

Air Schools Limited

The journey began on 20 May 1938 when a newly registered business, Air Schools Ltd, held their first meeting in readiness to begin an operation focusing on flying training. The company had already secured the lease on Derby Corporation's new all-grass municipal airport at Burnaston, six miles south-west of the city, and now had their sights set on securing a lucrative government contract to train Royal Air Force volunteer and reserve pilots, in readiness for the war that was brewing in Europe.¹

The chairman, managing director and driving force of the new company was Captain Roy Harben (1887–1947), a veteran of the Royal Flying Corps and winner of the Distinguished Flying Cross.² Harben had seen for himself the build-up of Germany's flying clubs and the re-formed Luftwaffe³ and had taken his concerns to the Air Ministry, who were already annexing small airfields as operational bases for their squadrons-in-waiting.

With the contract signed Captain Harben delegated the task of setting up the flying school to Edward Philips, who until recently had been part of the team responsible for organizing the legendary Royal Air Force Flying Displays at Hendon.⁴ Over the summer months Air Schools Ltd took delivery of twelve De Havilland Tiger Moths, four Hawker Hinds, three Fairey Battles and one Hawker Audax from the RAF in readiness for their first military contract, which began instruction in the autumn of 1938 as Number 30 Elementary and Reserve Flying Training School.⁵

As political events escalated the pace of pilot training increased and the complement of Tiger Moths soon swelled to 72, with Air Schools' civilian staff working a two-shift regime seven days a week and flying continuing well into the early hours of the morning.⁶ With an operation dealing with 180

trainee pilots at any one time the Royal Air Force were soon obliged to expand the limited facilities at Burnaston. The new buildings included a large hangar (Big Hangar) for storing and maintaining aircraft, together with a selection of transportable hangars, a parachute packing shed and a Link Trainer shed to house an early type of flight simulator. Burnaston House, the airport's dilapidated 19th-century mansion, was cleaned up for use as staff living quarters with an officers' mess on the ground floor.⁷ Prefabricated timber huts were



Wing Commander Roy Harben founded Air Schools Ltd, the company that later became Derby Aviation, in 1938.



Levelling the site for the new grass airfield at Burnaston, April 1938.

built behind the flying strip as the administrative base for ground and air crews. The training of pilots and engineers was well under way when Burnaston Airport was officially opened on 17 June 1939 with a grand flying spectacle dominated by RAF bombers.⁸ Trading during the financial year of 1939 was 'very successful' with contracts for the Link Trainer, the most profitable component of the company's business.⁹ By developing a number of enhancements for the Link trainer, including wrap-around scenery, Air Schools made an important contribution to the wartime training effort.

When war broke out in 1939, Captain Harben was recommissioned as a serving officer for the Air Ministry. As the law demanded, he resigned from the board of Air Schools Ltd and sold his shares. In order to continue his crucial role

as the motivation behind the development of the company, he became responsible for non-service matters as commanding officer and general organizing manager at Burnaston.¹⁰ He went on to establish a second flying school at Wolverhampton¹¹



Derby Aviation's original offices at Burnaston Airfield, 1947–65.



Burnaston Airport in 1956, looking westwards along Runway 27. Burnaston House is the white building amongst the trees to the right.