

HALTON APPRENTICES - 100 YEARS YOUNG by Min Larkin CBE

'Experience in civil engineering had proved that one of the best ways of producing a skilled man was to train him from youth as an apprentice in the environment in which he would afterwards work as a man.' - Lord Trenchard.

The Royal Air Force, in the early period of its life after the first World War, needed to train an elite cadre of engineers in a wide variety of trades for aircraft maintenance in a new branch of the armed services which was becoming increasingly technical. To meet this need Lord Trenchard conceived and planned the RAF Aircraft Apprentice Scheme whereby technical trades would be filled as far as possible by recruiting boys between 15 and 17 to undergo a three year course in workshop training together with technical and general education. He believed the added benefit of training boys in-house would foster a spirit in the RAF on which so much was to depend in the future. For this purpose, in 1920 No 1 School of Technical Training was established at Halton in Buckinghamshire.

However, while domestic accommodation for apprentices was being built, the first four courses were trained at Cranwell which led to a delay in Halton welcoming its first boys in January 1922. For the next 71 years Halton became the spiritual home of generations of RAF apprentices.

The School quickly established an international reputation for the standard of its training and Halton soon became a by-word for aircraft engineering excellence throughout the industrial world. By the mid-1920s boys from the old Commonwealth countries were under training at Halton as apprentices. The training procedures and practices developed at Halton were copied by the burgeoning civilian aircraft industries and many foreign air forces. Today's highly developed aeronautical engineering training in the RAF has its roots at Halton.

As well as producing an elite corps of engineers, apprentice training contributed a great deal to RAF culture. As Trenchard had foreseen the Halton spirit did permeate the RAF at a vital time in its development. Recruiting boys from any social background and geography helped to endear a wider public to the new service. Trenchard was determined that meritocracy would replace privilege in the RAF officer ranks and introduced the award of up to 12 Cranwell Cadetships each year for apprentices who at the end of their Halton training were considered to be suitable for officer and pilot training. Further progress in social mobility was taken when Trenchard opened the path for all apprentices to volunteer for training as Sergeant pilots in the mid 1920s. After 6 years of air experience these pilots would return to their ground trades in higher ranks with a greater appreciation of the part engineering plays in aviation. Above all Trenchard wanted apprentice training to prepare the boys not just as a reliable source of high quality engineers able to deal with the rapid developments in aircraft technology then underway, but also to be an asset to the economy of the country after their service commitment.

Trenchard had in fact laid plans for ordinary boys to achieve extraordinary things. Of the 40,000 who graduated from Halton, Seventeen won the Sword of Honour at Cranwell and others were usually in the top 10% of the College graduation lists. Over 12,000 were commissioned, with over 100 achieving Air rank; Several served on the Air Force Board; Thirteen have been Knighted and countless others awarded other State Honours. In later life many achieved high positions in Industry, commerce, the law, medical profession, the police, teaching and the church. During WWII, 2000 ex apprentices gave their lives. Among their 1200 gallantry awards is a VC awarded to Sergeant Thomas Gray. Some 3000 were Mentioned in Dispatches

Halton Apprentices (fondly known as Trenchard's Brats) were one of the main foundation stones on which Trenchard established the RAF. They played a major part in cementing the service as a permanent third force. Trenchard envisaged that the Halton-trained men would provide a strong base from which the RAF could expand to fight another war. As indeed they did as Trenchard himself acknowledged in a speech he gave in the House of Lords on the air war in October 1944.

"There is no doubt at all, in my opinion, that Halton and the Halton spirit have been a pillar of strength to the Royal Air Force all over the world. The Halton trained men have provided the nucleus on which the great expansion of the Air Force was centred. They have set and maintained an extraordinarily high standard of efficiency. You only have to look at the promotions and the honours gained. Over 1,000 high honours have been gained, and a large number of those men are very senior Air Vice-M Marshals and Air Commodores, running the highest technical offices in the Air Force. Surely the efficient maintenance of aircraft has also been one of the outstanding features of this war and that has been made possible by the Halton training of our men"

For its contribution to the RAF and to the Country No. 1 School of Technical Training was awarded a Queen's Colour on 25th July 1952. This Colour (currently at RAF Cosford where the School is now located) is unique as it is the only Queen's Colour ever to be awarded to a youth training school in any of the armed services; it was the first Colour to be presented by Her Majesty to an RAF formation after she ascended the throne and, as it was received by a Sergeant Aircraft Apprentice, a custom was established for it to be carried by a non-commissioned rank on appropriate ceremonial occasions. The original Colour is laid up in St George's Church at RAF Halton.

More of the history can be appreciated by visiting this website - www.oldhaltonians.co.uk.