

Avro and one of its Test Pilots

15th September 2009 - Roy Underdown Pavilion

The Roy Underdown Pavilion was packed to capacity to hear local resident and author Tony Blackman talk about the Avro aircraft company at Hamble, the Avro Vulcan and his career as one of its test pilots. Tony was Avro's Chief Test Pilot between 1970 and 1978.

A V Roe was one of our country's aviation pioneers, although there is some debate whether or not he was the first Englishman to fly. He was certainly the first Englishman to fly in an all-British aeroplane in this country. In 1910 A V Roe set up his own company to design and manufacture aeroplanes using a factory in Manchester.

The business needed to expand so he purchased land at Hamble where a garden city was envisaged for his employees, along with facilities for building and testing landplanes and seaplanes. In 1916, a purpose built factory, airfield & slipway were constructed, where Ensign Way is situated today, but only 24 houses were built in Verdon Avenue rather than a garden city.

During the First World War the company produced the Avro 504 in great numbers but Hamble was its main base for experimental/specialist designs. Famous aircraft designer Roy Chadwick and test pilot Bert Hinkler worked at the Hamble factory. Roy Chadwick subsequently designed the WW2 Avro Lancaster bomber and started to design the Vulcan before his death; Bert Hinkler was to make a record breaking flight from England to Australia.

In 1926, when the original Avro airfield could no longer accommodate the aircraft of that time, farm fields north of Hamble Lane were made into a larger airfield which was to become Hamble's main airfield. A V Roe sold his shareholding in the Avro Company in 1928 to Armstrong Whitworth.

Although A V Roe had sold his company, he lived in Hamble House from 1928 to the beginning of the Second World War. He is buried in Hamble Church graveyard and some of his family still have connections with the village today.

After serving in the Royal Air Force, where Tony learnt to fly and trained as a test pilot, he joined A V Roe and Co Ltd in 1956. Tony told of the development of the delta winged Vulcan bomber, including some of the accidents. In 1949 the company made the Avro 707 which was a smaller version of the Vulcan to test the delta wing principle, followed by the first prototype Vulcan in 1952 eventually leading to full production in 1956.

Tony illustrated these developments with excerpts of film, particularly its show stopper performances at Farnborough. Only one Vulcan remains today in flying condition and it is this aircraft that he delivered to the RAF in 1960.

Tony then talked about the books he had written, including 'Vulcan Test Pilot' and 'Tony Blackman Test Pilot'. He also talked about a painting which depicted the story of Avro at Hamble and the notable people associated with it. For more information about his books and more pictures of Avro look at Tony's website www.blackmanbooks.co.uk

