

KENLEY - BETWEEN THE WARS



Peace conference shuttle

Kenley had an important role ferrying Cabinet Ministers (including Winston Churchill), dignitaries and mail to the Paris Peace Conference that took place in 1919. Some of the planes used were converted bombers painted silver to look less war like.



De Havilland D.H.4A. No. 2 (Communication) Squadron, 86th Wing, R.A.F.

On the first night service one of the crew left the emergency hatch in the floor of the bomber open and, in putting on his lifejacket, accidentally inflated it. He moved up forward to ask the pilot what he should do and fell through the open hatch but was caught by his inflated jacket. He stayed there for the rest of the flight - cold from the waist down but alive!

Life on station

In the 1920s life was relatively care free and enjoyable for the young airmen. They flew the latest fighters, practiced formation flying and showed their skills in aerial aerobatics.

But it was dangerous too as aircraft technology was in its infancy, engines occasionally seized or parts broke. Your life depended on where this happened.

"Taking off... the crank shaft broke at 50 feet. Piled up on Coulsdon Common. The 10th forced landing to date (two bad) in 24 Squadron but the only one in which the aircraft was wrecked." JM Robb, 28-8-1921.

Sports, theatre and music groups helped forge team building and provided entertainment. Pranks were tolerated until they got out of hand - such as flying beneath Tower Bridge on Christmas Day 1926!



Bristol Fighters from Kenley practice for the RAF Pageant at Hendon over Manor Park, 1921. Air Chief Marshall Sir James Robb.



Kenley sports day - Tug of war, 1928.



Crown Prince Hirohito of Japan visits Kenley in 1924. He became Emperor in 1926. Flight Lieutenant Robb was told off for endangering one of the senior Japanese visitors by looping the loop with him on board his aircraft. Air Chief Marshal Sir James Robb.

Fear for the future

The station was rebuilt in the early 30s and, with worries about German military strength after Hitler's rise to power in 1933, Fighter Command was born in 1936.

The first monoplane fighter, the Hawker Hurricane, on which effective national defence depended, reached No 3 Squadron at Kenley in March 1938. This version needed more take off space than later ones highlighting the need to cut down trees nearby and provide the permanent concrete runways planned.

Annual Empire Air Days organised at British bases in 1934-39 provided entertainment and reassurance for the public and helped RAF recruitment.



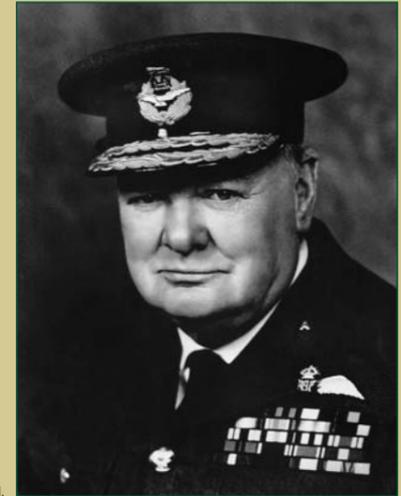
1937 Air Day display at Kenley. The original Hayes Lane road, closed permanently in 1939 when concrete runways were laid, lies in the foreground.

Inspiring people associated with Kenley

Sir Winston Churchill Prime Minister

He secretly took flying lessons here in the 1920s. In 1937 the County of Surrey formed its own Auxiliary Air Force Squadron - No. 615, at Kenley.

Churchill was appointed their Honorary Air Commodore on 4th April 1939 and it was known as "Churchill's Own". He flew to Kenley to visit 615 Squadron later that month.



Sir Winston Churchill.

Douglas Bader - WWII fighter ace

Stationed with 23 Squadron at Kenley and part of its aerobatic team, he crashed at Woodley aerodrome in 1931 while attempting to do a low level roll in a more powerful aircraft than he usually flew, to impress a pilot from their flying club. Both legs were amputated and replaced with tin ones with which he fought to walk, drive and fly again. His larger than life story is told in the 1956 film "Reach for the Sky" starring Kenneth More filmed partly at Kenley.



Douglas Bader, on left, in front of a Gloster Gamecock at Kenley.



This board forms part of the Kenley Heritage Trail created and funded by a partnership between the City of London Corporation, Kenley Airfield Friends Group and Tandridge District Council.