



WITNEY AIRFIELD

THE FINAL YEARS

By Peter Davis

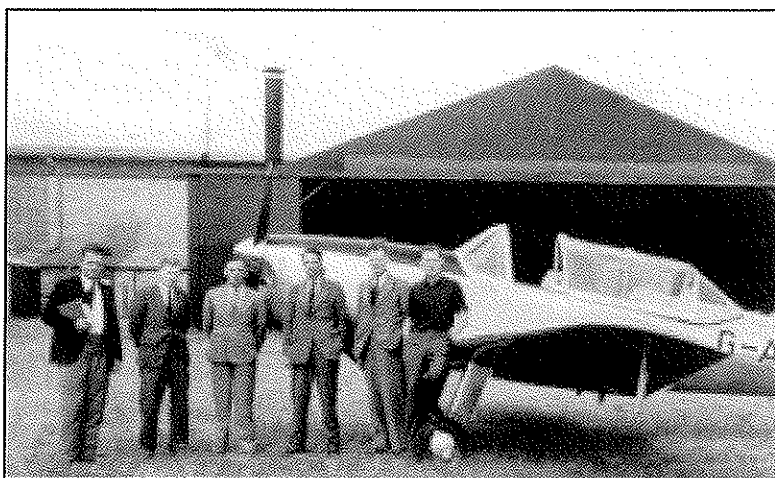
In the Summer 2004 issue we saw the rundown of the de Havilland workforce at Witney at the end of the war, but this was not the end of the story. To conclude the airfields history we now move on to its final, but interesting few years.

Post war activity

Entries in the log book of Philip Gordon Marshall (PGM), the former wartime General Manager, record that he made frequent flying visits to Witney, either for pleasure, when the object was to spend a night or two at Burford or to carry out some test flying. He made flights in several Rapides destined for overseas customers, a Portuguese example in October, one for Iraqi in December and a Dutch example in January 1946. On 7 May 1946 he accompanied Peter de Havilland to Witney in a Proctor and eleven days later was back again with Peter in the Proctor, to collect the second Rapide which was destined for India.



Three Rapides which had been converted from Dominies awaiting delivery to Portugal.



Canadian built DHC.1 Chipmunk G-AKCS was assembled at Witney and test flown by Pat Fillingham (leaning against wing) in August 1947.

The first UK Chipmunks

With war coming to its conclusion DH was eager to produce a new trainer to replace its ageing Tiger Moth and this task was given to De Havilland Canada in the summer of 1945. Production of this new, all-metal, stressed skin monoplane, named the Chipmunk, was underway by the end of the year and in May 1946 DH test pilot Pat Fillingham, who had been involved in test flying Canadian-built Mosquitoes, was invited to test fly the aircraft. He made the uneventful maiden flight of the prototype, now bearing the registration CF-DIO-X, on 22 May. After solving a few teething problems the aircraft was granted its C of A, crated up and sent to Hatfield in the November. Three other Canadian built

Chipmunks G-AJVD, G-AKCS and G-AKDN came to the UK and each received attention at Witney, G-AKCS being assembled there and air tested by Fillingham on 8 August 1947. CF-DIO-X made its first flight at Hatfield on 15 January 1947 and after further test flights he flew it to Witney on 10 August for further work, where it was registered G-AKEV. The Chipmunk went on to become a popular trainer with air forces throughout the world, well over 200 being produced in Canada and more than a thousand in the UK and 60 were also built under licence in Portugal.

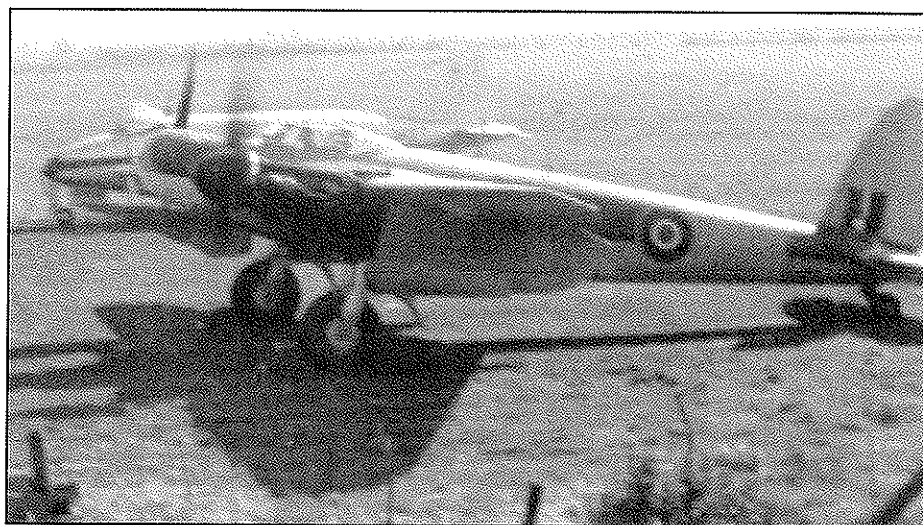


Doves, Mosquitos and a Vampire

De Havilland's first post war civil design was the DH 104 Dove, developed as a replacement for the now ageing DH 89 and PGM accompanied Peter de Havilland to Witney in the prototype G-AGPJ on 2 July. Two days later he delivered an Arab Airways Rapide from Witney to Little Horwood, Bucks and made two more visits to Witney in the Dove during the month when it was undergoing fuel consumption tests. The number of employees continued to dwindle, although the workload was still high and Rapides were now emerging from the paint shop with a variety of national registrations and colour schemes and still the odd Dominic left the airfield destined for the RAF. As Dove production increased some were delivered to Witney for customising, as were several Mosquitos destined for foreign customers. Witney did just touch on the jet age when an early Vampire, possibly LZ551, arrived by road to be modified for carrier landings.

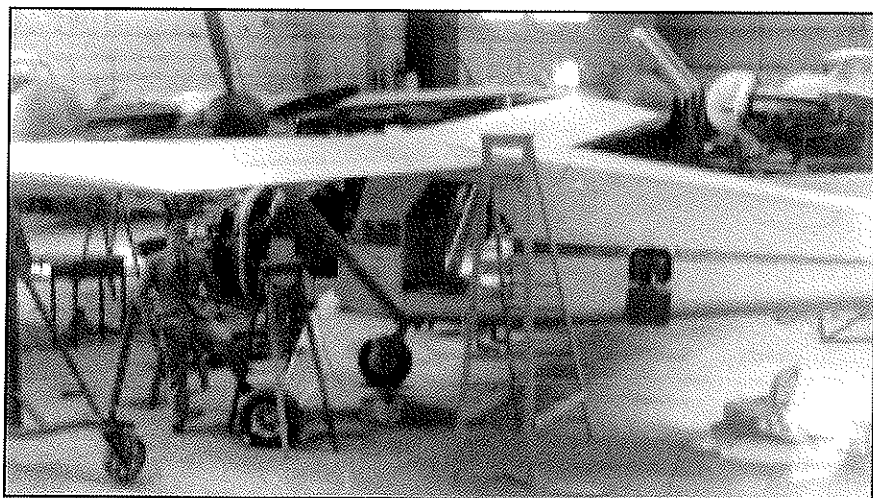
During 1946 PGM had been appointed Sales Director with de Havilland's Airspeed company, based at Christchurch near Bourmouthe, with responsibility for the new Ambassador airliner.

When he was transferred down to Christchurch in 1947 he managed to persuade DH's to let him take Leopard Moth G-ACMN with him for communications purposes and indeed retained it until 1952. From 1947 until its closure, he flew it to Witney on many occasions and on 9 August 1947 made a 45 minute flight at Witney in Chipmunk G-AJVD. On 23 June 1949 he visited for the last time, from Christchurch, in 'MN and noted with a touch of sadness "Witney almost closed - CLJ and Joe B holding fort". Thus ended his almost ten year connection with the airfield. The following April, Witney having now passed into the annals of aviation history, he parked the ever faithful Leopard Moth at RAF Brize Norton, while he spent a few nights in Burford, where no doubt he reflected on his Witney years.



Mosquito, possibly NF.38 VT651 with Dove G-AKET in background.

DH 89s and the first UK Beaver



The DHC.2 Beaver being assembled at Witney in 1949.

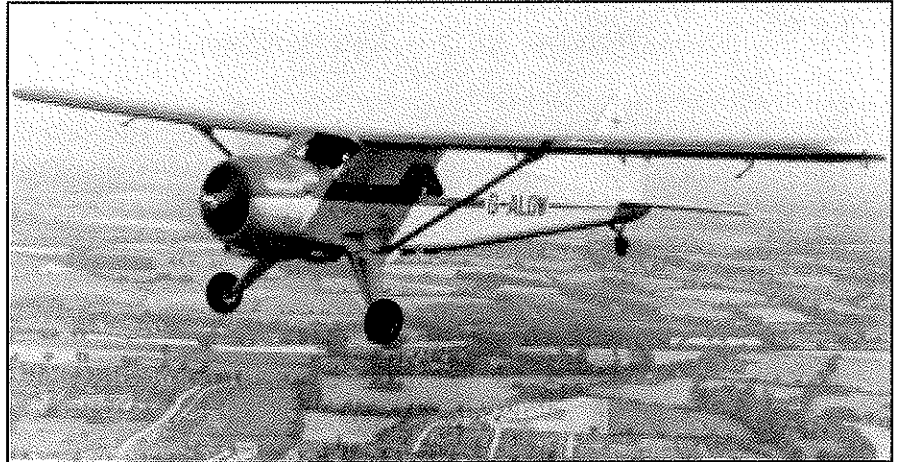
Dominie production continued at Loughborough until March 1946 when all components, complete or otherwise, were transferred to Witney where many late production aircraft were converted for civilian use. Vast numbers of Dominies now came on the market, and most were converted to civilian DH 89A Rapide standard at Witney. The conversion consisted mainly of a respray, the addition of cabin soundproofing and upholstered seating and new décor. In addition two aircraft, G-AJGS and G-AJKS, were built from scratch and given



Witney construction numbers W.1001 and W.1002. A total of 81 Rapides emerged from Witney for the British register and for export. Another type from the DH Canada stable was the Beaver utility aircraft and the first one to arrive in the UK was assembled at Witney in the summer of 1949, where it became G-ALOW.

From the drab camouflaged types that had emerged from the hangars during wartime, now civil colour schemes brightened the airfield. For the UK market the colour schemes of Channel Island Airways, Hunting Air Travel, Isle of Man Air Services,

Jersey Airways, Olley Air Services, Railway Air Services and Scottish Airways were just a sample. Those destined for overseas operators included aircraft for Air France, Air Services India, Anglo-Iranian Oil, Arab Air - Transjordan, Danish Red Cross, Iraqi Airways and KLM. Additionally aircraft went to Brazil, Canada, South Africa and Sweden.



The Beaver now registered G-ALOW in its natural environment.

Request for airfield extension

From 1946 to 1948 Witney Estates had appealed to the Air Ministry for permission to retain the additional land requisitioned during the war as they had ambitious plans for the airfield. This was turned down and they were told that they could only retain the land of the pre-war airfield as the requisitioned land was required for farming. Notice to close the airfield was issued on 11 March 1949 and in August DH left the airfield, many of the workers being transferred to the Leavesden factory. The airfield was sold by auction in London on 21 September to S Smith and Sons (England) Ltd but it was still listed by the Ministry of Civil Aviation among the airfields required to be retained for civil flying as late as October 1951. Smiths Industries transferred their car accessories division to the airfield and went on to produce car heaters, fans and hydraulic components on the site employing many former de Havilland personnel.

Postscript

In June 1945 the de Havilland (Witney) Association was formed to keep alive friendships formed during the war years and membership at one stage exceeded 500. It survived until 1986 when a dwindling and scattered membership thought it had served its time. The void was soon filled and the de Havilland Fellowship was formed the following year to cater for the same membership and this survived until it held a final reunion on 13 May 2000. The de Havilland period at Witney is commemorated in a display in the town's Witney and District Museum.

During 1969 C Martin Sharp who was the companies public relations manager from 1936 until 1960 recalled his memories of wartime Witney: "line ups of Hurricanes and Rapides, the bullet holes and bomb splinters, the cat and the gate police and the spotless canteen, and the good spirit that prevailed, thanks especially to the personality of folks like Ken Brown, Philip Gordon Marshall and jolly visitors who used to drop in on you from the air, their wings appearing over the brow of that considerable hill that you called the aerodrome".

Today Windrush Industrial Park occupies the airfield site and Bromag Trading Estate the domestic site. The 1918 guardroom still survives as do many buildings from that period but although the final first war hangar was pulled down in the late sixties to make way for a car park, hangars 2 and 3 survive as part of the industrial complex. The 1918 butts survived into the early nineties and are commemorated by 'Range Road.' On the civil side the Aeronautical College building still survives and the wooden clubhouse found its way down alongside the River Windrush at Minster Lovell as a sports pavilion, where it survived until 1996. Many aircraft that passed through Witney survive in museums and still fly in private hands. DH's lasting effect on Witney was the bringing of more diverse trades into the town breaking down the reliance on blanket making.



Going . . .



Witney airfield in July 1948, with First World War General Service Shed in centre with Belman hangars on the right. A Mosquito, a Tiger Moth, a Dove and a Rapide can be seen on the airfield.

Going . . .



Factory and Airfield For Sale – the end

Gone!



The General Service Shed being demolished circa 1970.



The former Witney Aeronautical College Mess which later became the DH offices seen in January 2002.