

Naval Dockyards Society Twentieth Annual Conference Synopses
Royal Naval Air Stations and the defence of dockyards
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Jim Humberstone: Calshot, the Solent and the establishment of Royal Naval Air Stations around British Coasts: 1911–1918

As recommended by Lord Haldane, Secretary of State for War to the Imperial Defence Committee in November 1911, the establishment of a new air arm for Great Britain required four components. These were military and naval wings, a central flying school and a dedicated aircraft factory. The Royal Flying Corps, comprising the two wings, was embodied by Royal Warrant on 13 April 1912.

Anticipating this development, the Admiralty had the previous December established a Naval Flying School at Eastchurch on the Isle of Sheppey. Ever self-confident, in October 1912 it set about establishing a chain of seaplane stations along the British coastline from Wales to the far North of Scotland. To its foothold on the Isle of Sheppey were added stations at the Isle of Grain, Felixstowe, Cromarty in Scotland and Calshot on the Solent.

In many ways Calshot would become the archetypal seaplane base, but how did this come about? Was the location fortuitously advantageous? Did it perhaps benefit not only from proximity to the premier naval base in the kingdom but also to the emerging plane-makers?

This paper will attempt to trace the influences that brought about the rise of Calshot and examine how it and the other stations contributed to the development of marine aviation and the evolution of the naval seaplane and flying boat as potent C20 weapon systems. Finally, reference will be made to saving the flying boat sheds from demolition to give a clear view of Calshot Castle.

Bob Wealthy and Colin van Geffen: Calshot and Lee-on-the-Solent Royal Naval Air Stations in the First World War

The location of Calshot and Lee-on-the-Solent in the Solent region will be summarised, illustrating their First World War rôle for aircraft on ships and operating from the sea, and associated RNAS training of pilots and aircrew. The key influence resulted from the establishment of RNAS Coastal Patrol Stations to counter the submarine threat and the demand for pilots.

From an initial interest in the use of aircraft by the RNAS via floatplanes and flying boats, the First World War stimulated a rapid expansion of Calshot. This took the form of trials of air-dropped bombs and torpedoes, the carriage of various types of guns and training of pilots and aircrew. Coastal Patrols located around the English coast had their HQ at Calshot. The later history of Calshot as a military base following the formation of the Royal Air Force in 1918 will also be summarised.

The intensity of RNAS pilot training and other activities at Calshot during the First World War had by 1917 led to a search for a site for additional seaplane training. After investigating NE England, the sea front at Lee-on-the-Solent was chosen for a Seaplane Training School. Initially seaplanes operated from the beach, buildings requisitioned and temporary canvas Bessonneau hangars constructed. A crane was installed to lower and lift seaplanes to and from the beach. Soon a small slipway was constructed followed by a larger slipway and a number of large hangars. More buildings were requisitioned and at the end of the First World War, now within the Royal Air Force, the base at Lee-on-the-Solent continued to expand with the addition of grass runways on adjacent farm land. The base continued to evolve and became the home of the Fleet Air Arm and Coastal Command. In later years it became a major engineering training establishment until the Royal Navy moved out in 1996.

Brief reference will be made to the First World War hangars that remain alongside the main slipway and the re-instatement, a few years ago, of the granite block in its original position on the sea front at Lee-on-the-Solent where it was the base for the jib of the crane used in 1917 to deploy and recover RNAS training seaplanes.

Tina Billbé: Anti-Zeppelin Experiments Combining Airship and Aeroplane Technology

Kingsnorth Airship Station was at the cutting edge of non-rigid airship design, primarily to defend merchant convoys from the threat of attack by enemy submarines. On 28 February 1915 Lord John Fisher, First Sea Lord, held a meeting outlining his requirements for a small and easily produced airship to warn shipping of approaching submarines. Commander Edward Masterman gathered a group of talented and innovative men and placed them under Inspector Commander of Airships at the Admiralty, Neville Florian Osborne. They moved from Farnborough to Kingsnorth, completed their designs and launched the first Submarine Scout within three weeks. Once production of the small SS airships was underway they began to explore ways to improve this craft and also design a larger airship for long range work.

On the night of 19 January 1915 the first Zeppelin air-raid dropped bombs on Great Yarmouth and Kings Lynn, followed by raids targeting London. Once protection against submarines was underway some of the Kingsnorth team started working to combine the speed of lift and ability for sustained flight of their airships with the horizontal speed and manoeuvrability of aeroplanes once they were in the air. By August 1915 the first trials of a prototype airship-plane were taking place but a fatal disaster occurred in February 1916. The deaths of the main designers in a trial, Squadron Commander de Courcy W. P. Ireland and Wing Commander N. F. Osborne, were a great blow to the project.

As well as London, targets in the southeast appear to have been Margate, Whitstable and Sheerness but Chatham Dockyard, Grain Seaplane Station, the adjoining repair depot (Port Victoria) and Kingsnorth Airship Station were not bombed despite their strategic importance. Experimentation at Kingsnorth using non-rigid airships was halted and it was not until 1918, when rigid airships became available, that experiments resumed with R23 at Pulham, the success of the initial experiments here being overtaken by Armistice.

Celia Clark: In search of Leslie Bates RNAS

Within the theme of the 2016 conference Celia embarked on research into her grandfather's early career. Leslie Bates joined the Royal Naval Air Service in 1915 and later had a distinguished career in the RAF. Details about his early flying days and later career have emerged from sources in Washington DC: from official records on the history of early flight; and family.

Philip MacDougall: A Deliberately Suppressed History - the Royal Navy's Marine Aircraft Experimental Establishments

During World War One the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS) provided not only an aerial defence to naval bases and dockyards in the United Kingdom but for the country as a whole. With aviation very much in its infancy and air fighting totally untested the RNAS went on to pioneer tactics, strategies and weapons that were eventually to be widely adopted by aerial forces throughout the world. However, upon the demise of the RNAS in April 1918 through absorption into the newly created Royal Air Force, the contributions of the Navy upon the development of aerial warfare were quietly and deliberately forgotten. Viscount Trenchard, then head of the newly created RAF, wishing to ensure the continuance and independence of a separate air force, did not wish the Navy to be seen as in any way competent in matters relating to aviation. To his mind, such recognition would encourage and strengthen those who wished to see the Royal Navy regain its aviation wing and therefore undermine the future of the Royal Air Force that he headed. This paper will reveal the hidden and deliberately suppressed history of naval experimental aviation during the period 1914–18 with particular reference to the marine

aircraft experimental establishments of Calshot, Felixstowe and Port Victoria (Isle of Grain) together with the advances made by the RNAS in the development of landplanes at Eastchurch (Isle of Sheppey).

David Evans: Creation and renewal of RNAS Portland/HMS *Osprey* near Portland Naval Base

Portland differed from most other naval air bases in that during the First World War it operated seaplanes and after the Second World War it was almost solely concerned with helicopters on partly reclaimed land. The first flight from a ship under way took place in Weymouth Bay in May 1912, when a Short S.27 took off from HMS *Hibernia* during the Royal Fleet Review. Shore facilities were provided, as seen in a photograph of that date at Yeovilton. Tents to hold seaplanes were built behind slips at Castletown, just outside the naval base gates, but on 28 September 1916 HMS *Sarepta* was opened as a seaplane base, using the slipways within the dockyard. An undated photo shows the initial accommodation, which appears to be a more robust tent in the same location as the 1912 photo. The tented hangar was replaced by a more permanent one in 1917.

In June 1919 the base, by then operated by the RAF, was closed, but the facilities remained. Flying boats and seaplanes were often seen in the area between the wars and the facilities may have been used for occasional maintenance. In 1939 Swordfish floatplanes of 772 Squadron Fleet Requirements Unit were based there, but withdrawn in July 1940 because of continual air raids. Activity resumed after the war, with Sikorsky helicopters stationed there for pioneering anti-submarine activity.

This paper details a major expansion of *Osprey* from 1959, illustrated by a collection of photographs held at the Fleet Air Arm Museum, Yeovilton. One notable feature was the reclamation of the Mere and the formation of new land to hold the continually increasing number of helicopters. The canteen building was reused, the 1940s Boiler House became a store for rotor blades, and the former No. 3 hangar became a M/T workshop. Some buildings survived closure in 1999 when it was renamed Osprey Quay; the hangars as suitable for holding sailing boats as helicopters, and the 1980s wardroom was converted into desirable flats for the Sailing Olympics of 2012. The canteen/headquarters/control tower is at present being considered for conversion into flats. The Maritime and Coastguard Agency maintains a SAR helicopter there, due to be removed in 2017.

The Fleet Air Arm Museum archives at Yeovilton contain much material that is relevant to all RNAS bases.

Ian Stafford: The Royal Naval Air Service and Air Defence of the Halifax Naval Yard and Base: a study in waning enthusiasm

The paper looks at the changing attitude of Admiralty to directly involving the Royal Navy Air Service in the defence of the Canadian and Newfoundland coasts and argues that the failure to follow this through marked the beginning of the Canadian shift to naval reliance on the United States.

Technically the Royal Navy was not responsible for Halifax base in so far as Her Majesty's Government had transferred responsibility for maintaining the Halifax yards to the Canadian authorities in 1906; but under the terms of the transfer the Royal Navy retained the right of user. Britain had the same responsibility to defend Canada as any other part of the realm. Legally Canadian ships had been put under Admiralty control. Some Royal Navy vessels joined a small coastal protection service established in Canada.

In 1917 it was apparent to Admiralty that German submarines could reach Canada. Admiralty gave directions to the coastal force as to how to operate and supplied three vessels to the coastal protection force. Involvement in defending the Canadian coast, forced Admiralty to give strategic thought to the matter.

Soon the need to use aircraft against marauding submarines in Western Atlantic arose. The Director of Air Services proposed sending RNAS personnel to advise and assist and also deploying two aircraft carriers. Other parts of Admiralty argued that the carriers should be deployed in the Mediterranean and that men could not be spared. The Canadians were also interested in the air defence of Halifax. Trans-Atlantic discussion about airships and seaplanes followed. It seems that the "Large America" seaplanes used by the RNAS in Britain were the most appropriate but that they should be supplied direct from the United States. Eventually this led to an American base near Halifax and the RNAS being sidelined.