

Meopham U3A 'How Things Work' Group – Visit To Biggin Hill Airport.



On 21st September we visited Biggin Hill Airport which this year celebrated its centenary.

After signing in & collecting our security passes, we were welcomed by Colin Hitchins, its Community Engagement Manager, who began with some of the airport's early history.

THE BEGINNINGS:

The airfield was originally opened by the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) during the First World War. First Koonowla House was requisitioned by the War Office in 1916 for the RFC to conduct wireless experiments. Then in Feb 1917 the RFC transferred from their HQ at RAF Joyce Green, Dartford, & established it as part of the London Air Defence Area, using the adjacent estate which contained a huge undivided field, ideal for aircraft. Biggin Hill was equipped with Bristol Fighters & became responsible for defending the capital against attacks by Zeppelins & Gotha bombers.

Interwar, the airfield was used by a number of experimental units, working on instrument design, ground based anti-aircraft defences & night flying. It was closed for reconstruction work, including the building of new hangars, between 1929 & 1932.

WORLD WAR II:

In World War II the airfield was one of the Battle of Britain bases. Spitfires & Hurricanes from various squadrons were based there, & claimed 1,400 enemy aircraft destroyed, with 453 Biggin Hill based aircrew killed. Between August 1940 & January 1941, the airfield was attacked 12 times; the worst attack wrecked workshops, stores, barracks, WAAF quarters & a hangar & killed 39 people.

POST WAR:

After the war, Biggin Hill was briefly used by the RAF's Transport Command, & then became a base for regular & reserve fighter squadrons flying Spitfires, Meteors & Hunters. From 1956 much of the civilian light aviation from the nearby original London Airport at Croydon relocated to Biggin which became a joint civilian & military airport. In 1958 Biggin Hill ceased to be an operational RAF station, becoming the RAF Officer & Aircrew Selection Centre. Croydon closed completely in 1959, from which time Biggin Hill became established as a civilian airport, initially under the management of 'Jock' Maitland, with occasional military flying as it was also used by some RAF squadrons.

THE CIVILIAN AIRPORT:

Late in 1963, Orpington Urban District Council, within whose boundaries the airfield lay, was approached by the Board of Trade to buy Biggin Hill Airfield. Orpington became part of the newly formed London Borough of Bromley in 1965; but after protracted negotiations with the Board of Trade & later the Department of Trade & Industry, the Council decided to purchase the airport in 1972 & this was completed in 1974. The Officer & Aircrew Selection Centre moved to RAF Cranwell in 1992, marking the end of active RAF involvement.

In May 1992 the Department of Transport issued a direction to the Council under the 1986 Airports Act. This direction affected airports generating turnover of £1million or more; Biggin Hill just scraped into this limit & the Council was required to set up a new company for the purpose of operating the airport as an independent commercial undertaking. To comply would have required the transfer of all the assets & liabilities to the company with a consequential loss of Council control over airport activities. The Council therefore decided that the granting of a 125-year lease would enable more control to be retained than disposal of the freehold or transfer to a local authority company with an uncertain future. In May 1994, the airport was leased to Biggin Hill Airport Limited ("BHAL") for 125 years. BHAL is a subsidiary of Regional Airports Ltd. which previously owned London Southend Airport. In 2001, the L.B. of Bromley, as freeholder, succeeded in a Court of Appeal action prohibiting the operators from allowing tickets to be sold for flights into & out of the airport, thus preventing its use for scheduled or holiday charter flights, but allowing business aviation & corporate shuttles.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENT:

Biggin Hill is one of 3 commercial airports within the M25, (the others being Heathrow & City Of London). It specialises in business & general aviation, with flights from 747 destinations. Its most profitable core businesses (landing fees, refuelling & storage) make larger aircraft preferable & the runway is just less than 6000ft long, enabling it to be used by most aircraft up to the size of a Boeing 737. Operating hours have been extended from 06.30 – 23.00 with various restrictions & reduction of the noise 'footprint', which is carefully monitored, especially as Biggin Hill is wholly within the green belt. It is currently listed amongst the top Business airports in Europe. Future plans focus on business & general aviation, & include the development of an avia-

tion college for up to 300 students, & the creation of up to 2000 more aviation related jobs by 2030 by attracting more businesses. Currently the Canadian firm Bombardier has established a jet service centre at Biggin Hill, & the development of similar businesses is particularly attractive to the airport as storage rents, job opportunities & local spending can all increase & taxes can go directly to the local authority.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT:

Biggin Hill plays a huge role in the local community, from offering educational trips for schools & community groups to supporting apprenticeships & local community initiatives, including fundraising & donations to local organisations such as Bromley Youth Music Trust, Sevenoaks Town Juniors FC, Men's Sheds, Biggin Hill & District Residents Association, Blackheath & Bromley Harriers AC, BBC Children In Need, Foal Farm (a local animal rescue centre), & many others. It also holds Open Days & an annual Air Show.

For a long time there was a wish to remember those who served at Biggin Hill in the Second World War, particularly during the Battle of Britain, through the building of a dedicated museum. The famous St George's RAF Chapel was declared out of use in 2013 & passed to LB Bromley which eventually awarded £1 million to set up a trust. The Biggin Hill Memorial Museum Trust was established to achieve this ambition, by developing the St George's RAF Chapel of Remembrance site, bringing the Chapel & long wanted museum together, to create the Biggin Hill Memorial Museum. This project, supported by Central Government, the Heritage Lottery Fund & Bromley Council, aims to safeguard the future of the Chapel & the memory of Biggin Hill's crucial role in protecting our freedom & way of life, & at the time of our visit, building & development works were steadily progressing. On reopening the Chapel will have been restored back to its original 1951 design, following the removal of a 1990 extension. The trust's website can be found at <http://www.bhmm.org.uk/>.

TOUR OF THE AIRPORT:

After an impressive lunch, the final stage of our visit was a minibus tour around the airport. For security & privacy reasons we were asked not to photograph the aircraft which were present, but were able to see almost all of the site, which was at one time divided into 4 camps, each with a different purpose, some for the army & some the RAF.



Boarding Our Minibus:



View From The Tarmac:

The airfield was known to many RAF pilots as 'Biggin On The Bump' due to the height variation of the runway which has a rise around its centre. Relatively few of the original buildings remain, but there are now various interesting commercial & other enterprises around the airfield. One of these is the Biggin Hill Heritage Hangar, a restoration facility dedicated to putting Spitfires back in the air. It has restored six Spitfires to flying condition, with several more projects waiting their turn. As well as up to 13 Spitfires on site there is a 1940 Hawker Hurricane & Battle of Britain veteran Messerschmitt 109 on view. Tours & other activities can be booked at <https://bigginhillheritagehangar.co.uk/>.



One Of The Few Remaining Wartime Huts



Our tour ended at the highly impressive airport fire station which is able to cope with up to RFF Category 6 events & has in the past greatly assisted the local fire services with very serious incidents. It can run tailor-made fire training courses for external companies in disciplines such as extinguisher training, helicopter fire training & hostess training.

FINALLY:

We finished our visit in the airport reception suite & handed back our security passes after thanking Colin & the other staff who had made our visit so worthwhile. We left with a much better understanding of the history & development of the airport & greatly impressed with the scope of its current facilities & activities which make it a truly unique airport.