

Folland's hovercraft projects & other hovercraft

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John Lewthwaite spoke about the development of the hovercraft, including a project by Hamble's aircraft manufacturer Folland to build a hovercraft named GERM. Nearly fifty years ago the Solent area was the centre of the hovercraft industry and it also had two hovercraft ferry services.

The first hovercraft was designed by Christopher Cockerell and built at Saunders-Roe on the Isle of Wight in 1959, and it was known as SR-N1. It was able to cross the English Channel that year although it did not have a skirt. Later the addition of a skirt led to the eventual success of hovercraft as a practical vehicle to travel over land as well as water.

In 1960 Maurice Brennan moved from Saunders-Roe to the Folland Aircraft Company at Hamble as its designer. The following year saw the first flight of Folland's Hovercraft GERM (Ground Effect Research Machine) but the company decided not to pursue it commercially, which turned out to be a sensible decision. They also developed other associated hovercraft projects such as a Hover-barrow, Hover-stretcher and Hover dump-truck.

In 1964 Hamble resident Joe Upcott, who owned the Celebrity Club in the High Street, bought a Union Dynamics hovercraft for his personal use.

Other companies developed their own hovercraft during the 1960s, including Hovercraft Development, Vickers Armstrong and Britten Norman, with the biggest hovercraft carrying up to 282 passengers and 37 cars. By 1978 the Super N4 could carry 418 passengers and 60 cars at 60 knots across the Channel and this hovercraft can be seen in the Hovercraft Museum at Lee-on-the-Solent.

Military versions of the hovercraft were also developed including troop carriers and mine hunters.

The high cost of hovercraft compared to conventional craft, the high power required and their noise are reasons why hovercraft were not as commercially successful as had been hoped. High maintenance costs, particularly of the skirts, and the failure of the Ministry of Defence to adopt them were other contributory factors to why there are not many hovercrafts around nowadays.

Today Hovertravel still operate a hovercraft service to the Isle of Wight and local firm Griffon is a significant producer of hovercraft, including craft for the RNLI where the unique features of the hovercraft are a great asset. John is still developing hover vessels for the Ministry of Defence.

British Pathe video of Folland's Hover-stretcher:

www.britishpathe.com/video/hover-stretcher/query/hamble