

College of Air Training

15th September 2011 - Roy Underdown Pavilion

Phil Nelson gave a very interesting and often amusing illustrated talk about life at the College of Air Training, as well as his work as a flying instructor. He was originally in the RAF flying the Vulcan bomber and his first connection with Hamble was flying Chipmunks with the Southampton University Air Squadron which was based at the airfield. Phil also undertook a refresher course on a Beech Baron aircraft at the College of Air Training. After leaving the RAF he became a flying instructor at the College.

The College of Air Training was formed in 1960 to train pilots for the National Airlines, BOAC and BEA, which were later to become British Airways. It started with an intake of 21 students but its official opening by the Duke of Edinburgh was not until 1961. The entrance to the College was where today Aquila Way meets Hamble Lane.

The student pilots first trained to gain their commercial pilot's licence and the course they took was equivalent to a degree standard education. There was a rigorous selection process and the successful candidates first undertook ground school training, including a flight simulator known as a Link Trainer. Phil used a series of short films to show the training process.

When the ground studies were completed the students went on to flying training with an instructor in a single engine Chipmunk, but from 1967 Cherokee aircraft were used. Once they proved themselves competent they were then allowed to fly solo and build up their flying hours. Then they moved on to advance flight training in a twin engine Piper Apache, which was later replaced by Beech Baron aircraft. As soon as the students had gained their commercial pilot's licence they would then become familiar with airline practices, such as training on a four engine jet simulator at Bournemouth.

Of course to sustain these activities many Hamble residents were employed at the College as airfield, administration and domestic support staff or in the hangars as maintenance engineers. The students had high-quality accommodation, enjoyed a good sports and social life including taking part in village events, such as the regatta and carnival.

Phil told of flying training which included circuits around the airfield, but once more experienced they flew to places such as Jersey and undertook night flying. Some of the amusing incidents included one night students putting an arrow on the top of the gasometer at Bishops Waltham to help guide them back to Hamble. They did not know that when the sun came up in the morning it raised and twisted so the arrow was pointing in the wrong direction. When landing after night flying some students nearly caught the Chipmunk wings alight on the paraffin runway flares, while others would confuse the lights along Hamble Lane as the runway lights.

The College later took pilots from other airlines and trained military pilots from Britain and overseas. Due to cuts forced on British Airways by Mrs Thatcher's government, British Airways sold the College to Specialist Flight Training who trained pilots from Arab countries using the fixed winged Slingsby aircraft and then helicopters.

Unfortunately the College was forced to close in 1984 and the site was sold to a property developer. The College of Air Training had the reputation of being one of the top training establishments in the world, producing the best pilots.

As well as the Society's usual members, the meeting was attended by local residents who had worked at the College, ex students and instructors, some of whom had come from as far away as Wiltshire and Berkshire.

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