



The first century at Brooklands

Brooklands, nursery of British aviation, is a hundred years old. Mike Jerram charts the history of a pioneering aerodrome



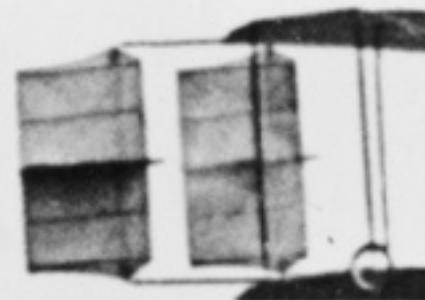
A century ago, a tract of former farm and woodland abutting the River Wey and the South Coast-London railway line in Surrey became a focal point for British motor sport and aviation.

On that June day in 1907 the two-mile-long motor circuit at Brooklands, near Weybridge, was officially inaugurated with a spectacular parade of motor cars running two abreast around its banked track.

But six months previously the Brooklands Automobile Racing Club had put up a purse of £2,500 for the first person to make an *aerial* circuit of the track before the end of 1907. In the summer of 1906 a French would-be aviator, one Monsieur Bellamy, took up residence in an archway of the Seven Arch railway bridge, there to prepare his flying machine for an attempt at the prize. Bellamy's bizarre contraption never did take to the air. Nor did any other aviator succeed in meeting the BARC's

challenge within the deadline.

But the elusive prize had attracted other would-be fliers to Brooklands, notably Alliott Verdon Roe and John Moore-Brabazon, who set up workshops alongside one another. Moore-Brabazon's minimally powered glider failed even to taxi. Roe was more persistent with his biplane. Initially quite inadequately powered by a 9 hp J.A.P. engine, it too failed to do much more than scurry along ground-borne at a fast walking pace. But, re-engined with borrowed eight-cylinder, 24 hp Antoinette motor, it may have flown. Roe wrote later that on June 8, 1908 he was taxying his 'Avroplane' on the Brooklands' Finishing

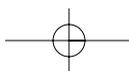


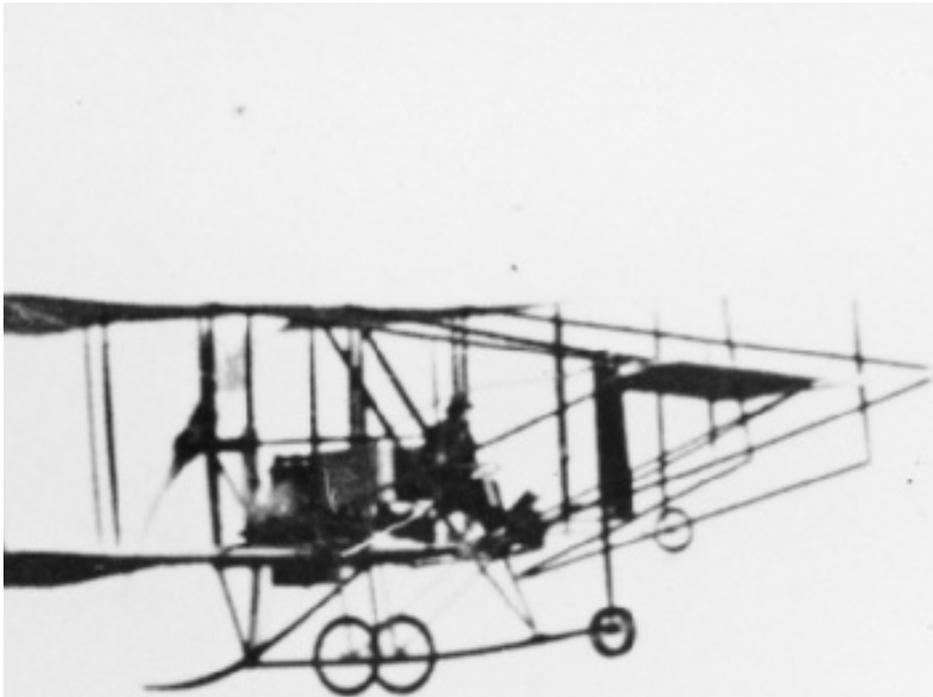
Straight when, "I realised that I was clear off the ground, not only with my front wheels, as I had been before, but with the rear ones too. I was flying for the first time. My flight in the air was over a distance of about 150 feet, and I made a perfectly smooth landing. Several attempts were made with very much the same results each time."

This 'flight' has been the subject of controversy ever since. (See sidebar). Certainly, not expecting to get aloft, Roe had not arranged for official observers to witness his achievement in making what may have been the first flight above English soil by an Englishman in British-designed aeroplane, and it was never formally recognised as such. The impecunious Roe was shortly afterwards thrown off the Brooklands site by its redoubtable track manager, Baron de Rodakowski, who saw Roe's experiments as "unhelpful" to the image of Brooklands that he wished to project.

Nonetheless, when Frenchman Louis Blériot made his epochal first aeroplane crossing of the English Channel in July 1909, the

Main photo: 22nd July 1911 and S. F. Cody departs from Brooklands in the Daily Mail Circuit of Britain Air Race. Note the spectators and cars on the banking
Above left: Brooklands in the '30s





Brooklands Automobile Racing Club was quick to recognise that aviation and motor sport could make comfortable bedfellows. Encouraged by George Holt-Thomas, proprietor of the influential *The Graphic* newspaper and British agent for French Farman biplanes, plans were laid for a 'flying ground' to be established in the centre of the Brooklands

race track. Within 18 months Brooklands boasted some 30 'aeroplane sheds', which were rented out to tenants who included eight flying schools offering training for the Royal Aero Club's then newly-introduced Pilot's Certificate.

Among the neophyte aviators who came to Brooklands was a wealthy young man named

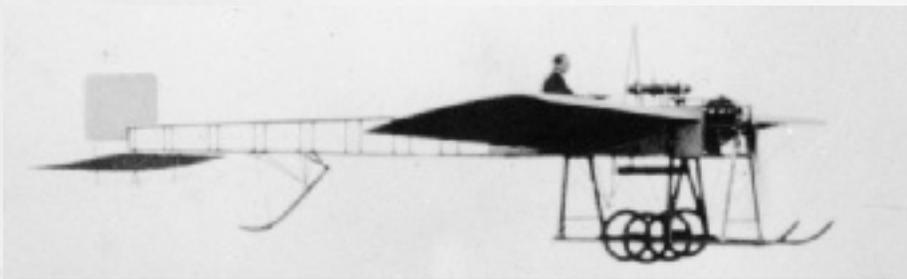
Thomas Sopwith, already a well established sportsman in yachting circles, who bought a Blériot-based Avis monoplane and taught himself to fly on it, albeit it with numerous mishaps along the way.

Soon, names that were later to become synonymous with the growth of the British aircraft industry began to appear above the sheds that formed Brooklands' new 'Flying Village'. The British & Colonial Aircraft Company (later to become Bristol Aircraft), Martin & Handasyde (later Martinsyde), Tommy Sopwith with the Sopwith Aviation Company, A.V. Roe (now welcomed back!), and Vickers, all established flying schools there, and were not wanting for eager customers: 50 had gained their certificates within a few months. A novelty was the world's first sales office for aeroplane flight tickets, which was established by Keith Prowse Ltd alongside the *Blue Bird* restaurant in 1911 to offer joyrides at two guineas for a five-minute 'flip'.

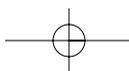
Brooklands, and British aviation, received a boost in the summer of 1911 when the *Daily Mail* — from the outset a staunch supporter of aeronautical development — announced its sponsorship of a Circuit of Britain Air Race that would start and finish at the Surrey aerodrome. On July 22 a crowd estimated at 50,000 watched 17 flying machines set off on the first leg, to Hendon, thence via Harrogate and Newcastle to Edinburgh, returning via Stirling, Glasgow, Carlisle, Manchester, Bristol, Salisbury and Shoreham. Five days later Frenchman André Beaumont's Blériot arrived back at Brooklands to win the prize and an audience with King George V at Buckingham Palace. The *Daily Mail* race was the inspiration for the 1965 film *Those Magnificent Men in Their Flying Machines*.

Following the outbreak of World War I, the Brooklands site was turned over to the War Office and the schools operated by Bristol, Sopwith and Vickers — which at that time jointly had trained more aviators than at any

photos via Philip Jarrett

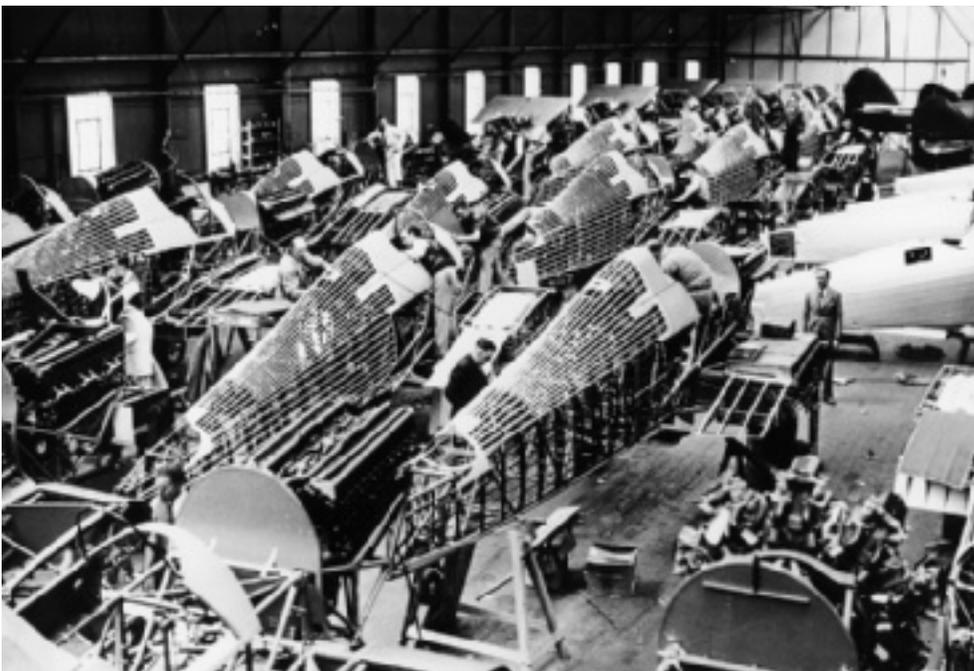


**Above: Thomas Sopwith pilots a Howard Wright Avis monoplane at Brooklands
Below: Avro Type D at Brooklands in October 1911**



other aerodrome in Britain — became a Royal Flying Corps school. A year later Vickers turned the former Itala Motor Works into an aircraft factory, initially building under sub-contract Royal Aircraft Factory B.E.2c, F.E.8 and S.E.5a scouts and its own F.B.9 'Gunbuses'. Tommy Sopwith's company built its aircraft in a former skating rink in Kingston-upon-Thames, but used Brooklands for flight-testing.

From those early beginnings came Vickers' long association with Brooklands, spanning five decades under its own name, and many more years as part of the merged British Aircraft Corporation and British Aerospace. Among more than 50 Vickers designs to roll off the production lines were the Vimy; Virginia; Wellesley; Barnes Wallis' classic geodetic-structured Wellington, every mark of which was developed and test flown at Brooklands, with 2,515 of the 11,461 manufactured built on site; Valetta; Varsity; Viking; Viscount, the world's first production turboprop airliner and



Left: Sopwith Camel were test flown at Brooklands

Left below: Alcock and Brown's Vickers Vimy at Brooklands shortly after completion in 1919
Above: Hawker Hurricane production at Brooklands, 1938. Hinds for Afghanistan and Persia (Iran) in background
Right: prototype Hurricane's first flight was from Brooklands in November 1935



This photo: first Vickers Wellington prototype lifts off from Brooklands
Below: Barnes Wallis' geodetic construction clearly visible on the Wellington production line at the Weybridge Works

one of the great success stories of British civil airliner production; Valiant V-bomber; Vanguard; and VC10, while significant design, development and manufacturing work on Concorde also took place there.

H.G. Hawker Engineering, formed in 1920 from the liquidated Sopwith company, and later to become Hawker Aircraft Ltd, was also a key player in the Brooklands story, building aircraft — notably between-wars biplanes such as the Hart, Demon and Fury and later the Hurricane fighter— at Kingston and Langley, erecting and test flying them from the Weybridge site. In all, more than 20 companies build or assembled and test flew aircraft from Brooklands over an 80-year period.

The former HM Balloon Factory and later Royal Aircraft Factory airfield at Farnborough in Hampshire is characterised as 'the birthplace of British aviation', largely by dint of the flight made there on October 16, 1908 by Samuel Franklin Cody which was officially recognised as the first made by a heavier-than-air flying machine in the British Isles.

Setting aside Alliott Verdon Roe's claim to have flown there four months before Cody, Brooklands must surely then qualify as the nursery, where the infant British aviation was nurtured and thrived in those few short years before the Great War. And equally importantly, it was at Brooklands that flying first caught and fired the British public's imagination. ■



Did Roe fly in 1908?

Despite assertions over many years that Alliott Verdon Roe accomplished a 'hop' in his biplane at Brooklands in June/July 1908, recent research in contemporary sources shows this is unlikely. In a letter written the day before he left Brooklands, Roe states only that he has 'nearly left the ground with present engine'. Until 1910 he made no claim whatsoever to have hopped in this machine, which was of extremely poor aerodynamic design. A full investigation appears in a new book, *Trials, Troubles and Triplanes: Alliott Verdon Roe's Fight to Fly*, by Philip Jarrett (Ad Hoc, 2007).

The original source for the claimed 'flight' date of 8 June 1908 is an eyewitness testimony made two years after the alleged event, but further research has cast serious doubt upon its credibility. Roe had agreed to remove his aeroplane from its shed in the Brooklands paddock on motor racing days and lift it into an adjacent field, and also to his shed being used as a refreshment room. As a major two-day race meeting was held on Saturday 6 June and Whit Monday 8 June, it is extremely unlikely that Roe would have conducted trials on those days.

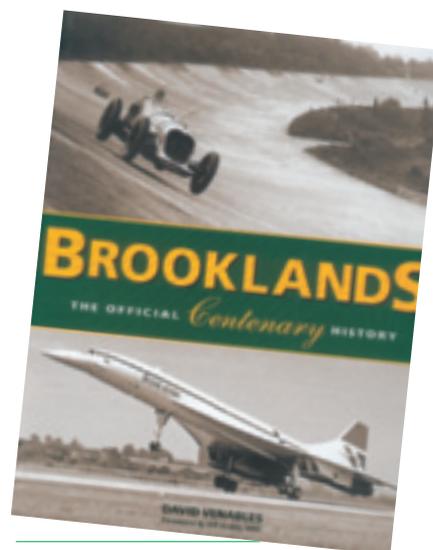


Top: Vickers Valiant V-bomber lifts off from Brooklands

Above: first flight of Vickers Vanguard, January 1960

Left: 1960's development

Below: a Vickers VC10 climbs past the VC10 fuselage production shops and final assembly hangars in July 1964



Brooklands — The Official Centenary History

By David Venables
Published by Haynes Publishing at £30.00. ISBN 978 1 84425 329 6. Hardback. 288 pages, illustrated with monochrome photographs and drawings.

As noted on these pages, 2007 marks the Centenary of Brooklands, the Surrey motor circuit and airfield steeped in both triumph and tragedy on the ground and in the air. This book, written by David Venables, Assistant Editor of the *Vintage Sports Car Club Bulletin*, is a celebration of those years. Economically but authoritatively written, it traces the characteristic banked circuit's pre-war history year-by-year, with sidebar tone panels on significant racing and aviation personalities, many of whom were the schoolboys' heroes of the day, though perhaps less feted than today's instant celebrity Formula One drivers. And what schoolboy could now name a current test pilot? Their exploits make fascinating, and occasionally saddening, reading.

When motor racing ceased at the outbreak of the Second World War, Brooklands' role as a centre for aircraft manufacture — already well-established in the Great War — came to the fore, with massive expansion as Hawker and Vickers mass-produced Hurricanes, Wellingtons and Warwicks. Peacetime saw Vikings, Valiants, Viscounts, Vanguards, VC-10s, BAC-111s, rolling off the Brooklands production lines, along with major components for the TSR.2 and Concorde.

Today, thanks to the efforts of the Brooklands Society and latterly Mercedes-Benz, many of the historic elements of the site have been preserved, along with cars and aeroplanes that played a role in its history.

The book's production reeks of class: high quality paper, photographs — so sharp, even from 80 years ago! — faultlessly reproduced at a sensible size and in sepia tone throughout, befitting the early era, and by no means unacceptable even for Viscounts, Valiants and Concorde. Appendices list lap records (John Cobb achieved 143.44 mph in his Napier-Railton in 1935), and an exhaustive list of aircraft types built on the site by no fewer than 23 manufacturers, while maps trace its development from that opening day 100 years ago to the present.

This is a fine volume, and by no means expensive. Highly recommended to aviation enthusiasts, and a must-have for any fan of British motor racing history. If you currently belong only in the former category, I'll wager you'll you be a convert to the latter by the time you've read this book.

Mike Jerram ■