

The de Havilland Aeronautical Technical School, Chester

Allen Coughlan (Student 1954-1959)

So, there we were, about 72 young erks, standing in front of the de Havilland Chester main block, having our picture taken for posterity, on 29th August 1954. Nervous young men, about to start down a road that would take many of us all over the world.

Yet, at that time, we were all looking around at each other, wondering whether we had done the right thing by asking our respective fathers to sign the document which would forever link us with the highly respected de Havilland Aircraft Company – the Indentures.



*The main entrance to de Havilland, Chester and the 1954 intake.
The factory was built by Vickers-Armstrong just before WW2, hence the VA letters on the pillars.*

Staff among the above are George Salisbury (Apprentice Supervisor), Bill Edwards (Fitting Section Instructor), Mr Walker (Machine Section Instructor), Mr Rowlands (Drawing Office Instructor) and Mr Parkinson (Sheet Metal Section Instructor)

Erks include Allen Coughlan (arrowed), Peter M Jones, Alan Dodd, Keith George, John H Jones, Brian Jones, Geoff Bellis, Mike Benoy, Mike Cribben, Hywel Roberts, John Bithell, Archie Lamb, Stewart Russell, Mike Nethercott, John Tranter, Lionel Barnes, Bas Owen, ?? Patrick, Dave Whatmough, Trefor Jones, Tony Ball, John Crossley, John Claridge, Jack Baynes, Dave Gorell, Dave Armstrong and Joe Brown.

As I stood there, I remember being absolutely elated at having succeeded in being chosen as one of the 72, out of well over 200 applicants, to begin a five-year Engineering Apprenticeship. Truthfully, when I applied, at the tender age of 16 years, I had no fall-back plan. I did not want to go to university – I felt it only right and proper to start earning some money in an effort to pay back some of the excellent support I had received from my parents whilst at grammar school. There was only one thing in my mind at the time – a career in aviation.

Earn some money! That's a laugh. My first weekly pay-packet contained the mighty sum of £2 2s 8d. Stoppages were 2s 4d!! Readers should also note that, not having any personal transport at that time, I was forced to catch the bus each

morning from Wrexham, which cost me 1s 10d per trip. So you will see that there was not a lot left at the end of the week. (However, I understand that prior to my time at the Technical School apprenticeships had to be paid for by the applicants). As time went by, of course, I acquired a clapped-out Morris 10 and felt like a king. This immediately solved the original necessity of having to catch the 0715 hours bus, which carried the 'grown-ups' to the factory for the 0800 hours start.

The apprentices were contracted to start at 0854 hours (don't ask me why), so each day the five apprentices who began their journey at Wrexham, would play table-tennis prior to starting their daily tasks. You can therefore well imagine just how skilled at controlling that little white ball we became over that first year.

After an excellent first year in the Technical School (right by the main gates), we were duly despatched, scattered all over the factory, to begin our on-the-job training. What a different world. New swear words were learned immediately! Lady operators were busy riveting Vampire/Venom booms. Overhead cranes were transporting Dove/Heron fuselages from sub-assembly to the track. The whole factory was buzzing. Allocated to a skilled man, I began my first three months in the 'real world' in the Fitting Shop.

In the years that followed, in accordance with my indentures, I attended Wrexham Technical College and (thankfully) progressed up to and beyond the Higher National Certificate level. This enabled me to be considered and ultimately accepted to work in the drawing office for the last six months of my five-year apprenticeship.

It would seem I 'passed muster' with Mr. Frank Tollow (Chief Designer) as he offered me a permanent position within his department, when my five indentured years were completed.



Allen in Cobham days

In the interim period, some of my close DH friends from Grove Park Grammar School, Wrexham, were also proceeding through life (in one or two cases) by transferring to Hatfield in an endeavour to widen their engineering capabilities. I opted to stay at Chester and develop my draughting skills.

From that time on, I spent the next 36 years or so enjoying my chosen career in the aviation industry. After approximately eight years in design, having received early encouragement from Rex Griffiths, who by then had been promoted to Chief Engineer, I changed direction and so began a long, happy period in Sales and Marketing, but still within the aviation industry. My last ten years were with Cobham plc, where I finally got back close to operating real aircraft – they own approximately 21 specially equipped Falcon 20 aircraft, along with a mixed fleet of other fixed and rotary-winged types.

Towards the end of my career, the icing on the cake was the Fellowship that the Royal Aeronautical Society considered I had earned. What a terrific time I have had in the aviation industry – a nicer bunch of guys you could not wish to meet. Thanks to the wonderful start the DH apprenticeship gave me, I was able to enjoy the subsequent 36 years – a time which included a fair bit of travelling around the world.

Incidentally, four of the five 'erks' from Wrexham stayed in the aviation industry all their working lives. We lost touch with No.5! If you are out there Johnny, please get in touch.

Finally, after all the years that have passed since that fateful day in September 1954, it is very satisfying for me to see the Chester plant not only surviving, but going from strength to strength within the highly competitive world of commercial airliner manufacturing. Airbus UK is a worthy successor to the company which gave me my start in life - de Havilland.