

INDIVIDUAL HISTORY

SOPWITH TRIPLANE N5912/8385M
Museum Accession Number 74/A/19

- 1916 Ordered as part of a contract for 25 Sopwith Triplanes from Oakley and Company, Ilford, Essex, serials N5910-N5934, to contract 216457/17. The Oakley Co. factory was a former roller-skating rink, demolished in the 1930s.
- Early 1917 Construction of the batch began, then almost immediately halted, when in the early Summer the order came through to convert the aircraft into twin-gunned machines instead of the original single gun mounting. Due to this late modification, and the fact that the company had not previously been involved in aircraft manufacture, no machines were produced until the Autumn of 1917. The contract was cancelled when Oakleys had produced only three aircraft, N5910-N5912.
- 19 Oct 17 N5912 left Oakley's works and was handed over to the RFC.
- Documents at the National Archives indicate that the brand-new N5912 was at Hendon from 19 October 1917 until 21 February 1918. Although allocated to Manston it spent some of that time unserviceable although the reason wasn't specified.
- 1918 Served with No.2 School of Aerial Fighting and Gunnery, Marske, near Redcar, Yorkshire (renamed No.2 Fighting School from 29 May 1918). Photos: Aeroplane Monthly Jul 75, p.348; Cross & Cockade GB Vol.3 No.2, p.86. Finished in Olive Drab/Khaki, unpainted engine cowling and Station Number 94 in large white numerals on the fuselage sides, plus additional flying wires attached to the mid-bay points of the upper wings. Flown by instructor Flt Lt Debenham who found it pleasant to fly ('Tripe' Autumn 1978 p.11).
- 12 Feb-15 Jul 1919 Displayed in 'Shed 7'-a Bessonneau hangar- at the RAF Aircraft Exhibition, No 9 Aircraft Acceptance Park, Town Moor airfield, Newcastle-the first such event staged by the RAF. Colour profile – Cross and Cockade International Winter 2011 Vol 42/4 p.248; photo p.251. Closing in Newcastle on 1 April, the exhibition and its aircraft moved to Leeds (Roundhay Park), where it opened on 31 May, closing on 15 July, with the aircraft and other exhibits moving to Tadcaster aerodrome for storage, this station closing in April 1920.
- Late 1919 No.2 Fighting School disbanded and airfield closed - aircraft probably stuck off charge at this time, but not scrapped.

Around this time (but no later than February 1919), a list of Aircraft allocated to Depots (National Archives AIR 1/670/17/124 (b) includes just one Sopwith Triplane 'N5912, (Unserviceable) at Manstone (Manston), Kent'

- 09 Jun 20-1924 Almost certainly N5912 was the Triplane displayed - coded '94' at the temporary Imperial War Museum exhibition at Crystal Palace, London. Photos: Flight 10 Jun 20, p.617; Cross & Cockade GB Vol.14 No.4, showing '94' on the Fuselage as carried by N5912 at Marske; also Cross and Cockade international Winter 2011 Vol 42/4 page 255.
- 1924-1932 One of nine IWM owned aircraft stored dismantled 'in very bad condition' in the basement of the Science Museum, South Kensington. See National Archives AIR 2/510 'Retention and Disposal of War Period Aircraft at Science Museum' 1932-1936. The aircraft were RE8 F3556, BE2C 2699, LVG 4503, Roland Scout D7515, a Fokker DVII, the Triplane, Camel N6812, Short 184 8359, and Bristol Fighter E2581, plus the car of SSZ 70 and a separate Bristol Fighter fuselage. Of these, the Triplane and LVG are with the RAFM, the bomb-damaged remains of the Short 184 are at FAAM Yeovilton, the Camel, RE8, BE2C, and Bristol Fighter are with the IWM, and the Roland, Fokker DVII, Bristol Fighter fuselage and SSZ control car appear to have been scrapped at Cardington c.1936. The Triplane was noted as having its engine fitted but some instruments were missing. As early as 26 June 1933 men were being allocated for moving and sorting these 'War Museum Exhibits' so an estimate for reconditioning could be made, as related in the 1933 No.2 Aircraft Storage Unit Diary of Flt Lt Rowland now held by DoRIS, Rowland referring to the 'War Museum, junk' .
- c1932-1936 Following removal from South Kensington by personnel from HAD Henlow, under the command of F/O Baker, between 12 May and 6 June 1932, stored dismantled 'in dilapidated condition' in No 1 Airship Shed at the Royal Airship Works, Cardington, Bedfordshire whilst the IWM moved to its new premises at South Lambeth as the surviving part of the collection of aircraft assembled under the orders of Lord Rothermere.
- When at Cardington, listed as fuselage with instruments and 130hp Clerget engine (incomplete), undercarriage, rudder, tailplane, elevators, struts, propeller, fin, flying wires and mainplanes.
- 1936 When not required for the IWM display at South Lambeth, the remains of N5912, lacking little more than some struts were discovered on the dump at Cardington by then Flt Lt later Air Cdr. N R Buckle, having been recommended for destruction on 4 February 1936, along with the LVG and SSZ 70 control car. Luckily, the RAF had requested the LVG and Triplane on 20 March 1936 for the forthcoming RAF display 'with a view to an attempt being made to recondition them sufficiently to enable them to take part in the display' (Cardington had become an RAF station in

1936). The aircraft was taken to Hendon and restored there by Buckle aided by FS Scott who had worked on Triplanes in the Great War. Photos: engineless at Hendon - Aeroplane Monthly Jul 75, p.348.

The restoration included fitting of Palmer tyres, wind driven fuel pump and painting in 305 standard dark green `Nivo' rather than wartime khaki.

27 Jun 36 Flown at the RAF Pageant at Hendon by Buckle with the Pageant Number 5 on the fin and traces of Marske Number 94 under the lower port wing (Photo: Cross and Cockade GB Vol.7 No.2, p.94). Involved in `attack' on WWI observation Balloon, together with an SE5a and Bristol Fighter, vs. the LVG now flown by the Shuttleworth collection. Ground view - RAFM P2226 (taken 26 Jun); Flight 2 Jul 36, p.8; The Aeroplane 1 Jul 36, p.27; Great aviation Collections of Britain (Ellis) p.171.

26 Jun 37 Flown again by (then) Sq. Ldr Buckle who was in charge of that years repeat performance of the kite balloon attack. Still carried Pageant No.5; Photos: Aeroplane Monthly Nov 95, p.61; Cross & Cockade UK Vol.3 No.2, p.88; Flight 1 Jul 37, p.9; the Aeroplane 30 Jun 37, p.792 & 798; RAFM PC71/72/249. `Attacked' the kite balloon, defended by the LVG, together with the SE5A and Bristol Fighter, the Triplane being `shot down' during the duel. See also Popular Flying Aug 1937 p.282.

1939 Stored for the duration of the war.

21 Jun 45 By this date the aircraft was at No.5 MU Kemble, Gloucester alongside the LVG. Photos - The Aeroplane Dec 14 1945, the magazine showed the Triplane fuselage with torn fabric around the cockpit and reported that the Triplane and LVG were to be restored to airworthy condition although the Triplane was missing its engine and struts and rigging wires needed to be replaced on both aircraft. Also The Aeroplane Spotter December 27 1945 p.302.

PRO files indicate that by 21st June 1945 both aircraft were at No.5 MU; a letter from the Station Commander, Wing Commander G.R. Stroud, to the Air Ministry Librarian, dated 15th October 1945 records that the Wing Commander had just rescued both aircraft from a salvage heap - their second escape from such a fate - and that he was reconstructing them to static condition, and he had spoken to Air Commodore Buckle who had restored them at Hendon pre war. There then followed a confused period when the AHB had already confirmed that they could be reduced to produce in correspondence dated 9th July 1945, and having heard about this, on 24 December 1945 R G J Nash offered to acquire them for his existing collection of historic aircraft, (PRO AIR 2/10,187) but by 31st January 1946 HQ 41 Group was requesting their crating for museum preservation following their earmarking for the AHB.

- July 46 Both aircraft packed at No. 76 MU Wroughton, Wilts for preservation and stored at the German Airforce Equipment Centre at Stanmore Park by December 1946 (PRO AIR 20/6289).
- 1950 From No.5 MU to No.39 MU Colerne, Wilts for refurbishing prior to planned RAF display at Farnborough, Hants in July 1950. The refurbishment planned at Kemble had not occurred.
Fabric damaged and many parts missing by this time including the engine cowlings, propeller, bracing wires and interplane struts. A replacement Clerget was temporarily provided by the Nash collection. Other parts were made at Colerne.
An inaccurate replica cowling was fitted, replacement flying wires were cut-down Tiger Moth units; the propeller was a 1929 Armstrong-Siddeley Lynx unit; struts were carved from builders' planks, and the wings were fixed using rifle cleaning rods - see letter from R F J Early, Air Pictorial Jul 57, p.250.
- Given treaded motorcycle tyres and Marske No.94 repainted in black beneath each wing. Photo: Tripe Autumn 78, p.13. Retained the Hendon Paddock No.5 on the fin.
- 7-8 Jul 50 Statically displayed at Farnborough. Photo: Aeroplane Monthly Jul 75, p.348; Flight 13 July 50, p.67; Flight 20 Jul 50, p.103; Cross and Cockade UK, Vol.2 No.2, p.89.
- 19-21 Jul 51 Displayed at RAF Hendon - Daily Express Jubilee Display. Photos: Aeroplane Monthly Jul 75, p.348; FlyPast Dec 84 p.61; Cross & Cockade UK Vol.3 No.2 p.90; Flypast June 2007 p.62; acquired an original propeller around this time.
- Possibly later stored at RAF Stanmore, Middlesex with other AHB aircraft.
- 1955-57 At No.15 MU Wroughton Wilts (minus engine) with other AHB aircraft.
- c1958-60 Stored at RAF Fulbeck, Lincs with other AHB aircraft.
- 1961 Renovated - including re-doping - by Hawker Siddeley Aviation at Dunsfold - delivered from Fulbeck at Hawkers' request. Photos: Airfix Magazine June 1961, p.8; Cross & Cockade UK Vol.4 No.2 p.90; Aviation News Vol.1 No.15 p.9. Given Clerget from Nash Collection.
- 24 Apr 62 Noted at 71MU Bicester still coded Hendon Pageant '5'
- 1962 Displayed in Foyer at Royal Tournament, Earls Court as part of the celebration of 50 years of British military aviation.
- 1963 Stored at RAF Biggin Hill with other AHB aircraft.

- 1964 Displayed at Fleet Air Arm Museum, Yeovilton to commemorate RNAS Triplane operations. Photos: Veteran & Vintage Aircraft of the World (Hunt 1965); Scale Models May 70 p.472. Flight International 21 May 64 and 4 June 64 p.944.
- c. Oct64 Returned to store at Henlow by No.71 MU Bicester.
- 1965-1967 `Restored' at RAFM workshop at Henlow. With an initial intention to restore to flying condition, all wooden parts were renewed - only metal parts retained. `..to ensure that the airframe will survive in a serviceable condition for many years it has been decided to renew all wooden members...it is felt that the only way of ensuring that the primary structural members i.e. longerons, spars and interplane struts are structurally sound is to renew them with AIS inspected timber. Where possible all original metal parts will be employed...despite their apparently bad condition we have reclaimed ALL the fittings...' (report by F/Lt Vian, Henlow, June 1965)
- Recovered and given a pair of Vickers 0.303" machine guns, instrument panel and correct polished engine cowlings, using the original engine plate and cowling ring, but with a new engine cowling. Work done to original drawings. Flying wires supplied by Hawker Siddeley, Dunsfold and Interplane struts replaced, and the Mk.1 Vickers guns supplied by the Army Ordnance Depot at Donnington, Salop. Original pilot's seat and wheels reused. Wings completely rebuilt/renewed apart from some spar fittings. Contemporary instruments and Clerget rotary engine fitted.
- Still extant at RAFM Stafford in 2011 were a number of original Triplane components retained from the 1960s rebuild - the fuselage longerons (but no vertical fuselage struts), at least some wing spars with ribs attached, three of them being recognisable as individual wings, (including starboard lower wing X005-5733 and upper wing X005-5734) and a box of smaller components.
- Two of the wings were temporarily displayed at RAFM Hendon for a Cross and Cockade Society meeting in March 2011.
- 1968 Displayed newly restored at Science Museum South Kensington, during the RAF/RAF Museum Golden Jubilee celebrations and display. Photos: Royal Air Force News April 20 1968 p.10; Scale Models May 70 p.472.
- 20 Oct 71 To RAF Museum Hendon where it remains on display today. Photos: Scale Models March 1975, p.142, Scale Modelling Sep 90, p.559-562; Cross & Cockade UK Vol.3 No.2, p.91-2.
- 5 Sep 73 Allotted RAF Maintenance serial 8385M.
- 17 Mar 03 Moved to newly resited Grahame White Factory building for further public display from December 2003. Photo on display; Wingspan International 20 pp.60-61.

The only other surviving genuine Sopwith Triplane is N5486 at the Aviation Museum, Monino, Moscow.

TEXT ANDREW SIMPSON