BIGGIN HILL HERITAGE HANGAR OPENS ITS NEW FACILITY

News / Events / Festivals

On Tuesday, 8 March 2016, the Biggin Hill Heritage Hangar (BHHH) at Biggin Hill Airport, Kent, officially opened its impressive new hangar facility. Elliott Marsh writes.

BHHH's long-awaited move into Biggin Hill Airport's Hangar No. 204 concluded in Winter 2016 with the whole fleet relocated "across the way" to a larger facility on the Western fringes of the airport. This new set up offers ample space for the growing collection, with one hangar bay housing mainly the airworthy aeroplanes whilst the neighbouring bay and adjoining workshop is dedicated to restorations and maintenance, providing engineers with improved facilities. The latter is the hangar that BHHH's many public events will occupy; a walkway has been painted onto the immaculate hangar floor and new barriers have been put in place to assist with crowd control during the very popular hangar tours, the regular 'Sit in a Spitfire' days and the many Spitfire Mk.TIX flights coordinated by into the Blue.

The veterans look on as Spitfire MJ627 prepares to depart. © Huw Hopkins – Global Aviation Resource

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Large skylights bathe the bright cream interior with natural light – a far cry from the charming-but-dingy Hangar No. 528 the collection occupied from 2008 to 2015 – and a foyer, reception area and offices are adorned with aviation artefacts and paintings. There is also merchandise on sale, including used Spitfire tyres, engine components, branded mugs and appropriate literature. The whole set-up reflects both the scale of the operation and the commercial professionalism BHHH operates with in 2016. It's quite unlike any other warbird facility you'll find in the UK.

The official hangar opening was hosted by BHHH's owner and director Peter Monk with several invited veterans in attendance, with Flt Lt Rodney Scrase DFC (a veteran of campaigns in North Africa, Sicily and Italy) cutting the ribbon to formally open the facility. Appropriately, Spitfire MJ627 carried out an early afternoon test flight, giving the assembled veterans and media the opportunity to see one of BHHH's airworthy aeroplanes operating up close. Credit must go to the engineers who worked tirelessly to ensure the aircraft was able to do so.

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The Bf109 ‘Emil’ undergoing restoration at Biggin Hill. © Huw Hopkins – Global Aviation Resource

PRESERVING THE PAST

The hangar opening broadly coincided with the 80th anniversary of the Supermarine Spitfire’s first flight, an occasion BHHH marked on 5 March 2016 when one of its Spitfires, *‘Spirit of Kent’* Mk.IX TA805, flew from Biggin Hill to carry out flypasts over the Battle of Britain memorial at Capel-le-Ferne and Ramsgate seafront; a further planned sortie to Southampton, spiritual home of the Spitfire, was curtailed when pilot Clive Denney ran into poor weather conditions en route.

BHHH’s first Spitfire was the aforementioned founding *‘Spirit of Kent’* Mk.IX, and over the years BHHH and The Spitfire Company (Biggin Hill) Ltd have carried out the restoration to flight of four Spitfires for numerous owners, amongst them marks I (Comanche Warbirds’ X4650), V (Fairfax Spitfire LLP’s EE602), IX (Keith Perkins’ TD314) and XVI (Pemberton Billing LLP’s RW382). A

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fifth is due to fly imminently, details of which cannot be disclosed but will likely reach the public domain once this beautiful aircraft has taken to the sky. BHHH also carried out extensive engineering work on Warbird Experiences' Spitfire Mk.TIX MJ627 in 2015, and currently maintains Stephen Stead's Spitfire Mk.XVI TE184. Six further Spitfire restoration projects are either in progress or waiting in the wings at Biggin, with more due to arrive in future.

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In the foreground, Spitfire TE184, with the Bf109 tucked out of view behind it and the three ongoing restoration projects sat to the left. © Huw Hopkins – Global Aviation Resource

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The Bf109 is one of the most anticipated warbird restorations in the UK. © Huw Hopkins – Global Aviation Resource

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The Messerschmitt's Daimler Benz engine is being worked on away from Biggin Hill and will eventually be mated with the airframe. © Huw Hopkins – Global Aviation Resource

At the time of GAR's visit in March 2016, the hangar housed workhorse Spitfire Mk.TIX MJ627 and Mk.XVI TE184 alongside three fuselages (two Mk.IXs, BR601 and LZ842, and a TIX, BS410) at different stages of restoration to flight – other airframes are stored, awaiting their turn. Due to client confidentiality, details of these projects cannot be published at this time. One of the most eagerly anticipated restorations at BHHH is the awesome Bf109 'Emil' *White 14*, which is undergoing extensive works to return it to airworthy condition.

The 'fliers' hangar includes the airworthy fleet of Piper L-4 Grasshopper, North American Harvard, Hawker Hurricane Mk.X, Spitfire Mk.V EE602, Spitfire Mk.IX TA805 and Spitfire Mk.XVI RW382. Alongside Peter himself, BHHH calls upon an impressive roster of experienced pilots to carry out its many flights and public air display commitments throughout the year. Dan Griffith and Clive

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Denney carry out the lion’s share of flying displays, with Pete Kynsey, Paul Bonhomme, Steve Jones, Richard Grace, Neil Oakman and Joe Hirst also available.

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The fuselage of TIX BS410 recently arrived at BHHH from Airframe Assemblies. © Huw Hopkins – Global Aviation Resource

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Spitfire Mk.IX BR601 is in the midst of restoration of flight. © Huw Hopkins – Global Aviation Resource

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LZ842 wears a striking desert camouflage scheme, which will set it apart from other Spitfires. © Huw Hopkins – Global Aviation Resource

In total, there are 12 Spitfires at BHHH as of early 2016, the largest concentration of the type under one roof anywhere in the world, with a small team of five engineers and a handful of contractors and support staff looking after the fleet. Future restoration projects include a de Havilland Mosquito, as part of the joint venture with Avspecs in New Zealand – an exciting prospect indeed!

From day one, BHHH has strived to maintain the intergenerational link between the veterans of World War Two and the present day. Veterans regularly visit the hangar to look over the aircraft and speak to the people who fly and maintain them. With the living link between generations fading with the passing of many veterans each year – the majority of those who are able to attend these gatherings are now in their early to mid-90s – BHHH's role in preserving aviation heritage is

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more important than ever, a point clearly understood by Peter Monk and his team. Their openness with the general public is also unique – no other organisation in the UK offers such a raft of hangar tours, ‘sit/fly in a warbird’ experiences and media events (always involving veterans) organised to promote aviation history.

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What BHHH is all about – the past and present combining. © Huw Hopkins – Global Aviation Resource

WARBIRD EXPERIENCES

BHHH is one of several operators offering ‘Fly in a Spitfire’ experiences, in this instance under the *Into the Blue* banner. These proved to be immensely popular in 2015, with many dozens of flights carried out by Spitfire MJ627 at both Biggin Hill and Duxford. With experiences booked up from now until the Autumn, the popularity of Spitfire pleasure flights isn’t showing any signs of waning!

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Hangar No. 204 also offers improved customer facing for the Spitfire passenger flights, with new offices providing a dedicated briefing area, lounge and a raised viewing gallery facilitating a superb view of the hangar ramp, taxiways and runway.

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