

Hursley Park

The raids on the Woolston and Itchen Works in September 1940 not only affected the production of Spitfires but also had a direct impact on the Design and Production Departments responsible for the continued development and management of Supermarine.

Following the death of R.J. Mitchell in 1937 responsibility for all further development of Supermarine aircraft, not only the Spitfire but also the Stranraer, Walrus, Sea Otter and Supermarine's proposed heavy bomber, fell to Joe Smith and his team in the Design Office. Located on the top floor of the new art-deco office block built in the late 1930s, the Design team had been lucky to escape from the 26th September raid relatively intact; at least one bomb had passed through the Drawing Office, out of the window and into the mud on the river bank below, another went straight through the floor without exploding. Miraculously the majority of the designs also survived and the men and women of the design team were quickly moved to temporary accommodation in old WW1 army huts, being used by the University College in Highfield.

The Production Team moved to the top floor of the Polygon Hotel and began, under the leadership of the new Works Manager Len Gooch, to plan the formal 'dispersal' of production around Southampton and beyond. Gooch had become the de facto Works Manager following the 24th September raid when the then Manager, H.B. Pratt, had been wounded and badly traumatised by the scenes of carnage. One of the tasks that Gooch and the dispersal team had was not only to find alternative locations to restart and expand Spitfire production but also to find more suitable and permanent accommodation for themselves and the Design Team. By October a site had been identified and the requisition process initiated.

The site chosen was a large stately home to the north of Southampton called Hursley Park. The owner of Hursley Park, Sir George Alexander Cooper, had recently died, leaving his widowed wife, Lady Mary Cooper, living alone with her servants in the mansion house. Her son, and Sir George's heir, lived nearby in Merdon Manor. An American by birth Lady Cooper had intended, as she had done in the First World War, to offer her home as a hospital for wounded Officers. The Ministry of Aircraft Production thought otherwise and requisitioned the House and part of the grounds for Supermarine.

On 7th December Lady Cooper welcomed the arriving Supermarine Management and Designers with a floral Spitfire but must have been bewildered by the change to her home. Although she was allowed to continue to live in certain rooms in the house and retain some servants the majority of her home was turned upside down. Valuable art works and decorations were removed by the estate workers and stored in a nearby barn. The beautiful oak panelling and Wedgwood plaques were boarded up and the halls, corridors and ballroom crammed with the drawing boards and tables of the draughtsmen, tracers, mathematicians and aerodynamicists of the Design Office. Bedrooms and dressing rooms became offices and meeting rooms, the servant's dining room

became a canteen for the workers and the stables were converted into a makeshift test lab and workshop for prototype designs.

A bus service was provided to bring the Supermarine workers to Hursley (a service long remembered for the break-neck speed of the buses down narrow country lanes) but many sought to find more local accommodation for themselves and their families, away from the bombing that had reached a terrible peak just before their move to Hursley (one of the huts used by the Design Office at the University was destroyed by an incendiary during the worst nights of the Southampton Blitz on 30th November-1st December).

Some of the Design team brought their families and lodged in cottages in Hursley and other nearby villages, whole families often crammed into single rooms in the already small cottages. For many this was not a choice but a necessity as they had been bombed out of their own homes in Woolston, Bitterne and surrounding areas of Southampton. Accommodation was a serious problem and Vickers-Armstrongs (Supermarine's parent company) began to build prefabricated huts nearby at Hiltingbury for many of the families.

At Hursley the strange juxtaposition of the rich, elderly Lady Cooper with her servants and the urban, industrial workforce engaged in secret military work was always going to be difficult and by 1942 it had come to a head when a servant attempted to steal some of Lady Cooper's silver. The robbery was a failure but the implications for security of unvetted household staff proved too much and Lady Cooper was "persuaded" to leave. In December 1942 Lady Cooper and her staff moved out of Hursley Park to her new home in Jermyns House (later owned by Sir Howard Hillier) never to return.

The "eviction" of Lady Cooper may have been partially to do with the security risks but Supermarine had already outgrown the space originally available. As the importance of the Spitfire grew alongside the pace of improvements and the number of Spitfire variants so the size of the Design Team grew. In 1941 a hangar, covered in camouflage netting was erected to house the Drawing Office (the design draughtsmen) and allow the Technical Office (the mathematicians and aerodynamicists) and planning departments to expand in the House. Another Hangar was erected by the Southampton entrance to the estate. This was to house a new "Experimental Department" who could undertake the construction of new prototype designs on site before testing. The combination of the Design Team, Experimental Hangar and the production management all in one, safe, location allowed Supermarine to respond incredibly quickly to the changing demands on the Spitfire and allocate work to the various "dispersal areas" or the Castle Bromwich factory. A capability and adaptability which helps explain how the Spitfire was able to remain at the forefront of the Allies' aircraft throughout the war.