

Faireys at Hamble

10th February 2011 - Roy Underdown Pavilion

A packed audience of members, ex Faireys' employees and Fairey boat owners attended to hear David Henshall talk about the Fairey Company, one of Hamble's major employers during the last century.

For centuries Hamble had been known for its boatbuilding and these skills, woodworking and canvas work, were very suitable for the fledgling aviation industry. Hence, Fairey Aviation came to Hamble and set up at Hamble Point during the First World War to assemble and test its seaplanes. One of the first developed was the 'Hamble Baby', followed by Faireys' more famous inter-war seaplanes, many of which were exported abroad. During this inter-war period the aircraft gradually changed from wood to metal construction.

David used the 'Firefly' as the theme of his talk, due to the same name being used for two of its aircraft and a later famous sailing dinghy. There was a 'Firefly Biplane' and the more famous Fairey Second World War 'Fairey Firefly' which was produced until the Korean War.

After the Second World War the company found it had to diversify so Fairey Marine was set up, with Charles Curry taking a leading role in this development.

It started by producing the Uffa Fox designed 'Firefly' sailing dinghy which was used for a single handed class at the 1948 Olympics held in this country. Twenty four 'Firefly' dinghies were transported from Hamble to Torquay in a Tank Landing Craft. Being post war the equipment was very limited, competitors had to share trailers, there was no extra buoyancy and galvanised buckets were used as bailers.

Faireys used veneer construction for the 'Firefly', an adaptation of a technique previously used for making aircraft such as the Mosquito bomber, known as hot moulding process. Each veneer was coated with glue and then stapled to a mould, put in a vacuum bag and heated in an oven to improve the gluing process.

This led to the successful production of identical wooden boats in large numbers, particularly for one design dinghy racing. Faireys then developed, manufactured and sold a wide range of sailing boats from the 'Duckling' dinghy to the 'Atalanta' sailing cruiser. This resulted in Faireys becoming the biggest boat builder in Europe in the 1950s.

With the introduction of DIY dinghies by companies such as Jack Holt, Faireys decided to move on to powerboats including the classic racing boat the 'Huntsman'. Maybe the story of these powerboats such as the 'Swordsman', 'Spearfish' & the military/patrol boats could be a subject of a talk in the future.

At the end of the meeting it was like a reunion of Faireys' employees, many of whom had not met for over 30 years, who shared their memories. A particular reminiscence was applying the glue, using a machine similar to an old washing roller mangle, when the handling of the materials resulted in them having yellow hands.

The Fairey boat owners, some of which had come from as far as London, Farnborough and the Isle of Wight for this talk, also shared memories of the Fairey Company and details of their boats. An enjoyable and successful evening!