



**ROYAL
AERONAUTICAL
SOCIETY**
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**Austers I have known and flown
- the History of Auster Aircraft**

Terry Dann, Auster and Tiger Moth enthusiast

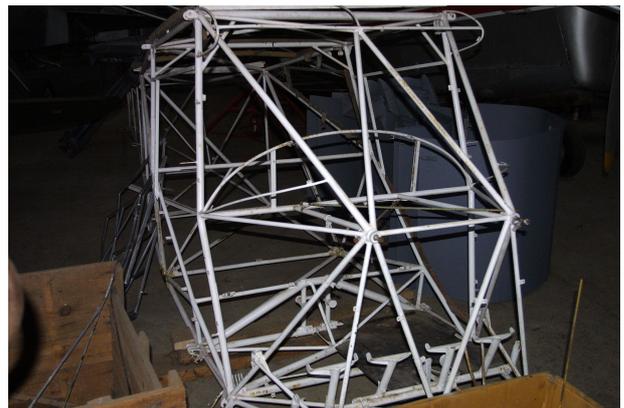


Leicestershire has little that remains significant as a remnant of latter-day aviation, but the county's most successful enterprise was undoubtedly the Auster Aircraft co., founded in 1938 and resident at Rearsby, north of Leicester, until 1970. Our speaker – not a local man - had visited two years previously to describe his restoration of a de Havilland Tiger Moth and it was with no less passion that he described his experiences and his knowledge of the most ubiquitous British light aircraft family – commonly 'the Austers'. He revealed an eight-part presentation, but the seams were almost invisible as

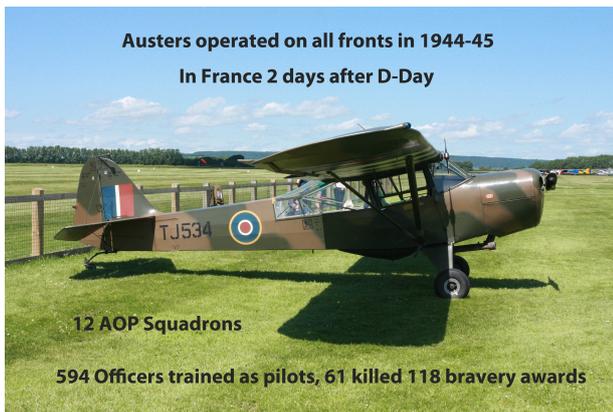
enthusiasm carried the story through the company's highs (a few) and the lows (too many).

His historical content was an almost chronological journey through the many aircraft models developed and put into production by the company. They were numerous, and in respect of their similarities they were a 'family' that it takes someone familiar with each model to know. Most enthusiasts will recognise an example of the genre in an instance but only refer to it as an 'Auster.' Our guide flew us thorough the family tree by detailing and illustrating the components within each that were its inherited, or to be contributed, elements of the Auster genealogy. He included technical inheritances and had a remarkably well-developed knowledge of the ergonomic qualities too, thus linking the physical and the practical aspects of the company's contribution to UK light-aircraft folklore.

In 1938 Founder Lance Wykes, a local businessman in the textile machinery business, imported a light aircraft from the Taylorcraft Aircraft Corporation of America and registered his enterprise as Taylorcraft Aeroplanes (England) Limited, They were based initially at the Britannia Works, Thurmaston, and evolved two distinct UK models, differentiated by having either a US or UK engine. Demand was promising, as the simple – welded tubular steel frame and fabric covered – aircraft were light-weight, used much smaller engines than many British contemporaries (de Havilland, Miles, Percival, etc), and were therefore economical. They were also adept short-field performers with reasonable cruise capability.



Initially, aircraft were tested from Ratcliffe aerodrome, north of Rearsby, but the site became a base for military operations between 1939-45. At Rearsby the company had established an assembly facility and developed a small airfield, so it was just as the future looked rosy that wartime austerities intervened. They had to become a supplier to the RAF of air-observation aircraft, and



under this guise several models evolved. These, and derivatives, were to dominate the company's history.

Terry Dann talked through the types in detail, and with tremendous insight into their evolution, and knowledge of some of their idiosyncrasies as well as their most respected values. A considerable amount of production was conducted at Syston and Thurmaston, and it is remarkable that the company was accredited 1,600 employees at its peak, but after WW2 employment fell to about 200,

all at Syston and Rearsby. He outlined the differences between the models that were presented as Model A through to J, with notable details being a rather unique auxiliary horizontal tail surface below the tailplane of early types that was a pitch-trimmer, plus the introduction of split flaps, and later high-lift wing devices, including trailing flaps (Note: leading-edge slats were introduced only on the 1948 240 HP Model N). The wing development, along with larger engines (the 55hp or so commercial pre-war engines gave way to 150hp engines by 1945) provided the RAF with an adaptable army-support aircraft that could follow closely behind troops. It was capable of operating from unprepared small fields and with a rear cabin that had an all-round view the observer would scan ahead of troops, and could even drop messages to friendly lines from a floor-mounted chute.

Many commercial light-aircraft variants arose after 1945 from the Model J, and it was at this time that the name 'Auster' was adopted. Syston remained the main place of manufacture, and Rearsby was where final assembly, fitting out and testing took place. We were treated to a blow-by-blow account of the Model J variants, from the original 'Autocrat', through the 'Aiglet' and 'Alpha' to the 'Workmaster.' All were based on the wartime airframes, and many ex-military aircraft were rebuilt for civilian roles, often with smaller engines. He outlined a scheme, launched by the Government in 1943, that promised support to purchase light-aircraft after the war, and although this far-sighted scheme was useful to industry the production levels that accrued were not adequate to permit the firm to build any type in significant numbers. Over a decade or so they produced a wide range of aircraft, often with several variants in production simultaneously, and while the commonality was relatively high, the benefits of large-scale sales eluded them. A bold attempt was the 'Atlantic' 4-seat tricycle gear project, which first flew in July 1958 but production plans were abandoned due to lack of finance. It was the desire to remain with the light-weight fabric-covered tubular-metal airframe that caused them to lose market share to the incoming all-metal, stressed-skin, US-based designs.



In 1960 the Beagle (British Executive & General Aviation Limited) company was formed with government support, and took over the Auster and Miles Aircraft enterprises. Auster had invested heavily in a crop-sprayer project, the Agricola. In the design they had still retained the basic tubular steel fuselage frame but opted for light alloy covering for the wings and tail surfaces and to offset



its investment had relied on a subsidy for the type in support of a potentially sizeable order from New Zealand. As the NZ government opted for a local derivative of a US design, the Auster company faced an uncertain future and their incorporation into the Beagle enterprise was a life-line.

The Beagle era began by creating the Terrier, a civil conversion of surplus ex-military aircraft of traditional Auster configuration, and the Airedale which mirrored much of the proposed Atlantic. This

proved to be a heavy aircraft, and whilst roomy and comfortable its performance and costs were not competitive with aircraft already in mass-production, so manufacture stalled even before it reached 50 examples.

In 1969 the Beagle enterprise, and in many respects the last vestiges of the British light-aircraft industry, was wound up. Rearsby had become the production centre for the B.206 twin-engine 7-seat executive aircraft – intended, but failing, to replace the highly-successful DH Dove – and the single-engine 2/3-seat B.121 Pup trainer and light tourer. Both designs failed to be competitive in terms of cost, and some aspects of performance. The Pup was a low-wing all-metal trainer that did gain much admiration, but it was to be the last aircraft in production at Rearsby, and was the emblematic end of the Auster story. The airfield was to return to agricultural use, and has not been a fully-licensed aerodrome since 1970. The factory is in alternative use, but the major portion of the airfield is in the hands of a landowner who still supports occasional summer-time Auster owners gatherings on his field, with a 600 metre or so cleared strip in the stubble that meets appropriate statutory approval.



It is worthy of note that Terry Dann opened the presentation with a photograph of a well-known face to many former associates in the room. The late Professor Michael Pearson, formerly a member of staff at Loughborough University, was one of the most pro-active of local individuals who contributed to the retention of much of the Auster-related memorabilia that remains in Leicestershire, and was a leading light in activities of the International Auster Club. In many ways this was a celebration, and a much appreciated 'welcome home.'

The meeting drew in a large number of people who had been associated with or employed by the firm, and the 200-seat auditorium was about three-quarter full. They joined Barry Jacobson in support of his expression of satisfaction throughout what has been a wide-ranging presentation.