

May 2019

The Farnborough Society Honours Beatrice 'Tilly' Shilling

One of Farnborough's most fascinating former residents, Beatrice 'Tilly' Shilling, was honoured on 25th May when The Farnborough Society unveiled a blue plaque at the house where she lived in Ashley Road between 1938 and 1955, followed by a buffet lunch with a display of Ms Shilling's accomplishments.

The entire proceedings were captured on film for a documentary based on aviation historian Paul Beaver's book *Spitfire People*, for More4/Channel 5. Paul was interviewed throughout.

Newly-appointed Chairman of The Farnborough Society, Len Amos, presided over the ceremony—his first responsibility in this role.

The plaque was unveiled by Frankie Webb, who had previously given a presentation on Tilly



Shilling to the society. Frankie became aware of Ms Shilling when Paul Beaver gave a talk on the Spitfire to her local U3A in Tadley. She was immediately intrigued and wanted to know more. The result has been an extensive research project that is ongoing. The Farnborough Society was particularly pleased to give an enthusiastic amateur—shown second left—the honour of performing the unveiling.

The Mayor of Rushmoor, Cllr Sue Carter, gave a speech emphasising her interest in young people, the focus of her mayoral year, and the importance of role models like Tilly Shilling for girls and young women, to open them up to the possibility of careers in engineering.

Leader of Rushmoor Borough Council, Cllr David Clifford, spoke very much from the perspective of a pilot. But having grown up surrounded by women, and with only daughters, he has come to realise that women simplify things while men like things complicated, and if men want things simplified, they must turn to women to sort things out. For him, Ms Shilling exemplifies this.

Sir Donald Spiers's speech concentrated on her time working on aero engines at the RAE, and her unique engineering background. He also described the recent formal opening of the new Beatrice Shilling engineering laboratory at Royal Holloway College, which he was invited to attend.

Over lunch, supplied by local social enterprise Vine Dining, guests, including Scott Peasey, the recently-appointed Assistant Principal of Farnborough College of Technology, members of the FAST Trust, borough councillors, and representatives of a number of local organisations and

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Ms Shilling's god-daughter, examined a display created by Barbara Hurst plus a number of artefacts from the FAST Museum, courtesy of Sir Donald.

The first section of the display told the story of Ms Shilling's early life, from buying herself a motorcycle aged 14 through becoming one of only two women to graduate from Manchester University in engineering, racing motorcycles at Brooklands, coming to Farnborough to work and RAE and her marriage to fellow RAE employee George Naylor. The second section focused on WWII and the tiny component that was to make her famous 'Miss Shilling's Orifice', a copy of which was included in the display. This simple piece of precision engineering solved a serious problem in the Merlin engine, giving pilots a much better chance in dog-fights with German fighter planes. The third section focused on Ms Shilling's post-war life, both in the RAE and racing motor cars, and her legacy.



Paul Beaver gave a very useful demonstration of the manoeuvres that were causing the problem using a model Spitfire, which clarified the rather technical diagrams in the display.

The society is very grateful to the current owners of the house, Mr and Mrs Cox, for granting permission for the erection of the plaque.

It is hoped that this plaque and the one The Farnborough Society unveiled last year honouring Sir Geoffrey de Havilland, together with a plaque put up by the Performing Arts Society commemorating composer Percy Eastman Fletcher in Sycamore Road, will in time form part of a network of heritage trails in Farnborough.