

The Black Sheds

On 18 January 2019 a group from The Farnborough Society enjoyed a tour of the Black Sheds on Farnborough airfield. The view of this iconic building will be familiar to aviation enthusiasts, visitors to the airshows, and people who had worked on the airfield, but few will have had the chance to see the interior. Constructed in 1912 to house early aircraft maintenance and formerly painted white but now the familiar black, it is a Grade 11 listed building retaining the original wooden roof timbers, and structure. It contains the BAE Heritage archive which consists of millions of documents, photographs, technical reports, manuals and artifacts from across the aviation industry. Not open to the public, although visits can be arranged by appointment, it is a source of records used by authors, film makers and researchers.

First stop on our tour was a huge 'family tree' of all the companies absorbed over time by BAE Systems. This list included such companies as De Havilland, Folland, English Electric, BAC, Avro Anson and many others. We learnt that BA stands for British Aerospace but to avoid confusion with British Airways an E was added to the title although the E has no historical meaning. The records cover all aspects of defence innovation including ships, submarines and aeroplanes, as well as some weapons dating back to the 1500s. We were shown boxes of documents, photographs and glass negatives which are all carefully labelled and entered on to a comprehensive computer system so that accessing them is relative easy. Everything is stacked in an orderly fashion on purpose built shelves. At this point we were advised that there was plenty of archive recording to be done if anyone wished to volunteer for such duties.

Although Farnborough is the centre for the archives, there are places across the country which actually house aviation museums open to the public and items are often either lent or borrowed from them. BAE Heritage also supports museums throughout the world by actively helping with displays of some of the artefacts held. We saw some items used in film sets, and parts of aeroplanes being stored for other repositories.

Although this is not a museum, many of the artefacts like trophies, photographs of aeroplanes and aviators, medals, and some documents are on display. This includes some memorabilia of Geoffrey de Havilland for whom The Farnborough Society recently installed a Blue Plaque on a house in Alexandra Road.

We were all fascinated by the tour which lasted over two hours and was guided by the two knowledgeable and enthusiastic curators. More information about the heritage can be found on www.baesystems.com under the 'Our Company' tab and then 'Heritage'.