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# Contraails

## Newsletter of the Christchurch Aviation Society

CAvSoc

### Air Transport Auxiliary by John Webster

Following our AGM, John Webster spoke about the ATA, an invaluable organisation that ferried aircraft during WW2 thus releasing military pilots for their primary role.

As secretary of the ATA Association and a volunteer researcher for the permanent ATA exhibition and archive at the Maidenhead Heritage Centre, John had interviewed several of the ATA veterans and, since his talk in May, one of the last four female pilots, Mary Ellis, passed away in the Isle of Wight on 25th July aged 101.

The ATA was a civilian organisation, allied to the then British Airways, whose motto was Aetheris Avidi or 'Eager for the Air' and whose initials are often said to have stood for 'Anything To Anywhere'. It was formed with just under 30 male pilots chosen from the civil list and who were all subjected to testing at Whitchurch, Bristol.

Whilst all of its pilots were initially assessed by flying the Tiger Moth, ATA's later establishment of a basic training facility favoured use of the Magister, Proctor and Harvard and, in addition, the ATA had its own taxi fleet of Fairchild Argus and Avro Anson aircraft. An HQ was soon established at White Waltham and there was full equal opportunity although equal pay was not achieved until June 1943. Pauline Gower recruited the first 8 female pilots in 1940, all highly qualified fliers, some of whom had owned their own aircraft, given flight instruction and flown with Cobham's 'circus'.



A female only base was initially formed at Hatfield, in the face of early male opposition to their joining the established Ferry Pools. Later acceptance saw the growing number of female recruits transferring to mixed Pools but two of those subsequently became all-female, namely Hamble and Cosford. Recruitment was not limited to Britons; over 20 women pilots came from the USA and 25 countries became represented in the ATA. In addition to its almost 3000 ground-based staff, over 1200 pilots joined the ATA of which about 7% were female and of whom 17

were to be killed in ATA service. The larger aircraft required a flight engineer and some 150 were recruited as well.

No fewer than 147 types of aircraft were flown by ATA and their essential details were given on just one or two pages of portable pilots' notes. There were six classes of aircraft, increasing in complexity and power from 1 typically a Tiger Moth; 2 single engine fighters; 3 twin engine aircraft; 4 heavy twins such as a Wellington; 5 four engine aircraft and 6 flying boats. Aircraft were often flown without armament or radios, which were fitted after delivery to a maintenance unit, but were not to be used by ATA's pilots as their navigation had to rely on map and compass, with the weather, barrage balloons and camouflaged landing grounds just adding to the difficulties to be overcome.

One remarkable day in the formidable Lettice Curtis' flying log recorded: Air taxi White Waltham to Brooklands; Wellington from there to Little Rissington; Spitfire from there to Llandow; by road to St Athan; Mosquito from there to Ford; air taxi to Brooklands & a repeat of the last 3 flights before: Mustang from Ford to Lichfield; Puss Moth from there to Castle Bromwich; Wellington from there to her base at White Waltham after less than 8 hours, of which 4hr5min were spent in the air.

John interspersed his talk with many anecdotal insights giving a good understanding of the great and relatively unsung contribution that the ATA made to the war.

### Bournemouth Air Festival

For the first time in many years the weather was perfect for all four days. What was missing was the big noise of Vulcan, Sea Vixen or Typhoon but a Tornado made a good start to the show. Vampire enthusiasts were well catered for in league with a Mig15 (flown by Norwegian vintage jet pilots) and earlier still was the great war display with a mixed bag of triplanes and biplanes 'ra ta ta tting' across the sky.

The Red Arrows as usual were impeccable with a new set of twists with a finale skywrite of

'100' for the RAF centenary. The Breitling Jet team of seven L-39C Albatros aircraft (Czech made jet trainers) finished with an impressive 'fleur-de lis' accentuated by IR decoy flares.



Next Meeting - Wed 07Nov18 - Royal Observer Corps by  
Neville Cullingford