The de Havilland Aeronautical Technical School, Christchurch

***Garth Rogers (Student 1955-1960)*; *died* October 2024.**

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 one of the old buildings remains now; several were demolished earlier in 2012 to make way for more modern establishments 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 (see page 12). 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. Sadly, John Clarke (he and his wife worked in the DO at Christchurch and still live at 1 Beresford Gardens) who got in touch as a result of a reunion advert in the Pensions Magazine, witnessed the demise of the School when it burnt down, it is believed, on Friday 8/8/75. It was reported in the local paper and he sent me the cutting and some photos he took. Cole Equipment-industrial water cooler manufacturers, were using the building. There was an electrical short circuit during a lunch break (desk fans were operating due to the heat and gas cylinders

were in use). No employees were injured but the fire service suffered some casualties. Damage was estimated at £1/2 million. New premises were operational within a few days on the Christchurch airfield. If anyone has any further information please let me know.

The magnificent gate, depicting the school badge, was built 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. (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 and 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 pages 10 & 11)

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.

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

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.

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, the late Colin Croucher, Dave Cheffy, the late Tom Sexton, 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

Third Reunion, 19th September 2009

The third Reunion was held at the Hoburne Park, Christchurch on Saturday 19th September 2009. The weekend weather was yet again magnificent - another Indian Summer.

The day started with a presentation of a framed and engraved watercolour of the old school in Somerford Way to the Red House Museum in Christchurch. A donation was made to our group by the sons of the late George Cherrett the Machine Shop instructor. We decided to commission a painting of the school. *(Photo on next page.)* The project was managed by Paul Moores and his wife Jane produced the work. It was accepted on behalf of the Museum by the Manager Mr Paul Willis. On 29th September I presented a second framed and engraved copy to the DH Aircraft Heritage Centre at Salisbury Hall. A thank you letter has been received from the Ops Director, Ralph Steiner.

L to R: Trevor Cherrett, Ken Cherrett, Mr Paul Willis

In the afternoon a group of about 30 gathered for tea and biscuits at the Hoburne Park to await the arrival of the Colonel's 1920s Clyno car driven by his son Michael. It duly arrived to great cheer from us all. The Colonel used to drive this open topped classic to the school and his son David to the Bournemouth Municipal College. The Colonel was held in great affection and used to take us onto the airfield for physical jerks what ever the weather. He had served in the Indian Army and had written many poems and ditties related to PE. Thanks go to Dave Cheffy who had researched the family and organised the visit. Phil Hill (1957) also brought along his 1934 Riley 6/12 MPH Racing Car recreation. *(Photo on next page.)*

L to R: Tony Leigh, Monty Penfold, Keith Ralls, Malcolm Dean, Des Stack, Tony Denyer, Dick Morgan, Ian Thomas, Dave Cheffy, Brian Millar, Brian Reeks, Hugh Phillips, Ian Partridge, Garth Rogers. At the wheel is Michael Thomas, the Colonel's son.

There were 130 attendees to the more formal do in the evening including 25, in total, from abroad (ex-apprentices-8 US/Canada, 6 from Europe 1 from New Zealand and 1 from the Channel Islands). All the ex-apprentices were given colour coded labels and the table plan was based on yearly intake.

The room as usual was buzzing all the evening with much reminiscing and laughter. An excellent cold buffet was provided and Garth Rogers addressed the throng. During the 50's many guys formed bands and skiffle groups and Dave Harrison (with Paul Moores, Colin Croucher, and David Fair) formed a group called Samaritans They made a recording on 78rpm records which Dave Harrison had kept in his loft. He had it converted to CD and I had it played during my speech. However it was not up to Lonnie Donegan standard and would not have done very well on The X-Factor.

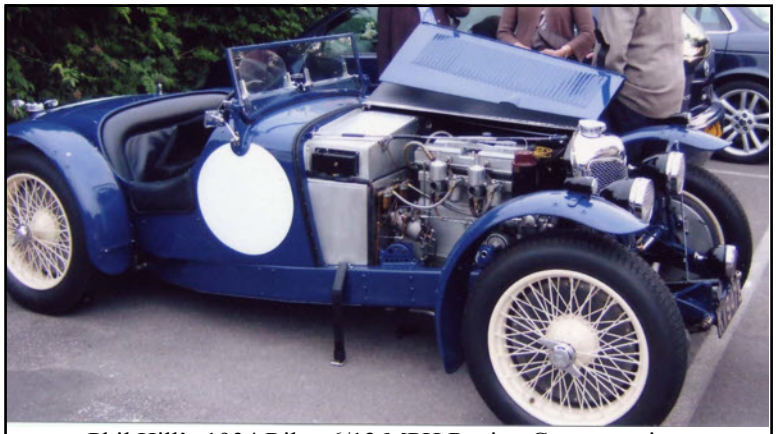
A potential attendee Buzz Cull (1954) sadly died a few days before the Reunion However he had requested that his son Gavin attend on his behalf. This he did and he met some of Buzz's old friends. I paid tribute to Phil Hight (died July 08), who was a good friend of Hilary and I and too many other attendees. Colin Allen (1954) came for the first time. He still plays drums for the British Blues Quintet, does tours in the UK and is based in Sweden.

Some lists and photos were put on display including the School painting and an excellent cut away drawing of the Sea Vixen by Dave Scammell (1952 starter) In addition Derek Higbee and Peter Hawkins brought along the steam engine again which had been built by the school.

My thanks go to our small committee comprising Colin Croucher, Paul Moores, Dave Scammell and Dave Cheffy and to the Hoburne Park for an excellent buffet and evening.

The Reunion was again a great success but numbers have, perhaps not unexpectedly, fallen over the years. Hence the Committee plans to consider future strategy - watch this space!

The painting of the old School in Somerford Way.



Phil Hill's 1934 Riley 6/12 MPH Racing Car recreation.

Fourth Reunion, 15th September 2012

The fourth Reunion was again held at the Hoburne Park, Christchurch, on Saturday 15th September 2012 on yet another Indian summer weekend. The evening was a great success with an attendance similar to 2009 with about a third being different from R3. It was great to see 14 from North America, 5 from Europe and Jack Williams and his wife from the Solomon Islands.

A Group Photo proved impossible in the end due to late arrivals and imminent light loss and the buffet dinner. There was a lot of paperwork on display and Sea Vixen models by Peter Cox and Alec Jacobs.

I made a speech thanking everyone who had helped over the years - particularly our committee - we formed a small committee back in 2002. Tom Sexton was on it for a short while but sadly was seriously ill and died shortly after the first Reunion. Dave Scammell I am sure you all know is an excellent illustrator and produces some great cut-aways of aircraft, cars etc. Paul Moores organised the painting of the School (by wife Jane) which has been lodged at the Red House and DH Heritage Museum near Hatfield. He has liaised with several local organisations on our behalf and is a skilled model maker having produced and exhibited many of his aircraft which are themed as having served on New Forest airfields. Dave Cheffy tracked down the Colonel's family, discovered a lot of interesting information and was responsible for getting the Colonel's son Michael to bring the still immaculate Clyno to R3. Finally there was Colin Croucher who sadly died in June. He was extremely popular as demonstrated by the attendance at his funeral at the Christchurch Priory. He contributed such a great deal, particularly in the early days of locating ex-apprentices and identifying guys in all sorts of photographs. He organised the appearance of the steam locomotive at R2/3. We did invite his wife Jackie, as a guest, but she did not feel able to accept. I am sure you all join me in wishing her and the family all the best for the future.

I also said that we had achieved two major and worthwhile objectives in the 12 year project: putting DHAeTS Christchurch back on the map and enabling old friendships to be re-kindled after years of commitment to family and careers.

Although it was felt that this should be the last on this scale I would continue to issue newsletters and look for the missing guys. Please keep sending the information. I am sure you will carry on with the smaller get-togethers based on school, DH start year, College Courses, Sport, digs etc.

Finally I thanked the Hoburne for their excellent hospitality. We gave the Catering Manager Mike Phillips three cheers as he had organised the buffet for all four Reunions.

I was then ambushed by thank-you speeches from Brian Millar (1953 and living in Provence) who presented me with an excellent Special Edition Book of the DH108 by Brian Rivas and then Tony Leigh (1954 and living in Texas) who presented me with his superb framed painting of XJ474 over the Needles with a list of R1 attendees followed by a similar but unframed picture signed by R4 attendees. Again very many thanks to all of you who were involved in this surprise tribute. Dave Cheffy sent in a report to the Lymington Times which has been published.

Garth Rogers

Presentation by Brian Millar to Garth of a special-edition copy of Brian Rivas' book "A Very British Sound Barrier", signed by a number of engineers and test pilots of the time.

Presentation by Tony Leigh to Garth of painting of Sea Vixen XJ474 with list of attendees at the first Reunion.

L to R: John Waygood, Paul Moores, Brian Reekes, Derek Higbee, Hugh Wilkinson, Brian Millar, Tony Poytz, Peter Cox, Fred Brown.
All started in 1953 except Peter & Fred, who started in 1952.

L to R: Tony Gilbert, Gerry Tuffin, Dave Burden, Hugh Phillips, John Waygood, Paul Moores, Brian Reekes, Hugh Wilkinson, Derek Higbee.
All started in 1953.

Brian Reekes, Brian Millar, Derek Higbee, Paul Moores, Dave Burden - all started in 1953.

Subsequent to the Reunion I have proposed a different kind of get-together as follows:-

Select a place and date, eg Duxford, Thursday July 18th 2013, say 3 months in advance. (It would be a weekday and outside school holidays to avoid crowds). Anyone who wishes to attend can just turn up. Some may wish to check that certain guys are planning to be there and/or arrange a lift to the venue. Meet say 11am at a well known landmark - eg Concorde, Blackbird or in the canteen for coffee. Do the exhibits and meet in the Restaurant for lunch. Afterwards chat, carry on touring the site, or make way home.
Just a reminder of the event may be necessary near the time but that is all. It will be up to individuals to research sites and routes etc. This will obviously mean a bit of travelling for everyone, and may be just for the guys. Anyway we have such possible destinations as:- Hendon, Old Warden, Middle Wallop, Science Museum and Imperial War Museum in London, Cosford, Yorkshire Air Museum, Yeovilton, Helicopter Museum, DH Heritage Museum, Beaulieu, Bucklers Hard, Swanage Railway, etc etc to name but a few.
We await reactions.
Garth Rogers, DHAeTS Christchurch 1955-60.

Peter Cox with his Airfix model of a Sea Vixen

Footnote:-
Tony Leigh has produced excellent pictures of the Sea Vixen with the R1 attendee list and the Sea Vixen on its own. He is marketing them at cost price which for a 25″ x 18″ print is £20 plus £6 postage in the UK or £9 to the US. Note a 28″ x 20″ size is also available, but is more expensive (Tony recommends the smaller size).
The prints are despatched from Studio One Frames Ltd in Essex.
NB the original is oil on canvas.
If interested please contact Tony at: 1418 Tilman Drive, Richmond, Texas, TX77406, USA or by e-mail at awleigh@earthlink.net

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

The first intake of apprentices at DHAeTS Christchurch, 1951.

This and subsequent photographs, with names, are in the DHAeTS Photo Album, which can be viewed on line at **www.dhaetsa.org.uk**

Were You At Christchurch?

It is estimated that between 375 and 400 apprentices started over the period 1951-58, based on the group photos (including 50 names from 1955 as that photo is not available). The numbers problem is compounded by the fact that some apprentices are in more than one group photo and some were missing on the day. In fact several guys found have not been identified on the photos and less than 20 still need to be identified from the photos. Memories of 50+ years ago do vary, as expected, so we have still have some work to do.

Thus we are still looking for information and ex-apprentices, so if you have not been re-discovered please get in touch with us - see Contact Us on our website.