

CHOCKS AWAY

The Story of Local Aviation

From July 31 to October 31, the Museum of St Albans will mount a fresh exhibition highlighting many of the most interesting events and achievements in the field of aviation in Hertfordshire.

The story starts in the 18th century with the first British balloon flights. Just one year after the famous Montgolfier brothers' first ever ascent at Versailles. In 1784 the diplomat Vincenzo Lunardi along with his dog and cat became the first in Britain to make an ascent in a balloon, 'traversing the regions of the air ... by the power of chemistry' as a contemporary memorial recorded.¹ The intrepid trio took off from Moorfields in London and touched down at North Mimms before finally landing near Ware. Sadly, Lunardi's balloon did not survive but the scientific principles of hot air ballooning were proved by his adventures.

For over a hundred years ballooning remained the only method of manned flight. But by the early 20th century, aeroplanes and airships took aviation, quite literally, to new heights. The outbreak of the First World War drove technology forward at enormous speed. The exhibition explains how the fear of aerial warfare came to Hertfordshire for the first time, in the form of the first bombing raids, carried out from German airships. Fortunately, the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) quickly learnt how to attack the floating leviathans. In 1916, Lieutenant Leefe Robinson of the RFC shot down a German airship, the SL 11 which crashed to the ground in a ball of fire at Cuffley. Parts of the airship frame will be on show.

During the First World War, it became clear that the future lay not with airships but with aeroplanes. The exhibition focuses upon how one of Britain's best known aircraft manufacturers, De Havilland, set up factories in the county. Between the two world wars the company helped aviation come of age. Local engineers made aircraft which could fly further and faster than ever before. As commercial airlines were established, they used machines such as the De Havilland Rapide, which was made in Hatfield and flown all around the world. De Havilland also encouraged supported the London Flying Club, once a resort of the fashionable and wealthy. The exhibition tells the story of the pioneering female pilot Amy Johnson, who learned to fly at the Club, and who became an international celebrity, known for her daring exploits.

With the outbreak of the Second World War, Hertfordshire again played a vital role in the design and production of aircraft. The exhibition includes the remarkable success story of the Mosquito. Built largely from wood, it defied sceptics to become one of the most versatile and durable aircraft of its time. Another wartime wooden aircraft, which the show will highlight, is the Horsa Glider, hundreds of which were made to transport paratroopers who spearheaded the D-Day landings. Other projects which were once top secret are explored – did you know that the research which created the famous

¹ J M Bacon (1870) *The Dominion of the Air*

'Dambusters' bouncing bomb was also carried out in great secrecy at the Building Research Station at Garston near Watford? Or that the development of RDX, the explosive which filled the bouncing bombs, was carried out at Waltham Abbey?

After the war, the development of the jet engine led De Haviland to create the Comet, the world's first passenger carrying jet airliner. With the dawning of the jet age, Luton airport, just across the border in Bedfordshire, developed itself at the leading edge of the package holiday industry. As air travel came within the reach of ordinary people, it changed the world. From the glamour of the 1950s "jet set", to the incredible growth of EasyJet, the experience of civil aviation has touched all our lives. Lunardi would have been amazed.

"Chocks Away" can be seen at the:

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