

THE MERLIN

NEWSLETTER

DUMFRIES & GALLOWAY AVIATION MUSEUM



Lancaster III PB456 SR-D

The story of Lancaster III PB546 was told briefly in the newsletter update at Christmas. The dig took place on the bonny banks of Loch Lomond, or more precisely, on the south east shore north of Conic Hill. The aircraft took off from its 101 Sqd. Base at Ludford Magna in Lincolnshire on the evening of 13th September 1944 at 19.05hrs. The flight was a night navigational exercise to test the skills of a fairly inexperienced crew. In this case the result was fatal. The exact cause of the accident will probably never be known, but a major fire with a subsequent breaking up of the airframe sent the bomber on its final dive, crashing at 22.10hrs. Unfortunately there were no survivors.

It is likely that most of the airframe was recovered at the time, including the two outer Packard Merlin engines. There have been reports over the years, most importantly from the now defunct Scotland West Aircraft Investigation Group. They gathered information in the early 1970s and discovered the outer wing. In later years, our members decided to investigate the loss further with help from the farmer, and we began to suspect that more than minor wreckage lay beneath the low lying peat bog beneath Conic Hill. An MOD licence and landowner's permission was obtained and dig teams assembled. The first dig took place on 9th November 2003 using hand tools only. Results were encouraging and another dig on 21st March 2004 showed signs of larger buried components, dare we hope, engines? It was then decided that we needed more than picks and shovels. Fast forward to 30th October 2006 when local contractor Ralph Smith plus his digger and a museum team assembled at Old Manse Farm Balmaha. The team and digger set off up the hill on the half hour trek to the dig site. However, the day turned out to be an anti climax, as a 17 tonne digger on top of a very unstable peat bog did not make for a successful operation, and by 11.30 it became apparent that a lighter machine was needed. We did manage to locate a few remarkable finds that day, but no hoped-for Merlins. On 21st October we tried again with a lighter machine and soon found evidence of something large lurking under the soft peat when a propeller blade began to show. It now became obvious that the peat sludge in the hole was nigh-on impossible to remove, so a hefty rope was slipped around the propeller hub and secured to the digger bucket. Ralph took up the strain very slowly and the big lump of Merlin began to move, until disaster, the rope broke! A quick trip down the hill on a borrowed quad bike took about 30 minutes to return with a heavy chain which was attached in place of the rope. This time we were successful, and the Merlin complete with radiators and propeller emerged after 60 years in the bog. The engine was pulled clear of the quagmire to firmer ground – to say it was in good condition is an understatement, it is probably the best Merlin recovered from any UK crash site.

The digger was then re-positioned at the other side of the impact area and after a short time another propeller blade appeared. The same extraction method was again employed with the same result. Unbelievably, the second engine was in even better condition than the first, still complete with all of its cowlings – almost as if it had been just unbolted from the Lancaster wing. The two engines were from the port and starboard inner positions. The dig also yielded oxygen bottles, radio gear, the emergency radio and a parachute in excellent condition. This was not the end of the story, as the digger was incapable of transporting the three-quarter tonne power plants down the steep track to the public road. Various ideas were explored, including the use of a helicopter (one was offered!) but eventually a very cost effective solution was found. An appeal was made to the Dumfries & Galloway Vintage Machinery Club asking if any of their members had a caterpillar tractor with tracks long enough and wide enough to support its own weight on the bog. We quickly received a reply from Russell Kingan, Jimmy Long and David Patton. Jimmy had the ideal machine, an International of 1957 vintage which had recently been restored. Sunday 12th November was chosen for the final recovery with Russell making his articulated lorry available to transport the tractor to the site. Your intrepid Curator fabricated a sledge out of a Transit van roof and we were ready to go. The team and the assorted bits of kit arrived at Balmaha around 10am, unloaded and proceeded up the hill with the tractor towing the sledge. Very soon we were on site and after a bit of bodging Merlin No.1 was secured to the sledge with lots of loose wreckage also on board. The trip went like clockwork and within one hour the tractor was back at the dig site, engine No.2 was loaded and the rest of the wreckage.

The trusty International was shut down and the area around the site crew fell silent apart from occasional bird song. Seven poppies were scattered and a small cross marked the site. The team then held two minutes silence in memory of the young aircrew lost on this hill all those years ago; it was after all, Remembrance Sunday.

The tractor restarted, and its exhaust bark echoing around the hills, we once again set off down to the loading area. All went well until the last gate before the farm when the sledge drawbar broke due to an unseen obstruction under the sledge. Despite this setback some running repairs got us to the lorry. The tractor was loaded first then with the help of the farmer's partner the two Merlins were loaded and secured for the 120 mile journey back to the museum.

The crew who perished in this aircraft are as follows:-

F/O	Clare Edward Brooks RCAF	Pilot
Sgt	Francis Alfred William Blerkom	Flight Engineer
Sgt	Edmund Foweather	Navigator
F/O	Lloyd Peardon RCAF	Air Bomber
F/S	Victor Jack Ward	Wireless Operator
Sgt	John Ridley Stokes RCAF	Air Gunner
Sgt	James Watt RCAF	Air Gunner

(at 18 years old Sgt Watt was amongst the youngest RCAFairmen KIA in Bomber Command)



Now for the credits:

Our thanks to the following:

Montrose Estates
The Bannerman Family
The D&G Vintage Machinery Club
Ralph Smith & Sons (Digger)

Photos:

Jim Eagles, Jim Richardson, Allan Thompson
Project Leader: Alan Leishman

Ministry of Defence
The D&G Aviation Museum Team
Russell Kingan Transport
DA Autoparts (raw materials for sledge)

Quad bike loaned by Michael Jones

A short video of the final recovery by David Patton of the Vintage Machinery Club is available from David on 01683-220592/220471.

Aircraft Restoration

Gannet AEW 3 XL497

Over the winter months little work has been possible on this exhibit but some progress has been made recently, mainly in drilling out damaged screws and reattaching access panels. Ken Garner has made a fine job of rebuilding the rudder which will be fitted as soon as possible. Recently, we found all the flight manuals and aircraft records dating back to its first flight in 1960. In its 18 years of service the Gannet visited many bases world wide including Changi-Singapore and the USA. Hopefully most of the reassembly work should be complete by the end of the 2007 season.

Lightning F53 ZF584

Some limited work has been done on this airframe by Ken Garner, ex-RAF electrical expert who also doubles as a metal basher! Ken has rebuilt two of the spine panels and we have received the flight and maintenance manuals from the previous owners which give details of its service with the Royal Saudi Air Force. Surprisingly, the flying hours are low, under 2000hrs, compared with over twice that on most ex-RAF examples. Plans are being made to re-attach the tail fin followed by the wings, before the aircraft is eventually replaced on its original plinth.

HU5 Wessex XT486

After the arrival of the Lightning we decided to exercise caution before accepting any more airframes due to the limited amount of space on our site. In October 2006 however we heard of a Wessex helicopter which was parked on an Army camp north of Liverpool, and which might be surplus to requirements. Although 50ft long, helicopters take up less room than fixed wing aircraft and acquisition was considered. Sergeant Jim Kilbride of 2 Para was dispatched to take photos and after viewing these, the decision was taken to make an offer. After some negotiation, a mutually acceptable price was agreed.

This aircraft is ex-RN and like the Gannet has a long history of service around the world, including active service during the Falklands conflict. We have made one trip so far to check the work required prior to transportation, and we have partially dismantled the rotors, main wheels and the tail assembly. The airframe is essentially complete externally and internally is in fair condition with the crew seats intact. The cockpit requires most instruments although the panel is in situ. Hopefully the Wessex will be on site soon.



Museum Development Project

Further to our "News Update" at Christmas, we have now been granted £8,000 by the local council to develop a business plan which will hopefully help us to source funds to buy our site. As well as the £8,000, the council are also providing 14 hours per month of Economic Development Department time. As a result we have been allocated a named person, Melissa Stewart, to help to guide us through the process of business planning. The first bureaucratic hurdle is the "Project Initiation Document" which is basically an agreement between ourselves and the council regarding the way forward. We have a sub-committee who meet regularly with Melissa and we should soon be in a position to sign the PID. We are also exploring other issues at these meetings to do with title deeds, council plans for the area, ownership of the museum access road etc.

As the process proceeds, we will be looking at development options, tourism market potential and the creation of a three year business plan. We feel that realistically we will probably only be aiming to secure the existing site in that time, but the new landowners have agreed to give us six years to find the money to buy the additional 2.7 acre field adjacent to the museum. As a group we are used to dealing with more practical matters, but we now have no option but to try to pick up new business orientated skills!

30th Anniversary Event

We did not hold an event in 2006 due mainly to the uncertainty over the future of the museum and whether or not we would be able to use the old runway for parking. We were keen to celebrate the 30th anniversary but were concerned about the cost. We were reluctant to risk scarce museum funds on an event in case we were unable to recover the costs – outdoor events are obviously weather dependent to some extent. However, we have recently heard that we have been awarded £5,000 by the D&G Challenge Fund to help towards the cost of the event, which makes the project much more viable. Had we known the grant would be available, we would have been securing exhibitors long before now but better late than never. Preparation of these events is very labour intensive of volunteer time, but has the potential of raising relatively large sums of money – money which is very important to us now that we are paying the new rent! The 30th Anniversary Event will be held on Saturday 28th July, so keep your fingers crossed for good weather!

Control Tower becomes a Listed Building

On 11th October 2006, Historic Scotland on behalf of Scottish Ministers, listed the former Control Tower as a building of special architectural and historic interest. We believed at that time that another control tower of the same design still stood at Findo Gask, however a little research has shown that this building was demolished in 2006, and we now believe that the museum's Control Tower is the last of its type built during WWII.

Donations

In the Christmas Update we asked if any of you could spare a pound or two for the separate account we have opened in order to help with the costs associated with bringing about our eventual ownership of the museum. We were very gratified with the response, and have tried to acknowledge every donation. One of our "Friends of the Museum" suggested that there may be some members who would like the opportunity to donate to this fund on a monthly basis, by standing order. Anyone who feels able to help in this way should contact our Treasurer, Jym Francey on 01387-720488 or by e-mail at jym@francey.net



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