Seaplanes at Hamble

7th April 2016 - Roy Underdown Pavilion

Another capacity 50+ audience, ranging from a school boy to a person in his nineties came to hear Ian Underdown, the Society's Chairman, give a well-illustrated talk about 'Seaplanes at Hamble' and he explained they were the main reason why the aviation industry came to the village.

Hamble's location, as well as its traditional local boatbuilding skills which were very appropriate for the construction of the early wooden aircraft, made it an ideal place for the fledgling aviation industry, especially for producing seaplanes.

Within four years of the first flight in this country, the first seaplane arrived at Hamble in 1912. The Daily Mail built a shed at Hamble Point as a base for its seaplanes it was using in a promotional tour of the country. Soon afterwards Admiralty seaplanes could be seen there and subsequently it built its own sheds. In 1917, the Admiralty started to construct its No. 1 (Southern) Marine Acceptance Depot for seaplanes, including a railway line. Its location was where BP Oil Terminal is today but due to the end of the war the building of the Acceptance Depot was abandoned.

Local yacht builder, as Hamble River Luke & Co, built its own seaplane which was displayed at the 1914 Olympia Aero Show in an incomplete condition and later it proved unsuccessful.

At the end of 1915 Fairey Aviation took over the Admiralty sheds to assemble and test its seaplanes. One of the first seaplanes developed was the 'Hamble Baby', followed by Fairey's more famous inter-war seaplanes, many of which were exported abroad. Gradually their construction changed from wood to metal. The well known 'Seafox', the spotter aircraft at the Battle of the River Plate, was completely designed and built at Hamble.

Avro came to Hamble in 1916 to build a purpose built factory, airfield and slipway to manufacture aircraft, especially seaplanes. The 'Avro 504' was produced in great numbers and later Avro undertook many experimental/specialist designs. This attracted famous aircraft designer Roy Chadwick and test pilot Bert Hinkler to Hamble.

British Marine Aircraft opened a new factory in 1936 to build flying boats. At the end of 1937, Folland Aircraft took over initially to undertake sub-contract work for other aviation companies, particularly undertaking the maintenance of the Imperial Airways flying boats.

Air Service Training (AST) operated Hamble's main airfield to train civil and military pilots from all over the world. AST became known as Britain's Air University and undertook seaplane training courses using the old Avro slipway, especially to train pilots for Imperial Airways flying boats.

Many of Hamble's seaplanes were used during the Second World War and Folland Aircraft produced a Spitfire Floatplane. As the war progressed the importance of the seaplane declined.

After the war passenger aircraft design developed and flying boats were becoming superseded. Aquila Airways was formed in 1948 and became the last British flying boat passenger service and its aircraft were maintained by AST at Hamble. Aquila Airways ceased operating in 1958 and this was the end of seaplanes at Hamble.

Over the years many aircraft associated with Hamble achieved many firsts in the industry and achieved several records. Another hugely successful Society talk that was very informative and surprised many who attended of the significance of seaplanes to the village and country's history.