

Schneider Trophy Contest - overview

A little over one hundred years ago, just after the dawn of the age of powered flight, the best aeronautical brains and the bravest pilots were competing for the prestige of the Schneider Trophy. Instigated by Frenchman Jacques Schneider in 1912 the contest was intended to encourage aircraft manufacturers to develop stronger machines capable of longer endurance over inhospitable terrain, the Contest gradually evolved into a challenge for speed. The best to achieve this was with marine aircraft - seaplanes and flying boats - as there were no land-based aircraft capable - runways weren't long enough whilst sheltered coastal waters were unlimited.

The Contest attracted the best in Britain with R J Mitchell at Supermarine, in pole position. Other competing nations included the Italians, French, Swiss and of course the Americans. All countries threw money at this new and prestigious racing event, because the first nation to win the magnificent silver trophy three times within five years (later changed to three consecutive wins) would keep it!

France won the first Contest in 1913, and so became the host for the following year (as stipulated in the rules). Britain won in 1914 and so would host the next contest, which could not take place until 1919 owing to the First World War. The delayed Contest was held in Bournemouth Bay. As no contestant completed the entire course, the event was declared void, but the venue for the next Contest was awarded to Italy, whose competitor had achieved the greatest distance.

Italy won the next two Contests, the Britain was victorious again in 1922 and so were hosts again in 1923, this time at Cowes on the Isle of Wight. The American Team won here and so in 1924 the Contest went to the USA, where it was cancelled due to lack of other competitors. USA was again the host, and the winner, in 1925 and so hosted the 1926 Contest, which was won by Italy, becoming hosts in 1927. This event was again won by Britain. The Contests now became biennial (every two years) and the RAF Station at Calshot was chosen as the venue for 1929.

However, following the depression of the late 1920s the British government could not see the merit of such small, fast aircraft as they believed the larger, heavier bomber was the way forward, and financial support was withdrawn. Dame Lucy Houston, a multi-millionaire widow stepped in, shaming the government by donating £100,000 to cover development and build costs for the 1931 contest (equivalent to around £50 million in today's money).

Despite fierce international competition, particularly from the Americans and the Italians, Mitchell's design triumphed. Pilots of the Royal Air Force established new world air-speed records that had seen Supermarine aircraft flown to their limits in Venice (1922 and 1927) and Calshot (1929 and 1931).

Air speed records had risen from just 45mph in 1913 to over 400mph following the 1931 contest. Of the twelve events, Britain won five (1914, 1922, 1927, 1929 & 1931). Four of these were won by Supermarine aircraft designed by RJ Mitchell (the 1914 Contest was won by Tom Sopwith's Tabloid in Monaco).

The Schneider Trophy – the most coveted trophy in aviation history, was Britain's forever and the technology allowed British engineers and manufacturers to develop and build better, faster and stronger aircraft in time to defend Great Britain and the world in the face of the worst military conflict the world had ever seen.

(Over 100 different aircraft were designed for these Contests. Not all were built and fewer actually participated, but many of those participants are represented by this collection)



The Schneider Trophy

French Contenders



Sopwith Tabloid (1914 winner)



Supermarine Contenders



Gloster Contenders



Blackburn Pellet (1923 Crashed during trials)



Curtiss Contenders



Bristol Crusader (1927 Crashed during trials)



Navy-Wright NW2 1923 (Crashed during trials)



Savoia & Macchi Contenders



Savoia S65 (1929 Crashed during trials)