

Hamble and the Battle of Britain

Hamble Aerodrome, operated by Air Services Training (AST) trained pilots and aviation technicians from 1931 (known as Britain's Air University), prepared for German attacks from May 1940.

After the fall of France it had been appointed in October 1939 to repair crashed or shot-down Spitfires. AST was the only concern in the country undertaking this work with, as its sub-contractor, its associated and neighbouring company Armstrong Whitworth. The two companies eventually amalgamated at the beginning of August 1940. (The Armstrong Whitworth factory site is now Ensign Park). By the start of the Battle of Britain staff had grown to over 500, with a 12-hour day shift and a night shift.

Because of the risks from concentrating all Spitfire repairs at Hamble, a second site was sought with AST securing premises at Exeter. Day and night guards were posted at the aerodrome, admission for employees and visitors was only with a pass and at night the aerodrome was strewn with a motley collection of old cars to prevent landings. Workers kept steel helmets and gasmasks ready to hand and work was carried on in gasmasks for a quarter of an hour practice on Monday mornings. Each factory had its own Home Guard platoon. During the Battle of Britain, air raid sirens sounded day and night with aircraft workers having to go to the shelters for an hour or two.

On Friday 12th July, bombs probably aimed at AST, fell in a stick of four in the village. The first landed in the garden of Myrtles in the High Street, the rest alongside School Lane, one failing to go off. On the night of 31st August/1st Sept., bombs were dropped at the north of the village, one near the 'new' Hamble School in Satchell Lane. Nearby houses were slightly damaged.

At the beginning of August 1940, flying training at the aerodrome was halted for the first time and only Spitfire test flying took place. Damaged aircraft landed for a quick repair or refuel, surprised to find that Hamble still had undamaged hangars. During the Battle of Britain, AST averaged 15 'fly-in' repairs a week for the RAF. Although the Battle climaxed on 15th Sept., the air war continued and on 26th Sept. AST's quasi-parent firm for Spitfire repairs, Vickers Armstrong Supermarine works was heavily bombed. 'Lord Haw-Haw' (German radio announcer) had apparently broadcast that this raid was to happen and that Hamble works were to be attacked the next day.

AST staff were of course tense but nothing happened. The company however soon afterwards had to disperse its activities acquiring premises at Netley, Swanwick, Locksheath and at Titchfield.

It is said that Hamble was the largest fighter repair base in the country. By the end of the Second World War, AST had repaired 2575 Spitfires at Hamble plus many more at Exeter.

Based on notes kept by H.J. Day, AST Commandment's Secretary.