

## **THE AIR-BRITAIN TRUST**

### **CHAIRMAN'S REPORT TO THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING – 21 OCTOBER 2017**

Air-Britain is now in its 70<sup>th</sup> year but has no intentions of either retiring or resting on its laurels. We live in challenging times and must respond accordingly.

So, what I intend to do in this presentation is to give you some insight into what we are doing and how we are responding to the various challenges.

The last year or so has in many respects been a period of transition for Air-Britain as we seek to look at what we do and what we produce for you, our members, and try to ensure that our products, services and ethos are fit for purpose. But, equally, we must also focus on getting in new and younger members in order to reverse the steady decline in our numbers given the increasing age profile of our existing membership.

Essentially, we have the dilemma of working out what we have to produce in order to attract in younger members while, at the same time, ensuring that we continue to deliver the products and services that the majority of you, our existing membership, want from us.

Air-Britain is, of course, both a membership organisation and now a charitable trust. This means that, in what we do, we have to focus both on the needs and desires of you, our members, while at the same time having regard to our charitable aims and posterity which is principally the recording, preservation and dissemination of aviation history.

I think it might be helpful firstly just to outline or remind you of our present management structure. This meeting today is formally the AGM of the charitable trust – of which you are all members. It is the same legal entity as our previous existence as Air-Britain (Historians) Limited but we introduced a revised constitution to assist in our refocus to ensure our long-term survival in these changing times.

As I outlined earlier in the formal part of the AGM, the Trust Board comprises, at present, 11 individuals. We would like to increase this to our full complement of 12 – so would welcome interested parties coming forward. The core roles of the Trust and its Board are to oversee what Air-Britain is doing. This is both for its members – you here today – and equally importantly to ensure that we are meeting our charitable objectives.

Desirably, the Trust Board should reflect our diverse interests and we believe that it perhaps ought to comprise no more than (say) 6 members who are active in the day to day management of Air-Britain but, more importantly, at least six who are non-executive. The non-executives have an important role to play in being able to stand back and focus on initiatives, strategy and long-term planning. In particular, they are there to ensure that what the management is doing is appropriate to safeguard the long-term survival of Air-Britain. We also look to our non-executives in particular, in representing and promoting our interests within the greater aviation fraternity.

Beneath the Trust, we have our main operating company – Air-Britain Trading Ltd as well as three other companies – Air-Britain Events Ltd, Air-Britain Travel Limited and Air-Britain Ltd. These latter companies are there primarily to protect Air-Britain from serious financial and commercial risk. Events manages our annual Fly-In, Travel our overseas tours and Air-Britain Limited is registered so as to protect our legal name.

The oversight of the day to day running of Air-Britain in all its activities is managed via a number of committees. The principal one is the Executive Committee, chaired by Rod Simpson and comprising representative members covering each of our activities.

There are also separate committees which get on with their own specific functions. Key is the Book Publishing Committee under the chairmanship of Nigel Dingley and then there is the Membership Services Committee chaired by Dennis Clement which is the interface between you, our members, and the management of Air-Britain and it endeavours to ensure that we are delivering the product and services that you want.

So that's the broad structure. So what have we been doing and, more importantly, what is in the offing. But, before I do that, I do want to make a special plea for help.

Perhaps the biggest hole in Air-Britain's collective management skills is that we have little or no professional expertise in marketing. We have so much to offer and yet we are often poor at telling the world and his wife about it. At best, we recognise we are amateurs – Howard Nash does what he can with advertising but admits he's a layman, Nigel Dingley, Steve Mitchell and a few others put material out on Facebook but it's a bit ad hoc and unstructured and we have no-one properly doing public relations and interface with the media. Put simply, I have to reiterate that we are amateurs in the all-important area of communications management. If anyone thinks they can help us or know of others who can, please do not hesitate in coming forward to help us fill this gap.

I mentioned earlier that we have been going through what I can best describe as a transition period – and this is by no means yet complete. Change is never easy – not least because there is always a divergence of views about what we should change and what we should leave alone.

The most obvious change which we will be introducing in 2018 is a restructure of our membership options and the magazines. This has come about as a result of two separate but linked decisions.

The first was the realisation from our consultations that our three separate quarterly magazines – AvWorld, Archive and Aeromilitaria were no longer quite delivering what we believed was wanted by you. In particular, Archive and Aeromilitaria were looking tired – unsurprising since their format had barely changed from when they were first introduced in the 1970s. The second driver was in response to the divergent interests of the membership.

It is probably a fact that an overwhelming proportion of our members join because they want the monthly Air-Britain News and access to our annual enthusiast titles. I see nothing wrong in this and we should be fully supporting their hobby and interests by giving them what they want. Their interests essentially finance what we do. But there is another body of members who are primarily interested in aviation history and research and for whom Archive and Aeromilitaria were originally designed and they equally look to us for support in their interests. There are, of course, many members who fit into both camps.

After lots of discussion therefore, we have come up with the revised structure which hopefully will be recognised generally as a win-win. Essentially, the three quarterlies will be merged into an enlarged AvWorld but importantly none of the present content and scope will be lost since we will be moving what tends to be called the listing material in those magazines on to our revamped website. This will facilitate the added advantage of making such data searchable. We will, by the way, ensure that those series which are still underway will be reproduced on the website in full from part one onwards.

The revamped AvWorld will henceforth focus on readable and researched articles.

As to ABN, by providing this as a standalone product, we have been able to reduce the cost to those members who simply want this and we are committed to making this monthly magazine even better in the future with increased coverage. And, while not dwelling on other publications' troubles, we would hope that those who previously subscribed to Aviation Letter will now see the benefits of taking ABN instead. The content of ABN is second to none and I must pay tribute to all the editors, sub-editors and correspondents who make it happen and particularly to Sue Bushell who puts it all expertly together.

While on the subject of ABN, I should mention the changes afoot to the electronic version. A few years ago, we introduced e-ABN as an option. Regrettably the take-up was poorer than we had forecast and its revenues did not cover its costs which has meant those taking the paper magazines were in effect subsidising the electronic version. What we have now done therefore is to follow the Scramble model and have entered into a contract with Pocketmags so that anyone wanting the electronic version subscribes through them. Pocketmags publish a vast array of e-magazines and our deal with them is on a shared revenue basis so we will no longer be losing money on this venture.

We have also decided that we will also be uploading back copies of e-ABN on to the Pocketmags site and we shall be formulating a special discounted offer to all members to enable them to buy the back

issue set in electronic format. And finally, we will also be ensuring that anyone buying an annual subscription to e-ABN via Pocketmags will be afforded full membership benefits.

It's early days with the revamped e-ABN and we will be monitoring how it works and look forward to feedback from any of our members who subscribe so that we can ensure that, to the extent that it is possible, it fully meets your requirements.

In regard to these various changes, I would like to pay particular tribute to Sean Meagher who is one of the few of us who seems to understand electronics and has led our discussions with Pocketmags!

I briefly touched earlier on our website. This is another one of our 'in transit' issues and, under the help and guidance of Ian Sparkes with Geoff Bogle of Resolution Computers, we are nearing the completion of a brand new website. It has to be admitted that our present website, which dates back far too far into the past and has been tweaked over the years, now looks a bit of a mess. At a recent meeting of the Board and Executive Committee, we viewed the look and feel of the new website which will be much cleaner and easy to use and will come with added advantages. There is still some work to do but we hope to get it up and running by the year end.

In particular, as I mentioned, the new website will carry those listing articles formerly in Archive and Aeromilitaria as well as bringing together various other electronic material, such as the virtually moribund Researcher's Corner. As matters stand, no decision has yet been taken as to whether we will have a password-protected Members-only section – but probably initially we will have everything open-book in order to encourage non-members to see what we are about.

Linked to all these regular magazine and research offerings, we are also some way down the track of introducing a regular e-newsletter available both to members and non-members. This will be primarily aimed at keeping you up to date, hopefully on about a monthly basis, with what's going on and what new offerings we have available as well as giving links to other things which we think might be of interest.

We need to see how this will evolve but it is one of our responses to the valid criticisms that there is no forum other than the quarterly AvWorld which keeps you in touch with us. We also suspect that, these days, more people will scan read something when it comes over their PC or tablet and thus it will be a more user-friendly form of communication.

However, the dreaded Data Protection Act and the increasing restrictions on who we can send what to over the internet is first having to be understood and resolved before we can launch the e-newsletter. But we are being ably helped by Jeremy Parkin and Steve Mitchell in getting this new product and service on-stream.

I cannot leave the subject of electronic products without also talking about AB-PIC and AB-IX. AB-PIC, which is freely available to both members and non-members has now been relaunched on a new platform. When it was first introduced, it was based on a platform which would have allowed it to hold about 25,000 photos. At the time, we never realised what a success we were spawning and as the numbers of photos grew, so the platform groaned and increasingly fell-over. But, thanks in particular to the management by Simon Wills and his team, the new platform is in place and is expanding again. Simon can update us but there are now about 250,000 images available to view. It is in my opinion that AB-PIC is undoubtedly the best aviation photo site on the internet in terms not only of the variety of aircraft contained therein but also the reliability and usability of the data in its captioning.

One is always pleased to find that, in searching for a particular registration, AB-PIC more often than not now comes up with the goods on the first page of Mr Google. If you haven't accessed it recently, I would urge you to have a look – and also perhaps to contribute further images – both new and old.

As to AB-IX – Air-Britain Information Exchange – this is one of the real benefits to members not available anywhere else and a serious success story. However, it has to be said that its use has given rise to a bit of controversy with some of its members. About one-third of our members regularly view it and in our surveys it has been determined that the overwhelming majority want it to be kept strictly to what it says on the tin – ie a facility for members to seek answers to their queries on aviation subjects, such as assistance in identifying what they have seen or digging into historical data etc etc. However, like all open forums, members can and do stray off the point. And, on occasion, some

responses can regrettably be intemperate which simply and unnecessarily upsets the person posting in all good faith.

In the interests of all our subscribers, we therefore have had to be fairly strict in overseeing what is being posted and also reminding offenders of the rules and guidelines.

But what has clearly emerged is that there is a need for an alternative forum for use by members in exchanging views and information both between themselves and for you to have the ability to dialogue with relevant individuals both within and without Air-Britain management about changes, policies, ideas and the like. Hence, we are now actively planning to introduce a new forum – some people call it a bulletin board – which we intend will be designed to meet these needs.

Again, it is early days and in particular, we are somewhat thin on people resources to run this new forum. Like all forums, it will need managing on a day to day to ensure that it is not abused – so we are looking for volunteers both to help us get the new site up and running and then to assist in managing it.

Finally, on the subject of ABIX, as you may know, it is presently hosted on the Yahoo network and this has seemingly increasingly caused some members access and uploading/downloading problems. Also, it is reliably reported that Yahoo may in the near future cease offering such hosting facilities. We are therefore looking into ensuring not only continuity but the preservation of the valuable ABIX archive and also in the process, ensuring that existing issues are reduced or overcome.

Mentioning the word archive, leads me to this more difficult topic. I have, as most of you may know, championed our need to preserve and make available an archive which contains not only books, magazines and photographs but also an increasing array of member's own unique records – from spotting logs through to detailed research files. Some years ago, we had hoped that the joint venture being proposed by the Royal Aeronautical Society would be the solution but they then substantially scaled back this project to one simply preserving their own material within the National Aerospace Library at Farnborough. Much of what we believe is important to be preserved for posterity and in support of our type of researches and needs, is simply not catered for within the NAL.

But – and it is a big But – while we have the makings of a substantial and comprehensive archive – we have so far singularly failed to identify the solution to the much more important issue of how it can be exploited properly and specifically how to make the material available to researchers and other interested parties. Just to put matters into context and since I personally look after the book and magazine archive, while Rod Simpson oversees the photographic archive, we now have some 9000 plus books and I guess about 30/35,000 aviation magazines. The latter include copies of almost every UK commercial aviation magazine from 1909 plus a sizeable number of foreign ones as well as a good proportion of the vast number of enthusiasts' magazines. In regard to the latter, if we don't collect them in, then many will simply disappear for ever. So, may I appeal to all that you should contact me if you have enthusiast magazines available to add to the archive collection.

While on the subject, perhaps I should also mention that this year we received notification that the CAA library and archive at Gatwick was being severely downsized. As a result, I undertook a rescue mission so we now have a vast collection of unique material including accident reports and the like. These have been added to previous downsizings by the CAA in our favour in respect of all their original paper-based register ledgers and material. Thanks in particular to Tony Doyle for monitoring CAA discards!

While it is an excellent concept to have all our archival material digitised, the enormity of such project is pretty overwhelming (especially when to undertake fast scanning, one inevitably destroys the original book or magazine). I don't at present have an answer and we certainly do not want to spend or invest substantial sums on such a project unless and until we know we have a viable solution to accessibility. In the meantime, I would particularly like to thank Geoff Negus who busies himself away with scanning some of our material. Those who subscribe to ABIX will know the valuable services that Geoff renders in responding to questions that come up, by reference to what he has scanned.

In the meantime, archival records which are donated are being boxed and stored at our distribution outlet at Tonbridge and it is possible they could be made available although at present they are not

catalogued. If someone would like to attend there to undertake a cataloguing, don't hesitate to let me know.

And which brings me on to the topic of Tonbridge itself. As you may recall, we had to vacate our previous distribution outlets at relatively short notice and were thus forced to take on a more expensive 5-year lease at Tonbridge to handle sales and distribution. This has now settled down and is being managed efficiently by John Henderson and his team of helpers. However, some of you may know that we have been beset of late with a number of internet issues, primarily it seems as a consequence of required upgrades to the credit card shopping facilities which require a high level of internet security.

I must give particular thanks to Howard Nash, our Membership Secretary, who has bravely fought through these issues in conjunction with John Henderson, Ian Sparkes, Geoff Bogle and others to try to keep the services running. Fingers crossed, we now seem to be finally fully back up and running.

Tonbridge is our vital operation to manage the sales of our books and this year we were particularly pleased with the combined efforts of our authors and the book publishing committee under Nigel Dingley in getting out our much-needed annuals both on time and in an improved format. The QR books, ERH & Airline Fleets are all very much a must-have early in the season and are well-received by both members and non-member enthusiasts alike. We also continue to publish the unique annual volume of record being the Civil Aircraft Registers of the British Isles – a full set of which is vital for researches into British civil aviation.

In the recent past, we have also published a number of new books giving the ultimate word on the subject – such as the 748, the Drover and the blockbuster Squadrons of the Fleet Air Arm. But what is on the horizon you may ask. Shortly, we will be publishing the detailed story of the post-war Avro transports – From Lancaster to York by Derek King. As I mentioned earlier, Derek was too unwell to attend today but this will be a masterwork when out in the near future. We also have on the stocks for the next 12 months or so, books on the Auster, the Beaufighter and even the fourth volume of the Miles trilogy from Peter Amos!

In terms of the regular updates, we are looking to get out the first revamped volume of Jet Airliners in the foreseeable future – this one being on Airbus, to be followed in due course with two further volumes on Boeing and then everything else. These are under the management of Terry Smith and, although he cannot be here today, we will tell him not to delay the Airbus volume by seeking to include Bombardier in the book! We have also persuaded Bob Ogden to update his Museums of the Rest of the World for publication early next year. And finally, for those of you who remembered the old Midland Counties series of directories on RAF Losses etc, we have secured the rights to publish the missing volume 2 of Bomber Command Losses in the Middle East. Many other books are in the pipeline.

While on the subject of sales, we must also mention the growing value of our second-hand book and magazines stock managed at Tonbridge by Roger Birchall. We update our sales list about once a month – it is on our website – and this is undoubtedly the most extensive list of aviation titles and magazines available anywhere on the net. We rely exclusively on donations but this does mean that many rare titles become available from members downsizing or, indeed, their family making the material available after they have passed on. So, as the evenings draw in, sit down and trawl your way through the list to fill in the gaps in your collections!

Of course, the other thing you should be doing in the evenings is thinking about next year and this brings me on to Air-Britain Travel, ably managed by Dennis Clement. This year, we had very successful trips to South East USA visiting Atlanta, Alabama, Pensacola and ending up at Sun n Fun in Florida and then a trawl round Scandinavian airports and museums and finally a long weekend in Frankfurt. Dennis has just announced that for 2018, he is organising a lengthy trip to Alaska and NW America, another to Italy, Switzerland and Friedrichshafen and finally a new 4-day visit to Madrid. Let's hope the second Spanish Civil War has not broken out by then!

These tours are always well worthwhile and generally have some added value not available on an independent visit and the camaraderie and accommodation are always both first class.

Our other outdoor event of the year is our Fly-In, ably managed by Phil Kemp at North Weald and well worthwhile both to see some interesting visiting aircraft and to meet old and new friends. The event management itself could not go ahead without the efforts of the Stansted Branch of Air-Britain who this year celebrated their 50<sup>th</sup> birthday. I and Simon Wills were delighted to attend their celebratory event in September.

On a sadder note, we have to record the demise of what was once considered our premier 'branch' – the London Society of Air-Britain or LSAB. Given increasing costs and difficulties in venues and travelling in London, this had struggled for many years but finally had to admit defeat. Our thanks to James Dale for all his efforts over the years.

While on the subject of other societies, some of you may have heard of the difficulties being faced by the Airfield Research Group of late. This very valued association has, like so many others, suffered from declining membership and equally a declining number of volunteers to keep them and their excellent quarterly magazine going. I can report that Vic Flintham and I have had on behalf of Air-Britain some initial discussions with them to see what we can do to help, given that they too have charitable status and archival material which needs to be preserved. I hope that we can find a formula to help them without causing our own limited resources to be stretched even further.

Which brings me on to make a few observations about our own back room. In running an organisation such as Air-Britain, various administrative functions have to be undertaken. For example, we have to pay the bills and make sure all our money is properly accounted for and managed. A number of fairly fundamental changes have recently been made in this area.

When our late lamented treasurer & book-keeper, Don Schofield, suddenly passed away a few years back, Mike Rice was able to bring in a non-member, Mark Simons to take over Don's role. But, with the complexity consequent on our reorganisation into a charity and with ever-increasing bureaucratic accounting and tax issues, we decided we needed proper professional help. Accordingly we have now taken on the services of a part-time accountant/book-keeper, Maria Nunn and it was agreed that Mark would stand down from both the accounting and treasurer role.

Under this reorganisation, an increasing role is also being taken on by Steve Mitchell, himself a chartered accountant and who is, fortuitously for us, on the point of taking retirement from his current employer. Amongst the assistance he will be giving us, Steve will be looking at helping us take proper advantage of our charitable status – and for example, has now signed us up to be able to operate Gift-Aid. More details of this opportunity for Air-Britain to benefit from tax-related benefits will be made available in the near future – when we have fully explored the options available.

I am pleased to say that Mike Rice himself, having so ably organised the relocation of sales and distribution to Tonbridge and handed over the management baton to John Henderson, has now resumed his earlier role as treasurer which he previously undertook many years ago, when life was much simpler.

Mike has served Air-Britain in various roles for more years than I care to remember and has always been willing to go that extra mile to do what's needed. In recognition of all his efforts over the years and because he has hitherto been in receipt of several of our awards, the Board thought we would recognise his services in a different manner this year by giving him a surprise. Unfortunately, Mike then told us he couldn't make it here today and hence the surprise will have to wait! But, here it is – a painting purchased at the recent Guild of Aviation Artists exhibition in the Mall. Mike admired it when he visited on the open day with a group of AB friends and Vic Flintham then surreptitiously bought it!

So, duly presented to Mike in his absence!

That, ladies and gentlemen, brings my somewhat extended review of where we are and where we're going to a conclusion – but I am happy to field any questions with support from my fellow directors and post-holders here today. We will, in particular take note of any suggestions and equally look to volunteers coming forward (here or later) to help us move forward!

**Malcolm Fillmore**