

# Wargrave Local History Society

## Latest News - April 2002

### The Air Transport Auxiliary

Ted Wallington had become involved with the ATA as a result of organising a meeting at which Lettice Curtis, one of the well known ATA pilots, was the guest speaker. As a result, he became an Associate member of the ATA Association, and has collected information about the ATA and those who worked for it.

In the late 1930s the Air Ministry considered that the use of qualified RAF pilots to perform some of the non-combat flying tasks was a waste of flying hours. Gerard d'Erlanger (of the then British Airways) suggested the formation of a group to specialise in this work, and eventually he was asked to form a unit to be called the Air Transport Auxiliary. It was formed of existing 'A' licence pilots, to fly light aircraft and carry mail, news, medical officers, perform ambulance duties etc., but this limited role did not last for long! Initially, the pilots were males aged 28 - 50, with a minimum of 250 hours flying experience, but who were not eligible for the RAF or the Royal Auxiliary Air Force. There were medical standards to be passed - although it was evident that these were not always enforced. They were given a rank and uniform, and a rate of pay equivalent to a junior rank in the commercial airlines, and had to undertake to keep up their A licence - letters were sent to likely pilots in August of 1939.

Later it was suggested that lady pilots may be able to take part in this work, and so a ladies section was formed under Pauline Gower - just 29 at the time - who had 2000 hours flying experience herself. Eventually 166 of the over 1000 ATA pilots were women. The pilots included many volunteers from overseas - one from South America had an 'unpronounceable name', so was (and still is) known as 'Chile'. The work soon developed into the ferrying of aircraft from manufacturer to air base, or between RAF stations. The pilots delivered 308,567 aircraft - made of 24 single engined types, 18 twin engined types, 7 4-engined types, and 2 types of flying boat. The pilots were provided with 'pilots notes' - a very basic set of about A5 sized instructions, had no radio on board, and had to navigate as best they could - often by following railway lines. The women also flew the largest machines - Lettice Curtis, for example, delivering 400 of the 4-engined bombers. Another well known woman ATA pilot was Amy Johnson, whilst Joan Hughes became the only woman instructor to both sexes for all types of aircraft.

Ted told us of many flying incidents - such as Rosemary Lees collecting a Baltimore from the manufacturer, whose agent asked who passed the pilots, and how much training did they have on Baltimores. He was surprised at the answers .... no-one, and none. Many RAF stations would be surprised at the sight of the ferry pilot - a blonde 5ft 1in tall girl having delivered a Lancaster bomber, or a slim young girl delivering a Mosquito. On another occasion, a pilot had taken a new plane from the manufacturers, but due to a fault once in the air, the throttle could not be closed. Speed went up to 400 mph, and in an effort to slow down, she climbed, and decided to head for White Waltham. Still the speed was too high, so she cut the engine, but it became apparent that she would overshoot the airfield. The engine then refused to re-start, and a crash followed, severely

damaging the plane, but the cockpit section stayed together, so the pilot was able to get out. But when the emergency teams arrived soon afterwards, they found the pilot had returned to the cockpit. On enquiring why --- the answer was that she was scared of the cows in the field!

Further information about the ATA and especially the role of women in its work, can be found at

<http://www.fleetairarmarchive.net/RollofHonour/ATA/ATA.html>

<http://www.raf.mod.uk/history/ata.html>

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