

Visit to the National Aerospace Library

with Tony Pilmer, Librarian

Tony proved a very entertaining and informative guide to this incredible collection, owned and operated by the Royal Aeronautical Society, and entirely devoted to man's quest to conquer flight. Located at the Hub, in Farnborough's heritage area, for 10 years, the library's oldest book dates right back to 1515, and was part of a bequest from Baden Baden-Powell, President of the RAS from 1900-1907. Also part of that bequest was Baden-Powell's cuttings collection, dating from the late 19th century and containing articles on kites and balloons as well as early aircraft, and his collection of cartoons.



The library holds a wide range of material of local interest, for instance on His Majesty's Balloon Factory, its successor the Royal Aircraft Factory, the Royal Air Force and, of course, the Royal Aircraft Establishment.

There is a wealth of correspondence between the Wright brothers and the RAS, reports and even a scrap of canvass from the Wright Flyer. Indeed, the first RAS Gold Medal was awarded to the Wright Brothers. (Samuel Cody only managed silver). From 1908-09, the brothers were in Britain, taking paying passengers for short flights and participating in prestigious and highly lucrative races.

The library also has material related to the first official Post Office Air Mail Service, launched in 1911 between London and Windsor, documents and blueprints on airships, notably the doomed R101, and a huge collection of photographs, the Mary Evans Library. One rather unexpected collection came from the UK representative of Junkers, who donated all his documents to the RAS at the outbreak of WWII.

Tony told us that, contrary to popular belief, aircraft technology was not kept top-secret during the war but shared among manufacturers to encourage best practice throughout the industry. This helps to explain how so much WWII material survives, and the library holds a vast collection.

Some of the other interesting things to be found relate to vertical take-off aircraft; the Test Pilot Flying School, founded in 1951; Air Ministry material, including a guide to German aircraft post-WWII; a stamp/first-day cover collection; early lithographs; Air Show programmes, one, produced shortly after the war, featuring captured British and German planes; and even a music collection.

Funded by RAS membership subscriptions and corporate sponsorship, the library has now catalogued 90% of their holdings.

Having shown us a very interesting range of items directly related to Farnborough, Tony then introduced us to Mike and Arthur, two volunteers who told us about the work they are currently doing, to catalogue and digitise documents, posters, lithographs, etc., and about their conservation work; they use a heritage database for cataloguing.

Both are members of the RAS and they explained that early members of the society tended to be showman but it quickly became more scientific, with pioneering work in things like aerial photograph and meteorology. It developed into a hub through which ideas from around the world could be exchanged, which greatly hastened the development of aircraft.

Tony and his colleagues made us very welcome and ensured that our visit was full of interest. However, the library is open to the public from Tuesday to Friday, 10.00am till 4.00pm, when the staff are happy to help with aero-related enquiries. They are also planning tours and talks as part of this year's Heritage Open Days.

More information can be found on their website: www.aerosociety.com/nal

There is, in addition, an aero history website: <http://aerosocietyheritage.com> (by summer, they hope to have added a few Cody themed items).

And, for the perfect present for the aero-enthusiast, over 13,000 aero-related gifts are available via: www.aerosociety.com/printsandposters



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