

A Brief History of Lashenden (Headcorn)

The airfield came into being not once, but three times in its illustrious lifetime.

Back in 1911 Shenley Farm (Which is the land on which Lashenden Headcorn operates from) was acquired by a family who had recently returned from Canada on a fact-finding mission, one of the ideas they thought would work was to increase the size of the fields having been inspired by the vast expanse of the Canadian prairies. The event didn't go down too well with the locals but in 1914 a member of the Royal Flying Corps was sent from the ministry to find a site for a possible First World War training school. Shenley Farm turned out to be the perfect place and was used as such for the duration of the Great War.

After the war the then new R.A.F handed the airfield back which then reverted back to a working farm. This family then sold the farm on to a family friend in about 1919, he bought it out of a gratuity from his service during the Great War.

So for the second time as an airfield the history continues

SHENLEY FARM was then bought at an auction held in The Royal Star Hotel, Maidstone in 1927 by my great, great grandfather, Edward J. Freeman. He was asked to start the bidding by an army friend who was forced to sell due to The Depression. Edward's opening bid of £6,000 – a fair starting price, he thought – was the only bid!

It is understood that Edward's youngest son, Mark, was a pilot so having looked at the farm again put it into use flying a First World War bomber, a BE2 bi-wing.

In 1942 the Airfields Board requisitioned Shenley Farm and used rubble from the blitz to fill in ponds that form part of the runway we use today. Tracking and coconut matting were put down to form an all-weather structure that was held down by steel spikes. The RAF named the aerodrome Lashenden, which was an attempt to confuse the enemy, Lashenden is to the southwest of the field!! On the 6th August 1943, 127 Wing Royal Canadian Air Force moved in comprising of 403 and 421 Squadrons equipped with Spitfire 1Xb's under the command of 'Johnnie' Johnson. The airfield was then passed over to the United States 9th Air Force and upgraded by the construction organisation. On 13th April 1944 the airfield was taken over by the 100th Fighter Wing, 19th Tactical Air Command, 9th Air Force using Shenley House as its headquarters. On 17th April, 354th (Pioneer Mustang) Fighter Group comprising 353rd, 355th and 356th Fighter Squadrons arrived operating the North American P51D Mustang. There were 3000 ground crew supporting 70 aircraft and one sortie would use over 3,500 US gallons of Avgas. The 354th Fighter Group left Lashenden on the 22nd of June 1945 and the airfield closed.

And for the third time the airfield is reborn.....

After the war the aerodrome was handed back to our family and at the end of the 1950's my late father, Chris, met my mother Diana who was flying and working in Canada. Her arrival at Shenley Farm prompted flying to start up again and in 1963 Diana bought a second-hand wartime hangar from Newport Pagnall that my father built with the help of the two Alf's, Arthur Saunders, Jack Woolford and Nelly the crane! The other blister hangar was completed between 1965-7 and was dual-purpose with pigs, then sheep, living in the eastern end. In 1969 the British Aerobatic Team spent the Spring Bank Holiday here resulting in the 1977 Public Enquiry and 22 enforcement notices – thankfully all of which were quashed. 1969 was also the year of the fire in the large blister hangar on the eastern side which resulted in the loss of nearly 1000 pigs; only one escaped and was found down by the river dipping itself in the mud.

Diana did a lot of her flying in Austers, one of which (G-AJGJ) Chris modified with a long-range belly tank extending the range to 5 hrs! This minor mod was approved by the A.R.B. and is still in use today.

G-AJEI was bought as a birthday present by my mother and Chris rebuilt it with the help of another engineer and my mother in the Nissan hut.

There was a good liaison with Rochester and in the 60's Diana as social secretary organised several events with a number of aircraft visiting, including famous pilots such as James Black, Neil Williams, Neville Browning and Roy Legg as well as some pilots from the Red Arrows. Sheila Scott was a good family friend and I remember her arriving in appalling weather and having to stay the night with us.

Parachuting began in the 1960's with Lashenden Sport Parachute Club and the Met Police Parachute Club that ran until 1979. Headcorn Parachute Club was started by the present owner, David Parker, using first a Cessna 206, then a Cherokee 6 and the Islanders, followed by the Let 410 of today. The Lashenden Air Warfare Museum was started in 1970 by Jack Matthews and 1972 saw the arrival of Headcorn Flying School with Mike McRoberts and Colin Dyne, that resulted in a fleet of Robin aircraft for which we were the agents. At about that time the 500 Air Training Corps started up and in 1976 Farmair became busy chasing the Colorado beetles around Kent with seven Pawnee PA25 crop spraying aircraft that were based here (the winters were spent spraying cotton in the Sudan and Libya). The engineering by that time had become the heart of the place – Ted Dann was in charge and with Keith Butler and Joe Webb they kept the Pawnees going.

Privately owned aircraft also made up a good proportion of those based here. In 1987 Mike moved to Rochester and London Flight Centre Headcorn Ltd was formed run by Nigel Harris with Cessna and Piper aircraft. In 1995 Nigel left and today we have Weald Air Services Ltd supplying aircraft to our enthusiastic instructors! In 1992 the aerodrome had to fight a second public enquiry with 14 enforcement notices including one on a change of use on the drop zone which was proved in our favour as we still graze sheep there much to the concern of some of the jumpers! Without the sheep we would have lost!

James Tuke obtained his PPL(H) in 1987 and started Thurston Helicopters Ltd in 1989 with G-JWFT. Also in 1987 the blister hangar collapsed under the weight of snow and to add insult to injury the hurricane in October of the same year damaged the new hangar that was being erected to replace it. Robinsons had to replace all of the 'Z' purling and use a turfer to pull the building back into alignment.

The Tiger Club moved to Headcorn in 1990 from Redhill originally with Jim Alderton and now Jerry Knight in charge of day-to-day. Also in this year the Toy Shed was built to replace the barn that burnt down on Christmas Eve.

My father left us for the A.T.C. in the sky in January 1999. We held a memorial service for him and afterwards I went up in G-ATWJ with Terry Hodges to scatter his ashes down the runway. His passing was the end of an era and I had always had the feeling that he was invincible – he was always there on the end of the phone and radio helping pilots and giving advice to other aviators whether they needed or wanted it! I know that he saved a great number of airfields using the knowledge he had gleaned from the two public enquires. I had a year of fire-fighting before I felt comfortable in his chair but I can say that now I am beginning to enjoy the job! Everyone has been very helpful, especially with the improvements and runway extension re-seeding!

Skybus Balloons run by Tony Hill and Shiralee Colin moved into the guard hut in 2000 and shortly afterwards they took over running the Wings restaurant. Then in 2001 a new club, Windbags, started despite Ben Williams having problems getting off the ground due to the foot and mouth outbreak. Also in 2001 Hi-flight Aerospace moved in run by Simon Marsh and specialising in aircraft refurbishment and aircraft re-sprays. Most of our old tractors and balers were bought from his father, Kerry, so I knew the family traits! Plans were recently passed to rebuild the ablution block and also a new museum building. Added in 2007 we now have a vertical wind tunnel for parachute training!

That's all so far !! Jamie Freeman