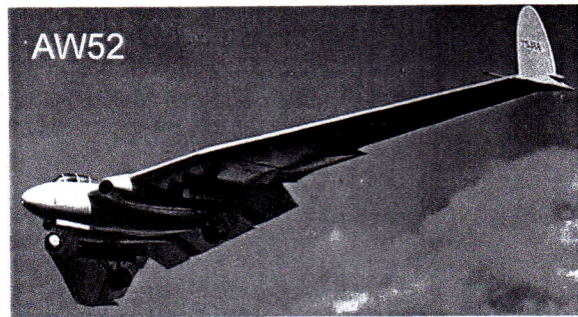

Local History A to Z

We plan to make this a regular feature of the Newsletter and to include in it some lesser-known local history topics. The column 'takes off' in this issue with the letter 'A' and a local aeronautical story from sixty years ago.

AW 52

Long before Concorde went into service and as long ago as 1943, the Coventry firm of Sir W G Armstrong Whitworth developed an experimental, tail-less jet aircraft, the AW52 which became known as the Flying Wing. This aircraft had no fuselage or tail section and was essentially a large fixed wing powered by two Rolls Royce Nene jet turbines. It was the first of its kind in the world and was developed as a prototype for a planned six-engined passenger version.



Whilst on a test flight East of Leamington on Monday May 30th 1949, the prototype aircraft was at 3,000 feet when it began to oscillate violently and pilot J O (Jo) Lancaster, fearing the

plane was about to break up, bailed out. The plane which was on the secret list crashed in open country near Leamington Hastings. Jo Lancaster parachuted to safety and landed in a field at the rear of The Cuttle inn at Long Itchington narrowly avoiding 'touch down' in the adjacent canal. It was the first ever deployment of the Martin-Baker ejection seat in an in-flight accident.

Many people can recall seeing the Flying Wing. The sound of jet engines was fairly uncommon back in the late nineteen forties and given the low altitude that the plane frequently flew at, its appearance seldom went unremarked. Colin Jennings recalled one such occasion

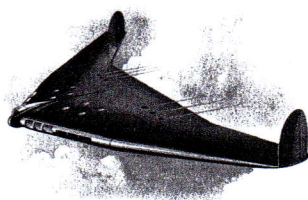
'As a fourteen year old boy I was in the Pump Room Gardens when I saw this extraordinary sight in the sky, a plane without a fuselage or tailplane flying very low from West to East. It was quite unlike anything I had ever seen in a book or film. When I got home and told my family about this strange aircraft we discovered that it was called the Flying Wing. I am sure some friends who I told about it thought it was all the product of an overwrought imagination' Alan Griffin remember seeing it fly over his home in Southam and his parents stood in the back garden and witnessed the accident that befell it on that May afternoon in 1949.

A second prototype continued to fly with the Royal Aircraft Establishment at Farnborough until 1954 when development ceased. Sixty years on, the American aviation company Northrop is engaged in research for a large multi-engined plane based on the 'Flying Wing' principle which Armstrong Whitworth had successfully demonstrated in the AW52.

Footnotes

J O (Jo) Lancaster was born in 1919 and flew heavy bombers during the Second World War. He completed 54 operations including participation in the 1000 bomber raids. After the war he became a test pilot for Saunders-Roe and Armstrong Whitworth and clocked up over thirteen thousand hours on a wide variety of aircraft of all types.

The Martin Baker company is still in existence manufacturing ejection seats. The lives of 7,300 pilots have been saved thanks to their seats.



An artists impression of the Armstrong Whitworth design for a six-engined Flying Wing with accommodation for passengers within the central wing area.