

Origins

Supermarine had been making flying boats in their workshops on the banks of the River Itchen since 1913. They had gained a reputation for high speed flight, winning the Schneider Trophy for Britain in 1931 with their S6B seaplane, but as the clouds of war grew ever darker the Woolston Works took on a new importance. However, it was not a flying boat but a land plane, a small aircraft they knew simply as "The Fighter", to which all eyes had turned.

From its very first flight in 1936 it stood out. A rare combination of beauty, design and purpose. "The Fighter" was soon to get a name which still resonates today. That name was "Spitfire".

For the British government, desperately rushing to equip the RAF with fighter aircraft capable of matching the German Luftwaffe, the Spitfire was vital, and the Spitfire meant Woolston.

Into Production

Production was not easy. Supermarine was used to making a small number of finely crafted aircraft, now they had to produce hundreds, fast!

To meet demand the Woolston Works were expanded and modernised. A new factory, the Itchen Works, was built just up the road and sub-contractors, like Follands in Hamble, were employed to make parts of the planes. Once all of the parts; the fuselages, wings tail and engines were finished, they would be transported by lorry to Eastleigh where they completed the final assembly and flight tests before the finished Spitfires were flown by the ATA to the RAF.

By May 1940, the start of the "Battle of Britain", every Spitfire "scrambled" to face the enemy had been built in Woolston.

That had not been the plan.

A massive Shadow Factory had been built before the war at Castle Bromwich in the midlands to mass produce Spitfires. Castle Bromwich had the space and tools Woolston didn't, it was also further away from enemy attack, but as the Battle of Britain began they not produced a single aircraft!

The RAF, and Britain, had to rely on the men and women in Southampton.

Destruction

But Woolston was vulnerable, very vulnerable. Its location on the banks of the Itchen, alongside the naval shipbuilder Thornycrofts and across from the docks and gas works, made it a prime target for the Luftwaffe. Everyone knew it. The air raid shelters, on Peartree Green, were too far away and workers had to stay at their benches until the last minute (a government order to reduce the hours lost to production!), but they had no choice. Castle Bromwich was only just beginning to deliver aircraft and neither Supermarine, the RAF nor the nation could not afford the loss in Spitfire production a move might cause. The workers would have to stay put and hope.

By September 1940 that luck began to run out.

On 11th September a raid on the airport at Eastleigh narrowly missed the Supermarine hangars but hit the neighbouring Cunliffe Owen factory, killing 52 workers. A few days later, on 15th September, an air raid on the Woolston Works again missed the Supermarine works but devastated the surrounding houses, over 1,000 homes being damaged in some way. It was a sign of things to come but production had to continue, uninterrupted.

These raids had however made the management and government realise that something had to be done, and soon. A plan was hatched to requisition suitable workshops and premises to prepare for a 'dispersal' of production in and around Southampton. Stores were moved to nearby villages at Botley and Bishops Waltham. Two garages, Lowther's and Hendy's, were requisitioned along with the Hants & Dorset Bus Depot (Bus Depots were needed as they had the roof space required to make the wings) on Winchester Road in Shirley. Jigs, the vital frames needed to make the parts, and machines were carefully moved and only just in time.

On 24th September a German raid attacked the Itchen Works. Some damage was done to the factory, but more devastating was the bombs had hit an air raid shelter and workers in the open trying to reach the shelters. The scenes of carnage were never forgotten by those who witnessed it.

Two days later the Germans returned, hitting both the Itchen and the Woolston Works. Although the fabric of the factories was badly damaged and some partially completed aircraft damaged or destroyed, miraculously most of the vital jigs and tools were undamaged, but it was clear the days of the Woolston works were numbered. Arriving soon afterwards Lord Beaverbrook, the Minister for Aircraft Production, ordered the abandonment of the Works on the Itchen and a full dispersal of production.

Woolston had paid a heavy price. Not only had the works been made unusable much of the surrounding area had been destroyed, Itchen Ferry effectively ceasing to exist. But it had done what was required. By the time it was abandoned the Shadow Factory at Castle Bromwich was finally producing aircraft. The dispersal, against all odds, proved a remarkable success, spreading out from Southampton to Trowbridge, Salisbury, Reading and beyond. However, in the vital days when Britain most needed the Spitfire, it was the workers of Woolston who delivered.

Photographs

The photographs show the Woolston and Itchen Works both before the raids in September 1940, and afterwards.

Visible in the foreground of the "Woolston Works, 1939 Wing Assembly" photograph are the vital jigs, the frames in which the Wings were made.

Visible in the background of the "Itchen Works, 1939 fuselage Assembly Stage 2" photograph can be seen Supermarine Stranraer and Walrus aircraft. Although neither as beautiful nor as famous as it's cousin the Spitfire, the Walrus played its own vital role as a reconnaissance plane for the navy but also performing Air Sea Rescue including recovering Spitfire pilots who had been shot down!