

# **GE Aviation - History of the factory**

## **7th June 2018 - GE Aviation**

GE Aviation kindly agreed to host this meeting of the Society which gave members the opportunity to visit one of Hamble's last surviving large houses, Sydney Lodge. Sydney Lodge is a Grade II listed building built between 1789 and 1798 and was the home of the Earl of Hardwicke. It is now undergoing a thorough restoration after suffering water damage. The Society also visited GE's new high-tech composites facility that included a cleanroom to produce components for Airbus.

Following this Chris Hodson gave an illustrated talk about the factory's history from 1936 to the present day. Similar to other Hamble aviation companies the aircraft factory started because the waterside site was suitable for producing seaplanes. British Marine Aircraft bought Sydney Lodge and its grounds, as well as Hamble Cliff House that gave access to Southampton Water. The factory was built, with an adjacent housing estate and shops for its employees, to construct and service flying boats which were popular at that time with airline companies for long distance flights.

After much investment British Marine Aircraft did not prove successful so Henry Folland took over and the factory became Folland Aircraft Ltd. During the Second World War it was a sub-contractor for Spitfire production and undertook work on a variety of bombers. After the war there were limited opportunities for new aircraft production therefore the factory had to diversify by producing refrigerators, aluminium prefab buildings and Pony electric light trucks.

Eventually it undertook aircraft sub-contracting work again as well as design and development work. It produced the huge control surfaces for the large Brabazon passenger airliner and wings for aircraft such as the Chipmunk and Vampire jet fighter. In 1951 Teddy Petter took charge of the factory and changed Hamble's philosophy to concentrate on smaller aircraft. First it produced a Midge jet fighter and undertook development work on ejector seats. Then it went into production of the well-known Folland Gnat and one is displayed at the entrance to the factory. In the 1960s and 1970s the Gnat was used by the world renowned Red Arrows aerobatic display team.

In the following decades the factory built sub-assemblies and components for the Harrier and Hawk jets and were specialists in moulding jet canopies and windscreens. It undertook work for Airbus and Boeing on their passenger airliners and McDonnell Douglas on various projects. Over the years the company was consolidated into larger aircraft groups or changed ownership and the most familiar name remembered by local residents was Aerostructures. In 2007 GE Aviation became owners of the Hamble factory.

Over the years these companies invested in modern machinery and expanded the factory. Similarly, GE Aviation invested in a 9,000 square metre composites production facility at Hamble as part of a £50 million-plus investment in the site from 2012 to 2018. Today about half of GE Aviation's production is made from plastic composites.

A most interesting visit and a very knowledgeable speaker whose illustrated presentation gave an excellent insight to an important Hamble factory.