

The women fliers of WW2

Often flying with no radio or navigation aids, the women pilots who delivered aircraft during the Second World War from the factories to the airfields, sometimes did so at the cost of their lives.

The October meeting of the Woodhouse and Woodhouse Eaves Local History Group heard a fascinating account, from Tim Norton, of the exploits of the Air Transport Auxiliary (ATA), the role of the local airfield at Ratcliffe and the men and women pilots who flew from there during WW2. The Air Transport Auxiliary was made up, mainly, of commercial and private flyers who volunteered to ferry aircraft for the Royal Air Force and Royal Navy in wartime and so release RAF pilots for active duty.

Ratcliffe a vital link

The Air Transport Auxiliary ferried new aircraft from factories to operation sites around Britain and also took damaged aircraft back to these factories for repair. The ATA had 14 Ferry pools around Britain, where new and damaged aircraft could be taken to reduce the possibility of damage in air raids on aircraft factories. Ratcliffe airfield was selected as one of these ferry pools because of its central location and good transport links via the Fosse Way to local aircraft factories.

Ratcliffe airfield was originally set up in 1924 by Sir William Lindsay Everard MP as a private aero club. It was opened by the famous flyers, Amy Johnson and Sefton Branker, at a grand air pageant attended by 5000 people and 100 planes. In the years up to WWII, the aero club developed into one of the finest civil aerodromes in the country, with first class maintenance hangars and very good social amenities, including bars and open-air swimming pools. At the onset of the war all private flying ceased in Britain and the airfield became No 6 Ferry Pool, for the ATA. Initially, the Air Transport Auxiliary was manned entirely by male pilots but as the war progressed, it soon became apparent that more pilots were required and a women's section was formed, under the direction of Pauline Gower. At first, the women were billeted at hotels in Leicester and had to travel to the airfield each day, but Sir William Lindsay then had a block of garages on his estate converted into sleeping quarters, and allowed the women pilots to eat at his home at Ratcliffe Hall.

Flying by a 'flip card'

Ferrying aircraft was very demanding, as pilots often had to fly up to five different types of aircraft in a single day with only the aid of a simple flip card system to familiarise them with the various controls and different take-off and landing procedures. Many of the aircraft had no radios or navigation systems and so planes were flown to their destinations by following ground features, which could be extremely hazardous in bad weather conditions, resulting in the inevitable loss of lives among the ferry pilots. Overall, it is estimated that Air Transport Auxiliary delivered over 300,000 aircraft during the war, of which around 50,000 ferry flights were carried out from the Ratcliffe aerodrome. Their achievements were eventually recognised in 2008, with the issue of a Service Medal. Sadly, by this time, there were only 12 of the original pilots still alive to receive it.

Mike Jenkins

Note for local readers – The airfield was at Ratcliffe on the Wreake, not Ratcliffe-on-Soar.