

THE FARNBOROUGH SOCIETY VISITS THE FAST MUSEUM



On 10th May, The Farnborough Society were the guests of Farnborough Air Sciences Trust for an marvellous evening of lecture, tour and conversation in their museum located in Trenchard House, historically important as the building in which the Royal Flying Corps evolved into the Royal Air Force.

Upon arrival, we were offered refreshments before taking our places for a lecture by Dr Graham Rood on the history of aviation in Farnborough and of FAST.

The story begins in 1878 with a balloon equipment store in Woolwich, with another opened in Chatham in 1882, where a balloon school opened in 1886. Then, in 1890-92, Aldershot became the site of both the factory and Balloon Section of the Royal Engineers. When a larger site was needed, the whole operation moved to South Farnborough in 1905. In 1908, it became HM Balloon Factory and Balloon Section RE.

In 1909, it was decided to split the builders function from the users, and the building side of the enterprise became, in 1911, the Army Aircraft Factory; in 1912, the Royal Aircraft Factory; and in 1918, the Royal Aircraft Establishment. Meanwhile, the users side became, in 1911, the Air Battalion; in 1912, the Royal Flying Corps; and in 1918, the Royal Air Force. From the early years, when local furniture manufacturers would be given drawings to create wooden frames, till its heyday in 1975, when some 8000 people were employed by RAE, the story of flying has been central

to Farnborough's identity. It is particularly interesting that during its earliest years a disproportionately large proportion of employees have been women, as attested by the many photos on display.

And central to that story is Samuel Cody, a former Wild West showman, who accomplished the first powered flight in Britain in 1908. He came to Farnborough as a kite instructor, in the days when kites were considered the safest means of achieving flight. Cody was instrumental in the development of powered kites, and later aircraft, by trial and error. Local people would come in large numbers to watch Cody's experimental flights, though the airstrip was so rudimentary that one of the cows grazing the land was struck during military trials, instantly killing the animal. Sadly, Cody was to lose his own life in 1913 in a plane crash. An estimated 100,000 people attended his funeral in Aldershot Military Cemetery.

A replica of the 'Cody Flyer' in which he made his landmark first flight was built to celebrate its centenary in 2008, and is now housed in a purpose-built building to the rear of Trenchard House. Here, Dr Rood pointed out the key features of the craft and demonstrated the controls. Local schools and inmates from Broadmoor helped with the reconstruction. We were fortunate to be able to speak to people who worked on that project, including a lady who stitched the canvass for the wings and her husband, who worked on the engine, which really brought Cody's achievement to life.

The Farnborough Air Sciences Trust was set up in 1993, with the aims of preserving historical buildings on the site and building an archive of artefacts, images, reports, etc. They have been successful in preserving the greatest concentration of listed buildings in the UK, including three wind tunnels, a 1950s RAF IAM Centrifuge, RFC black sheds c. 1912, GI Building/Trenchard House and the reconstructed portable airship shed now the focal point of a small park among new development near the museum.

The archive that FAST has built includes: complete filing cabinets of documents; a technical library with books dating back to 1898; some 40,000 reports on film from 1918; 80-100,000 glass photographic slides; every photo taken since 1912 and engineering and architectural drawings, all of which are being catalogued to create a complete record of all the research carried out on the site. FAST aims to make as much of this material as possible available via the internet to raise funds to continue the work.

In addition, the museum, which attracts visitors from around the world, houses around 4000 artefacts covering the entire history of aviation in Farnborough. The collection includes various aircraft, including a Lightning, a Jaguar, a Hunter and a Puma. Entry is free, and it is entirely volunteer-run. In addition, FAST hosts lectures and visits, makes loans to other museums, and works closely with various academic institutions. In association with the British Library, an oral history is being gathered. To further the aims of education and community inclusion, FAST engages schools with competitions.

It was generally agreed that Dr Rood's presentation was excellent, and that having volunteers on hand with first-hand knowledge of RAE made the tour especially interesting. FAST is a local treasure that The Farnborough Society is proud to support.

