

HISTORY OF ELSTREE AERODROME

By John M. Houlder, C.B.E.

Pre 1939 the present Haberdashers School was known as Aldenham House and was lived in by Mr. Vickery Gibbs up until the time of his death. The gardens were world famous and employed 70 gardeners.

On Mr. Gibb's death (his brother was Lord Aldenham, the Chairman of the Westminster Bank) the estate was turned into a country club, which included a polo ground. At that time flying was extremely smart and fashionable. Large numbers of the polo players owned their own aircraft, the Puss and Leopard Moth being particularly popular. The present Aerodrome started as a grass field to cater for their needs together with a small hanger, which is now Brickfield Plant.

During the war the concrete runway was put down, together with the present hangars and the Aerodrome was used for modifying Wellington Bombers. These aircraft were towed up the Watford Bypass from the factory in Watford (without the wings) and put together in the hangar. In addition, an endless stream of modifications were continually fitted, including, it is rumoured, the mod. to carry out the early bouncing bomb trials.

At the end of the war the situation was that the ground belonged to the Aldenham Estate but the hangars belonged to the Ministry of Supply. However, London Aero and Motor Services started operations on the Aerodrome with a flying club and also ferrying fruit from Italy in Halifax Bombers. After a heavy landing in which the Halifax broke through the concrete of the runway, the fruit service was transferred to Stansted.

The club and private owners remained but by 1950 the roofs of the hangars were almost non-existent, as they had been made from ungalvanised thin steel sheets. London Aero and Motor Services went into liquidation and Lord Aldenham negotiated with Hunting Aero Surveys, Nat Summers and others to take over the Aerodrome but failed to reach agreement.

At this time I had a Messenger hangered at Elstree Aerodrome and on the final Friday night break-up party I was persuaded to try to carry on management of the Aerodrome on a week to week basis until Lord Aldenham could find a professional Aerodrome manager to take over. I called Lord Aldenham on the following Saturday morning and together we went to the Ministry of Supply and arrived at the desired temporary arrangement. It is interesting to note that in those days everyone worked a half-day on Saturdays.

I found that managing an Aerodrome was not as difficult as it appeared at first sight and ultimately took out a 40 year lease on the ground and bought and re-roofed the hangars. I also bought three Austers at £300 each to continue the flying club and it is interesting to note that at that time the charges were £1.75 per hour solo and slightly more for dual. One of these was the famous XT from which Setty's body was dropped after his murder.

I soon discovered that running a flying club required more time than I had available, and I asked my own old friend Ron Payne who was manager of Wolverhampton Aviation to take over management of the club. His activities ultimately led to the formation of the London School of Flying.

It is a curiosity of law that an assistant instructor without a commercial license is only entitled to give instruction in flying for a payment if both the instructor and the pupil are members of the same flying club. The Elstree Flying Club was therefore formed for this purpose with myself as proprietor and originally it also supplied food and drink, etc. However, there came a change in the licensing laws and only "Members Clubs" could obtain a license - hence the formation of the Elstree Aero Club.

A major step was the grant of Customs facilities, which occurred in October 1968.

Elstree Aerodrome has always been particularly fortunate with its staff. Originally there was one man, Joe Floyd who performed much the same tasks as Tom Kilcoyne. He was paid what was then the fantastically high salary of £8 per week. The next to arrive was "Jock" who intended to work for 3 days with a view to earning a little extra for Hogmanay, and completed 29 years with us.

In the early days there was great emphasis on agriculture in this country which was heavily and directly subsidised. Accordingly, the Aerodrome produced a barley crop every year for ten years and the crop was dried in a small white building behind the hangar. We also grew an experimental crop of sugar beet, but it never came to anything. Ultimately we allowed this agricultural area to be a tip for rubble, which provided the more or less level area extending from the London School of Flying to the Control Tower. Previously this was quite a steep slope. Other major works were the construction of the sewage plant, a new fuel installation, the Control Tower and some more or less hard standing at the bottom end for light aircraft. This was achieved by allowing the space to be used for the storage of gas pipelines provided the contractors left the area fit for heavy lorries.

As for the future, I foresee no major developments. I think the present usage of Elstree Aerodrome is just about in balance with the air space available in the immediate vicinity