

Fond Memories of Martlesham Heath

By Geoffrey Peel. Posted 16 September 2006

I joined the research department of Pye Ltd at Cambridge in November 1944 and in 1946 the company received a contract from RAE Farnborough to design, develop and produce blind landing transmission systems. My part in this was the design and development of the aerials; azimuth, glide path and beacons. After initial experiments at Cambridge and the airship centre at Cardington, the aerial development was carried out at Martlesham.

Heath Robinson

The first and largest aerial array was the azimuth, which produced the highly directional horizontal guidance patterns which lined up an approaching aircraft to the runway. Initial full scale design of this was done in a rather Heath Robinson way using a timber structure mounted on a rotatable cabin trailer, originally used for radar. Attached is a photograph of myself at work on part of the array in 1947. The trailer was parked at the northwestern corner of the airfield, just off the perimeter track, not far from the Black Tiles, with whose lunches we became very familiar..

Please move that Lanc...

Following this initial work a complete installation, including the transmitters, also designed by Pye, was built at the southern end of the North/South runway; (I forget the actual bearings). The ensuing further development involved much flying with the aircraft of BLEU to test each modification. Most of the work was done by an Anson, with the occasional Lancaster. These were not always in the best state of repair. I recall one flight when the pilot was, unusually, the station commander. Very shortly after takeoff the Anson began to vibrate alarmingly. Looking out of a starboard window, I saw a panel on the upper wing surface flapping in the airstream. The pilot's language was colourful, to say the least, as he instructed the control tower to 'get that ***** Lanc off the runway, I'm coming in NOW'. On another flight, this time in a Lancaster, there was a little toggle switch, just hanging in some extraneous wiring, which was supposed to be operated immediately before touchdown to flatten off the approach. This time it broke and we hit at three degrees, which doesn't sound much, but it jolted the poor old craft - and its occupants!

Blood Chit

This was all long before the days of Health and Safety. Before each flight I had to sign a 'blood chit', which in effect meant that in the event of an accident the authorities accepted no responsibility. I also had to draw and sign for a parachute from stores. That was the theory, In practice there was always a shortage of parachutes, so I was usually given a Mae West, in spite of the fact that most of the trips were over land. I did once ask what I could do if we got into trouble inland, and the answer was along the lines of 'Hope'.

Anson plough

Of the pilots of BLEU I remember little, except for one. He, who shall remain nameless, was something of a 'show off'. He liked to impress civilians, such as myself, by flying his Anson in a somewhat unorthodox manner. One of his favourite antics was to fly at about fifty feet towards a row of high voltage electricity distribution cables, as if to fly below them. At the last moment he would hop over. After I left I heard that he did eventually attempt the underpass, with the result that he ploughed an unwanted furrow in a local farmer's field. Whether this was true, I know not, but it was certainly in character.

Circuit and bump

Mae Wests made more sense when development of the glidepath antennae began. These were installed alongside the East-West runway, just East of the road crossing and so all the test flights involved approaching from the sea. Over the months I became very familiar with the inlets and creeks of the Deben . Each circuit and bump meant that the road had to be closed, to the frustration of passing traffic.

Fondest memories

The development of Pye ILS kept me at Martlesham for about two years, after which it was transferred to Farnborough, before undergoing trials for the RAF at Great Massingham. But of all the airfields I worked at, it is of Martlesham Heath that I have the fondest memories.

It is good that a small part of its history is being preserved.