

Surviving RAF and Commonwealth squadron ORBs which are over 30 years old are open to the public and are at TNA in class AIR 27 (except RAF Regiment squadrons which are in AIR 29, and South African Air Force units in AIR 54). ORBs of some other RAF units, such as operational training units, are in AIR 29. Fleet Air Arm squadron ORBs for the Second World War are in ADM 207. Army Air Corps squadron ORBs (from 1957 onwards) are in WO 295.

ORBs which are less than thirty years old are held by the Air Historical Branch of the Ministry of Defence. Bona fide researchers may apply to the Branch for the release of information from such books.

Named Aircraft

During both World Wars, some aircraft were paid for by public subscriptions or private benefactors, and these 'presentation' aircraft were often given names. During the Second World War the authorities were keen to encourage the 'purchase' of aircraft by subscription. The donors were given a photograph of 'their' aircraft and, in some cases, a logbook was compiled detailing some of the aircraft's exploits. Some of these are now in local museums, libraries and record offices.

Research and Development Aircraft

Aircraft used by research and development establishments at Boscombe Down and Farnborough were loaned to the Ministry of Aircraft Production (MAP) and its successors. A card was kept by the MAP for each aircraft, recording details of the loan. The Royal Air Force Museum has microfilm copies of these cards.

The Royal Aircraft Establishment's flight logs, which record virtually every flight made at Farnborough between 1914 and 1954, are at TNA in class AVIA 1.

Fleet Air Arm aircraft

More detailed histories of individual Fleet Air Arm aircraft are given in:

- R Sturtivant & D Cronin, *Fleet Air Arm Aircraft, Units and Ships 1920 to 1939* (Air-Britain, 1998).
- R Sturtivant & M Burrow, *Fleet Air Arm Aircraft 1939 to 1945* (Air-Britain, 1995).

Preserved aircraft

Preserved historic aircraft, surviving in the UK in museums and elsewhere, are listed in: K Ellis, *Wrecks and Relics* (17th edition: Midland Publishing, 2000).

Further Research

Please write to the Department of Research and Information Services if you require further advice on these or other sources.

Further information on many more sources, especially official records, is given in: S Fowler, P Elliott, R C Nesbit & C Goulter, *RAF Records in the PRO* (PRO Publications, 1994).

TNA's website also gives advice on using the records held there.

Addresses

The National Archives

Ruskin Avenue
Kew
Richmond
Surrey TW9 4DU
Tel: 020 8876 3444
www.nationalarchives.gov.uk

Department of Printed Books Imperial War Museum

Lambeth Road
London
SE1 6HZ
tel: 020 7416 5000
www.iwm.org.uk

Air Historical Branch (RAF)

Building 824
RAF Northolt
West End Road
Ruislip
Middlesex HA4 6NG

Department of Research & Information Services

Information Sheet No.5 Royal Air Force Aircraft: Service Histories

This leaflet describes the records available at the Royal Air Force Museum and elsewhere, as well as listing some useful books (titles of books are given in *italics*). The books mentioned here are in the Royal Air Force Museum's Library, and may also be held by The National Archives (TNA) (formerly the Public Record Office) and the Imperial War Museum.

Researchers wishing to view material held in the Royal Air Force Museum's library and archives should make an appointment by telephone, fax or e-mail with the Department of Research and Information Services well in advance of their proposed visit. Enquiries should be made in writing (enclosing an SAE), mentioning any sources which have already been consulted.

Separate information sheets are available from the Department of Research and Information Services about other topics of research, such as RAF personnel records and aircraft or airfield histories.

Department of Research & Information Services
Royal Air Force Museum, Grahame Park Way, Hendon,
London NW9 5LL Tel: 020 8205 2266 Fax: 020 8200 1751

website: www.rafmuseum.org
e-mail: research@rafmuseum.org

In the case of aircraft in service from the 1930s onwards, it is generally possible to trace the RAF units to which a particular aircraft was allocated and the causes of any accidents in which it might have been involved. Unit records should reveal something of an aircraft's operational flying.

Aircraft Movement Cards

For every aircraft in the RAF, a card (Air Ministry Form 78) was kept, recording the units to which that aeroplane was allocated and noting when it was damaged and repaired. The surviving cards, dating from about 1930, are held by the Ministry of Defence's Air Historical Branch, but the Royal Air Force Museum holds copies on microfilm and can supply prints for a small fee. Whilst most of the cards are quite informative, those for aircraft sent to the Middle and Far East theatres during the Second World War are not: the majority of these simply record the aircraft's arrival at its destination and make no mention of its subsequent fate. It is thought that similar records were kept by overseas commands, but these appear not to have survived.

M J F Bowyer & J D R Rawlings, *Squadron Codes 1937–56* (Patrick Stephens, 1979) gives the codes used by each squadron, flight or other unit to identify its aircraft (No systematic records have survived which list the code letters allocated to individual aircraft, although some information may be given in unit Operations Record Books at TNA: see below).

B Robertson, *British Military Aircraft Serials 1878-1987* (Midland Counties, 1987) is especially useful for identifying early aircraft from their serial numbers.

Aircraft Histories

Very brief summaries of RAF aircraft histories, listed by serial number (starting with J1), are given in the series:

J J Halley, *Royal Air Force Aircraft* (Air-Britain, 1976–1998). Each book covers a range of serial numbers: e.g. Royal Air Force Aircraft: R1000 to R9999, etc.

The series includes:

D Thompson & R Sturtivant, *Royal Air Force Aircraft: J1–J9999 and WWI Survivors* (Air-Britain, 1987).

J J Halley, *The K File: Royal Air Force of the 1930s* (Air-Britain,

1995): more detailed histories of aircraft with serial numbers in the range K1000 to K9999.

The following books, published by Air-Britain, give the histories of individual aircraft, listed by serial number:

- R Sturtivant, *The Anson File* (1988)
- S Shail, *The Battle File* (1997)
- R Hayward, *The Beaufort File* (1990)
- R Sturtivant & G Page, *The Camel File* (1993)
- A Brew, *The Defiant File* (1996)
- R N Roberts, *The Halifax File* (1982)
- H Moyle, *The Hampden File* (1989)
- J F Hamlin, *The Harvard File* (1988)
- L G Cooper, *The Hornet File* (1992)
- E Myall, *The Hoverfly File* (1997)
- J J Halley, *The Lancaster File* (1985)
- M Goodall, *The Norman Thompson File* (1995)
- R Sturtivant & G Page, *The S.E.5 File* (1996)
- B Gomershall, *The Stirling File* (1979)
- C H Thomas, *The Typhoon File* (1981)
- M A Fopp, *The Washington File* (1983)
- R N Roberts, *The Whitley File* (1986)

Similar books, giving information on individual aircraft, include

- F K Mason, *The Avro Lancaster* (Aston Publications, 1989)
- H Holmes, *Avro Lancaster: The Definitive Record* (Airlife, 1997)
- E B Morgan & E Shacklady, *Spitfire: The History* (Key Publishing, 1987).

Aircraft Accidents and Casualties

Air Ministry Form 1180 was designed to record details of aircraft accidents so that the causes could be analysed and the resulting data used in accident prevention. The original cards – mainly dating from 1929 onwards, although a few have survived from 1919 – are held at the Air Historical Branch, and the Royal Air Force Museum has microfilm copies which can be consulted, printed copies of which can be supplied. Museum staff can supply limited numbers of transcripts/prints for postal enquirers. To trace a specific accident it is essential to know the date and the aircraft type – there are no indexes for location, unit or crew names.

Further information on some aircraft accidents between 1919 and 1962 are at TNA in class AVIA 5.

Losses of RAF aircraft and personnel in accidents for the period 1950-1996 are covered in: C Cummings, *Last Take-Off* (1950-1953), *To Fly No More* (1954-1958) and *Lost To Service* (1959-1996) (Nimbus, 2000, 1999 & 1997).

Daily wartime losses of squadrons in Bomber and Fighter commands are recorded in:

- W R Chorley, *RAF Bomber Command Losses (Vol. 1: 1939-40; Vol. 2: 1941; Vol. 3: 1942; Vol. 4: 1943; Vol. 5: 1944; Vol. 6: 1945) Vol. 7 (OTUs 1940-1947), Vol. 8 (HCUs & miscellaneous units) and Vol. 9 (Roll of honour 1939-1947)* (Midland Counties Publications, 1992-2007).
- N L R Franks, *Fighter Command Losses. Vol. 1: 1939-1941; Vol. 2: 1942-1943; Vol. 3: 1944-1945 (including 2nd Tactical Air Force and Air Defence Great Britain)* (Midland Publishing, 1997, 1998 & 2000).

More information about researching personnel casualties is given in the Royal Air Force Museum's information sheets on personnel records.

Unit Records

Operations Record Books (ORBs or RAF Forms 540 & 541), were compiled by all units, including stations and non-flying units, whether operational or not. The quality and amount of information contained in ORBs can vary, depending for example on the thoroughness of the compiling officer. Some squadron ORBs are quite detailed, listing for each flight the aircraft serial number, pilot/crew details, flight times and general information on each flight. Others may only mention flights which involved combat. Some units had to destroy their records, for example when retreating during the Battle of France in 1940. In the case of very busy units, such as Flying Training Schools and Operational Training Units, it was not possible to go into great detail about every flight - only events such as accidents would be deemed worthy of note.