

IN THE BEGINNING – RAF COSFORD



(Badge Motto – ‘Only the beginning is Difficult’).

By 1934, plans were in hand for the rapid expansion of the Royal Air Force to meet the threat of Nazi Germany. One of the greatest problems was the provision of Aircrew and Technicians to maintain and fly aircraft during the first months of a war, and to train the influx of men who would be mobilised later. One of the answers to the Technician shortage was the expansion of the Apprentice Scheme and the provision of a new School. This was to be No 2 School of Technical Training and Cosford was chosen as the site.

To house the apprentices, modern Barrack Blocks at a cost of £250, 000 each were planned. Drawings were actually prepared in 1937 for the construction of 4 blocks to be named Fulton, Brancker, Salmond and Samson. In the event only the first named was built – FULTON BLOCK.

Construction of Fulton Block and one of the Workshops

The block was named after Captain Fulton, a Pioneer Aviator and Aeronautical Engineer who became the first Commander of military aircraft in Great Britain with the formation of No 2 Company of the Air Battalion of the Royal Engineers. Captain Fulton was responsible for getting the Air Battalion changes from a branch of the Royal Engineers to the Royal Flying Corps in 1912.

Halton was to be the model for the new School and, not surprisingly therefore, efforts were made to recruit Staff from there to help establish the new School. Early in 1937 the Civilian Instructional Staff at Halton were approached for volunteers to become the instructional nucleus at Cosford. About 35 Engine and Airframe Instructors volunteered for the move and preparations commenced at Halton under the supervision of the new School's CEO, Wg Cdr Chinnery.

*During the second half of 1937 several of the Staff from Halton visited Cosford in preparation for the move, only to find great difficulty in locating the new camp and receiving precious little assistance from the inhabitants of Albrighton. Much local reaction appears to have been hostile to the building of an RAF Camp and locals complained about “**spoiling some of the best agricultural land in the district**”. The thought of “thousands” of Airmen invading the area with their corresponding problems was not well received by the Albrighton and Shifnal populace and several strongly worded articles appeared in the local press.*

*However, time marched on and preparations of the new camp continued. Higginsons from Hampton-in-Arden cleared all the trees, hedges and fences in readiness for Land Cultivators from Yorkshire who did the drainage, levelling and seeding down. * MacAlpines built the large hangars, Fulton Block and the boiler house, employing numerous Irish workmen, some of whom never left the confines of the camp for long periods for fear that their sleeping places in the large diameter culvert piping might be taken by another ‘lodger’.*

On the 15 July 1938 an “Opening Up” party commanded by Sqn Ldr A C Francis AFC arrived from Halton. Equipment packed into trains, lorries and private furniture vans flooded in.

“The contractors were still far from finished. Irish painters and labourers were dashing around like flies in and on the roofs of the Cosford buildings and one had to keep on the move to avoid getting painted too. The windows were not fitted; the éclair doors of the workshops had still to be fitted and what of the overhead cranes? – NO – not fitted yet...”.

What of the Cosford Railway Halt? – NO – not complete yet!

Practically everything was manhandled off the lorries that came by road from Halton. All the trains stopped at Albrighton where an unloading party transferred equipment to lorries for the short trip to Cosford. At first, high loaded lorries could not get under the railway bridge (close to what is the garden centre now) and with no by-pass then, MacAlpine’s quick solution was to lower the road under the bridge, and make a raised railed pedestrian walkway alongside – all this still survives to this day and can clearly be seen!

The equipment was unloaded and placed in position in the half-finished buildings to await the arrival of the first batch of Apprentices. No 1 (Apprentice) Wing had already been formed at Halton and comprised of 770 Apprentices, of whom 40 were Naval Air Apprentices. They had all been sent on block leave during July and on return to Halton proceeded to Cosford by special trains. The aim of causing the minimum interference with their training programme was largely achieved, although training began with hundreds of workmen busy fitting windows and doors and painting everything in sight.

The first Royal Air Force Cosford Commanding Officer was Group Captain W J Y Guilfoyle OBE MC RAF who arrived on 21 July 1938, who subsequently took up residence at Albrighton Grange.

No 1 Apprentice Wing arrived shortly afterwards on return from leave and training commenced on 4 August 1938. The winter months arrived and there were still hundred of window frames without glass and workshops without doors. Even the big éclair doors were still not fitted, but instruction proceeded, complete with overcoats, scarves and boots. The busy routine of No 2 School of Technical Training became established and links, both social and sporting, were established with the local communities.

D.J.S.

* N.B. The value of MacAlpine’s Site contract was £1.35 million.