



## **MAKING A MEMORIAL MONUMENT**

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### **CHAIRMAN, FRIENDS OF THE NEW FOREST AIRFIELDS**

On Friday 16 August 2002 The New Forest Airfields Memorial was dedicated. This ceremony was the culmination of around seven years' work by the Friends of the New Forest Airfields. Speeches were made, the dedication plaque unveiled, and prayers offered up before the Red Arrows aerobatic team of the Royal Air Force, in immaculate formation, trailed their dramatic smoke streamers above the gathering.

The Last Post and Reveille were sounded, and the National Anthem taken up with great enthusiasm by a thousand voices. As the last notes faded, a dream had at last been realised. The flags and uniforms departed, the crowd drifted away and there, in solitary splendour, under a blazing sun, stood THE MEMORIAL. It will stand for many years to come, a tribute to all those it remembers.

Every ending has a beginning and the intricate threads of achievement between one and the other are fine, closely woven and, in this case, enhanced by happy coincidence. It is fair to say that the original seed was sown on New Year's Eve, 1993, when my wife and I were invited to a party by Rob Sawyer, a fellow aeroplane enthusiast. He handed me a book about local wartime airfields and, as I browsed through the pages, the years fell away and I was once again back in my days with the Air Training Corps, in the later stages of World War Two. In those days, the sound of aero engines was seldom absent from the sky, I was madly keen to fly and a regular visitor to most of the airfields in the New Forest area. That night, saturated by returning memories, I never slept and arose the next morning, determined to record something of my love affair with aeroplane, as I came to write "The Lure of the Blue".

Publication was a costly problem so with some trepidation but the help of my son, Steve, we published and printed the eighty-page booklet ourselves. Despite a few hiccups, it received good press notices and sold well locally, many copies also going to locations all over the UK and overseas.

On 22 November, 1994, my post contained a letter from John Leete, at Basingstoke, who had read the book and was anxious to meet me and see some of the remaining airfield sites. So, on a wet Sunday a few weeks later, he arrived with a party of friends. We toured around, visiting several places of interest. During lunch at 'The Three Tuns' at Bransgore, the conversation turned to commemoration of the airfields. Alan Brown, chairman of the New Forest Aviation group, had erected some modest plaques, but those, together with the gravestones in local churchyards, were all there were.

Over the following months, the possibility of erecting a comprehensive memorial with material collected from all the airfields was discussed. Some months later, John arrived with a jeep, a party of re-enactment enthusiasts and a cameraman with the object of making a "then and now" film and shots were taken of the lads in US uniforms of the wartime period, complete with small arms. They leapt in and out of some of the remaining surface air raid shelters on the Holmsley South site, loosing off a few blanks to create a little realism. Later, we visited Beech House, a modern dwelling on the site of the mansion that had been the wartime airfield headquarters but since demolished.

There we met Bernard Baily, the owner, also an aero-enthusiast, the holder of a private pilot's licence and owning his own plane. He showed great interest in our plans, and it was decided that we should, as a group, seriously explore the possibility of a permanent memorial to all those who had served on the New Forest airfields during and immediately after the war. John set about obtaining sponsorship from national firms and established a link with Maeve Kennedy of the "Guardian" newspaper and other bodies likely to be of assistance. A tentative approach to the New Forest District Council resulted in a thumbs down, for various reasons, to our hopes of a site in Lyndhurst. Bernard suggested that a plot of land adjacent to the old airfield and abutting a field in his ownership might be the answer to our problem and approached the owner, Bob Newell. The request was declined but eventually Bernard was able to offer the present site on an extended lease for a peppercorn rent.

At this stage it became necessary to formalise our activities and consequently, a meeting was held at Beech House on 16 May- 96 to make realistic plans for the future. John, Bernard and Basil White, a friend of both Bernard and me, plus myself, attended the meeting. Basil, who lived at Sopley, was an architect of standing having spent his early days in his profession working on the government buildings in New Delhi. He had been approached by Bernard to give us the benefit of his experience. It was agreed that Basil should produce draft plans preparatory to seeking charity status. This he did, making the necessary planning application, which did not meet with approval. At a second attempt, the revised plan was accepted by the NFDC, so we had a site, a plan, an eager band of hopefuls, but as yet virtually no money.

The next stage was an application to the Charity Commission. Bernard made an introductory trip to the Commission's offices at Taunton, in May '97 which paved the way for our registration as an officially recognised charity, enabling us to raise funds from 8<sup>th</sup> September '97. By this time, the group had enlarged and now consisted of John Leete, Bernard and Ann Baily, Madeleine Edwards, Basil White and Peter Durant, plus myself. Consequent upon our attaining charity status, this committee became the Board of Trustees.

Duties at this time were allocated as follows CHAIRMAN, Bernard, ARCHITECT, Basil, SECRETARY, Madeleine, TREASURER, Ann, HISTORIAN AND RECORDS, Les and SOLICITOR, Peter Durant.

Bernard's wide range of business contacts proved a great asset throughout the construction period, his first "kill" being the donation of a wartime Dakota propeller by CFS Aeroproducts of Baginton, Coventry. The arrival of this item gave the group a terrific boost, providing the focal point of the memorial. The agreement of Edmund de Rothschild to become our patron and Group Captain Luker, CO at RAF Odiham as our Honorary President, at John's instigation, were also announced at this time, together with a number of individuals and organisations who had given us their blessing. Our finances then totalled £1,184.

Whilst membership and assistance was being sought from various sources, our first newsletter was produced in the summer of '98, announcing the divergence of our activities by the establishment of a "heritage trail". An appeal was also launched for suitable contributions to a time capsule to be installed in the fabric of the memorial and opened fifty years hence.

It came as a great shock to learn that our architect, Basil, had died suddenly and sadly would never see his creation in the finished state, though it would be, in a sense, HIS memorial. Charles McKenzie, member of other like bodies to FONFA, joined the Board of Trustees in October '98 and immediately took up the office of PROJECT MANAGER. Patrick Kempe, film-maker and archivist with local interests also became a trustee at that time with a special responsibility for visual records.

1999 began with the resignation of Madeleine. Charles also mooted the idea of a newspaper based on the principle of the "freebie", with advertisers providing the revenue and I provided a list of prospective advertisers. The proposal that we should join Defence of the Realm and the Solent Protection Society was also suggested. At this time, Merryfield Park premises, part of the old RAF Sopley, owned by Bernard, were being refurbished by he and Charles to create our HQ. Bernard stated that in general terms we should concentrate all our efforts on the main task, i.e. the memorial.

In May, the board welcomed Peter London as a trustee and besides his expertise and enthusiasm, he loaned the Trust some valuable office equipment. He agreed to become

Press Officer, limiting his activities solely to the memorial and in addition, to produce the next newsletter.

By this time the need for a solicitor had disappeared and consequently, Peter Durant left the group. Work at HQ was progressing and the offer of the main building stone and transport thereof, free of charge, from Hanson, Bath and Portland, subsequent to Bernard's mention in a trade journal, was agreed after he and Charles had paid two visits to the quarry and arranged the loan of a stone saw. A cutting shed was erected on Bernard's premises and a portacabin brought to the erection site to house tools etc., by way of donation by Keystone (masons). R.H.H. Franks, metal workers, agreed to fabricate the time capsule as a donation, Bernard supplying the metal sheeting.

Since Madeleine's departure, there had been no permanent secretary and as I had acted as a stand-in, I was invited by the board to take over. At this time, Ann was able to report that after several incidental expenses had been met, the main and membership accounts totalled over £1,700.

In June a letter was received from John stating that a coming press article about FONFA would be less than flattering. Enclosed was what purported to be an e-mail emanating from an uncheckable address, voicing the fears of a person from East Kilbride, alleging that he had made a contribution (of which we had no knowledge) and that our affairs were not being carried out in a proper manner. It was agreed that the nature of this communication and its contents branded it almost certainly as bogus.

At the meeting of 12<sup>th</sup> July, Bernard announced that we were now in possession of eight to ten tons of aircraft spares, obtained through the good offices of Eric Hayward, to be disposed of for funds. These items were catalogued by Bernard and Charles, each putting in some 100 hours of work, besides the ongoing task at HQ, for which the incidental expenses were paid by them. It was at the same time agreed that all contact with the heritage trail should be discontinued and that all our efforts should be focussed on the memorial.

An open day in September to mark the establishment of our HQ was reasonably well attended, showing 8 to 10 new members, one life member and £80 00 for funds. Eric Hayward, an aviation consultant, who had made a tremendous contribution with his aircraft spares became a trustee on 25th October' 99. By this time, stone cutting had commenced and in order to expedite matters, £1,000 00 was made available from the main account for outside labour. In addition, a further facility of an interest free loan of £5,000.00 by Bernard and Ann was offered to ensure continuity of construction, to be used if and when required.

The memorial base had been laid by Bernard some months before the Spring 2000 newsletter was printed but at that time, we were able to report that Derek Fagan would commence construction of the memorial core as soon as the weather allowed. Bernard had negotiated an agreement to rent land adjacent to the memorial for pony grazing and

model aeroplane flying and proceeds will help to swell FONF A funds. There had been a steady flow of donations and memberships and at the board meeting of 26<sup>th</sup> June, Ann was able to report a balance of £1,758.93 on the bank account with the membership account standing at £1,057.63.

At this time, Bernard was devoting much of his energies to the construction work and also had health problems, so he wished me to take over the chair. This proposal was adopted by the board on 22<sup>nd</sup> October '00 and welcomed by me, as holding the joint appointment of chairman/secretary meant a considerable saving in routine administration etc. Ryanstone of Co. Wicklow, Republic of Ireland, donated paving and sets in green granite for the memorial "apron" and would deliver free of charge. Ann reported new government legislation regarding "gift aid", that would enable FONFA to claim against donations by taxpaying benefactors. The final result of an "aerajumble" held at Bournemouth International Airport showed £186 taken on the day, from books and spares and resulted in the subsequent sale of spares totalling £260. Donations etc. were still coming in at a steady pace.

The new year, 2001 came in with concern being felt at the lack of progress although the airfield name plaques had been engraved at a cost of £110, defrayed by Bernard. At the meeting of 27<sup>th</sup> March, Ann was able to report that our total cash asset stood at £3,224, but also announced that she wished to relinquish the office of treasurer, though she would continue until a replacement could be found. Another misfortune overtook us with the news of Eric's resignation on becoming the victim of a stroke. He had made a significant contribution and had been sadly missed. Peter too, had health and business problems, preventing him from producing the proposed newsletter. Keystone carried out stone cutting at a cost of £440 and the main elements were ready for use by mid-May and the slabbing and sets for the "apron" had been delivered by Ryanstone.

Another trustee had by this time joined the Board, John Lay of Sopley, also chairman of the RAF Sopley Association. He agreed to assist me with laying the "apron" slabbing, setting the kerbs and spreading the shingle surround. An approach to Weymouth Technical College for possible help in stone erection as an exercise failed to elicit a positive response but we were in contact with Mark Luscombe of Keystone and arrangements were finally placed in his hands.

By mid-July, considerable progress had been made by Keystone with occasional help from Bernard, with more contributions in kind and the loan of his employee, Charles and myself, Bernard located a run of redundant iron railings to be disposed of by Southern Water at Lymington, which cost £200 plus, eventually a considerable amount of work in refurbishment and erection at the site.

On 29<sup>th</sup> August an appraisal of our finances took place. It was agreed that £1,000 should be transferred from the membership account to the main account and that Bernard and Ann should supply £2,000, leaving the main account standing at £5,183 of which £3,840 would be paid to Keystone for services rendered. The balance of the main account

would then stand at £1,343 with \$100 in hand to be changed for sterling, and the membership account at £128.

No meetings took place between September and January '02 although work had continued with more stone cutting by trustees for the side paving. The "apron" had been laid and pointed by me with John's assistance and Tim Lowndes of MacPennys Nurseries would supply topsoil, shrubs and Mypex membrane for the surround.

At this time, a letter was received from Betty Hockey who had been a member of the concert party entertaining the forces at Holmsley South on the eve of D-day, wishing to be associated with the forthcoming dedication ceremony. This resulted in Betty becoming a trustee and providing many valuable contacts, not least of which was an introduction to the Red Arrows. A copy of her original letter is attached as app.6.

A draft of the proposed dedication reading: "In grateful remembrance of all personnel, service and civilian, British, Commonwealth, Empire and Allied, who served on the New Forest Airfields during and immediately after World War 2", was prepared by me and adopted. In the final run up to dedication day, each copy of the Bransgore Parish Magazine, 1850 in all, contained a FONFA news sheet providing background information and invitations to attend the ceremony, all printed and distributed free of charge. This was one of the very many gifts in cash, kind, services and general support and assistance, far too numerous to mention, but nevertheless greatly appreciated.

The final organisation centered around the availability of the Red Arrows, which fortunately was forthcoming without charge within our time frame, enabling a firm date to be fixed, dignitaries invited, and publicity arranged. The preparation and erection of the railings was the last major task although many necessary items such as the public address system, media coverage etc. needed to be organised. Unfortunately, Peter London was no longer able to carry out his duties as a trustee and left us but was replaced by John Brooks, who took over the spares department and Treasurer's Office, besides presenting FONFA with a very substantial cash donation.

Thus consolidated, the remaining loose ends were tidied up, the programme for the dedication was finalised and our original aim achieved. It can be fairly said that with enthusiasm, goodwill, determination and hard work, our task was well done.

LES WHITE CHAIRMAN.