

THE FAIR OAKS AERO CLUB & THE 6d PILOTS

Iain Wakeford 2017

A month or so ago I mentioned Fairoaks Airport in connection with the servicing and repair of aircraft during the Second World War, but I should have mentioned also that the airfield was the site of a training school for pilots – a function it continued to do after the war as this local advertisement shows.

The story of Fairoaks really begins back in 1931 when Colonel Louis Arbon Strange bought part of the Ottershaw Park Estate known as 'Dolley's Farm'. Colonel Strange changed the name of the house to 'Fairoaks' (it is thought as a reference to a prominent group of trees in one of the fields) and within a few years had laid out part of the land as an airstrip from where he could occasionally fly to his work for the Spartan Aircraft Ltd on the Isle of Wight.

As a private airstrip for just himself 'Fairoaks' probably didn't attract much attention, but in 1935 he wrote to Bagshot Rural District Council for permission to establish a proper aerodrome on the site with workshops, club house and hangers where other private owners could store and fly their aircraft. Ironically, given the current situation with the site, the council refused permission on the grounds that the land had just been zoned for residential purposes (at a density of one house for every two acres) but eventually permission was given for a steel framed hanger - for the Colonel's aircraft at least.



FAIR OAKS AERO CLUB

have pleasure in announcing that the

CLUB HOUSE is now OPEN

Non-flying members are particularly welcomed to avail themselves of the following facilities . . .

Lounge - Fully Licensed Bar - Restaurant
Ladies' Lounge. Billiards Room & Tennis Courts
Surrounded by 12 Acres of Lovely Gardens.

For particulars of membership write or apply to :

The Secretary
FAIR OAKS AERO CLUB
Telephone CHOBHAM 375

An advertisement from May 1947 announced that the Club House was now open to the public.

Then in 1936 the Air Ministry got involved and requisitioned Fairoaks as the site of one of twenty-two airfields for 'civilian training schools of those who will join the RAF Volunteer Reserve'. Bagshot Council and some local residents were appalled (although Chobham Parish Council seemed in favour), but despite some protests (and claims that the site would be totally inadequate for flying) the men from the Ministry got their way and the General Aircraft Ltd were awarded the contract to organise, equip and manage the new school. In

June 1937 their Chairman, Sir Maurice Bonham Carter, reported that 'the buildings on the site are already in an advanced stage' and that it was hoped to open in September that year – with the conveyance of the site being signed on the 20th August for £8,750 (with extra land being bought in 1938 for another £4,675).

Flight Instructors at Fairoaks in 1942 outside 'A' hut.





wokinghistory.org

A view of the London Transport Flying Club's building on the edge of the airfield. With thanks to Andy Raymond, author of 'The Sixpenny Pilots' (published by Cirrus Associates, 2006).

More hangers and all the associated buildings needed for an aerodrome in wartime were soon provided, so that after the war the whole complex included quite a selection of buildings (and aeroplanes) some of which then became available to private clubs and the general public.

One of those clubs to move to Fairoaks after the war was the London Transport Flying Club – a group established by employees of what was then the London General Omnibus Company. They managed to persuade the company's 'Social Club' to set up a branch where for just

six pence a week any employee of the company could learn to fly!

In reality the six pence a week only gave you membership of the 'social' side of the club, with charges for fuel and other costs being levied for those wishing to fly or be taught to fly.





Nevertheless the 'Sixpenny Pilots' as they became known eventually came from all parts of the London Transport organisation, so that even underground train drivers eventually took to the sky (I wonder what their passengers would have thought had they known)!

A 'flying visit' from the London Transport Garage to Fairoaks in the early 1950's.

The club is no longer exclusively for employees of London Transport, but what will happen to it (and others who still fly from Fairoaks) if the airfield closes I do not know.

I would like to thank Bernard Newnham and other members of the club for their help in supplying illustrations and information for this article.

Members of the London Transport Club organised a special trip to the site in a double-decker bus.





A visit to the club in the early 1950's by the then Minister for Aviation, Lord Pakenham (on the right wearing the flying helmet), believed to be talking to Anne Orde.

Incidentally in the run-up to the Air Ministry deciding that more people would need to be trained to fly there was a debate in Parliament, wonderfully reported by 'The Aeroplane' magazine.

'Air Debates in the House of Commons have a habit of producing a worse display by Members of Parliament than any other subject. Quite a lot know something about finance. Some know something about cattle, pigs and poultry. A certain number know something about shipping, both mercantile and service. A minute percentage have some knowledge of history and foreign politics. But excepting those who have served in the Royal Air Force, and a few people who have learned to fly since then, the House of Commons knows less about aviation or air power than anything else, and the worst of it is that in these days of air panic everybody wants to get on his or her hind legs and talk and hardly anyone has anything worth talking about'.

That, of course, is far from the situation today – now most politicians know little about pigs or poultry either!

Mr H F Gardener, Chairman of the London Transport Club throughout the war and champion of its survival at Fairoaks afterwards

