



Local History: What Ever Happened to Alton's Spitfire?

Throughout the Second World War, which Britain entered on 3 September 1939 following the onset of German aggression on Poland two days earlier, the British people were encouraged to save money and invest it in the war effort. National Savings campaigns on service themes were organised each year and local newspapers were full of advertising for them and their associated publicity events.

The National Savings movement was a direct legacy from the 1914-18 war and its main aim was to appeal to the small saver. The purchase of National Savings Certificates was portrayed as more advantageous and sociable than stuffing the notes into the mattress. It became the War Savings Campaign in November 1939 when local committees were re-organised. Smaller units, such as street and works groups, increased enormously and by 1943 there were nearly 300,000. It has been suggested that the efforts of these voluntary workers in the savings movements helped more than all the propaganda, BBC broadcasts, films, leaflets and posters.

Special drives with great local activity were organised annually in the war years starting with the National Savings Week of June 1940 and followed by War Weapons Week, Warships Week, Wings for Victory, Salute the Soldier and Thanksgiving Week in subsequent years. The pre-war tradition of the movement ensured the success of the appeals, but it has been suggested that all they did was switch existing funds rather than achieve 'new' savings. It is thought that it did discourage people from spending, thus not hindering the war effort. It seems that the Wings for Victory and later campaigns did help sustain civilian morale, so were useful from that angle rather than the generation of additional saving.

The Spitfire funds of 1940 represented tangible evidence for the support of the RAF by the British public. At that time enemy aircraft ranged over the skies of Southern Britain and with RAF planes flying from many Hampshire airfields, many folk would have been familiar with the efforts of the young allied pilots. The bombing of Southampton, Portsmouth and many other places, combined with the crashes of numerous hostile aircraft, would have re-enforced the desirability of more fighters.

The idea of presenting planes had begun in the First World War and in the summer of 1940 every other Spitfire off the production line had been donated. A nominal sum of £5,000 had been quoted as the cost of a Spitfire and in addition to individuals who provided a plane, local funds were started up all over the country and indeed the Commonwealth.

In Hampshire the campaign seems to have been launched following a letter from Dr HM King, a teacher at Taunton's School in Southampton (later an MP and Speaker of the House of Commons), in the Hampshire Chronicle on 27 July 1940. The next edition of the weekly paper included an appeal to



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farmers, farm workers and everyone interested in the countryside for a Hampshire Agricultural Fighter Plane. Subsequently the Broadlands Spitfire Fund raised £118-15-7 (£118.78) from tenants and workers on the estate which was passed to this fund.

On 10 August the Mayor of Winchester opened an appeal for Winchester and District. Dr King wrote again the following week reporting that *'a countywide campaign was springing up in Hampshire to raise Spitfires for the nation. Portsmouth was first in the field with two, Gosport, New Forest and Winchester are raising one, Bournemouth and Southampton were stirring and Eastleigh would shortly be at work'*.

On Tuesday, 3 September 1940, the first anniversary of the outbreak of war, a Spitfire Fund was launched in the Alton Urban and Rural Districts. Within very few weeks the target had been reached and there was considerable embarrassment that this fact was announced before a big fund-raising concert of the Coldstream Guards on Sunday, 20 October. There were problems selling the tickets as a result and a suggestion that keeping the figures quiet until after the concert was regarded by some as obtaining money by false pretences! Whilst £100 might have been expected for a sell-out performance, only £9-15-5d (£9.77) was raised as a consequence. Other schemes had been more successful including an exhibition of vegetables in the fire station, various sporting events and the raffle of a German airman's parachute which had been on display in Kerridge's shop window in the town.

At the final meeting on 12 November 1940 a cheque was sent to Lord Beaverbrook and it was agreed to name the plane 'The Alton and District Spitfire' and it was requested that it be flown over the district at a pre-arranged time. Interestingly, the decisions made at the final meeting were never formally ratified as there was no further meeting and the minutes were never signed by the Chairman, Councillor Arthur Jones, Chairman of the Alton Urban District Council!

Meanwhile on 7 September the Hampshire Chronicle carried a letter from an ex-public school serving Officer regarding an appeal for a Public Schools Spitfire, donations to be sent to the Alresford Branch of Lloyds Bank. Three weeks later a Cedarwood Pug-owning resident of Itchen Abbas started an 'Our dogs Dog Fighter Fund' to present a Spitfire from the dogs of England! The Mayor of Winchester did not seem to be having a lot of success with his campaign. Following a letter suggesting that such appeals were not helping the widows and children of those killed in the Battle of Britain, he was prompted to start another appeal for these dependants. In November it was reported that he had sent £88 to the RAF Benevolent Fund. At that time it is surprising to note that the Winchester and District Spitfire Fund was still some £600 short of its target, whilst appeals in other Hampshire towns had already achieved theirs.



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Presenting an aircraft was in fact a nominal term, as no additional planes were built. It was not possible to order individual aircraft as the factories were already in full production on Government contracts. Consequently the aeronautical press at that time suggested that national interests would be better served if such monies raised by public campaigns were given to the RAF Benevolent Fund!

The Southampton factory of Supermarine had been destroyed by enemy raids on 26 September 1940, resulting in the planned dispersal of production in a number of requisitioned premises in the surrounding counties. Many of the early purchased aircraft were the Spitfire Mk IIB version, built at the newly constructed factory at Castle Bromwich in the Midlands, also a target for enemy bombers. By the beginning of April 1941 some 650 out of a total of 920 Mk II Spitfires had left the works to complete the re-equipping of squadrons using older Mk I planes.

With a donation of £5520 11s 9d in November 1940, the Alton Urban and Rural District Spitfire Fund in Hampshire presented Mk Ila P8173, taken on charge by 45MU (Maintenance Unit) Kinloss on 14 March 1941, then allocated on 26 March to no 266 (Rhodesian) Squadron at Wittering for operations. On 3 July it was shot down by Bf109s while escorting Blenheims to Mazingarbe, Sgt R J Thoburn 754132 being wounded and captured, to end the war as POW No.6 in Stalag 357 at Kopernikus. Other Hampshire aircraft have also been documented.

The Andoverian (AD204) was a Mk.Vb Spitfire. It was delivered to 118 Squadron at Ibsley airfield in Hampshire in September 1941. It had a long and interesting history and survived the war, unlike many of the presentation Spitfires. The Cat, the unofficial name of the Aldershot aircraft (P8136) saw active service for six months before taking on a training role; Bournemouth II (R7220) a Mk. Va survived the war; Winchester eventually put its name to a Mk. V Spitfire (W3319) which first flew on 10 June 1941. Assigned to 92 Squadron the following month, it failed to return from an operation on 27 August 1941 and was posted missing. The New Forest plane, a Mk V (W3323), was lost in a mid-air collision in September 1941, less than three months after taking to the sky. Records also indicate that The Dog Fighter, also a Mk V Spitfire (W3403), first flew on 7 June 1941, joined 92 Squadron on 9 July, but was removed from their list only two days later.

In 1940 commemorative illuminated manuscripts were presented to Local Savings Committees which presented aircraft and many of them were framed and hung in Town Halls all over the country. It is uncertain if any these, or the small shields such as the one in the Alton Town Hall, are to be found in other Hampshire towns. However by 1942 for War Weapons Week, and in subsequent years, special bas-relief plaques were produced for local savings groups and these also found their way into Civic Offices. A certificate of Honour for the 1943 Wings for Victory campaign was presented to the Alton & District Savings Committee and this was later given to the Curtis Museum.



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The target for Alton in the Wings for Victory appeal between 3-10 April 1943 was £240,000, enough for the purchase of five Lancaster bombers. These aircraft had entered service the previous year and were the RAF's greatest bomber of the Second World War with over six thousand being produced. It is perhaps relevant to mention that on 21 March 1943, just two weeks before the savings appeal, the famous Dambuster's raid had taken place so the public were enthusiastic at the prospect of helping provide more bombers. The appeal was opened by Squadron Leader Learoyd VC, accompanied by the local MP at that time, General Sir George Jeffreys, who took the salute at the customary parade and march-past outside the AUDC Offices in Westbrook House. The Squadron Leader also gave a speech in the Public Gardens in front of a Hurricane fighter, which remained all week to help promote the events. He gave news of the Spitfire which Alton and District so generously gave to the nation in 1940.

The aircraft had gone in 1941 to a Squadron which took part in many sweeps over the Channel and occupied territory. It also accompanied many bombing raids on docks, factories, marshalling yards and that sort of thing, and took part in protecting convoys within fighter distance of our shores. In July 1941 the Alton Spitfire went up with a Squadron for a sweep over Northern France. They met a considerable number of Me 109s, and several dog-fights ensued. Your aircraft is missing from that operation.

An advertisement for the savings campaign in the local newspaper the following week proclaimed *Avenge your Spitfire by lending for Lancasters*, suggesting no-one locally had known of the exploits or demise of their aircraft prior to Sdn. Ldr. Learoyd's speech. In the event £253,841 was raised, which was sufficient for six Lancasters at a nominal cost of £40,000 each. The fact that the average life of such aircraft was some three weeks and that during April 1943 Bomber Command lost 243 planes on operational service, 93 of which were Lancasters, suggests that information in any surviving log books might be a little sparse. As each Lancaster had a crew of seven, the terrible loss of life is a far more important fact than numbers of replaceable aircraft.

In addition, it appears that in 1943 log books were presented to the Air Ministry in which were to be recorded the details of the operations of the aircraft 'purchased'. Each book was to have inscriptions on the front cover to commemorate the savings campaign and inside the cover to relate the book to the local Savings committee. These were to be returned at the end of the war and at the time of the appeal it was realised that they would become historical documents of great interest and should be handed over to the Mayor to arrange for their permanent custody. How often this actually happened is uncertain, although there are two such log books relating to aircraft 'purchased' by a town in neighbouring Dorset.



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Unfortunately no log books relating to Hampshire towns have yet been located. It would be interesting to know if any survived and to find out what happened to other planes with Hampshire connections.