The Girls who kept the Few flying

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Now, thanks to a £50,000 grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), a permanent exhibition and study centre will be created.

Grandma Flew Spitfires! is the project that will provide a lasting memorial to the courage and skill of the ATA pilots at Maidenhead Heritage Centre, just two miles from White Waltham Airfield that acted as their headquarters throughout the war years.

Over 1000 male, and just 168 female, civilian pilots were recruited to the ATA. They ferried 309,000 planes between factories throughout the UK to the RAF and RN airfields that needed them. The tremendous skill and courage of those involved was underlined by the fact that they flew a full range of aircraft – 147 different types – from Tiger Moth trainers, through frontline Spitfires and Hurricanes to heavy bombers such as the Lancaster.

The women needed to overcome male prejudice to take on the role, including having to fight to achieve equal pay with male colleagues for undertaking the hazardous job. Flying in bad weather conditions claimed the lives of a number of those in the ATA, including aviation heroine Amy Johnson who, before the War, had established records flying solo from Britain to Australia and South Africa.

A collection of ATA documents, maps, photographs and operating manuals has been maintained by the Maidenhead Heritage Centre, along with artefacts such as leather flying jackets, sheepskin gloves and flying helmets. The volunteer-run project will see this nationally important collection fully archived, conserved for future study and all the information digitised so as to be readily accessible to the public.

Volunteers will also interview surviving ATA members and their families to add to the wealth of material. Part of the Maidenhead Heritage Centre will be converted to provide a dedicated study centre with permanent displays available to the public for the first time. Teaching materials will also be developed for use by local schools.

The Heritage Centre plans to open the new facility to the public next summer.

Stuart McLeod, Head of the Heritage Lottery Fund South East England, said: “With the 70th anniversary of the Battle of Britain currently underway it is altogether fitting that this project should address the hidden history of the men and women who helped to keep the RAF flying throughout the Second World War.”

For the Maidenhead Heritage Centre, Chairman Richard Poad MBE, said: “We are delighted to have been awarded £50,000 by the HLF towards our **Grandma Flew Spitfires** project. The grant is a real vote of confidence in the project, which is dedicated to recording, preserving and passing on the fascinating heritage of the ATA. Perhaps the least known of the home-front war effort achievements, this was a truly amazing contribution, especially as many ATA pilots had only flown light aircraft before the war."

To raise additional funds to create Grandma Flew Spitfires, Maidenhead Heritage Centre has launched a public appeal, whose patrons include HRH Prince Michael of Kent and the Home Secretary Theresa May, MP for Maidenhead. To follow the progress of the project.

Notes to editors

Maidenhead Heritage Centre (MHC) was established to advance the education of the public by providing and maintaining a heritage centre and museum for the public exhibition of objects, documents, photographs and other items connected with the history of Maidenhead and the surrounding district.

The Maidenhead Heritage Centre explores the history of Maidenhead and its surrounding area - from Romans villas and Saxon Kings, Brunel's 'Sounding Arch' and its wartime role as headquarters of the Air Transport Auxiliary to racing cars, the Profumo Affair, Hammer films and the construction of the Jubilee River. The Museum is based at 18 Park Street, Maidenhead SL6 1SL, is fully accredited and has over 4,000 objects in its collection.

The Museum is open from 10am to 4pm, Tuesdays to Saturdays and also on the second Sunday of each month from 10am to 12.30pm on Farmers' Market Day. As well as housing a permanent collection, the Museum organises special exhibitions and hosts 30-minute lunchtime lectures on the second Thursday of each month.
www.maidenheadheritage.org.uk

Using money raised through the National Lottery, the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) sustains and transforms a wide range of heritage for present and future generations to take part in, learn from and enjoy. From museums, parks and historic places to archaeology, natural environment and cultural traditions, we invest in every part of our diverse heritage. HLF has supported more than 33,900 projects, allocating over £4.4billion across the UK, with over £428 million granted in the South East alone.

Further information

HLF Press Office: Vicky Wilford on 020 7591 6046 / 07968 129241 / vickyw@hlf.org.uk or Phil Cooper on 020 7591 6033 / 07889 949173 / phillipc@hlf.org.uk

Richard Poad, Maidenhead Heritage Centre Chairman on 07973 849 836 or ata@maidenheadheritage.org.uk