

Latest updates to the site

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During each year, I attend a number of aviation related events, in addition to photographing operational low flying. Landscape photography also provides a challenge. This section features reports on various outings..... Here you will find a list of the latest update

BLenheim BA194 - An ARTIST'S IMPRESSION BY NEIL FRASER Living in Duns, Berwickshire, anybody with half an interest in Aviation History cannot fail to be intrigued by events which took place between 1942 and 1946 at RAF's Charterhall and Winfield. Periodically I visit the former. When standing on the main runway, it is easy to dream about sights and sounds which would have been commonplace. Sadly however, I can only imagine, continuing to rely on stories related by a diminishing number, fortunate enough to recall what to my mind, must have been an extraordinary period in Military Aviation History. The histories of Charterhall and Winfield have already been documented in the pages of 'The Charterhall Story', by J.B Thompson, published several years ago. This work continues to provide excellent reference, particularly regarding individual airframes which served with the Parent Unit, 54 Operational Training Unit - or OTU. The home(s) of that establishment - a Nightfighter OTU, RAF's Charterhall and Winfield became operational on 13th May 1942. Intervening years were to see intensive operations carried out by a range of aeroplane types. Sadly, accidents were all too common, earning Charterhall the nickname 'Slaughter All'. Such was the requirement for Operational Nightfighter crews! Some time ago, Aberdeenshire based aviation artist Neil Fraser suggested the production of a painting which would depict a 54 OTU aircraft - of my choosing! As subject matter, I therefore selected a Blenheim V - BA194. This aircraft was lost on a mission out of Charterhall on 8th January 1943, killing its crew, pilot Flt Lt Richard Hillary and RO Sgt KW Fison. Flt Lt Hillary found fame during the Battle of Britain when he served with 603 (City of Edinburgh) Sqdn. In addition, he was the author of a best selling novel entitled, 'The Last Enemy'. Shot down over the English Channel during 1940, he was badly burned. Subsequently spending an extended period in hospital, Hillary then underwent several plastic surgery type operations performed by Sir Archibald McEndoe. Passed fit again for flying duties, during November 1942, he volunteered for a Night Fighter Conversion Course. He was thereafter posted to 54 OTU at RAF Charterhall. On 8th January 1943, Flt Lt Hillary's aircraft for some reason, spun into the ground, killing himself and Sgt Fison. A memorial at the main gate at Charterhall commemorates the lives of Flt Lt Hillary, Sgt Fison and others who died whilst serving with 54 OTU. Designed by David Ross, author of the biography 'Richard Hillary', the work was unveiled by HRH The Duke of Kent at a ceremony held on 6th November 2001. Significantly, the Rev Geoffrey Fison, son of the late Sgt Fison, dedicated it. Having indicated my preference, Neil then embarked on the computer design of a 3D Blenheim V model. Meanwhile, during June 2004, I had flown from Charterhall in a Taylorcraft Auster aircraft. Whilst airborne, I took several air to ground images over Duns. One of these was used as a base for Neil's project. Initially I carried out work on the photograph, removing buildings and other features which would not have been present during 1942. The painting was to depict BA194 climbing out of Charterhall to the south east of Duns during late summer of that year. Whilst composing this painting, Neil used computer software called APM, Artists Perspective Modeller, a mathematical 3D plotter devised by an American aviation artist called Joe De Marco. Into this, the artist enters X, Y and Z (length, breadth and height) measurements of key points of an aircraft plan. An Excel spreadsheet then calculates two dimensional co-ordinates at any given viewing angle or distance. These points can then be plotted onto paper, and, like children's 'painting by numbers', the points are then simply joined up to complete what De Marco calls a 'catroon', or pencil outline of an aircraft at any desired angle. An effective add on feature also produces rough line drawings from computer. Adobe Photosho is then utilised to 'airbrush' colour onto an image, which can subsequently be added to a landscape. Working with Layers, Neil was able at that stage to produce a picture which he envisaged to be as close a likeness to the finished article as possible. The Blenheim V turned out to be a difficult aeroplane to research. Whilst photographs do exist, little detail is available regarding individual airframes which served with OTU's, in particular the one based in Berwickshire. The result became very much an artist's impression. For instance, a dilemma arose when considering which camouflage scheme to employ. Referring to my copy of 'Fighting Colours' by Michael J.F Bowyer, I learned that a significant number of Blenheim V's were delivered to the Royal Air Force in a dark green/dark earth/sky scheme of earlier war years. Whilst there would have been a distinct possibility that BA194 was in fact finished in 'all black'. Neil and I nevertheless decided to depict the former, which complemented the harvest scene at the heart of the painting. In addition, we elected to omit a dorsal gun turret from the aircraft. Some Mk V's also featured noses which were devoid of glazing. However, we opted to retain that feature. Included in the bottom third of my original air to ground image was the trackbed of the former Reston to St Boswells (Berwickshire) Railway. A victim of Dr Beeching's cuts during the 1960's, in 1942, the railway still offered a passenger service. Completing the scene therefore, is an LNER D20 steam locomotive, a single example of which was based at Duns. The locomotive is depicted hauling two LNER teak coaches of that period. This, in addition to harvesting operations completes a pastoral scene with an air of calmness - exactly what I had in mind at the outset. Hopefully the work will serve to illustrate how aircraft from 54 OTU would have looked when they occupied the skies over Berwickshire from 1942 to 1946. The painting will undoubtedly take pride of place in my collection. Work is well underway on a follow up which includes another night fighter type to serve at Charterhall and Winfield - the Bristol Beaufighter.

FORTUNE FAVOURS THE BOLD - APSS 1 1/2 STRUTTER PROJECT During the closing years of last Century, I was frequently found in the hangars and offices of the Scottish National Museum of Flight. At that time East Fortune (in East Lothian), was THE place to be with an energetic, forward thinking curator - Adam Smith, who would eventually move on to pastures new at Oshkosh, WI. The ambience and character of the facilities at East Fortune were superb, a magnificent collection of aeroplanes and artefacts was cared for by a hard working knowledgeable group of staff members who all contributed in their own way to something which was unique. During Adam's tenure, the unexpected could be expected! Who for instance, could ever forget the visit during August 1998 by the late Mark Hanna? On that occasion, the annual PFA Fly In, Mark displayed the Old Flying Machine

Company P-51 Mustang, operating the aeroplane from the Museum of Flight. Tragically - only weeks later - he was to lose his life in a flying accident in Spain. During July 2000, history was also made during the Millennium Festival of Flight when no fewer than three so called Warbirds used East Fortune's runway. These were Spitfire, Hurricane and most importantly Blenheim, the first example of the type to land since the cessation of hostilities in 1945! Another of Adam's projects, working with the Aviation Preservation Society of Scotland (APSS), was to initiate assembly of a new build Sopwith 1 1/2 Strutter, an aircraft type which had formerly been operated from East Fortune. Located at the Museum of Flight, the APSS has over 100 members who assist in the preservation of Aviation History. Over 30 currently work on various projects which include affording support to Museum Staff engaged in restoration and conservation activities. The main APSS project at present is construction of the 1 1/2 Strutter. During the year 2000, a group from the organisation approached Adam Smith suggesting that they build a replica of an aircraft for the Museum's collection. This would be an airworthy example, which would ultimately participate in the annual Festival of Flight in addition to other local events. Following discussion, the 1 1/2 Strutter was the type selected. In addition to having been an aircraft which was formerly operated from East Fortune, the 1 1/2 Strutter was considered most suitable because of the influence its design had on later types such as the Camel and Pup. Produced by the Sopwith Aviation Company, the 1 1/2 Strutter was a single or two seat multi role bi plane. Originally intended for use by the Royal Naval Air Service, the aeroplane was so named because of each of the upper wings being connected to the fuselage by means of one pair of short struts and one pair of longer examples, forming a 'W' shape when viewed from in front. A single Clerget 9Z rotary engine producing 130 hp, provided power. Armament was in the form of a fixed .303 Vickers machine gun with a similar rear-firing example in the observers cockpit of two seat versions. There was also provision for up to four 56 lb bombs. Maximum speed was 102 mph with a service ceiling of 13,000 feet and range of 350 miles. First flying in December 1915, deliveries were made to the Royal Naval Air Service in February 1916. That organisation, along with the Royal Flying Corps - later becoming the Royal Air Force - would use the 1 1/2 Strutter. With the Somme Offensive in France planned for June 1916, the first RFC unit to receive the 1 1/2 Strutter was No 70 Sqdn, which reached the continent by early July. At first, the Squadron's new mount proved to be effective, however, by January of the following year, when No 43 Sqdn (also operating the type) arrived in France, it had become outclassed. Sopwith Camels replaced it by late October 1917. The 1 1/2 Strutters long range and stability did however make the type particularly suitable for Home Defence Duties and in this role, it continued to serve with No's 37, 44 and 78 Sqdn's, RFC. The RNAS meanwhile used its aircraft as bombers in theatres such as The Aegean, Macedonia and in France. 1 1/2 Strutters were also operated as ship borne aircraft, flying from aircraft carriers and other warships. On completion of its frontline days, both services - RNAS and RFC - used the aeroplane for training purposes. It also became a popular mount for senior officers. Other nations to use the 1 1/2 Strutter included Belgium, Estonia, France, Japan, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Russia and the United States. At East Fortune, 1 1/2 Strutters were used in the training role by pilots flying from the Battle Cruiser Fleet at nearby Rosyth. During December 1917, the first examples of the aircraft arrived. Although considered obsolete by that time, the fitting of floatation bags, detachable wings and skid type undercarriage gave the aeroplane a new lease of life. Necessary modifications were carried out at East Fortune. At present, the APSS example, considered to be a late production model - not a replica, is being built under LAA (Light Aircraft Association) formerly PFA (Popular Flying Association) supervision, using copies of original drawings. Thus far, as the accompanying images show, work has been completed on tailplane, elevators and wings, the fuselage now receiving attention along with undercarriage components. Not having examined the project for some two years, I was recently invited by Jim Mattocks - APSS Strutter Representative, to visit the team whilst they worked, in the process recording progress to date. I must say that I was most impressed, although not surprised by the standard of work exhibited. The aeroplane is at long last taking shape. One looks forward with relish to the day when it eventually flies, in the process becoming a welcome addition to the Scottish Airshow and General Aviation scene. Progress can be monitored by referring to the excellent APSS website www.apss.org.uk Details regarding this and other activities are well documented. As with all projects of this magnitude, finance is always required. Those wishing to donate should contact Jim Mattocks or any other APSS representative. Details are on the relevant website.

NEIL FRASER AVIATION ART During recent years, I have taken several images which stand apart from others for one reason or another. One of my favourites is the photograph above, depicting an Apache AH.1 of 9 Regiment Army Air Corps, departing the Borders Gliding Club at Milfield on 27th April 2005. On that occasion, several examples of the type were using the airfield as a Forward Arming and Refueling Point (FARP) during an exercise codenamed 'Lightning Dawn II'. During that morning, aviation enthusiast Iain Scobie and myself drove to Carlisle Airport where Apaches were forward deployed. Carlisle is a most productive location at which to photograph aircraft, with helicopter deployments almost always operating from former aircraft dispersals on the south side of the aerodrome, adjacent to the A689 Carlisle to Brampton road. As the day progressed, Iain and I were horrified to learn that each formation of helicopters was departing for Milfield, an airfield located near home at Duns, involving a drive of only thirty minutes! There therefore followed a rapid dash eastwards towards Newcastle, then to Milfield. On our arrival, Apache operations were in full swing with aircraft shuttling to and from targets further north in Berwickshire. The leading image in this report was taken during the first wave of departures and was used by Key Publishing Ltd as a front cover of its magazine 'Airforces Monthly'. Recently however, I received a request from Aberdeenshire based aviation artist Neil Fraser who wanted to use it as the basis for a painting. This work would depict a dramatic rescue mission carried out by personnel from No 45 Commando Royal Marines on Monday 15th January 2007. On that date, British Forces were engaging Taleban targets at Jugroom Fort, Helmand Province, Afghanistan. During the operation, one member of 45 Commando, Lance Corporal Mathew Ford became separated from his colleagues. Realising what had occurred, personnel strapped themselves to the stub wings of two Apaches in an effort to retrieve Lance Cpl Ford. Despite being located, he tragically lost his life. Neil's illustration depicts the operation with the two lower aircraft featuring personnel strapped to their exteriors. A third, the main subject is providing covering fire. I think the painting is a fitting and appropriate testament to the bravery of all concerned, at the same time showing the high

degree of detail for which Neil has become known. Further examples of Neil's work can be seen at <http://www.planeart-neilf92.blogspot.com/> Anyone intersted in purchasing or commisioning paintings can contact him at neil.fraser9@btirnet.com

