

Comments on Alan Buckland's Presentation
The Post War History of the British Aircraft Industry

From Geoff Kennedy

I will set the ball rolling on this month's subject and give you an address list to use for any response members would like to make.

The History of the British Aircraft Industry seems to be a good example of what went wrong in Britain in the immediate post-war period. I have a greater appreciation of how complex the issues are and how determining the causes of the decline of a huge UK industry are difficult to assess and on which there is still no consensus. From Alan's introduction and what I have read, a number of points have struck me:

- a) as in many of our industries at that time, we seem to have been complacent, resting on past achievements, but also appearing, after six years of hard slog, to be tired and wanting a rest. We were neither having to rise from the ashes, like much of mainland Europe, but nor were we a growing industrial power like the US;
- b) the aircraft industry consisted of too many small companies who prized their independence more than organisational efficiency and were resistant to change; this led to higher costs and much effort being put into many designs, only a few of which could be adopted; there was not enough concentration on investment and modernisation, which raises the much asked but never resolved question as to whether the Attlee government placed too much emphasis on investment in social projects to the detriment of our economic competitiveness;
- c) did the Government hinder or help with its involvement through the likes of the Brabazon committee and other interventions? It did read like normal British muddling through, from short term pressure to short term pressure and no real plan. Did the emphasis on providing aircraft for routes around the soon to disappear Empire, for BEA and BOAC, cause the industry to concentrate on too bespoke designs for a small market with little export potential?
- d) and, in the end, were we always doomed to failure, because we were broke and did not have the resources to compete with the US, which was (is) huge and had a large domestic market as a base?

And none of that covers military aircraft development!

Response to Geoff's Comments from Alan.

Thank you Geoff for the comments. They summarise very succinctly the problems facing the industry after the war.

The role of the Government looms large in the whole story. As you suggest, it's not easy to determine whether the Government helped or hindered the industry. As BOAC and BEA were nationalised, there was inevitably considerable interference with the airlines and, by association, in the manufacturing industry also. At the same time, some critics argue that neither the Treasury nor the Ministry of Aviation had anyone who really understood the industry and so were ill-equipped to assess the potential of designs, make sensible procurement decisions or to understand the realities of attempting to compete with the US.

The Attlee government was apparently keen to see the recommendations of the Brabazon Committee up and flying. However, as you say, there was also a focus on social projects and no doubt aircraft, along with other industry sectors, had to compete for funding with the expanding welfare state.

From Phil Hammond

May I start by thanking Alan for his comprehensive and thought provoking introduction to this subject.

Following on from your thoughts Geoff may I comment on my experiences of working in the industry, in Coventry during my career for what was Dunlop Aviation Division when I worked there for 6 months in 1967 before going to University and subsequently with them on and off under different ownership (currently Meggitt) during my career.

Coventry's association with aviation is almost as significant as with the Automotive sector as a visit to the Aviation Museum at Baginton Airport will confirm. Also Dunlop is not just about Tyres, they do make aircraft tyres but also wheel and braking systems, de-icing equipment for the industry, Consumable / Repairable material.

Throughout its chequered history (rather like the UK aircraft sector in general) Dunlop Aviation is still there making a contribution to the industry and that's significant business when you consider the Life Cycle costs of operating aircraft.

Typically purchase cost will account for 25% of the total and the balance is made up of selling on until it's not fit for purpose / safe to fly. The airframes (what we see and sit in) are often referred to as ' Christmas Trees' off which the consumable / repairable parts are hung.

Because the operating costs are significant it's usually the case that the aircraft company (Boeing, Airbus etc) will require suppliers such as Dunlop to supply their systems free of charge. They make their money from servicing / repairing their systems and component parts.

There are still people I know locally who worked for Dunlop / Meggitt and some, I believe, with relatives, second or third generation these days, working there.

Response to Phil's comments from Alan:

It's interesting to hear about your and Coventry's association with the industry.

Though I didn't cover it directly in my introduction, your comments are a reminder of how important the systems, equipment and parts supply side are to the regional and national economy. I worked for Lucas Aerospace myself for several years, until it was taken over, along with the rest of the LucasVarity group, by the US company TRW in 1999.

Britten-Norman is now the only British company that can be said to "manufacture aeroplanes", but the supply side is still huge with British companies like BAe Systems, GKN, Rolls Royce, QinetiQ, Meggitt... supplying globally to the aerospace industry.

From Ian Hedley

As an RAF child, with a brother who holds the world record for flying hours in a Jaguar, I will comment on the defence angle.

Alan, you mention, in passing, that Wilson cancelled TSR2 and that is all you say about a decision that I was appalled by in 1964/5.

As you say we surrendered our world lead, with the Frank Whittle jet engine, to the Americans.

TSR2 was way ahead of the USA and we then surrendered that lead by Wilson cancelling the project.

I watched TSR2's maiden flight from Boscombe down on 27th September 1964 as I did with the British built Concorde from Filton on 9th April 1969 (my birthday).

The current horrendously expensive American fighter, F something!, we have ordered is not on a par with TSR2 even now.

The short-termism of UK politics, (getting re-elected every 5 years is the most important issue?), has always got in the way of scientific advances.

We invent, the government interferes and we let the innovation go abroad and then buy back at vast cost.

Other examples which cost us dear: TQM, Hovercraft and the scientific brain drain. We learn nothing from history and keep on making the same blunders except that they cost UK Plc more each time.

Response to Ian's comments from Alan:

Thank you for some thought-provoking comments.

I know that I made little mention of TSR2 and the other projects cancelled by the Wilson Government in April 1965. The military side was not in my self-imposed remit and the controversy surrounding the cancellation of TSR2 is a major topic in itself. It was one of the few military projects that were started despite the Sandys Defence White Paper.

The Labour Party had always had the three projects in their sights as a target for cuts as soon as they got into power and they wasted no time in carrying them out. Was it technical problems, mounting cost, government interference on a grand scale, politics...?