

SOPWITH AVIATION – THE FOUNDING FATHERS



Thomas Octave Murdoch Sopwith – Pioneer aviator, engineer, industrialist and businessman; founder of Sopwith Aviation, Hawker Aircraft, Hawker Siddeley Aviation and the Hawker Siddeley Group

Thomas Octave Murdoch Sopwith was born in 1888 the son of a wealthy industrialist. Enthused by a passenger flight in 1910 he bought a Howard Wright monoplane and started teaching himself to fly at Brooklands. After a crash he bought a Howard Wright pusher biplane and on November 21st, 1910, with just nine flying hours, Sopwith gained Royal Aero Club Aviator's Certificate No.31. In 1911 Sopwith entered many competitions in England, on the Continent and in the USA and was very successful. With his prize money he started the Sopwith School of Flying at Brooklands in February 1912.

Fred Sigrist - TOM Sopwith's engineer and works manager

Fred Sigrist, Sopwith's engineer from his luxury motor yacht 'Neva' and who accompanied Sopwith during his competition flying, was in charge of maintenance, overhaul and modification of the school aircraft. He later became Works Manager and had a genius for organising quantity production. During World War I he was responsible for the manufacture of thousands of Sopwith aircraft.



The first Sopwith built aircraft was Sigrist's 1912 'Hybrid'

Fred Sigrist built a two-seat tractor biplane for instructional use at the Sopwith School of Flying. With wings from their Wright biplane on his newly designed fuselage, it was known as the Hybrid. It was purchased for the Royal Navy which instantly made Sopwith approved military aircraft contractors. The money was used to purchase a Roller Skating Rink in Kingston upon Thames as the factory.

Harry Hawker - A brilliant young pilot, worked closely with Sopwith and Sigrist to perfect the design and performance of their aircraft

Harry George Hawker was born in Australia and went to work as a motor mechanic aged fourteen where he showed his natural aptitude. He arrived in England in 1911 and was taken on by Sigrist as a mechanic in 1912. Hawker always wanted to fly and asked Sopwith to teach him. In four days Hawker went solo and within a month, aged 23, he gained his Aviator's Certificate. In October, he set a new British duration record with a flight of 8 hours 23 minutes, the first of his many records. Hawker was put in charge of test flying, demonstration and competition work.



The 1913 D1 'Three Seater' was the first entirely Sopwith aircraft

The D1 was praised for its remarkably clean design and high quality of construction. Its exceptional performance was proved when Harry Hawker claimed a height record of 12,900 feet with a passenger, and 8,420 feet with three passengers. Three aircraft were purchased and operated by the Royal Naval Air Service. One bombed German airship sheds at Dusseldorf in 1914.

The 1913 Bat Boat was Britain's first flying boat and the world's first practical amphibian (operable from land and water)

Together with the D1, the Bat Boat caused a great stir at the 1913 Olympia Aero Exhibition in London. It was assembled in Kingston with a Sopwith airframe initially on an S E Saunders built boat hull. Harry Hawker proved its practicality when he won the £500 Mortimer Singer Prize for the first proven amphibious aircraft. It was bought by the Royal Navy. In 1914 larger Bat Boats were sold to the Royal Navy and the Germany Navy.



Later in 1913 Sopwith entered the Daily Mail 'Circuit of Britain' Race

Through 1913 and 1914 Sopwith made a number of two-seat floatplanes for the Royal Navy and the Greek Navy. Sopwith's reputation was enhanced and Harry Hawker became a public figure when he managed to fly 1000 miles up the East coast from the Solent, around Scotland to Ireland before an accidental landing near Dublin. He was awarded £1000 by the Daily Mail for his determination.