

Finding XH 903 – 33 Squadron's Gloster Javelin at the Jet Age Museum



Gloucestershire Airport, Saturday 4 August 2018

On a very hot Saturday afternoon last weekend, thus the relaxed but appropriate 'Hart's Head' attire worn in some of the following photographs, I paid a visit to the excellent and informative Jet Age Museum at Gloucestershire Airport to investigate the story of the Gloster Javelin bearing 33 Squadron colours that appeared in the recent 'Loyalty' newsletter. Accompanied by close friend George Philp, a retired Squadron Leader, my Crewman Leader in Germany while I was on the other squadron, keen aviation buff and a member of the Jet Age Museum, we received a very friendly welcome from the staff at the front desk and all of the guides in the Display Hall, especially as the reason for the visit became apparent.

33 Squadron flew the two seat Javelin, Britain's first delta wing all-weather fighter, in the Cold War-era between July 1958 and November 1962. The Javelin was equipped with interception radar, had an operational ceiling of 52 000 feet (almost 16 000 metres) and a speed of more than 700 mph (1 130 km/h). Armed with four 30mm cannons and, later, four Firestreak missiles it was built to intercept Russian bombers. Javelin first flew on 26 November 1951 and Gloster and its sister company, Armstrong Whitworth, would go on to build 435 aircraft for the RAF. Unfortunately, the Javelin was the last aircraft type that Gloster would produce and in 1963 the Gloster name disappeared completely from the list of British aircraft manufacturers as a result of the 1957 White Paper on Defence produced by Minister of Defence Duncan Sandys, in which, to counter the growing Soviet ballistic missile threat, he proposed a radical shift away from manned fighter aircraft in favour of missile technology, along with a

rationalisation of the British military aircraft and engine industry.

XH 903 was the 65th of 85 Javelin FAW7s built by the Gloster Aircraft Company, completed in early 1959 and delivered from the Gloster factory at Hucclecote on 27 February to RAF St Athan. After service acceptance checks with 19 MU it was assigned to 23 Squadron at RAF Coltishall and detached to RAF Horsham St Faith, now Norwich Airport, on 1 May. XH 903 returned to Gloster's Moreton Valence factory on 1 June 1960 for changes to systems and equipment and the replacement of its Sapphire Sa7 engines with the reheated Sa7R. Now completed as a Javelin FAW9, it was delivered to St Athan on 5 January 1961 and to 33 Squadron at RAF Middleton St George on 14 February. Ten days later it went to RAF Leuchars on loan to 29 Squadron, returning to 33 Squadron on 3 March. In October 1962, 5 Squadron, then flying the Javelin FAW5, began to convert to the FAW9 variant and took on charge most of 33 Squadron's aircraft, including XH 903. Re-equipment was completed by 21 November and coincided with the Squadron's move from RAF Laarbruch to RAF Geilenkirchen and assignment to 2 ATAF, XH 903 gaining the code 'G' at this time. The aircraft flew with 5 Squadron until 20 September 1963 when it suffered a Cat3 accident. This resulted in its withdrawal from use until repairs were completed, the aircraft returning to 5 Sqn on 10 April 1964. On 7 October 1965 5 Squadron disbanded as a Javelin unit and XH 903 was flown to 27 MU at RAF Shawbury on 15 October for storage. It was struck off charge on 2 December 1966 and allocated to RAF Innsworth for display on 23 August 1967, receiving the maintenance serial 7938M. The aircraft was delivered to the Gloucestershire Aviation Collection, now known as the Jet Age Museum, on 19 May 1993. It was restored as XH 903 at RAF St Athan in 2003 and is now on loan from the Royal Air Force Museum.

The Gloster Aircraft Company was formed in 1917 and although taken over by Hawker in 1934, becoming part of the Hawker Siddeley Group, it continued to produce aircraft under its own name, and 33 flew aircraft produced by both companies in the 1930s and 1940s: the Hawker Hart, the Gloster Gladiator and the Hawker Hurricane. From 1934 the Gloster Company produced 747 Gladiators, an aircraft remembered by many for 'Faith, Hope and Charity's defence of Malta in 1940, yet Gladiators also fought in France, Norway and, as 33's history records, in Greece, Crete and North Africa. Remaining operational until 1941, the Gladiator also equipped eighteen foreign air forces. The Museum has restored the wreckage of four Gladiators, the current project shown overleaf being N5914 of 263 Squadron, which crashed in Norway on 2 June 1940. By 1942, Gloster had also built 2 750 Hawker Hurricanes, at which point they switched to making Hawker Typhoons, which led to another aircraft that 33 used from 1945 to 1951 in Europe and the Far East, the Hawker Tempest.



The Museum has a number of aircraft on display, which also includes a Javelin Mark 4 and a number of Gloster Meteors. In the Hall there are a number of cockpits, models, dioramas and displays. I was amazed to climb into the Avro Vulcan cockpit and discover the incredibly small and cramped space in which five to seven crewmembers operated. Sitting in there for the 15 minute tour makes one realise just how remarkable an achievement the 'Black Buck' missions were during the Falklands War.

I hope that the volunteers can bring the Link Trainer, tucked away in the corner of the Hall, to full working order in the future. With only 26 working examples listed in the UK, including one fully restored model down at the Tangmere Aviation Museum, this would be a welcome addition to help inform the public about the training of pilots and the advances made in simulation.

Having resolved Centre of Gravity calculations throughout my RAF career, and seen the modern day solutions provided for aircrew today, one of the more fascinating items on display was the Airspeed Horsa Centre of Gravity calculator (photo right and below) designed for the safe loading of the gliders, many of which were made locally by furniture manufacturers.

The Jet Age Museum has a well stocked shop and a good café, with seating available outside which allows visitors to watch the fixed wing and rotary wing traffic in the Staverton circuit. With a large car park and free admission I fully recommend a visit to the Jet Age Museum if you are ever in the area; details regarding opening days and times can be found on the website, 'jetagemuseum.org'. The airport also offers hot air ballooning, wing walking and trial flying lessons in a vintage biplane. Have fun!



Above: Fuselage of Gladiator N5914
Below: The Link Trainer

