

Roger and out

From writing memorably on many of the century's iconic aerospace events to being the wit behind *Straight & Level*, Mike Ramsden piloted *Flight International* through its glory years

Ramsden in 2016 after receiving his lifetime award



BillyPix

Mike Ramsden, the legendary editor of *Flight International* during what many would consider the heyday of the magazine and the post-war aerospace industry, will be remembered as an exceptional writer, visionary leader and gentleman of the profession.

Ramsden, who died on 28 July aged 90, was also the last editor of *Flight International* to have begun his career in the industry, serving as a technical apprentice at his beloved de Havilland before joining Flight in 1955. It was a time when the demands of the Cold War were accelerating the development of military aircraft technology, jetliners were becoming a reality, and the two superpowers were poised to launch the space race.

There was still an extensive UK aircraft industry, with government funding for projects that was often mired in secrecy and controversy. Untangling the politics and explaining the technology to many tens of thousands of aviation professionals and enthusiasts hungry for details made the job of Ramsden and his colleagues fascinating, challenging and rewarding.

As Ramsden recalled of those early years in an article he wrote for the 100th anniversary edition of *Flight International* in 2009: "The stories flew at us: birth of the jet age, Cold War, Sputnik, MiGs, industry mergers, airline competition, incident safety-reporting and jumbo jets."

After a spell running the air transport desk, Ramsden took over as editor from Rex King in 1964. It represented a new era in that he was from a generation that had not fought in the conflict with Hitler. His two predecessors, King and, before him, Maurice Smith, had both served in the Royal Air Force. Smith won two Distinguished Flying Crosses flying Lancasters and Mosquitos; King was a weapons intelligence officer.

However, under JMR, as he was universally known, the magazine was also embracing a less UK-centric outlook after adding "International" to its title in 1962, and beginning to report extensively on the remarkable aerospace developments in the rest of Europe, the USA, and the Soviet Union.

As a former engineer, Ramsden helped establish *Flight International's* reputation for technical expertise and coverage of aviation safety, reporting on accidents and their investigations, but also advocating for advances in training and oversight. He had a front row seat for many of the major aerospace events of the late 1960s and 1970s, including the Apollo programme and the inaugural press flight of Concorde.

JMR's poetic way with words in capturing the poignancy of a historic moment became a trademark. In an editorial following the 1969 Moon landing, he wrote:

"The wings man made in the morning of this century have flown faster and further than he could have dreamed. In this our journal's 60th year, a man who had walked on the Moon was greeted back on Earth by another who had been the Wright Brothers' mechanic. No handclasp in history more vividly measured man's progress or the nobility of his intellect and its mastery over matter."

He was also for many years the anonymous wit behind Uncle Roger Bacon, original author of the Straight & Level diary page, inventing characters such as Captain Speaking and business editor Rex Stocks.

Ramsden "moved upstairs" to become editor-in-chief in 1981, a post he held until 1989 when he moved to the Royal Aeronautical Society to spend the last four years of his full-time career as editor of its monthly journal, *Aerospace*. His stint on *Flight International* spanned 34 years, from a time when – as he recalled in our 2009 article – there were 25 tortuous production processes from writer to reader. This compared with two or three as computers and other new technology began transforming publishing in the late 1980s. In aerospace terms, his tenure took in the emergence of the USA's first jet airliner, the Boeing 707, and that of Airbus's coming-of-age A320.

In retirement, he continued to write and appear on the lecture circuit. In the 2016 Aerospace Media Awards, he was recognised with a long-overdue Lifetime Achievement Award.

Published in Flight 5 Jan 2009, to mark the magazine's 100th year of publication.

When I joined Flight in 1955 it was still to reach its 50th anniversary. Many of the aviation pioneers were still around, and meeting such people was to be my greatest luck.

I was interviewed by editor Maurice Smith and associate editor Rex King. Both had served in the Royal Air Force in the Second World War. Maurice won two DFCs flying Lancasters and Mosquitos, while Rex was a weapons intelligence officer - nobody could touch a crashed enemy aircraft until Sqn Ldr King had examined it.

Maurice was often away flying new aircraft for our In The Air series or testing the latest Ferrari in Monaco for our sister weekly Autocar. Ex-Bomber Command pilots with 40 missions could do what they liked.

Rex was our de facto boss. He was a collector of rare books, a stylish writer and a light handler of the reins. Appointed editor in January 1958, he preferred after-work meetings over a pale ale in The Brunswick Arms near our offices, then in central London. Big ideas took off in the Brunswick. One evening in 1957 Rex agreed to our ideas for a diary column and named it Straight & Level, where "Uncle Roger" Bacon and his offbeat, but quintessentially British sense of humour held court for almost half a century (and he still puts in an appearance for his annual festive quiz).

Rex King introduced an important change in at the beginning of 1962 attaching the word "International" to the journal's title.

We didn't seem to need a heavy command structure. It was up to the staff to fill 2,000 reader-pleasing pages a year. The stories flew at us: birth of the jet age, Cold War, Sputnik, MiGs, industry mergers, airline competition, vertical take-off, man on the Moon, supersonic transport, European co-operation, incident safety-reporting, and jumbo jets.

I started by assisting air transport chief Bob Blackburn, devotee of The BBC's Goon Show and advocate of accountability, a concept which I hadn't then appreciated. Bob's thesis was that secrecy about public spending makes enemies. In 1964 I succeeded Rex as editor, a post I held until 1981 when David Mason took over and I became editor-in-chief for the next eight years.

Our technical editor Bill Gunston, who won his wings on RAF Harwards, was the most infallibly well-informed aviation person I have ever known. He became famous for his technical "probes". His desk was covered with references to jigs and widgets that he had spotted in arcane publications like Aircraft Production. One of his probes resulted in a visit to Rex's office by an Air Ministry security official.

Mark Lambert had been a Royal Auxiliary Air Force Meteor pilot and would fly anything anywhere. He had an instrument rating, understood navigation equipment like INS, Decca and Doppler, spoke fluent French, German and Italian, and played the Spanish guitar.

Ken Owen, aeronautical engineer and pilot, earned two special places in Flight history: he reported the hugely complex public inquiry into the Comet 1 disasters in consecutive issues, which are still the most succinct summary of the subject. And he crashed our Miles Gemini light aircraft.

Everyone loved the Cirrus-engined Gemini but it was a twin without single-engine performance, demanding a big bootful of rudder if you wished to avoid a wizard prang after engine failure on take-

off. Ken put it down somewhere in Croydon without hurting anyone. Maurice rang George, or was it Fred, and ordered a Gipsy-powered replacement.

To do a special issue Mark would fly the editorial aircraft to the factories, usually with photographer and artist. Arriving in the proper manner with the Flight flag flying and Mark speaking Italian (or whatever) opened doors.

The Gemini was followed by a Beagle Airedale (immortalised in the editorial Line Book: "Fly Airedale - Enjoy Lunch During Take-off"). The Airedale was followed by a Beech Baron and, lastly, by a Piper Seneca - very nice until a flightless bean-counter heard about it.

As today our cutaway drawings were miracles of engineering insight. In my time the masters of this wondrous art were Arthur Bowbeer, John Marsden and Frank Munger. All had backgrounds in draughtsmanship and hands-on aircraftmanship (Frank still overhauls Merlins). Their drawings were the "pin-ups" of every aircraft factory - as they are today.

Production editor Roy Casey sub-edited our text, corrected proofs, sized pictures and pasted galleys on to layout sheets secretaries retyped text (often retyping retypes) and merciless messengers biked it all to the printers, who retyped and re-read it again.

All gone now, swept away by the personal computer - and Macintosh. But there were about 25 processes from writer to reader compared with two or three today. And of course aeroplanes were always black and white. Colour lead-times were six weeks now they are six seconds. We were inefficient, yes, but how we admired the craftsmanship and obliging natures of those old-fashioned printers.

Roy Casey had the full range of attributes expected of a sub-editor, from very grumpy to very funny, with an ashtray full of cigarette stubs in between. Writing-style and grammar were his protectorates. One evening Roy telephoned the pub to tell us that nosewheel should be hyphenated. In retrospect I think he was just reminding us that sub-editors deserve a beer too.

In 1968, the long-standing rivalry between Flight and its British weekly opposition The Aeroplane was resolved by the merger of their parent companies into the IPC empire. After co-existing for a while, The Aeroplane was folded into Flight International. The name was resurrected as the historical Aeroplane Monthly title.

J M Ramsden




5 AUGUST 2019

Mike Ramsden

Known for his humility and wit, plus writing skills, Mike Ramsden, "JMR" to everyone, has passed away aged 90.

Tweets by
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 **Malcolm Ginsberg**
[@BTNewsupdate](#)

Strike action at Heathrow on Tuesday has been called off after the airport group and the union Unite agreed a deal over pay. Unite and Heathrow have reached an improved money offer which will now be presented to its members.

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JMR speaks at Brooklands during the celebrations of Flight magazine's 100 years 14 March 2009. Image by Flight regular photographer Mark Wagner.

Our condolences to wife, self-dubbed "Angela Obvious", noted in *Flight's* *Straight & Level*, son James, daughter Annabel and family.

The funeral will be on Tuesday 20 August at 12:30 at Harwood Park Crematorium, Watton Road, Datchworth, Stevenage, Herts SG2 8XT.

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It was back in 1955 that he arrived at the then *Flight* magazine (still printed today as *Flight International* today and on-line as *Flight Global*) from an apprenticeship at de Havilland Hatfield. His stint on the world's oldest aeronautical weekly was to span 34 years, from a time when – as he recalled in a 2009 article – there were 25 tortuous production processes from writer to reader.

He was to serve the publication in various capacities until 1989, when he joined the Royal Aeronautical Society completing last four years of his full-time career as editor of the monthly *Aerospace*.

His poetic way with words in capturing the poignancy of historic moments shone through. An editorial following the 1969 Apollo 11 moon landing showed his journalistic craft to perfection:

"The wings Man made in the morning of this century have flown faster and further than he could have dreamed. In this our journal's 60th year, a man who had walked on the Moon was greeted back on Earth by another who had been the Wright Brothers' mechanic. No handclasp in history more vividly measured Man's progress or the nobility of his intellect and its mastery over matter."