100 years of world-beating fighter aircraft will be marked

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But the fact that no other town in the country has contributed so much to the UK's air forces has largely been overlooked. Now a group of former employees and aviation enthusiasts will put these achievements on the map, thanks to a £49,500 grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF).

The Hawker Association's Kingston Aviation Centenary Project will bring to the public's attention a roll of honour that includes the most successful allied First World War fighter, the Sopwith Camel biplane; the Hawker Hurricane – mainstay of the Battle of Britain in World War II - and the world's only operational vertical take-off fighter, the Harrier 'jump jet'. Other iconic names include the Hawker Hunter, once holder of the world air speed record; and the Hawk, used by the RAF's flying display team the Red Arrows.

This year marks the centenary of the town's first aircraft factory founded by aviation pioneer Tommy Sopwith. A special celebration event, The Kingston Aviation Festival, will be held in Kingston Market Place in early June when a historic biplane, the Camel, will be a star attraction appearing in the town for the first time since 1918. A range of displays, scale models and paintings will be on hand, together with family activities including the opportunity to sit in the cockpits of other famous planes, and fly a flight simulator.

Joint project leaders Bill Downey and David Hassard said: "We are thrilled to have the support of the Heritage Lottery Fund. It gives us the opportunity to share this amazing history with the people of Kingston and especially the young people who might be inspired by what their predecessors were able to achieve through vision, hard work and determination."

The factory closed in 1992 and part of the HLF-funded project is to collect and record memories of former employees. This oral history archive will be used in presentations at the centenary exhibition and also on the dedicated website. Volunteers will be recruited to help run the project that will also involve local schools, colleges, clubs and societies.

The project is working closely with the Brooklands Museum at Weybridge where the biplane and other exhibits are kept. Other material is being lent by the BAe Systems heritage archive. Sopwith Aviation evolved into Hawker Aircraft and this in turn became part of British Aerospace, later BAe, in 1977. For much of the last century, the aviation industry was the largest employer in Kingston with a workforce which often exceeded 3,500 men and women.

Sue Bowers, Head of Heritage Lottery Fund London, said: "This is the story of a world-beating local industry, the thousands of men and women who were part of it, and the outstanding military aircraft which have played a vital role at key points in the nation's history."

The project organisers are keen to hear from former Hawker and BAe employees as well as potential volunteers. They should contact David Hassard on 020 8546 2715 email hassards@talktalk.net or Bill Downey on 020 8949 5498 email billdowney@sky.com.

Notes to editors

- Of all the aircraft designed and built at Kingston perhaps the most celebrated was the Hawker Hurricane, designed by Sir Sydney Camm. Although the Spitfire is often portrayed as the aircraft that won the Battle of Britain it was in fact the Hurricane that destroyed more enemy aircraft than all other fighters and ground defences combined. The Harrier 'jump jet' amazed the world with its vertical take-off, distinguished itself in the Falklands Campaign in 1982, and was only retired from the RAF in 2011. Original designer of the Harrier, Ralph Hooper, is supporting the Aviation Centenary Project.
- The Hawker Association, which is run entirely by volunteers, exists to keep alive the spirit and memories of the Hawker companies, publicise their achievements and encourage and facilitate the preservation and conservation of artefacts, papers, photographs, information and data relevant to the companies at the Brooklands Museum.
- The Kingston Aviation Festival will run for the four days of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Bank Holiday Weekend – 2 to 5 June 2012.

Further information

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