

February 2002

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In this issue:

This month we concluded *Edwin Shackleton's* report of his exploits during 2001, but on his request this was only published in the newsletters circulated directly to Strut members. Along with the usual news items, *John Shuttlebottom* has sent us another article about the early years of the Bristol Aeroplane Company, with a review of a little-known rarity, the Bristol Brownie.

On the 'back-page' we have reproduced another fascinating collection of wartime letters via *Dave Hall*, whose father was a pilot in the RAF. These extracts illustrate some of his experiences while training at RAF Grantham in 1940. Dave has also sent us a write-up of the The Royal Aeronautical Society lecture on the BMBF, which he attended last month.

This month's meeting: Thursday 14th February 2002

It was hoped that John Hamer would be able to join us next Thursday to talk about the latest progress and developments of his Mini Max homebuilt design. However, due to commitments with the BBC his visit has had to be put off until another time. Instead, we are going to throw the meeting open to yourselves, for another....

Curiosity Evening! Yes, following the success of this event a few months ago, we think it's a good idea to try again. Have a good rummage through the attic, wardrobe, workshop, etc. and see what you can find of an aeronautical nature that could be brought along on Thursday to share with others. Anything with a story will do, small or big (as long as it fits in the car!), and the more curious the better. We heard some great tales last time!

Last month's meeting:



In January we were pleased to once again welcome Polly Vacher to our Strut meeting, this time to talk about her epic adventure Round-the-World trip. It was a real insight for those of us who fly PFA type aeroplanes in fair weather, to hear how she coped with everything the elements could throw at a pilot; rain, crosswinds, icing, high altitudes, and a lot of it at night too! Polly described these events in her modest un-assuming manner, but the audience, mainly of fun-flyers, could not help but be impressed at her achievement.

At each stop on her trip, Polly would look for the opportunity to promote her charity, *The Royal International Air Tattoo flying scholarships for the disabled*, and we also were reminded of what it is about. She read to us a letter that one candidate had written, which described graphically how this person's life was transformed by the gift of flight when in deep despair through her disability. Polly is herself on the selection board for these scholarships, and described how difficult it is sometimes to decide who will or will not qualify. If more funding was available, even more lives could be enriched in this way.



Our Strut trophy was passed around after the meeting and a generous contribution of well over £100 was donated to Polly's charity fund. Thanks to all present for your support.

The Royal Aeronautical Society lectures.

Last month's meeting at BAWA featured a presentation by Squadron Leader Paul Day on the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight at Coningsby. *Dave Hall* was in the audience, and he has assembled the following resumé for the benefit of those who couldn't make it...

The Battle of Britain Memorial Flight

based on a talk by Sqn Ldr Paul 'Major' Day OBE AFC
RAF



The Bristol branch of the Royal Aeronautical Society arranges an excellent series of talks through the year, and this one was no exception, being a frank insight to the difficulties and pleasures of running the BBMF.

Based in Coningsby, Lincs. since 1976, the history of the Flight has been a series of highs and lows since it began in 1957 as the Historic Aircraft Flight at Biggin Hill. By this time, virtually all of the wartime aircraft had been scrapped, though the odd gate guardian remained. Additionally few spares were available for the later aircraft such as the Mk 19 Spitfire that had survived scrapping, though there were spares for the Mk 15, but no aircraft of that version left.

Gradually the collection came together, three Mk 19 Spitfires and a Hurricane Mk 2c at first, joined temporarily by three Mk 16, one of which was crash-landed on a cricket pitch by a senior Officer who failed to appreciate that while the main tank below him was empty, the wing tanks had plenty! A picture of the incident showed the cricket match continuing in the background, while just a few small boys were showing any interest in the aircraft as it sat on the boundary.

The Mk 16's moved on elsewhere, as did the Flight itself through a series of bases and then the flight gained Mk 5b from Vickers and Mk 2a Spitfires, the latter being the only one that was actually flown in the Battle of Britain. These acquisitions were largely through the money spent making the film of the same name. Not until 1972 did the Flight acquire a Hurricane 2c, then in 1973 a Lancaster B1. At this point, somewhat illogically, its name changed to the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight.

This Lancaster was originally destined for the Far East, but had been used instead to map large areas of East and Southern Africa, and even had a test wing-section grotesquely grafted onto the upper surface for flight trials of the Handley Page Laminar Flow wing. It was missing the mid-upper turret, but a replacement to complete the aircraft was discovered in Argentina in 1975 and collected by the Navy.

Since settling in at RAF Coningsby, the BBMF has acquired two Chipmunks, used mainly to keep up skill levels on tail-wheel aircraft, a DH Devon (since sold) and a DC3 Dakota, subsequently adapted for parachuting. The Dakota presents a number of logistical challenges - being considerably slower it has to set out much earlier than the Spitfire, Lancaster and Hurricane for joint events, or the faster aircraft have to be occupied while waiting for it to arrive. Also, not being UK-built means parts generally take longer to obtain, and have to be paid for in currency.

Despite gentle handling, constant maintenance of engines and airframes and occasional major restorations are the price of having an operational Flight. In 1991 the Hurricane 2c had a forced landing at RAF Wittering due to a problem with the sectional camshaft. In the crash the engine moved forward a foot or so from the rest of the plane which led to a fire, all but destroying the fabric and wooden craft. The rebuild took seven years, and was not without problems since while all the Spitfire drawings survive, only about 95% of the Hurricane drawings exist. It was given the colours of 56(F) Squadron, as their badge is a Phoenix rising from the ashes.

The Lancaster received a new main spar in the mid-nineties; quite a tricky business without any written manual - how do you split a Lancaster fuselage? Its current livery is No 61 Squadron (code QR), rather special as it's the squadron my father Geoff Hall flew with for most of 1941-43 on Hampdens, Manchesters and Lancasters, rising to Sqn Ldr before moving to train aircrew, and then to BOAC.

Not all maintenance goes smoothly; Paul Day was checking out a 2-seater Spitfire (not a BBMF plane) to see that the landing gear was working correctly after maintenance, and had an elderly mechanic aboard. When raising the gear the handle gave that worryingly solid feel, and sure enough it refused to go down again. The hour or so spent flying around to burn off fuel before putting it down on its belly seemed an age. Luckily the ground was soft from recent rain and no significant damage was done, but a Spitfire stops exceedingly quickly under these conditions.

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