



'If not Hendon, where?' : A Royal Air Force Museum Podcast

The RAF Museum opened at Hendon by Her Majesty the Queen in November 1972, but Hendon was by no means the first site suggested for such a museum. This podcast tells the story of the formation of the Museum and the search for a suitable site.

The idea of a Royal Air Force Museum can be traced back to the First World War, when Lord Rothermere gave instructions for examples of aircraft to be allocated for an exhibition. In November 1931 the Air Council discussed the possibility of setting up an "Aeronautical Museum" noting that:

- there was no department within the Air Ministry specifically responsible for the preservation of records and artefacts;
- the Imperial War Museum's remit only covered the First World War, and
- there was no equivalent to the National Naval and Nautical Museum.

They concluded, however, that a full scale museum was impracticable, but approved in principle "the institution of an aeronautical museum as an ultimate ideal to be aimed at in the future" and arranged – as an interim measure – to store suitable exhibits at RAF Cardington.

No progress was possible until 1958, when the Air Ministry again looked into the creation of a National Aeronautical Museum. This may have been due in part to the Royal Aeronautical Society's search for somewhere to store and perhaps display the Nash Collection of historic aircraft, which the Society owned. One site that was considered was the former Grahame-White hangar at Hendon, but the project did not proceed.

In 1959 the Ministry's Working Party on Historic Aircraft proposed the creation of an exhibition in the new Air Ministry Building in Whitehall, now the Ministry of Defence Main Building. The exhibition would cover "the whole lifetime of the RAF and not merely the period of the last war" and be open to the public at weekends, but no aircraft would be displayed. Sadly the idea of a public exhibition was dismissed the following year, partly because the space available was too small, but objections were also raised about "turning part of the Air Ministry into a peepshow" and the potential for "small boy trouble". Clearly the civil servants were uneasy about the idea and worried about spoiling their new building.

At the end of 1961 the Air Council set up a Historical Advisory Committee chaired by Sir Dermot Boyle "to advise the Air Council on the identification, preparation and display of articles of historic interest to the RAF and the nation". Independently, John Tanner, then Librarian, Curator and Tutor at the Royal Air Force College, Cranwell, was preparing a paper suggesting the formation of a Royal Air Force Museum, which he sent to Sir Dermot. The



paper seems not to have survived, but we have a letter from Sir Dermot to John Tanner in which he explains that the committee would be recommending that “a Royal Air Force Collection be established and that provision be made for acquiring, storing and exhibiting this collection at various centres throughout the Royal Air Force”.

The committee’s first interim report, issued in 1962, indicated that there was no practicable possibility of establishing a museum in London; the next identified a building at RAF Upavon in Wiltshire – a site which had been home to the Royal Flying Corps in 1912 – but by the time the third report was issued it had become clear that the costs involved in converting the building into a museum would be too high. Instead a hangar¹ at RAF Henlow in Bedfordshire, referred to locally as the “Pickle Factory” or the “Cathedral” was suggested. The Museum’s archives include sketches and plans showing the proposed layout of the Henlow Museum, and in March 1964 the decision to establish the Museum at Henlow was announced in Parliament. The Minister hoped that the Museum would be ready to open in 1968 for the 50th anniversary of the formation of the Royal Air Force.

By this stage John Tanner had been appointed the Museum’s first Director and Sir Dermot had become Chairman of the Board of Trustees. Their dedication and determination were the driving forces creation of the Museum.

There was evidently still a desire for the RAF Museum to have some sort of presence in London. In 1964 discussions were under way with the Crown Estate Commissioners regarding a site on the Mall – this would, however, be too small to accommodate anything larger than uniforms, medals and paintings and it was intended that the aircraft collection would be stored at Henlow, with access given only to “serious students for research”. Ironically, our audience research shows that people who visit the Hendon and Cosford sites come primarily to see the aircraft!

Discussions regarding the Mall site dragged on as there were difficulties with the lease. Other London sites that were suggested included Kensington & Hampton Court Palaces, and in December 1964 Sir Dermot Boyle briefly considered the disused Brompton Underground station in Kensington; it is likely that he was not thinking of using the closed platforms, but the building on the surface still has an RAF connection as the headquarters of the London University Air Squadron.

1965 proved to be a decisive year: in April the Mall site was allocated to the Institute of Contemporary Arts, forcing the Museum to seek other premises. The Air Member for Personnel suggested a single site (rather than one at

¹ Building 194



Henlow and another in London) on an airfield, commenting that there was “no evidence that very much consideration was given to Biggin Hill or Hendon”. A note on the file dated December 1965 states “[we] ought to consider Hendon as the next best thing to the Podium [on the Mall]. We know that Dr Tanner is quite attracted to Hendon”. At that time Hendon was still an active RAF station, with a history going back to the roots of aviation in Britain; it was relatively close to central London with easy access by tube, while the M1 motorway was not far away and would help to bring visitors from the north. The question was discussed in the letters pages of *The Times* with some correspondents demanding that the Mall site be allocated to the Museum while Lord Chandos suggested Biggin Hill and further letters appeared, including one suggesting Hendon.

Once again, negotiations took a long time – there’s truth in the saying that “the Devil is in the detail”. Who would pay for the construction of the building? Who would own the land on which the Museum would be built? How many staff would be required and who would find the money to pay their wages and other running costs? The Treasury finally agreed in May 1967 that the Museum could be built at Hendon, provided that none of the costs of construction came from public funds – an appeal would have to be launched to raise about a million pounds (about 14 million pounds in today’s money) from members of the public, companies and those serving in the RAF.

On 6 November 1967 it was finally announced that the Museum would be built at Hendon, with the aim of opening “by 1971”. The Museum took possession of two buildings – one of which was the Grahame-White hangar – at the end of 1967 and a small nucleus of staff began work. The Museum staff mounted a small exhibition at the Science Museum in 1968 to mark the 50th anniversary of the formation of the RAF. The building design was agreed in 1969 but it was not until 1972 that the Museum was ready for opening.

There is another site that doesn’t appear in any of the many files relating to the RAF Museum in the National Archives, and it is interesting to speculate what might have been....

The Museum’s own archive collection includes a plan for a building on the site now occupied by the Royal National Theatre, on the South Bank in Central London. The plan is dated 1959 and shows a building with six floors and a basement; it would be large enough to take aircraft as big as the Lancaster, with older (lighter) aircraft on the upper floors. Such a central location would bring in much larger numbers of visitors than come to Hendon, but there would have been no room for further expansion – how would the Museum have managed to tell the continuing story of the RAF?

This podcast has told some of the previously untold story of the RAF



Museum. The Hendon site celebrates its first 40 years, and we look forward to its history developing further in parallel with the continuing history of the Royal Air Force.