

CONTACT!



The Newsletter of the former RAF Defford Reunion Association, now merged with the

DEFFORD AIRFIELD HERITAGE GROUP

in partnership with THE NATIONAL TRUST, CROOME

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Editor: Bob Shaw Distribution: Ann Sterry

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BRISTOL 170 WAYFARERS AT DEFFORD

'FLYING LABORATORIES', 1948-1956

The Bristol Type 170 Freighter was a twin-engine aircraft designed and built as both a freighter and short range airliner. The airliner version was known as the Wayfarer. The Wayfarer could accommodate 32 passengers plus a toilet. The Freighter version (named as such) boasted opening nose doors and well over 200 were built. Whereas, as a somewhat utilitarian airliner, the Wayfarer had but limited appeal, and only about a dozen were built. Of these, two Wayfarers came to TRE Defford, where they saw valuable service as commodious flying laboratories.



ABOVE: Wayfarer VR382 in RAF colours, flying from Defford on July 25th 1950
(All photographs Crown copyright except where acknowledged otherwise)

WAYFARER (cont.)

For a succinct account of the Wayfarers at Defford, we cannot do better than quote from W.H. 'Bill' Sleigh in his epic 'Aircraft for Airborne Radar Development' (1986), where he wrote: '... two Wayfarers were allotted to TFU, serving the Unit between 1948 and 1956. These two aircraft VR380 and VR382 were both modified as AI systems flying laboratories. Wayfarer VR382 was initially used in 1948 for development flying of the S band AI Mk 16 system, contracted to GEC, which was directed to the post-war F4/48 All Weather fighter requirement, with Anson PH816 as a parallel carrier vehicle. In 1952, the project was changed to X-band, designated as AI Mk 18 and its intended use for Javelin application was changed to the Sea Vixen. VR 382 was also used for FIS (rear attack warning) system light trials, while Wayfarer VR 380 was employed as an X-band AI Mk 22 laboratory aircraft directed at the Javelin 'All Weather' system as well as work on airborne DME' (Distance Measuring Equipment).



ABOVE: *Bristol Wayfarer VR382, after arrival at Defford in September 1948*

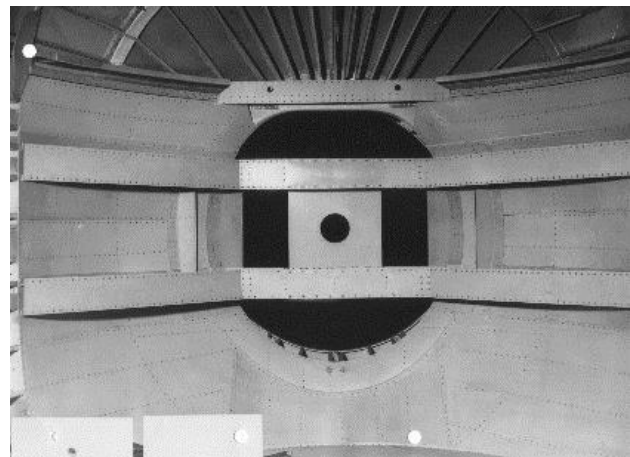


ABOVE: *Wayfarer VR380 featuring the radar scanner on the nose. VR380 reverted to civilian status as G-AGPV in 1958 but at the date of this photo, it still displayed the nose radome (more on the radar installation in VR380 on the next pages.*

WAYFARER (cont.)



ABOVE: Superb close up air-to-air of Wayfarer VR382, flying from Defford

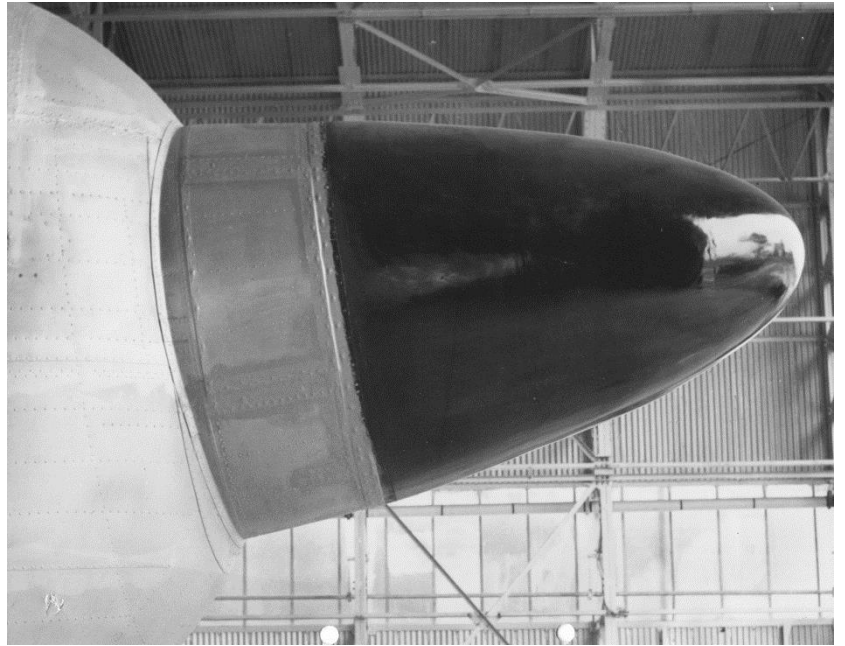
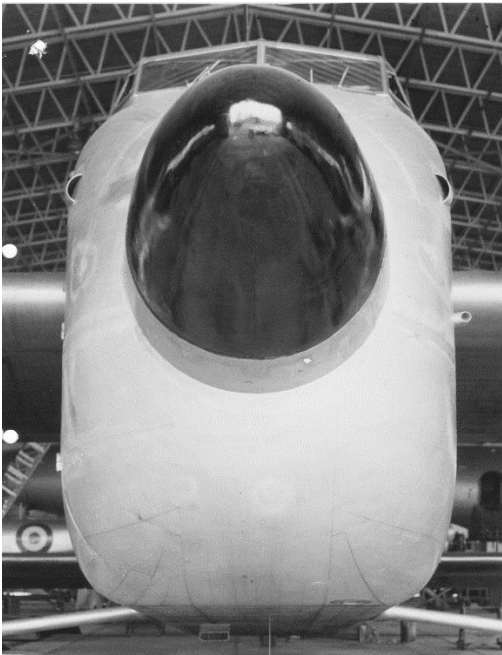


ABOVE: Left, VR382 in workshop hangar at Defford. Right, interior of nose of VR382 with radome in place.



LEFT: 'Flying Laboratory', interior of VR382 showing AI trials equipment in place on bench at Observer's Station typical of type used in late 1940s

WAYFARER (cont)



ABOVE: Nose radome housing scanner for AI Mk 19 trials on VR380, photo taken on July 19th 1953



ABOVE: interior of VR382 taken July 1954 showing Rotol APU (Auxiliary Power Unit)

WAYFARER (cont.)

Back in 2012, it was the practice of 'Contact!' to challenge readers to identify a "Mystery picture". DAHG newsletter number 83 (June 2012) featured a photo of an aircraft on a scrap heap. The photo came from Phil Butler and sparked a number of replies. This was a Mystery Picture in more sense the one – your Editor could not remember who gave it to him or where it was from! He thought it was probably during a senior moment later in the evening at 'The Brandy Cask'. Readers were asked if they could identify the aircraft whose remains were depicted here and tell us more about them. The editor commented that the serial VR382 was a useful clue – and might provide a surprising answer.



ABOVE: Puzzle picture - the remains of Wayfarer VR382 at Blackbushe (Phil Butler)

First to respond was Nic Shelley, who e-mailed: *'Hello Bob, I think I have got this one right - it is the fuselage of Bristol Wayfarer VR382 in which I first flew on 16th September 1953 with Squadron Leader Jim Cade (OC 'A' Flight) which comprised an Air Test and then to Christchurch and return to Defford. This was my tenth flight after joining TFU on the 8th September 1953 after returning to the UK from a tour with 78 Squadron at Fayid in the Canal Zone, Egypt flying the Vickers Valetta aircraft.'*

John Yates wrote: *'VR382 – the only information I have been able to find is VR380 and VR382. Ex G-AGPV and G-AGUT. To A.M. Spec. C9/45. Used (at Defford) for air intercept radar tests.'*

In the next edition of 'Contact', September 2012, Dennis Williams provided comprehensive information on VR382:

'VR382 was first registered as G-AGUT to the Bristol Aeroplane Company in October 1945. It was built as a Bristol 170 Series 21, so in fact was not a Freighter, but the 40 seat passenger version of the Freighter, known as the Wayfarer. On transfer to the RAF for use at Defford, it became VR382. Another Bristol 170, G-AGPV, the first prototype, also went to Defford, as VR380. The two aircraft were sold to R.A. Short Aviation at Blackbushe in 1957. Roger Wintle recalls VR382 leaving Defford in pieces on a lorry, and it appears VR382 was used as spares to keep VR380 flying at Blackbushe. CAA records show G-AGUT was not taken off the register (permanently withdrawn from use) until 1960, and G-AGPV soldiered on until 1965.'

WAYFARER (cont.)

Having cleared up the mystery and to bring the account of Wayfarers at Defford up to date for this edition of 'Contact!', Phil Butler has kindly supplied copies of Ministry of Supply Forms 1101, which provides a record of movements in Ministry of Supply ownership of the two Wayfarers, finished in RAF colours and serving at Defford. These aircraft were respectively G-AGPV which became VR380 and G-AGUT which became VR382. (Form 1101 is the equivalent form for Ministry of Supply aircraft, to the Form 78, for RAF aircraft).

On September 26th 1946, forms 1101 tell us G-AGUT (VR382) was flown from the Bristol Aeroplane Co at Filton to Defford, where it was accepted 'Off Contract' as a Flying Radar Laboratory. However, this did not go according to plan and instead VR382 was allotted to RAE Farnborough for 'Freighter Duties' – presumably a higher priority than radar research flying at Defford, and duly flown from Defford to Farnborough on November 26th 1946. After nearly a year, on August 12th 1947, VR382 was flown back to Filton for repairs and modifications, presumably to fit it to resume its earlier intended role in radar research. The loan to Defford continued until VR382 was 'released from task' on August 29th 1956, and sold initially to C. Graham at Bournemouth.

Following a generally similar career pattern, G-AGPV the first prototype Bristol 170 which was completed as a Wayfarer. Other sources tell us G-AGPV first flew on December 2nd 1945. After successful flying trials, G-AGPV was finished in RAF markings as VR380, and on September 26th 1946, despatched from Boscombe Down to Bristol's at Filton from where it was modified to meet TFU requirements, after which it was despatched again to Boscombe Down. On August 5th 1947, it was damaged with port engine failure, and despatched to Bristol's at Filton on November 17th 1947 for modifications. The next entry records the arrival at Defford of VR380 on June 2nd 1949. From Defford, the aircraft was despatched to Filton for modifications under contract 6/Aircraft/5820.CB.24(a), returning to Defford in January 1951. Twelve months later VR380 is recorded at West Raynham using AN/APQ 34 (which was a K-band bombing radar by Westinghouse), followed by use for training on AN/APQ 43 radar (US radar exported to UK with the British designation AI-22 for use in Javelins FAW.2 to FAW.6). Finally, in 1956 the airframe of VR380 was released and declared Category 5 for breaking to components. The record indicates that it was released to 24MU at Ternhill airfield in Shropshire, but in fact it probably remained at Defford. Finally, like its sister Wayfarer,

VR382, it was sold to C. Graham of Bournemouth, on August 29th 1956.

LEFT: A flying shot of Wayfarer VR380 (Phil Butler).

Reverting to G-AGPV, was it kept flying by the breaking for spares at Blackbushe of VR382 (G-AGUT)?



WAYFARER (cont.)

There are no entries on Forms 78 which might continue the story, but Dennis Williams points out other sources suggest that neither of the two aircraft were scrapped in 1956. Civil Aviation Authority records show that after C. Graham in 1957, G-AGPV was transferred to ownership of R.A. Short on November 28th 1957, then a year later to Shortcut Aviation (a trading name of R.A. Short) on November 6th 1958. Internet sources suggest G-AGUT may have been reassembled at Blackbushe, but was then scrapped, while G-AGPV was overhauled by Eagle Airways at Blackbushe before starting work with Shortcut Aviation, also at Blackbushe. Shortcut Aviation reformed as Air Condor and operated G-AGPV as its sole aircraft on charter work at Southend from March to December 1960, carrying out passenger, freight and livestock flights.

G-AGPV was being operated by Air Condor when it was involved in an accident at Southend on April 22nd 1960. After application of full power for a night take-off (with 44 passengers and three crew on board), the Wayfarer swung through approximately 270 degrees and collided with Auster G-AJEO of the Southend Flying Club. The Wayfarer sustained damage to the rudder but the Auster was written off. Two passengers in the Wayfarer were seriously injured when the rotating propeller of the light aircraft pierced the fuselage.

Whilst G-AGPV was being repaired (at Hurn) Air Condor leased B170 G-AHJD for its charter work until August 1960. G-AGPV returned to service but Air Condor went into administration in December 1960, with G-AGPV having been sold in November to Trans European Aviation at Coventry Airport. Trans European Aviation ceased operations in August 1962, and it is believed G-AGPV was flown to Gatwick (photographs show it there in 1963) and scrapped in 1965.

YOUR FEEDBACK WANTED!

Can you add to this story of the Bristol 170 Wayfarers which served at Defford 1948 – 1956 as “Flying Laboratories?” or on the subsequent history of these two aircraft?

Do you have any other comments on any aspect of the content of your ‘Contact!’ newsletter?

In either case, write to the Editor, Bob Shaw by e-mail on shaw.bob@btinternet.com

Thanks to Dennis Williams, Nic Shelley, Phil Butler and other DAHG members for additional information for this article. Ed.

Letters to the Editor

JET ASHTON, JET VIKING AND JET LANCASTRIAN

From Nic Shelley.

Thank you for another interesting and enjoyable newsletter.

It brought back many happy memories of my time navigating Ashton WH492 with four RR Nene engines from RAF Defford to Luce Bay on Bombing Trials while serving with TFU in what I then considered a remarkable aircraft.

In 1948 I had already flown in Lancastrian VH 742 fitted with two RR Nene engines as the outboard jet engines and two Merlins as the inboard engines with Captain Ron Shepherd (Rolls Royce Chief Test Pilot) and in Viking VX 856 fitted with twin RR Nene jet engines with Captain Mutt Summers (of Dam Buster Bouncing Bomb Trials fame) from Vickers airfield at Wisley on cabin noise measurement tests while serving as a Flight Test Observer during my Apprenticeship from 1941 to 1948 at the Rolls Royce Flight Test Establishment at Hucknall airfield near Nottingham.

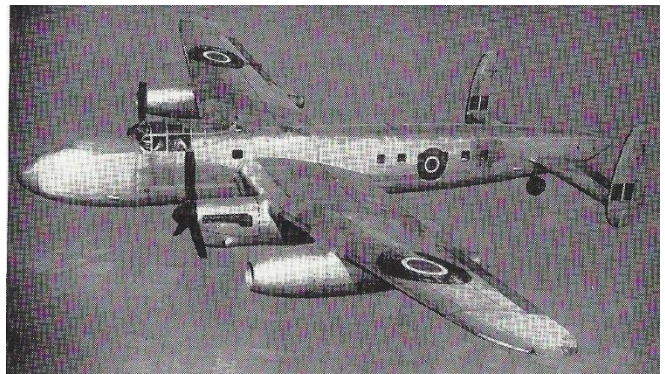
According to Bill Sleigh he thinks I am the only known member of Aircrew to have flown in all three of the UK's first three jet engined passenger aircraft!!!

Now 92 years old I look back with many happy memories of those halcyon days never to be repeated.

With all Best Wishes to you and all the DAHG members.

Nic Shelley Squadron Leader, RAF Retired

PS: Bob: Congratulations on bringing the major projects to a successful conclusion. I am pleased to read that you are continuing to edit/create 'Contact' each month in spite of your difficulties. Nic



ABOVE: *Left, Viking VX856. With Nene engines. Right, Lancastrian VH 742 with two RR Nene engines as the outboard jet engines and two Merlins as the inboard engines. The Merlin's props are feathered in this picture, so the Lancastrian is flying only on jet power.*

MORE ON AIR VICE MARSHAL RONALD BAIN THOMSON

From Mike Dean.



I think there may be a case of mistaken identity in Andrew Ferrier's piece when he wrote:

"Reading Bob's introduction to the article in May's newsletter about my uncle Ronnie Thomson, he mentioned that he flew with Frank Griffiths to Hilbre Island off the Dee estuary. Looking again at his log book, it seems that he also flew there on the 12th and 23rd June with other crew members and a Mr Capelli."

Assuming that you have access to the Fisher images, you will find MARIO CAPELLI in **four** of the images D000151, D00152, D02724 and D02725. Let me know if you need copies

Mike

ABOVE: *Mario Capelli who was a member of TRE Group 11. Ed)*

POSTSCRIPT ON AVRO ASHTON WB492

The story of the Ashton aircraft at Defford continues to attract comment and further information from readers:

From Phil Butler:

I attach my notes from the cards for WB492. You will note that the aircraft's fuselage was sent to Farnborough and I forgot to summarise that I think it was intended for some structural testing work.

Also, I have five photos of WB492 taken at Woodford in March 1952, and one airborne shot showing the wing-mounted bomb panniers, which I shall scan if you need them.

Best wishes, Phil

From Nic Shelley, Squadron Leader, RAF Retired

Hello Bob, on the date you mention 4th August 1955, when the fire in the wheel well of the Ashton was reported. Checking my Flying Log Books I see that on the 4th August 1955 (my 28th Birthday) I flew as navigator with Squadron Leader Hedgeland in Meteor WM295 from Defford to RAF Dyce and then return to Defford. Checking further I see that on the 4th August 1954 I flew on an Air Test with Flight Lieutenant Chase in Wayfarer VR 380 and if I remember rightly this might be the date of the Ashton incident. Would you please confirm that this is correct. Pleased you received the photos of the Lancastrian and Viking.

Best wishes, Nic

There will be more on Ashton WB492 and Wayfarers in the next (September 2019) edition of 'Contact!', the DAHG newsletter due to distributed on September 30th 2019. Bob Shaw, Editor

WILLIAM E HARRISON, RAF DEFFORD

Tony Bates, an RAF Defford Museum volunteer, reported on interesting visit by Anne-Marie Lloyd with her 93-year-old grandmother Mrs Edith Emily Marie Harrison on the 20th November 2018.

Mrs Harrison (née Adams), who currently lives in Gloucester, grew up on Stonehall Farm in Defford. Her father farmed land that was part of the Croome Estate which was requisitioned in 1940 for the construction of the airfield.

Her father also looked after animals on Defford Common and in his role as Steward he collected rents from those who grazed their animals on the Common. Mrs Harrison spoke about frequently visiting the Coventry family at Croome Court - but always by the back door!

Work started on airfield construction in 1940 and at some point there were both German and Italian prisoners of war working on the construction. Some were also involved in helping on the farm and sheep dipping was mentioned. One of the prisoners made a wooden cradle for her father.

In terms of her timeline, she went straight from school into codes and ciphers. She remembers being tested at school for suitability for that kind of work. She was first based at Biggin Hill and was then loaned to Bletchley Park. (EM Adams is listed on Bletchley park employees list.)

Whilst on leave she returned to Defford and met William E Harrison, an RAF serviceman who was based at Defford for a period. He had recently returned from Canada where he had been training. She understood that he was a navigator. In 1944 they were married in Pershore Abbey and the best man was an American serviceman known as 'Hank' (surname had slipped the memory) a pilot in 219 Sqn.

Guests at the wedding included Group Captain John McDonald and his wife and she also mentioned his driver (WAAF Joan Tustin) who was a close friend. One or two other names mentioned including Wing Commander Harkness.

Mrs Harrison spent an hour in the Museum with her daughter and it was a very moving experience. Once or twice during the video she excitedly pointed out where they were located and a number of faces were recognised as she moved around the Museum.



LEFT: William Harrison training in Canada

RIGHT: The wedding at Pershore Abbey of William Harrison and Edith Adams, 1944.

