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Rochester Avionic Archives Newsletter

From the Curator.

The RAA was pleased to support BAE Systems at the 'Salute to the 40s' show at Chatham Dockyard. It was a chance to catch up with a number of people and to publicise the RAA. Some of the snippets we were told are given here, but memory can be fickle. Our next big event is the company Long Service Association Dinner in October.

Looking through the old newspapers is always rewarding and I was able to follow-up the story of the Candelabra with the help of the Guildhall Museum. I would love to know how Elliott Bros acquired the Candelabra.

Then we have the strange story of the 40' Hanger. Was it really moved from Kingsnorth?

Chris Bartlett

Curator

The 'Salute to the 40s' show at Chatham Dockyard

To the left is the BAE Systems stand and above are two pictures of the Spitfire located near our stand. Of course, I could not resist the chance to get into the aircraft (getting out again was a lot more difficult as it is a very snug cockpit!)

The 'Salute to the 40s' is an annual show at the Dockyard at Chatham and it celebrates the years of World War II and beyond. BAE Systems is one of the show sponsors so once again the RAA took along some of its collection to put on the stand. The weather was splendid, and we had a good position near the stage and beside the Spitfire. The entertainment on the stage was really lively and we all had a great day out. A number of ex-employees came to visit and, as always, they have the most interesting stories to tell. Some of these snippets are given in this Newsletter.

Gold Award

In the 1993 The Air Transport World Advertising Awards Scheme, GEC-Marconi Avionics won the Gold award in the Avionics and Instruments category.

Air Transport World is arguably the most respected trade magazine in the civil aviation market.

The Streets where we live again!

Curtis Way

In my note about the local roads, I forgot that there is a Curtis Way beside the new Fire Station, (by the entrance to the Company site), but why is it called Curtis Way. Glenn Curtiss (note the double 's') was an early aviator who established a company which initially specialised in Float planes and Flying Boats, so there may well have been a connection with Short Brothers. I found that Curtiss 'Jenny' trainers were built in the UK in WWI so is that the reason? I shall explore this further (*Ed*)

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Snippetts from the 'Salute to the 40s' show

Terry Gausden was an ex-employee of the Company, at Rochester, and when he came to the BAE Systems stand he had many stories to tell. (I have added a little research where possible. *Ed*)

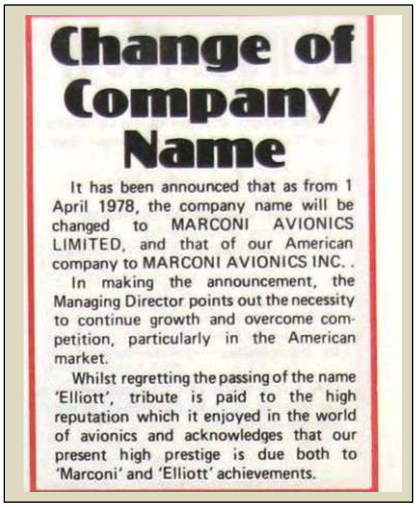
Fuses
In the 1950s there was XTS Division which apparently made fuses for ordnance. The Division was succeeded by the more obviously named Fuse Division. This Division was highly secure and was certainly around in the mid-70s, but was moved from the Airport Works shortly after.

Guided Weapons Division
This Division was located next to the old Thorn Building to the West of the site and next-door to Brimar. Apparently, when Brimar moved, many of the local Air raid shelters were filled with scrap electronic valves!

Radar
Radar work at Rochester is little known, but the broader Company work in this field can be traced to the early 1950s.At this time valve computers were used. Work at Rochester was in the Aircraft Direction Division (ADD) which was renamed as Airspace Control Division to avoid the obvious confusion with Airborne Displays Division. There was also the Elliott Radar Division at the site, but the timescale of these names is not clear.
In 1968 The General Electric Company of the UK (GEC) and English Electric agreed to a merger. The upshot of this was that the radar interests of Marconi and AEI together with the Airspace Control Division of Elliotts were brought together under the umbrella of Marconi Radar Systems Limited.
Airspace Control Division, having previously had its engineering facilities split between Rochester and Borehamwood and its manufacturing at Rochester, had by this time consolidated its engineering at Borehamwood and its manufacturing at Hillend in Scotland.
In 1970 the decision was taken to move engineering, which included programming, to Chelmsford; relatively few employees took up the offer of re-location.
Development engineers were integrated into the Radar development team and some Systems Engineers were merged into existing project teams, whilst another small team, headed by ex – Elliott man Bob Marshall, was added to the Marconi systems department.
Whilst some of the Elliott products were familiar to Marconi because the two companies had worked together on various projects or in consortia, Digital Radar Simulators were totally new. The technology had been developed by Elliotts and the Royal Radar Establishment and resulted in the world's first digital radar simulator – Sim X. The system was based on the Elliott 502 Computer and led to a number of similar projects.
In the 1960s Elliotts had a contact to support and improve the AEW Radar in the Royal Navy's Gannett aircraft. Apparently in the front carpark at Rochester there used to be a hut over a hole in the ground into which the Radar was set!
The story was told that a fitter was given an armful of Fluorescent tubes and told to walk past the main Hanger where there was an operational Radar. The idea was that the tubes would light up and he would drop them! (This apparently never happened although I was told the story some 10-15 years later! *Ed*)

The Elliott 502 for the SIM-X for RRE.
The picture was taken at at Rochester.

A fuss about a name!



Change of Company Name

It has been announced that as from 1 April 1978, the company name will be changed to MARCONI AVIONICS LIMITED, and that of our American company to MARCONI AVIONICS INC..

In making the announcement, the Managing Director points out the necessity to continue growth and overcome competition, particularly in the American market.

Whilst regretting the passing of the name 'Elliott', tribute is paid to the high reputation which it enjoyed in the world of avionics and acknowledges that our present high prestige is due both to 'Marconi' and 'Elliott' achievements.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

The Editor,
Company Newspaper.

Dear Sir,

Following on the recent light-hearted theme of correspondence on the Company's new name, I have watched with interest the recent activity in removal of the old name from the front of Tower 1 and its replacement with the new name in much smaller, almost unreadable letters at each end of the original strip.

Is this indicative of our embarrassment at the name or could it be that only two executives are "sold" on the new name and that they have yet to "win over" their colleagues on the front row of Tower 1, Floor 4?

T.E.R. Shipman,
ADD

The Company name has always been displayed along the top of Tower 1, but after the stormy weather in May, this year, the 'BAE Systems' name fell off and has only just been replaced. This is probably the longest time that the Company has been without a name.

The City of Rochester Silver Candelabra

One of the silver Candelabra pictured at the Guildhall Museum. (I *hope to get a better picture in due course. Ed*)

The story of the silver Candelabra started with a letter sent to the Editor of MAv News in the January 1979 edition. The Marconi Avionics News of February 1979 then had a tantalising, incomplete, portion of the presentation dinner Menu Card.
The original information was provided at the time by Mr Sid Randall of ECV, and Mr. S Williams, Works Engineer, supplied the menu card details.

THE CANDELABRA

A pair of silver Candelabra were presented on the 10th October 1961 by Elliott Brothers (London) Limited, a member of the Elliott-Automation Group, to the City of Rochester to mark the occasion of the 900th Anniversary of the granting of the City's Charter. They are at present in the Mayor's office. The presentation reads: -

'The Candelabra were made by William Eaton, a famous London silversmith, in 1815, the year of the Battle of Waterloo. They carry the Hall Mark of King George III. In 1833 they were modified to the requirements of King William IV by John Bridge, the Court Goldsmith and Silversmith, whose mark is on much of the Plate in Buckingham Palace.

In that year, they were presented by King William to Major-General Sir Henry Wheatley C.B., G.C.H., who was for a long time his Keeper of the Privy Purse. The finials with their Royal Crowns on cushions, which were added at that time, bear the inscription:

"The Gracious Gift of His Majesty
King William the Fourth
1 Jan MDCCCXXXIII

and carry the Coat of Arms of Wheatley, quartering the arms of Lewin and Slaney with those of Hawkins in pretence.

The Candelabra, which weigh 511 ozs and which are each made up of nineteen separate pieces, comprising the heavy stems, which can be used as separate single candlesticks and the four-branch candle holders, which can either be used with one candle on each branch or with a fifth in the place of the central Crowned Finials. The original central candle holders, which were displaced by the finials, have been preserved and have special provision made for them in the fitted, wooden brass-bound chest.

They are an interesting, early example of the transition in taste from the severe Greek and Roman Classical inspiration of the Regency Period towards the more naturalistic and decorative designs which found favour during the next reign. They are profusely decorated with embossed Eagles, Lions Heads, Scallop Shells, Flowers, Fruit and Foliage.

The Company is proud to be the largest civil provider of employment in the City and looks forward to many years of expansion of its interests here.'

Oh! Really?

In order to brighten up the lives of their employees, the Company is to introduce some revolutionary new schemes. Thought to be the first of its kind in the country "A Dial-A-Joke system will enable employees to dial up a daily joke on the internal phone system. A company spokesman remarked that for very little capital expenditure, the return in a happier working environment was immeasurable.
Starting in the summer the company is planning to employ a Company Jester. This person will roam the factory add offices, wearing a funny hat and will be responsible for the general jollity of the works. The spokesman said. "*We are reviving a tradition practised by the Kings and Queens of olde England, after all, why shouldn't we be happy in our work?*" Some precautions will be necessary though, for instance the jester would have to be locked up during visits by important customers. In line with its Happier Working Environment Policy, the Company will be nominating some of the days in the year as Chaos Days. Along the lines of the traditional April 1st. Chaos Days will be days of absolute lunacy; practical jokes will be rife and there will be prizes for the funniest. It is planned eventually to hold one Chaos Day per month with a full week of chaos at Christmas. For further information contact B. Loon, Silly Products Division

When Iris' Eyes are Smiling

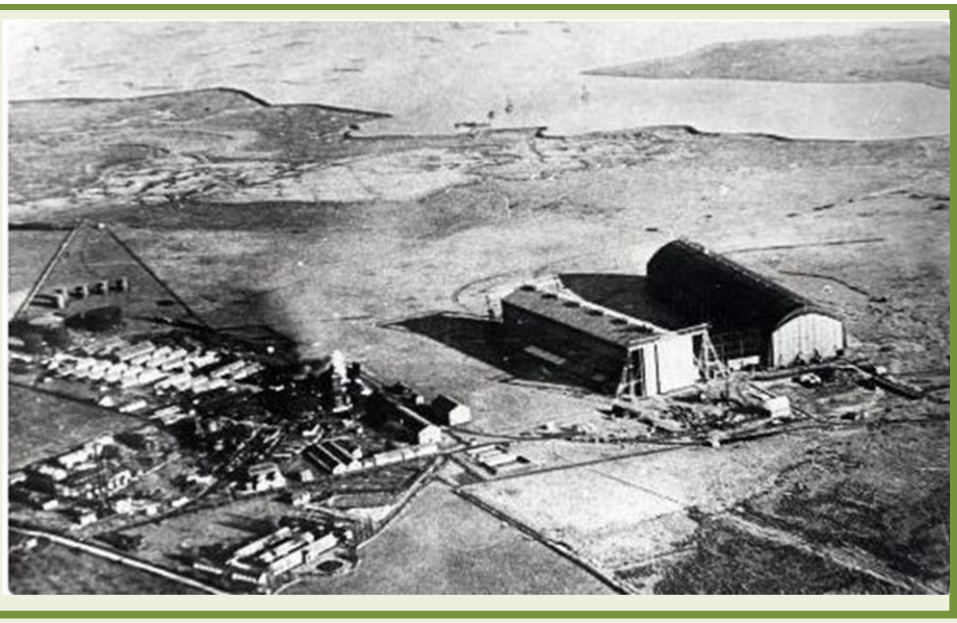
Welcome back, Mrs. Iris Sullivan, the woman of whom the Queen once remarked: "Who the hell is she?"

Iris, from Technical Publications, New Road, had the misfortune to break her ankle shortly before last Christmas. Apparently, Iris, who is known for her Christmas spirit (her capacity for it would leave most men under the table) was playing the part of Santa Clause in a local drama production, and during the dress rehearsal she fell off the chimney. Her husband, Eric, Deputy Head of a Dartford school, was full of grief at the time and was heard to mutter: "I suppose this means I'll have to cook the turkey now."

All is now mended however, and it's good to see you back, Iris.

From the Newspapers of 1978

Our Hangars



Before the power station was built, Kingsnorth on the Isle of Grain in Kent, was an airbase. In fact it became the country's most important air defence base in WWI. The station was built in 1914 to carry out patrols and was further expanded into an airship developmental and construction site after airship construction ceased at the Farnborough works in 1915. The base closed in 1920 and was decommissioned in 1921

The Rochester site has two large Hangars which are purported to have been removed from the Kingsnorth Royal Naval Air Services and rebuilt by Short Brothers at their new Rochester Airport site in 1933/34.
It must have been a massive undertaking to re-site the Hangars. The picture below shows the front wall just being pulled down which would have caused major damage. More research is needed to verify this story.

The Short Brothers site probably during the 1940s

The Rochester site in 1965

The Kent History Forum has the following comment:
'Look at a Google satellite view for the 40-foot hangars with the curved roofs comprising the BAE Systems factory complex. If I compare the photos of the airship sheds that were removed they bear a striking similarity to the 40 ft hangars at Rochester airport. It looks like they have arranged them by reducing the length of each by cutting them in half and erecting the two halves side by side. I have measured them, and they look similar sizes, about 17meters wide.'
http://www.kenthistoryforum.co.uk/

The old negatives have a picture, from 1979, of birds nesting in a Fire Bell. The Bell was attached to the huts that were to the West of the Towers.