

From Martlesham To Muscat - 1943 to 1996

A flying career: Air Commodore Robert Lightfoot



Some readers will know that I have spent the large part of my life flying: in the military from the Piston Provost to the Tornado and in civil aviation from the Tiger Moth to the Boeing 747. This flying career began at Martlesham Heath. It is this Martlesham connection that leads to this article following a prompt from Bob Metson who is one of our MHAS members.

My parents chose to move to Martlesham during the war from the small mining village of Audley in Staffordshire. There, the bombing risk came from near misses on the factories in Crewe and if there ever was a hit near our house I was too young to remember. In Martlesham however, at the very young age of four years I can recall the excitement of watching the Luftwaffe flying low over our house in Bealings Road and often chased by our fighters. The V1 was an equally exciting, albeit frightening, event but fortunately they were very rare. Waiting for the explosion after the pulse jet engine had cut out was an experience well embedded in my memory. Our protection was a steel frame in the house under which as many as possible would crawl but there was one between two houses and after my brother Ken, David Cook from next door and I had crept in there was no room for adults! Readers who lived on the base might like to note that this house, in common with many rural Suffolk houses at the time, had no mains water or drainage utilities. A consequence of this bombing was a number of UXBs in the area and my career might well have never started as finding these weapons was a popular activity for young boys in the village – my friends and I took appalling risks through complete ignorance of what might happen.

Perhaps influenced by the V1 experience, later in life I made a model pulse jet engine and I'm somewhat lucky to have survived the hazards of blowlamps and pressurised paraffin on bench test runs! Another vivid memory of the war years is the day the sky darkened in 1944 when the fleet of tugs and gliders set off for Arnhem. Another opportunity to see and feel the addictive nature of flying was a visit to Debach airfield over the A12 from Woodbridge. There the USAAF operated 4-engined bombers and the public road was close to the dispersals. The aircraft were B17 I presume and it is somewhat ironic to recall that my mother often reminded me that I was frightened by these large machines.

School began in the local primary school in the lane opposite the Red Lion Public House. The school operated for many years until the village was divided by the sale of RAF Martlesham Heath but it is now a private house. Miss Hay was an exceptional headmistress and that school was a vital key to my later life. Only two of my year managed a pass in the

test for 11 year olds (apologies if my memory omits others) and I was off to Woodbridge School where life was very different indeed.

British schools have a good military ethos and the Combined Cadet Force (CCF) was a significant part of the syllabus and I joined as soon as I could. I had one uncle with a meritorious career in the Royal Navy Chief Petty Officer Horatio Brown but no other family connections with the Armed Services until elder brother Ken Lightfoot joined the British Army under the National Service provisions. He enjoyed two years in Cyprus during the EOKA emergency serving in the Suffolk Regiment. The RAF section of the CCF was the root of my lifetime attraction to flying. In the school grounds it was possible to ground hop a glider with a bungee pulled by the boys who were sometimes more mischievous than disciplined. This resulted in one crash into the rugby posts but no injury to the pilot. The idea was to limit the aft movement of the stick through a stop mechanism but this was easily overcome! I recall another aviation event at the school that was potentially catastrophic but luckily no one was hurt when a fuel tank was released from a USAF fighter and it landed on the main pathway in the grounds just before break time when many boys would have been using the path. The American presence in the area remained strong with the twin bases of Bentwaters and Woodbridge. Their approach paths crossed the village of Martlesham and the succession of latest fighters made excellent viewing. On the ground, the A12 through the village was heavily used by the personnel from the bases and gave us boys an insight into the huge difference in styles of British and US automobiles.

Real gliding was available at RAF Martlesham Heath and this facility has been well described on this website by Peter Bowen. I soon became drawn to the gliding school and stayed on after obtaining the A and B certificates for solo circuit flying a few weeks after my 16th birthday. Nearly every weekend I rode to the base on my bicycle – check over the launch winches (ex barrage balloon winches) and do as much as possible to assist the CO and other instructors in getting everything ready for the day's flying. As cadets, we were allowed to operate the V-8 powered winch and that was often our job for most of the day until near the end when we would have one or two flights in the T-21 side by side or the in-line two seat T-31. These winches had a basic wire mesh in front of the operator for protection from the cable drum but what would today's Health and Safety inspectors make of the idea of young lads left alone with such machinery? Much later in life I was required to make a judgement on the qualifications for winch divers and this experience helped me to keep matters as flexible as possible. Arthur Pryke was the CO, Ron Page and Peter Warren were other instructors who gave so much of their weekend time for our benefit. The engineers in the MT section deserve a big vote of thanks for getting these winches and the Bedford 15 cwt trucks ready for us. I recall giving the CO a uncomfortable moment when I thought I had seen sufficient driving of these trucks for me to bring one back from the far end of the airfield at the end of the day - I had no driving experience. The truck went faster and faster and gave me a moment of concern when a large fire engine appeared on the perimeter track in front of me. Luckily, I had the good sense to abandon this enterprise by pulling over onto the grass and stopping. Needless to say, Arthur was not too pleased.



This picture of the author and a T-31 was published in the local newspaper.

The gliding was at the weekends when the base did little flying but there was plenty to keep me interested during the week – as a day boy I returned the village each evening from school. The road to Felixstowe was a great vantage point as it crossed runway 30 and only a simple barrier was between viewers and the tarmac. I recall the early Vampires showing the way forward for fighters – little did I know that I was to learn to fly these fine machines some 10 years later. The main runway was not so accessible but creeping into the bracken in the undershoot of runway 22 from Black Tiles gave quite an exciting vantage point for landings. Peter Stovold was the son of the owner of the restaurant and he was a good friend who later became an RAF aircraft fitter and served at Bruggen on Canberra aircraft and then became a civil licensed engineer. Sometimes we were seen and chased off by the RAF Police and I should apologise here to anyone involved for wasting their time. Another local hostelry was The Bell in Kesgrave and some readers might recall a pianist and ukulele player who did a good impersonation of George Formby. He was my father.

Part of the perimeter track near the B Flight road was very convenient for model aircraft flying and I was one of a group of local lads who often enjoyed time there – all without permission of course. I made one attempt to obtain permission but when it was refused by the Station Adjutant I took it upon myself to appeal directly to the Station Commander! I wish I had kept his reply as he was not best pleased that a mere schoolboy should challenge the decision of his adjutant! My brother and I became suppliers of fuel to our friends because our mix was generally superior to any other and much admired. Paraffin, oil and ether were the main ingredients but a shot of amyl nitrate worked wonders. It also had a magic sniff about it! It is, of course, a Class A controlled drug now.

I am grateful to Paul Chamberlain for his memories of the Blind Landing Experimental Unit where he was a radar fitter and he reminded me of the fleet of Mosquito, Viking, Varsity, Devon, Lancaster and Lincoln aircraft in that unit. The Lincoln fleet was sold to the Royal Australian Air Force (with whom I served for a year in 1975). Other aircraft I remember were the Avro 707 trio and their unique configuration was of great interest. Bob Metson reminded me of the helicopter night flying trials using 'goose neck' flares for marking the landing sites. I saw the results of this early work at my first posting to RAF Acklington in Northumberland where the Whirlwind Search and Rescue flight would often launch at night using the same goose neck flares. Indeed, my basic flying training took place at RAF Spitalgate near Grantham and the grass runway was lit by goose neck flares. I can well believe Bob Metson's description that they 'were a bit dodgy and messy to handle'.

Two local disasters illustrated the hazards in flying. The tragic Canberra crash at Crown Point in 1953 was remarkable in that the aircraft hit the garden behind the Fish and Chip shop: the roads, the shop and the Blue Triangle garage were untouched. The owners of the shop were my aunt and uncle and one of their sons Ronald (Willy) Lightfoot joined the RAF as a fitter and served in Germany. The USAF fighter that crashed into The Falcon caravan centre in Kesgrave closed the A12 for some time as live ammunition was cooking off for a few hours. One of the employees in the centre survived the fire by jumping into a water tank. Sadly, fatal crashes featured throughout my service career. Indeed, I was discouraged from ever joining the RAF as a pilot given the fate of my predecessors from Woodbridge School in the RAF: one killed on Meteors during training and another paralysed when ejecting from a Lightning after a collision at Wattisham. Others advised against a career as a military pilot in any form given the bleak future for manned aircraft outlined in the infamous 1957 Government White Paper.

Close to where the Supermarket is now located, there was a large dump which could be seen from the Felixstowe road. This dump was beside the 15 Sqn B Flight hangar and whole wings and fuselages were discarded. If it has been filled in with the contents intact, there could be some interesting finds if it could be opened

In 1957 in the 6th form at school and was awarded a flying scholarship by the RAF. I recall going to the stores at Martlesham Heath for kitting out for open cockpit Tiger Moth flying. I returned home with an impressive hoard of gear; sheepskin boots, goggles, leather helmet, gauntlets and blue flying suit. I recall trying on this kit more than once before reporting for flying at Cambridge Airport and just 13 days later I held a pilot's licence. That was a miracle as the last leg of my solo cross country was a bit of a shambles. The leg should have been 40 minutes but I managed over two hours! The scene in the open cockpit was memorable with me trying to open maps in the slipstream and scanning a wide area of East Anglia to find my position. The Tiger Moth had no radio or navigation aids. Readers who know the Tiger Moth will appreciate how little fuel I had at the end – the float gauge had disappeared below the sight glass! Later in life as a well qualified flying instructor I used to analyse that flight to see where it all went wrong. I put it down to flying in a wind too strong for cross country navigation by a student. With my shiny new licence, any pocket money I could save was spent on buying 30 minutes flying at Ipswich Airport on the Auster fleet. Stanley Ward was the CFI and I owe him a sincere thank you for his guidance to a young and overconfident pilot.

In the early 60s I saw less and less of Martlesham as I was busy at RAF Acklington as a Jet Provost Instructor but I returned to the area for a conversion to the Lightning fighter at Coltishall near Norwich and after two years in Scotland I returned for another full tour as a Lightning Instructor. It was there that I made some good friends from the F100 Squadron at Bentwaters with both aerial and social encounters. Wattisham was visited by air on many

occasions and I have since become friends with the MO of that time Douglas MacLeod. He was the MO for Martlesham Heath as well as his main base and he now lives in Majorca.

Is there a story about the Officers' Mess? It looked to me more suitable for the tropics with its veranda than East Anglia. I have heard it said that the plans were mixed up with a base in East Africa and out there somewhere is a nice two storey brick Mess! I had lunch in the mess just once as a cadet and it was all very formal for us schoolboys and I'm not sure we enjoyed the food as much as we should have done.

Where does the picture at the top of this article fit this story? I put it there to attract interest. At the Lightning Conversion Unit I had become quite a capable low level display pilot and that qualification led to a detachment to 5 Squadron at Binbrook to help them with their major display commitment in Canada and the USA. The picture was taken at Toronto International Airport where I displayed the Lightning at the Canadian National Exposition. I experienced a variety of hospitality arrangements on the display circuit but nothing matched the Canadian adventure. Smart hotel down town, free rental car for week and a hospitality suite in the hotel open all hours and all free. Well, somebody has to do these jobs! In the background is a Victor K2 which fuelled us across the Atlantic and took part in the display with Vulcan B2. After Toronto it was Washington for the opening of Dulles International Airport. The outward sloping glass in the terminal gave me some concern on my high speed runs as I was close to supersonic and the shock wave could easily dislodge glass panes. Whenever I pass through that airport I am reminded of the great week in 1969. The trip continued to Florida for a week with the F106 wing at Tyndall AFB and then home via Newfoundland. There, in the snow, we had to wait a while for the weather for the diversion airfield in Iceland to improve before the Atlantic crossing. A few days in the bars there wrapped up an extraordinary month away.



Lightning reheat rotate.

Copyright © 2006 Chris Stone, aviation artist. In the collection of the Royal Air Force Club.

This picture shows a 111 Sqn Lightning F3 stream take off at Wattisham. (By permission of the Artist Air Cdre Chris Stone and the owner of the painting). It is included because it is the best picture available to show the awesome power of the Lightning which I was able to exploit at many airshows around the world.

After commanding No 5 squadron at Binbrook I had a series of ground tours and had the time to enter the King's Cup air race in a Robin Aiglon from the RAF College flying club where I was one of the instructors. This race has historic connection with Martlesham Heath

(see 'Martlesham Heath' by Gordon Kinsey) and I was pleased with a third place from my first attempt but the modern race with its handicap system did not encourage me to race again.

The Tornado came into my life on a posting to Saudi Arabia to head the Al Yamamah arms sales project but where does the Boeing 747 fit in this account? When the time came to leave the RAF, I was invited to take the position of Commander, Royal Flight of Oman. The fleet comprised two B747, a DC8, six helicopters and two Gulfstream 4 executive jets. Naturally, although not a rated pilot on any of these types, I took every opportunity to fly each aircraft to see if all was in order for a VVIP operation. Not many pilots can claim time wadi-bashing in a DC-8 or having the authority to wheel out a 747 from the hangar for a few hours general handling whenever the office workload became a bit tiresome. Another perquisite in this post was several Concorde flights on the flight deck. One night, it was necessary to scramble the 747 from a cold start in its hangar: tow it out, get the flight crew together, load catering for large numbers, fuel for unknown destination and so on. We hadn't rehearsed this procedure and discovered that the item that took the longest time before we could launch was getting the stewardesses out of their beds and waiting for them to get ready! I was sorry when that job ended.

Martlesham Heath is still on my map as I live near Colchester and frequently travel through the base to places further up the A12. Without its influence, I might never have taken the flying career that I have enjoyed so much.

Robert Lightfoot. Air Commodore RAF and Ameer Royal Air Force of Oman

Air Force Cross

Queen's Commendation for Valuable Services in the Air

Omani Al Amjad medal

His Majesty Sultan Qaboos Jubilee Medal

Aircraft Flown (in alphabetical order)

Aerospatiale AS332

Auster Autocrat

Auster J5

BAC 111

BAE Hawk

Boeing 747 SP

Boeing CH-47 Chinook

de Havilland Chipmunk

de Havilland DH-82 Tiger Moth

de Havilland Vampire

Douglas DC-8

English Electric Lightning

Gulfstream 4

Hawker Hunter

Hawker-Siddeley Nimrod 3 AEW

Hot Air balloon

Hunting Jet Provost

Hunting (Percival) Provost P.56 (piston)

Junkers 52

Lockheed F-104 Starfighter

McDonnell Douglas Phantom

Northrop T-38 Talon
Panavia Tornado
Robin Aiglon
Sailplanes, various
Scottish Aviation Bulldog
Vickers VC 10
Westland H-3 Sea King
Westland Wessex