rebalanced a city's appreciation of its industrial heritage and led the way in securing local recognition for the most significant 'Coventrian' of the 20th century.

Looking back to the beginnings of that grassroots preservation movement, although some of the early pioneers have fallen by the wayside, those that remain can be justifiably proud of an incredible achievement.

www.midlandairmuseum.co.uk

View of the original museum site, circa 1983.
VIA AUTHOR



A view of the Whittle centre shortly after its opening. MAURICE BUTLER



Argosy 101 G-APRL, donated by Air Bridge after negotiations lasting ten years, flew into Coventry on February 20, 1987. VIA AUTHOR