



A VERY BRIEF HISTORY OF FARNBOROUGH AIRFIELD - VERONICA GRAHAM-GREEN

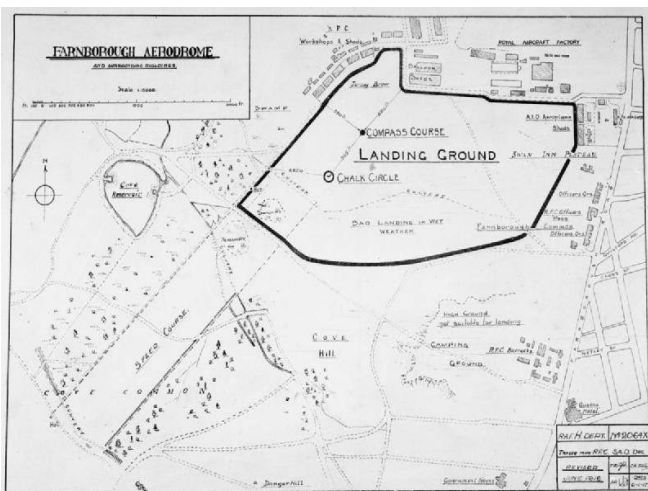
The talk began with the reading out of an email received from a member of the Cove Brook Greenway Group and which contained personal reminiscences of activities on the airfield before WW2, when the airfield was not fenced to keep the public out; the sender had witnessed a couple of aircraft accidents and first hand accounts such as these are important little bits of history.

The speaker outlined the background to flying at Farnborough which resulted from British Army representatives, having witnessed the value of gas filled balloons in the American Civil War in 1865, returning to persuade the powers that be, that whoever could get to altitude to observe enemy activities had a very powerful advantage; the Royal Engineers Corps were instructed, under the leadership of Captain Templar, to get on with the development of balloons for the British Army. This work had been started at Woolwich Arsenal, moved to Chatham, and, in 1890, moved to Aldershot in a place which became known as “Balloon Square”.



Cody's Tree in its original position with the Black Sheds in the background

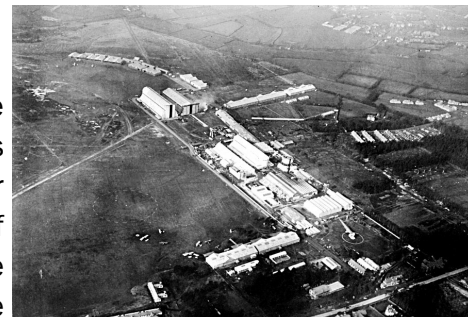
In 1905, wishing to move on into the production of airships, and not having room to do so on the site in Aldershot, after a fairly wide search, it was decided to move just 2 miles north and to set up operations on Farnborough Common. The Army Balloon School built premises by the Farnborough Road, now known as Trenchard House and the home of the Farnborough Air Sciences Trust Museum. The Balloon Factory had been established on what is now the site of the Barons BWW sales area and all the way to the west to incorporate Cove Common. In addition, a large area of land used for Army training and known as Laffan's Plain after Lt. Laffan who had led a party of sappers to clear a large area of scrub and vegetation as a site for Queen Victoria's review of the Army during her “Diamond Jubilee celebrations; (she never came but the work had been done).



Thus , flying came to Farnborough as a site with enough room to accommodate airship sheds. Samuel Franklin Cody, who had been employed by the army in Aldershot to teach the troops how to use his man carrying kite system, came here with the move to Farnborough and was involved with the production of the first airship “Nulli Secundus”. He constructed British Army Aeroplane No. 1 and flew it from Farnborough Common on 16th October, 1908, to make the first powered, heavier than air, controlled and sustained flight in the UK.



After a brief spell when the Army decided that fixed wing aircraft were of no use to them, the need to develop proper aeroplanes was recognised and the Balloon Factory became the “Aircraft Factory”, later to become the “Royal Aircraft Factory” coincident with the formation of the “Royal Flying Corps”. Later, when the RFC was merged with the Royal Naval Air Service to form the Royal Air Force on 1 April, 1918, the “Factory” was renamed the Royal Aircraft Establishment (R.A.E.) in order to distinguish it from the newly formed R.A.F.



Royal Aircraft Factory oblique c.1915

Briefly renamed the Royal Aerospace Establishment in the mid 1980s, in the early 1990s it was changed to the status of a Government Agency, first the DRA and later the DERA before being privatised in the early 2000s to be called “QinetiQ”. The airfield itself, having first been bought by BAe., was sold on to TAG Aviation who have spent a great deal to bring it to a very high standard, now known as London (Farnborough) and used extensively by “business jets”.



Airfield and Black Shed Aug 2011

We learned that many of the road names in Farnborough relate to the names of men or machines which had a significant presence at Farnborough Airfield. These range from O’Gorman Avenue (the first civilian superintendent of the aircraft factory) to Hall Road (a director of RAE in the early 1950s). Former Test Pilots are used as road names (eg Neville Duke – though this was mentioned by a member of the audience) and there is a Wetherspoons pub in Victoria Road known as the “Tilly Shilling” – Miss Shilling was a world famous engineer, known in particular for providing a solution to an engine problem on the Merlin engines fitted to fighter aircraft such as the Spitfire and Hurricane (the speaker invited the audience to examine the door handles on the Tilly Shilling pub – they are similar to the control column of a Spitfire). Another well known local feature is the 4/5 scale representation of a Gloster aeroplane built specifically to fly the newly developed Whittle designed jet engine and situated, not on the Whittle Roundabout as might be expected but on the Ively roundabout nearby. It is not appropriate to try to cover all the roads and places mentioned and which in any case was not a complete list. What was clear was that there are many, many, places within the Farnborough / Cove boundaries which owe their names to some sort of connection to the Farnborough Airfield.



Aerial view of the RAE c.1955