

# HATFIELD THIS CENTURY

Hatfield people explore their history from 1900

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EDITOR: F.J.Cox

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## NEWSLETTER

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### CHAIRMAN'S COMMENTS

Thinking back over the past year's activities I hope that the Committee has provided something of interest to all our members through the talks that have been arranged and/or in the Newsletters produced by our hard-working and ingenious Editor, Frank Cox. We are now approaching the end of the Group's year and as I give thought to our forthcoming AGM I trust that as many of you as possible will try to attend, and let us have your ideas on what you would like the Group to arrange and be involved in during the coming year. If you are unable to get to the AGM but have some suggestions please feel free to contact the Editor or any other member of the Committee. May I take this opportunity of encouraging any of you who wish to become more involved in the Group's activities to consider standing for election to the Committee. Three Committee members retire each year and although they may, if they wish, offer themselves for re-election we would welcome a situation where we have more candidates than vacancies! I must also remind you that for the past year we have operated without a Secretary. Although we have survived I feel that we would function more efficiently if we could fill this important though not very onerous post. Don't be reticent - I would be only too happy to discuss the role with anyone tempted to helping the Group this way. Furthermore, we are always pleased to hear from volunteers who can give active support or even lead the projects in hand such as setting up the Town Trails. We have no shortage of potential projects and areas of research that have been identified, quite often have to be held in abeyance awaiting a team or leader to take them on. Finally we welcome any suggestions of possible speakers for future meetings. *Brian G. Lawrence*

Mr. Ron Price, an ex-DH apprentice has kindly donated to the museum a DE HAVILLAND BOYS' CLUB badge. This evokes memories for Stan Clayton who in an oral interview remembers, prior to 1939, two directors, Mr. Hearle and Mr. Nixon, giving the boys a building comprising of four walls a roof and front door. Three sets of woodworking tools and a supply of plywood, being redundant Don trainer wings, were also given with the exhortation to "build yourselves a club to be known as the DH Boys' Club". A warden was appointed who, with the aid of other men from the factory instructed the boys in football, cricket, fencing, boxing, etc. In the early days of the war the club was extended and refurbished to be taken over as the DH Sports and Social Club.

Members' meeting. On 11th March about 24 members were entertained by 'Doc' Watson recalling some of his experiences during his time serving in the County Police Force. Thank you Doc for your tales, both serious and humorous. Also thanks to Ron Kingdon who brought along some of his local photographs which created much interest while we were enjoying a cup of tea and biscuit. Welcome to those members who attended for the first time. Please come again and swell our regular attendances.

If you need a lift to any of our meetings contact Pat Sherrard who will try to put you in touch with someone with a spare seat.

Hatfield town suffers under the irony of change. Until a few years ago the aircraft industry was by far the biggest employer. Now that role falls to the University of Hertfordshire.

Such a change is not new to the town. Early in this century the Great Northern Railway with its locomotive depot was the biggest and most stable employer. That faded with the railway amalgamation of 1920. But this contemporary change has an ironic twist, for the first major employer gave way to the second which arose from it.

The de Havilland Aircraft Company settled in Hatfield in 1934. Only sixty years later, under different ownership, it has given way to the University as the big employer, de Havilland grew, particularly during the 1939-45 war, so that Hatfield was in danger of becoming a one industry town. The firm, after great successes but undergoing changes in ownership, as successively part of Hawker Siddeley, British Aircraft Corporation and British Aerospace, grew in a town of not more than some 25000. Many, if not most, employees lived in Hatfield. Much housebuilding took place to accommodate them. This development reached a climax when the Development Corporation began to build Hatfield New Town in 1951 when many of the new houses went to employees of de Havilland. The effect was to produce prosperity but now Hatfield was dependent even more on one industry.

By 1952 the local aircraft industry had reached a peak of employment. That year also saw the opening of Hatfield Technical College. The college arose where it did because of de Havilland's. The site of ninety acres of farmland was a personal gift from the chairman of the company, A.S. Butler, to the County Council in May 1944. The college library was named after him.

Butler's condition for the gift was that the work of the company's Aeronautical Technical School, established in 1934, be conducted by the new college. This was a bonus for the college for it meant that it could start in 1952 with some advanced courses, those for the examination of the Royal Aeronautical Society, among others. Aeronautical engineering thus became the flagship of the college for some years. When the college opened it had some fifty employees, including thirty lecturers.

As the college rapidly diversified, de Havilland, though the major industrial connection, became only one of many firms locally with college students. There was a big increase in chemistry, biology, electronics, business studies and computer studies. This accelerated when degrees of the Council for National Academic Awards in those subjects could be conferred from the early 1960s. Employment by the college increased in line with these requirements. For instance the sole librarian, in 1952 rose to half a dozen. By that time Hawker Siddeley had absorbed de Havilland.

Earlier the company had initiated and developed jet air liners and overcome the Comet disaster of 1954. Then, at the time that the college, renamed the College of Technology, was developing half a dozen degree courses of its own, scores of Tridents were being built, all at Hatfield. Employment rose considerably in both organisations. By the 1970s, when the college had become a polytechnic the aircraft firm had been nationalised as British Aerospace, and was still the biggest employer in the town. But this had not many years to go. For whereas in June 1992 the polytechnic blossomed into the University of Hertfordshire, the closure of the aircraft firm, now privatised, was announced only three months later. While the gradual cessation of employment in aircraft took place until December 1993, the university now become the chief employer in Hatfield.

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Don't forget the AGM at the Oxlease Day Centre on 14th May at 8 pm followed by a talk on 'Love Spoons' by Ralph Hentall.