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# AIRSHOWS

**S**ome things never change — well, not much. 40 years ago, in the summer of 1968, I would set out in my Ford Anglia to a variety of air displays around the UK. Perhaps surprisingly, in 2008 I will still be going to some of the same venues and will expect to see a handful of the same aircraft taking part... and still at the wheel of a Ford, albeit a far more recent model! While times have changed in the airshow world in many respects, it's the variety we still enjoy at airshows that keeps me going, year after year.

In 1968, the vast majority of displays in the UK were organised by the military air arms based here. This largely meant RAF 'At Home' Days and USAF Armed Forces Day events, with similar affairs being mounted by the Royal Navy and Army Air Corps. Often, each of these would feature fairly similar participants, notably the RAF's Battle of Britain 'At Home' Days which still saw a touring 'circus' of RAF and USAF items going round the different airfields staging these shows in different parts of the country. The home-based units provided variety, and would help ensure that enthusiasts were prepared to visit several such shows, while international participation came from other NATO nations. Much the same was the case in continental Europe, and particularly in Belgium and the Netherlands, where air force open days took on a similar form although they were fewer in number. In each case, with military aviation always in a state of change and development, these shows reflected this process.

Of course, the three big European trade shows were all around 40 years ago, and by far the most famous individual air displays in their respective countries. The SBAC show at Farnborough in 1968 was only the second time limited overseas participation had been permitted, in the form of foreign aircraft with British engines. It had been realised, not least because of growing international co-operation on programmes like Concorde, that Farnborough could no longer be just a showcase for British aviation. 1968 was not a good year for the show, however, with the first day's flying being cancelled as part of the airfield was flooded, and later the fatal Bréguet Atlantic accident. Then held at Hanover, the ILA was by far the biggest airshow in West Germany and reflected the growth of the country's relatively new post-war aerospace industry. Paris outstripped both in terms of size and stature, and 1969's Salon Aéronautique at Le Bourget was surely one of the great events of all time, featuring the débuts of both Concorde prototypes and the Boeing 747 amongst others. Memorable times indeed.

But it wasn't all about the military and trade shows. Of course, 1963 had seen the first of Biggin Hill's annual Air Fairs, and by 1968 this was an

established feature of the calendar. It had grown in reputation and popularity since its earliest days when it was seen simply as a means to raise the public profile of air travel and the holiday trade. In the USA, the Confederate Air Force staged its first Airsho in 1963 at the organisation's then Rebel Field in Mercedes, Texas. The CAF's move to Harlingen in 1968 took the Airsho with it, and there it thrived as the first regular display anywhere in the world to be focused on historic aircraft of the WW2 era. Many others would follow.

In the 1970s, the pattern of military open days, though reduced slightly in number, still provided a core of major shows. New venues were presenting themselves — it now seems hard to imagine the airshow scene without Duxford, yet its inaugural display under the auspices of the Imperial War Museum wasn't until 1973. The flying side of the early Duxford shows was co-ordinated by staff from the Shuttleworth Collection whose expertise had been built up running the events at Old Warden, already quite well established. Let's not forget that warbird operators as we know them today were very few and far between 40 years ago. In fact, I very much doubt that the term 'warbird' was widely recognised on this side of the Atlantic. It certainly wasn't in France, where the first La Ferté Alais 'Meetings Aérien' were taking place in the early 1970s. Gradually, though, that part of the scene grew, and with it the part these machines played in displays.

Air displays were more popular than ever with the public, and for the first time it was becoming almost possible to think in terms of an airshow 'industry'. The first professional, sponsored civilian aerobatic teams began to appear, more historic aircraft were becoming available, and great pilots like Bob Hoover, Neil Williams and Ray Hanna were gaining widespread recognition for their display flying prowess. Some of the finest shows were also born.

Numerous displays had been held at different UK venues in aid of the Royal Air Forces Association for many years. When that at North Weald in Essex was transformed into something called the Air Tattoo in 1971, run by a team of volunteer enthusiasts including two young air traffic controllers, Paul Bowen and Tim Prince, those involved hoped to improve on what had gone before but their ambitions were still fairly limited. They grew when what now became the Embassy Air Tattoo moved to the USAF stand-by base at RAF Greenham Common for 1973 — the start of a golden era. It was the most impressive military air display the UK had ever seen on a regular basis. After a one-year break because of the effects of the fuel crisis and various changes within the organising team, the first International Air Tattoo, staged in 1976 under the direction of Paul Bowen and Tim Prince in aid of the RAF Benevolent Fund, set the tone for what was to come. Greenham went on witnessing some of

the best airshows in the world, growing ever further in size and stature, until the presence of the US cruise missile base there made hosting further Tattoos too difficult after IAT 83. As it turned out, IAT's new home at RAF Fairford would see the event moving to the next level in terms of its status in the airshow world.

The other fine example of how the UK came, in the eyes of many, to lead the airshow world was an Anglo-American affair. RAF Mildenhall, like other USAF bases in Britain, had staged Armed Forces Day shows for several years, but it wanted to do something more in 1976 to mark the US Bicentenary. It called on the services of organiser Roger Hoefling, who transformed the event, bringing in a level of professionalism that, frankly, USAF displays had never seen before — on either side of the Atlantic. Having a permanent, knowledgeable co-ordinator to run things, rather than relying solely on base personnel who are soon posted away, was perhaps the most important element. It allowed the Air Fete, as the Mildenhall show became known in 1978, to develop into something very special. Throughout the 1980s, Air Fete's unique formations and large-scale operational scenarios mounted on particular themes set new standards, and the combination of this with the best American hospitality has never been improved upon. Neither, in all probability, will it be.

Looking back, the Cold War years were heady days for military-organised or military-orientated airshows. Most of the time, air arms had the budgets to provide strong support to events, and air displays were certainly seen — not least by the USAF — as a means of illustrating the close partnership between NATO members in a very public way. The public responded, too, often in huge numbers. For instance, the Abbotsford Airshow, the largest in Canada with strong international involvement (and known for some

'Whilst nostalgia is a wonderful thing, today's shows are more than capable of matching the standards set by their predecessors'