



Tom Campbell Black's Avro 540 Cadet aircraft at Harrow Hill Farm, Newlands Corner, near Guildford, April 22 1935. Photo courtesy of Documentary Photographic Archive at Greater Manchester County Record Office.



An air ambulance that belonged to the Surrey branch of the British Red Cross.

When exciting air pageants filled the skies

Thousands once flocked to the air displays on the outskirts of Guildford where people had the chance to take a flight – sometimes while the aircraft took part in exhilarating races. They wouldn't allow it today! Historian Frank Phillipson tells the story

FROM the late 1920s until the mid 1930s the pioneer aviator Sir Alan Cobham led a campaign to make Britain more 'air minded' by leading a group of

famous pilots on spectacular air shows around the country.

He traded under the name of National Aviation Days Ltd, but was better known by the unofficial title of Cobham's Flying Circus.

Because he felt that Britain was lagging behind America and Europe, he wanted to arouse interest in civil aviation development, show Britain's aviation achievements and the importance of promoting progress in the industry.

The displays were designed to interest and entertain the public so as to enlist their support.

At each town visited, Cobham invited members of local councils for a flight in one of his 10- to 20-seat airliners at the show.

His aim was to encourage them to make plans for a local aerodrome. Provision for one for Guildford was proposed in the early 1930s at Peasmarsh, west of the main London to Portsmouth railway line and north of New Pond Road on the Loseley Estate. However, this never came to fruition.

At the airshows, the public could take flights in an airliner or smaller two- or three-seat aircraft.

They were also able to fly in the aircraft while they did acrobatics, flew in formation and in races.

In the Second World War, many RAF aircrews said that they had taken their first flight at one of these air displays.

The main rival to Cobham was a succession of touring air display companies formed by Henry Barker and James McEwan-King.

In 1933 they traded as British Hospital Air Pageants Ltd (BHAP) in 1934 as Sky Devils Air Circus (SDAC), in 1935 as Jubilee Air Displays (JAD), in 1936 as British Empire Air Displays (BEAD) and in 1937 as Coronation Air Displays (CAD).

At the end of 1935 Cobham sold his air display company to the aviator Charles Scott and it then became CWA Scott's Flying Display Ltd (CWASFD).

The air displays from the two leading companies over the 1930s period did not vary a great deal.

As examples, details are

given here of two air shows that took place at Newlands Corner near Guildford.

On Saturday April 29 1933, British Hospitals Air Pageants held an air display at Harrow Hill Farm (east of the A25 at Newlands Corner) with a demonstration being made to the British Red Cross (Surrey branch) and the Child Guidance Clinic.

The free use of the field was provided by Mrs St Loe Strachey of Harrowhill Copse.

Trees along a section of the northern boundary were cut down to allow aircraft to take off.

The air show, led by Charles Scott, had a fleet of 16 aircraft, including one or two airliners down to smaller two- and three-seat types.

The show ran continuously from noon until dusk and included The Great Air Race,

Grand Formation Flight, Wireless Controlled Flying (instructions to the pilot), Aerobatic Flying, Aerial Marksmanship, Wing Walking, Parachute Descents, Upside Down Flying, and Humorous Events.

Also on show was a single-engine high-wing monoplane ambulance aircraft.

Thousands of people were attracted to the show and 15,000 people paid admission to it.

The aircraft could hardly cope with the demand for flights and there was surprise at the number of women and children wanting flights, including aerobatic flights in open cockpit aircraft.

There were many comments from people landing such as "marvellous" and "wonderful".

On Sunday April 30, the aircraft flew on to the next venue

at Northampton. The aircraft took passengers on a one-way flight with a coach later bringing them back to Guildford.

Easter Monday April 29 1935 saw Jubilee Air Displays hold an air show again at Harrow Hill Farm.

The then Mayor of Guildford, W G L Sheppard, accompanied by the Mayoress, opened the display in the afternoon.

Despite the uncertainty of the weather, a large crowd was attracted and there was a high demand for flights.

These included six passengers who had an exhilarating experience when they were carried in an air race around a triangular course, "the three machines roaring across the finishing line almost abreast".

Spectators were entertained by aerobics including loops, rolls and spins. A paper

streamer released at 2,000ft was repeatedly cut by an aircraft as it fell to the ground.

"A great thrill" was a simultaneous parachute jump made by two parachutists who made a perfect landing together.

Throughout the afternoon and evening the flying was watched by hundreds of motorists and others on the slopes of Newlands Corner.

It is possible that the Harrow Hill field may have been used in 1936 or 1937 to demonstrate a new Red Cross air ambulance (a two-engined, low-wing monoplane) Monospar ST25 named *Florence Nightingale*.

Airshows today are altogether different, usually being held on airfields with much more stringent safety measures.

No longer is it possible to get as close and involved in flying as it had been at these 1930s shows.



Air pageant and air show programmes courtesy of Colin Cruddas.



Advertisements from the Surrey Advertiser and Surrey Times for the air shows.



Known air displays in the Guildford area in the 1930s

- April 22 and 23 1933: NAD: Sussex Farm, West Clandon.
- April 29 1933: BHAP: Harrow Hill Farm, Newlands Corner.
- October 6 1933: BHAP: Broadmead, Send.
- April 15 1934: NAD: Sussex Farm, West Clandon.
- April 28 1934: SDAC: Stoke Hill Park Estate, Guildford (between River Wey and the Lido).
- April 21 1935: JAD: Harrow Hill Farm, Newlands Corner.
- April 19 1936: CWASFD: Witley Park, Witley.
- June 9 to 11 1937: CAD: northern end of Stoke Park, Guildford.

Details of any others would be welcome.

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