

The de Havilland Aeronautical Technical School, Christchurch

Garth Rogers (Student 1955-1960)



Airspeed and de Havilland

Airspeed, then based at Portsmouth airfield, was bought into by de Havilland in 1940 and merged completely with them in 1951, but the Company was known as the Airspeed Division of de Havilland Aircraft for some time afterwards. Christchurch was created as a shadow factory for Portsmouth during WWII and by the latter part of 1951 it had a full design, development and manufacturing capability. During the war years Airspeed manufactured Horsa gliders, Oxfords and Mosquitoes. This was followed in the late 1940s and 50s by the Ambassador airliner, Vampire, Sea Venom and ultimately the Sea Vixen.

The site had a grass strip, a concrete runway (from 1953) and an aero club. The sports facilities were at Wingfields (a right turn before the "Cat and Fiddle Pub") on the A35 some two miles from the factory.

The site, which had a workforce of some 1800, closed in July 1962. Only a few of the old buildings remain, at the right hand end of the old site. The rest of the land, including the airfield, sports facilities and the School, was used for new businesses and housing. From 1984 to 2000 a Sea Vixen stood outside the old factory site, but due to vandalism and weathering it was moved to the Tangmere Museum. The engraved plinth is still in place.



The Apprentice School and its Apprentices



The first intake of DH apprentices at Christchurch was considered to be in 1951; there is a group photo taken in front of an Ambassador. Some Airspeed apprentices came from Portsmouth to finish their five-year term and over the years others came from DH sites. At this time there was only a small compound on the factory site for apprentice use. The School in Somerford Way, situated up a right turn about ½ mile short of the factory, was opened in 1953. It had been built in 1938 and was originally the first Rosicrucian theatre in England. The magnificent gate, depicting the school badge, was built later by apprentices from the 1954 intake.

School Layout and staff

The main entrance was the old foyer converted into an office for the Apprentice Supervisor (Mr Bush) and his two secretaries (Miss Reece & Miss Berwick) plus toilets. Above this office was the tool store (looked after by Jim Hall and his assistant) and an office for the Chief Instructor (Mr Barker), both reached by an open stairway. The auditorium had become the workshops – Fitting (Messrs Milton & James) on the left and Sheet Metal (Mr Hayward) and Woodwork (Mr Spalding) on the right for about half its length. Beyond that was the machine shop, full of lathes and grinders etc. (Fig 6). (Mr Cherrett)



On each side some steps led up to the stage partitioned off from the workshops. This was used for lectures, films and school gatherings. On the other side of the stage were the staffroom, classroom (Mr Glover James was our maths & science mentor) and more toilets.

Another entrance to the school grounds was used for vehicles (e.g. for the odd car, motorbike and many bicycles) which was on the left just beyond the school, via an unmade-up cul-de-sac called Beresford Gardens, at right angles to Somerford Way.

The nearby airfield, entered through an old iron gate, was used by the school for PE led by Lt Col Thomas. There was a pavilion of sorts which was used in bad weather. The school staff supervised our practical, academic and physical welfare.

The Apprenticeship and Apprentice Activities (more photos at end)

An apprenticeship consisted of one year at the school followed by twelve 3-monthly periods in various departments round the factory. In parallel, over the five years, everyone attended Bournemouth Municipal College taking courses up to degree level.

Many apprentices played for football, cricket and rugby teams, were members of other various clubs within de Havilland such as the sailing and car rallying sections. Others built floats for various local carnivals and charity events etc. and some formed bands.

A college group set a new record for the number of guys on a letter box and a steam engine was manufactured at the school capable of carrying children on Sports Days and other special occasions (The latter is now with the Bournemouth Engineering Society).

The last entry was in 1958. Many of the guys finished their apprenticeships at other DHA sites such as Hatfield in Hertfordshire.



Apprentice Five Sinners Skiffle Group from l to r:- Geoff Elliot, Gerry Bellis, Ray Neal, Paul Moores & Brian Miller.
(1953 starters)

At the end of their apprenticeships employment was sought at Hatfield and at many local firms. In addition, a fairly large number went to North America to join aircraft and space programmes.

Reunion Launch

Garth Rogers first considered the possibility of a reunion for the Christchurch Apprentices in the 1990s and really started looking for chaps in 2000. Having considerable success in finding ex-apprentices, with the help of many people, it was decided to set up a small committee and discuss the idea and book a venue.

A small group (Garth Rogers, Colin Croucher, Dave Cheffy, Tom Sexton (since deceased), Dave Scammell and Paul Moores) met at the Somerford Hotel in March 2003 and fixed the date, venue, and detail for the first reunion. The year was very appropriate as the school in Somerford Way had opened 50 years before.



Bournemouth Aviation Museum, Hurn, 2003

First Reunion, weekend of 21st September 2003

Visit to Bournemouth Aviation Museum

This was attended by some 100 apprentices and many thanks were due to Assistant Manager Chris Christie for a very enjoyable afternoon mingling with old friends and the Vampire, Venom and Sea Vixen.

The Main Event

206 attended the main event at the Hoburne Park. This included 130 ex-apprentices (60% also brought their wives/partners), 1 ex school staff, 4 Bournemouth Municipal College Lecturers, and 4 ex DH staff. The ex-Apprentices came from far and wide: 1 from Australia, 17 from US/Canada, 4 from Europe and 2 from the Channel Islands. Many others still live in the Dorset /Hampshire area; Colin Croucher did a great job recruiting many of them. Lapel labels were handed out to help recognition.

The rooms were buzzing right from the start-and the wives joined in the re-establishment of old friendships with great interest. Garth Rogers presented a bunch of flowers to Joan Reece – secretary to the late Mr Bush and the only member of staff who could attend.

Speeches were made by Garth Rogers, Paul Moores, John Tribe, Keith Ralls, Derek Bernard and Phil Hight

Cards were signed by attendees and sent to Miss Joan Reece and Mr George Cherrett, another ex-member of staff, who was not well enough to attend, as a memento of the occasion

The sit down buffet (Fig 14) put on by Hoburne Park was excellent, as were all their arrangements, led by Wayne Clarke the Manager.

Many guys brought memorabilia, in the form of photographs, letters, clothing (overalls, ties, scarves etc), test exercises made at the school and other items which were put on display and created great interest.

Second Reunion, weekend of 23rd September 2006

A very successful second Reunion was held at Christchurch in September 2006. There were several meets over the weekend, but the formal events started at 11.30 am at FRA Hurn. Some 40 ex-apprentices were given an excellent two-hour presentation, tour and buffet, which was sponsored by the MD Jim Chapman and organised by his PA, Mandy Derham.

In the afternoon there was an informal gathering at the Hoburne Park, Somerford, Christchurch with tea and biscuits. Photographs were viewed, including a DVD compiled by Malcolm Dean, and there were lots of reminiscing and discussion.



Garth Rogers

John Tribe

The main event started at The Hoburne Park at 6.30 pm and was attended by 184 people which included 100 ex-apprentices. Two came from New Zealand, 15 from US/Canada, 3 from Europe, 2 from the Channel Islands and one from the Maldives. There were quite a lot of new faces, as some guys could not come to the first reunion or had not been found at that stage.

Mr Willmetts represented BMC (old Bournemouth Municipal College) and several ex DHA staff were also present. Sadly our metal working instructor Mr Hayward had died in February and secretary Miss Joan Reece, who had attended the first reunion, was in a nursing home. However the sons of Mr Cherrett (the machines instructor), were present to represent their father, who could not travel.

Mr Paul Anders, Hoburne Club Manager, provided a memorable event with an excellent sit down buffet on well decorated tables organised in start years.

A model steam train designed and manufactured by the apprentices in the 50s was put on show by the Bournemouth Engineering Society, who had been donated it when de Havilland closed at Christchurch in 1962. They had maintained it in excellent condition and it is run at various events and open days.

Garth Rogers gave an address which included calling on two ex apprentices, Barry Black and Terry Gauden, without warning, to sing a song which they performed in the 50s. The words had been written by our PE Instructor Colonel Thomas and caused great merriment at the time. They duly did this (without a crib sheet) much to the acclaim of everyone.

An appeal was made on behalf of Bob Wright, who is actively supporting the ex-Mexicana Comet 4C Restoration Project at the Museum of Flight in Seattle. The plan was to circulate his letter and Museum news to all the ex-DHAeTS Christchurch guys after the reunion.

Thanks went out to our small committee of Colin Croucher, Dave Cheffy, Paul Moores and Dave Scammell, plus special thanks to Geoff Pitts, who organised advertising in the professional magazines and provided a write-up of our Apprentice Supervisor Mr Bush after the School had closed.

There were lots of photos and lists on display and everyone mingled once the buffet was over. The atmosphere was tremendous and there was a great buzz the whole evening.

Our Third Reunion will be on 19th September 2009

This will be again at the Hoburne Park. Details and invitations will be sent in the next year or so.

Please put the date in your diary!

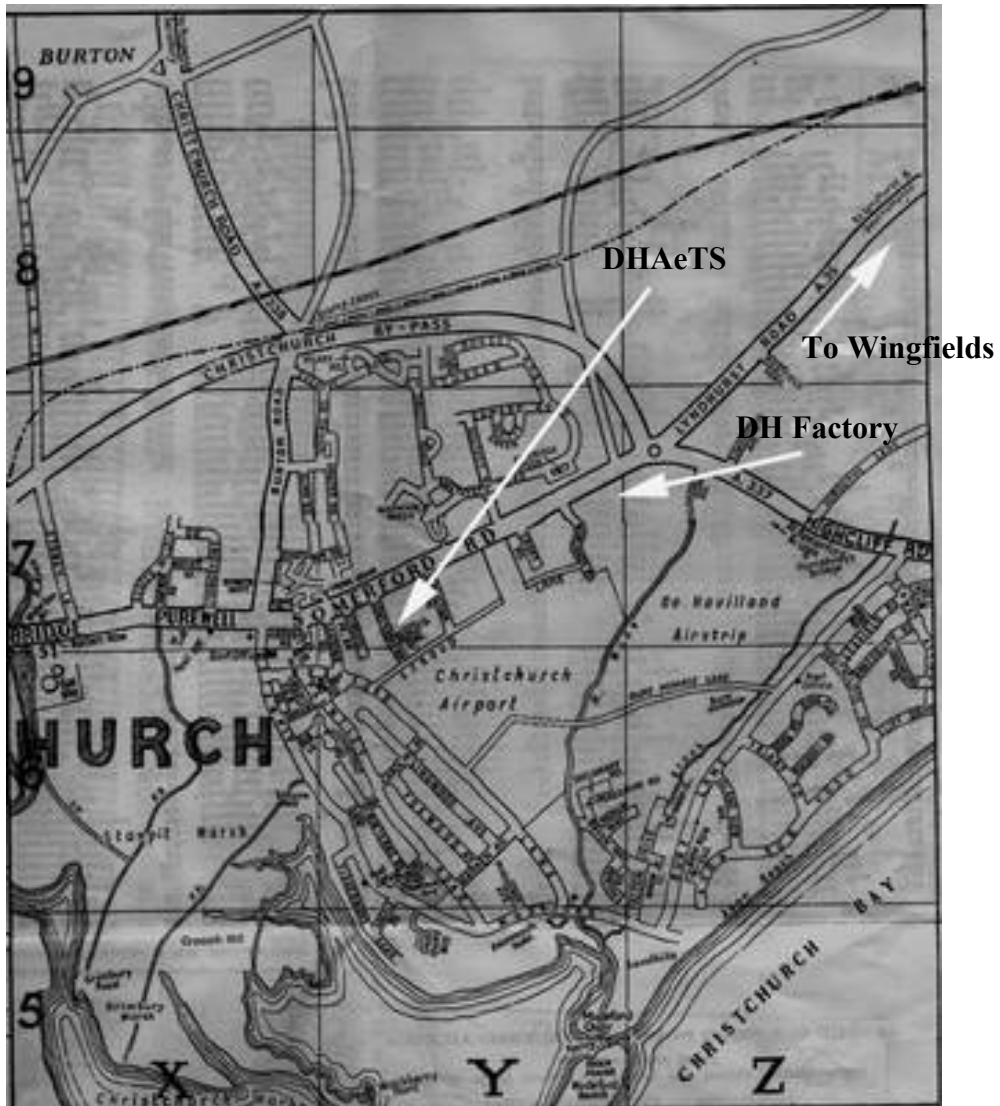


Engine Float for local Carnival (from l to r:-Rusty Walton, Colin Croucher & Terry Gauden (1957 starters)

Steam Engine manufactured by apprentices



Pillar Box Record near Bournemouth Municipal College



Location of airfield, factory and School



AN INTERIOR VIEW OF THE TECHNICAL SCHOOL