

# The Spitfire at Hursley Park

**Intro:** Welcome to Hampshire HistBites. Join us as we delve into the past and go on a journey to discover some of the county's best and occasionally unknown history. We'll be speaking to experts and enthusiasts, asking them to reveal some of our hidden heritage, as well as share with you a few fascinating untold stories.

**Julian:** In this episode, I'll be speaking to Dave Key, the site historian at Hursley Park, near Winchester.

So good morning, Dave. Let me start by setting a little bit of context for any of our podcast listeners who don't live locally and explain where Hursley Park is. It's a private country estate adjacent to the village of Hursley, some five or six miles to the southwest of Winchester which includes a great two-star listed mansion. But today we'll be concentrating on the short, but illustrious period when Vickers Supermarine, manufacturers of the Spitfire, found themselves operating there during the dark days of World War II.

So Dave, what was the Vickers Supermarine company and why did they come to Hursley?

**Dave:** Okay, well Vickers-Armstrong Supermarine works were one of Britain's premier aviation companies particularly in the 1930s, and they'd specialized in sea planes both for the RAF and for the Royal Navy.

In the 1930s, they'd taken on, under chief designer R J Mitchell, a project to meet an RAF requirement for a fighter aircraft. That fighter aircraft was to become the Spitfire, one of the most successful aircraft ever produced and still one of the greatest iconic pieces of design. That became the overriding priority for Supermarine in Southampton, where they were based. It was a race against time in the years before the start of the second world war to actually ensure that adequate supplies of fighter aircraft, not just the Spitfire - the Spitfire was actually a minority in terms of numbers in the battle of Britain, outnumbered two to one by the Hawkers Hurricane - but it was a vital and iconic aircraft and in building it, Supermarine were focused almost entirely around the Woolston area of Southampton and the final assembly was actually done in the - what was at the time called Southampton Municipal Airport, which just about everyone at the time, and still today still calls Eastleigh Airport.

To actually design a plane like that took a large number of people, took a large administrative organization and that's pretty much what Supermarine was. It was a company, part of a much larger organization. I mean, Supermarine was only one half of Vickers-Armstrong Aviation, the other half was in Weybridge and they make things like the big bombers, like the Blenheim. And that in itself was just a small part of the Vickers company who made ships. They made tanks, they made just about everything, anything to do with steel and munitions and everything. So Supermarine soon by the late 1930s had become almost a flagship for the defence of Britain. And certainly it became true as the war began.

**Julian:** So what was the sequence of events that led up to part of the workforce from Woolston coming to Hursley Park?

**Dave:** Well, in the build-up to the war, the government have actually been trying to increase aircraft production. I mean, what's quite often missed is the fact that the British aviation industry in the 1930s was primarily based all along the south coast of England. Not just Southampton but you had in just in the Southampton area itself, as well as Supermarine, you had companies like Folland aircraft down at Hamble, you had Air Service Training at Hamble as well. You also had on the Isle of Wight Saunders-Roe, you have Bristol, Weybridge all the way across the south coast of England. Aircraft companies like Parnalls, Gloucesters making aircraft. The trouble with that was, they're incredibly

vulnerable, and eventually the Germans have taken north of France, all of those factories within attack range of German aircraft.

And so they'd actually taken on a policy of building up factories, what they called shadow factories in the more industrialized areas of the midlands and the north. And Supermarine had works up in Castle Bromwich. In the Midlands that was the intent, the trouble was that by the start of the war, they hadn't produced a single aircraft and so everything was focused on Southampton and that left Southampton works at Woolston and Itchen extremely vulnerable. And by the Battle of Britain the Germans were starting to turn their attention to not just the RAF's airfields and radar sites, but also to the means of production and in September, 1940 in a space of three raids, two in particular, the Luftwaffe attacked and put out of action the Supermarine works both at Woolston and Itchen with quite a serious loss of life and that led to a complete shutdown of those factories and a dispersal of production capability across first of all, Southampton, and then out into a much wider area.

One of the biggest problems though, was that you still had a design team and an administrative force that needed to coordinate all that. Not only were you now coordinating a factory in Southampton and one up in the Midlands, you also now had a myriad of small workshops, garages, being used, where you had to move supplies between them, had to ensure that all the parts were available in each sub-assembly, transported for final assembly, put together and flown off. And at the same time you had to improve the design. The Spitfire that went into the battle of Britain was not the same plane that came out at the end of it. They had already been upgraded and that was a continuous and constant process of improvement. So, with the works destroyed in Southampton, Supermarine looked for a new location and initially the administrative departments were moved into the Polygon Hotel and that's no longer there, but it used to be slightly to the north of the civic center in Southampton and the design into world war one huts in the university college, Southampton.

The most important part of the entire organization, and in fact, one of the very first ones to move:- the wages department, they were moved to an old house in Midanbury, a place called Deepdene House. It's the same thing that we say about the army is you always make sure that you pay and feed your soldiers, same goes for workers.

**Julian:** What was it about Hursley Park that made it suitable for the design team?

**Dave:** Well, I mentioned those three sites and they're all in Southampton, the trouble was that people think about the raids - the bombing - very much in terms of destruction of buildings. So the factories being bombed and put out of action, but actually one of the biggest problems was logistics. If you are coordinating a complicated, dispersed organization and you bomb the telephone lines, if you knock out the electricity supply, if you knock out the roads, you can't communicate, you can't produce things and you can't transport things. So the necessity to move the administrative and the design teams away from what were not just vulnerable from direct attack, but for that indirect interference in terms of capability to do work, they had to look outside of Southampton and as they dispersed production, from Southampton first into Eastleigh, Chandler's Ford, Winchester and then out to Newbury, Hungerford, Reading, Trowbridge, and Salisbury they looked for a way of actually coordinating that. And actually, when you look on the maps, using all the A roads that Hursley actually forms quite a good location. It's close to Southampton, therefore easy to maintain links with the main Southampton area, but it also gave the capability to set up a transport and communications hub at Hursley and that's ultimately the main reason why it was a good opportunity. And it was also a good opportunity because in the first world war, the owner of Hursley Park, Sir George and Lady Cooper had actually given over the estate to the military for an army camp and the house was turned into Lady Cooper's Hospital for Officers. Other ranks were out in huts in the grounds, but the officers had nice rooms in the house and some of the latest technological medical facilities. As the second world war came, sadly Sir George died quite early on in May 1940, his wife, the dowager Lady Cooper, she again tried to offer the house to the government for use as a hospital and in fact, they'd actually started to look to hire nurses for it, but the ministry of aircraft production under Lord Beaverbrook famously took whatever they wanted. Beaverbrook's ministry men were generally described by other ministry people

as Beaverbrook's bully boys and they would go around and just say, 'Nope, we're having that' and take it from anybody.

And so, when Hursley Park was available, they took full advantage of it and the raids occurred on the 24th and the 26th of September in Southampton, but Beaverbrook ordered Supermarine to actually start dispersal immediately and by October a lease was being signed for Hursley Park and the departments actually started to move in, in the beginning of December 1940.

Not too soon you might say in fact, because the Southampton blitz occurred not long before and narrowly missed the design office at Highfields in the university grounds and narrowly missed the Polygon Hotel, striking the civic center in central Southampton. So, it was a necessary move and the beginning of December, you'll actually see Lady Cooper welcoming with relatively open arms the design and administrative teams actually physically into Hursley house. So you had this quite incredible juxtaposition of an Edwardian, wealthy American heiress, Dowager Lady Cooper with her servants and some of her children still - not that they were children, grown adults by that time - having some of the rooms in the house and literally cheek to jowl with designers, managers, clerks, telephonists, all sorts of people suddenly just literally thrust in. There's actually surviving documents showing the layout of the house and what had been this magnificent ballroom with oak paneling and gilt fittings, lined with tapestries sort of beautiful parquet oak dance floor, suddenly it was just filled with drawing boards for the design team. That's where the Spitfire was made.

**Julian:** There seems to be a tremendous contrast here between what I imagine was a fairly sleepy village and the big house and group of people who for their time must have been at the very leading edge of technology. So how were they received in the big house?

**Dave:** It's not just a big house - you're quite right. Generally speaking, when people describe Hursley at the time, they describe it as like disappearing into the past, into a feudal world because most of the great estates - those that survived at any rate - the house was fed by an entire infrastructure. All of the villages that surround Hursley essentially a large proportion of the people living in those cottages were estate workers in some way. Many of the cottages actually were owned by the estate. So, you became a gamekeeper or a maid, or you worked in the dairy. The vast majority of people, not just in Hursley itself, but Slackstead, Ampfield were all feeding into that big house. For the people of Hursley the first impact of the war actually, they'd already had the Battle of Britain, had resulted, not in any aircraft coming down actually in Hursley though there are stories of it, but quite close by, and actually two German airmen that had been recovered from one of the crashed Hienkels were actually buried in the graveyard in Hursley for some time, until they were re-buried at the German War Graves up in the Midlands.

The village in fact, already had one of the locals killed in the raid on Supermarine in September, so this was no big surprise to them, but suddenly what you got was an influx of people. The most notable thing is that as people moved into the area, they were quite often moving from what were relatively new modern houses, for example in Bitterne, like a three-bed house with electricity and running water and proper sanitation, it didn't exist in Hursley. There was no electricity, the night soil man still came around and collected. If you lived out at one of the villages and you wanted water, you had to remember to prime the water pump before you actually got any water. So, this was a real shock to a lot of people and quite often they're also moving like from three bed houses, not just into a new house, but they were billeted with another family. If you take an example, the main street in Hursley, the house is still there, which is the old saddlery, the Wilde family lived there and suddenly they had another family, the Fear family, living in one of their rooms. So it suddenly became extremely crowded and it was quite a shock to the system. In the actual house itself, yeah, people changed their jobs. There was less in the way of estate work but there were new jobs, and you see across the board, not only people coming in from outside, but perhaps more noticeably the shift in the way in which the people actually in Hursley began to work.

**Julian:** So did most of the workforce from Supermarine actually come and live locally in the area or were they bussed in and out?

**Dave:** It's a mixture. Certainly as many as could tried to live in the area, but in fact, Vickers-Armstrong's accounts - literally people think about the aftermath of the bombing in terms of setting up factories but one of their biggest problems was finding accommodation for the workforce and just up the road from Hursley, Hiltingbury the junction with Hook Road where it crosses over to the Hursley Road, they actually set up about eight hutments as they called them basically an entire new community of prefabricated housing was set up specifically for the workforce. A lot of people try to either billet or lodge or rent homes in the area, but you're absolutely correct is that the vast majority of people were actually bussed there. It's actually, perhaps one of the most understated and quite remarkable feats of logistics. Supermarine had both a transport department up at Hursley itself, they also had taken over Garrett's Garage in Chandler's Ford, which is on the Winchester Road, where Quikfit is there now, and use that as their transport and distribution hub and that managed not only the transport of goods and materials, but also would coordinate the transport of personnel. But most of the personnel were transported by bus by both Joan's Buses and by Hants and Dorset buses later on.

**Julian:** Given that Hursley House had suddenly become filled with staff from this modern industrial organization, did Lady Cooper and her own staff stay on in the house, or did they move elsewhere?

**Dave:** Initially, yes. Lady Cooper retained a suite of rooms on the first floor, bedrooms and dressing rooms. Some of her immediate servants retained a suite of rooms in the east wing of the attic floor. It sounds a bit dramatic, attic, it's actually quite big rooms, but the majority of the house was given over to Supermarine for their use. And initially, Lady Cooper was quite positive about it. There's a lovely picture of the floral Spitfire that she made to welcome the staff to the estate in December 1940. However, inevitably, tensions did mount from Lady Cooper's point of view in the past, if you think about how an estate house works is that servants show deference. That's what they're supposed to do. Argue about how good or right that is but that's what they did and Hursley is designed such with staircases, which are for the family and friends to go down great, sweeping beautiful oak staircases, but it also is designed with hidden staircases inside the walls for the servants to move around. When Supermarine came, they didn't differentiate between the two and there are memories of Lady Cooper being a little bit aggrieved by these workers basically cluttering up her stairs and getting in her way.

And at the same time for Supermarine, you have Joe Smith, the chief designer following R J Mitchell's death in the 30s, took an office in what had been Sir George Cooper's business room, a panelled room on the ground floor, which has a massive safe built into it where Lady Cooper would store her money. And there were occasions where he was in the process of having top secret meetings on the latest design of the Spitfire or whatever plane and the butler would walk in. This became a real problem when an unvetted cook was brought in because of loss of staff to recruitment and other jobs of war work and they essentially decided that a better idea for how they're going to spend their war was to steal all the silver from the Coopers rather than actually do this low paid job. The plan was to set a decoy fire and acquire silver in the confusion. Unfortunately, all they managed to do is to actually knock themselves out and get caught, but it did rather highlight the security problem. And so by the end of 1942 you see Lady Cooper moving out. The prime reason - I mean, the security incident was the excuse - the reality was that as the war went on, the Supermarine team was growing and growing and growing as more and more demands for more and more variants of the Spitfire were made. As a result space became more and more pressing and they had to start moving out and so Lady Cooper was essentially forced out on this, on the pretext of the security. She moved with her staff to Jermyn's House in Romsey and Supermarine took over all the rooms that had been vacated, reorganized things, and also began to build their own additional hangers in and around the house, particularly a large drawing office, a big hangar covered in camouflage netting on the eastern side of what have been the kitchen garden and then down by the school, another large hangar, which they used for experimental work, so that's where just about every prototype of the Spitfire and later jet fighters, that Supermarine built would be assembled, tested, engines run up then disassembled and taken off to an airfield for flight testing, because you can't fly from Hursley. So normally they'd take

the planes apart and take them up to, for example, Worthy Down just to the north of Winchester which was a Royal Naval air service station until the planes got a bit bigger and they started moving them off the water to Bolton or to Hyde Post.

**Julian:** It was great to hear story a moment ago about the cook, the unvetted cook, but presumably the activities at Hursley must have been of great interest to the enemy at the time. Were there any examples of security being breached?

**Dave:** There are rumours of it. There is an account by Dennis Webb who worked right the way through from the 1920s in Woolston and then through in Hursley and he was in charge of both transport and then later on subcontracts. He gives an incredibly detailed account of his time at Supermarine, and he certainly gives an account of at least one person they suspected of spying and he'd been working in the transport department. They were a bit concerned about that. Other than that, no, it's surprisingly little, I mean, certainly the Germans never seem to have been aware that Hursley was in use in the way it was 'cause it would have been extremely vulnerable.

In fact there was only one German bomb that ever actually went off in the grounds that was an incendiary device and that was the result of an apprentice bringing one up from Southampton and being curious as to what happened when you hit it. Initially it went bang, he wasn't the most popular apprentice but that's pretty much it.

**Julian:** And what about the people in the village, have you come across any accounts of how this huge influx affected them and their lives?

**Dave:** Well, it's a funny way of looking at it is that it's almost a seamless switch. And perhaps the best way of describing it is to look at the local home guard.

The Hursley Home Guard was obviously primarily initially made up of people from the local village. It was headed by Sir George Cooper, this is the son of the original Sir George Cooper, so it's Captain Sir George Cooper who had actually fought in the first world war, he became head of the local Home Guard and the villagers joined. There were for example, the estate carpenter, or estate workers who were involved in carting, there were chauffeurs and as Supermarine moved in the chauffeurs for Sir George Cooper and his family became transport for Supermarine. The carpenter for the estate, he transferred and became a wood worker in what's called the mold loft. When they made the aircraft, the first thing you would do when you designed it was, it would go to the mold loft, where they would make a mock-up of the plane to make sure it worked and also to get the opportunity to actually work out the running of the pipes and the electrics that had to go into the plane, before you then went down to the experimental hanger where it would actually be produced as a flyable plane in aluminum and other derivatives and so forth.

So you get a very easy shift and it was the same with the Home Guard, as the war goes on. Quite often the members of the Home Guard had started as estate workers and were now Supermarine workers, or there were Supermarine workers who are now part of the village. So it blurred quite well, particularly in the school where of course you had a lot of the local Supermarine workers were now going to Keble school alongside the classmates who were born and bred in the village. They certainly adapted. Otherwise very little had actually changed.

**Julian:** And as the war moved on past D Day and on to its end in 1945, did Supermarine move out or did they stay on for some time there?

**Dave:** By 1945, there were certainly moves by the parent company Vickers Armstrong Aviation, to move Supermarine's design team and administration out of Hursley and up to South Marston. Now South Marston had been a site that been purchased by Vickers in 1944 to provide additional production capability for the Castle Bromwich Spitfire factory up in Birmingham. So South Marston is just outside Swindon, it's where until very recently a Honda factory was. That move was resisted

tooth and nail by Joe Smith, as I said the chief designer and many, many, many of the Supermarine workers, largely because most of them had families locally and a move to Swindon was not appreciated and not wanted. And they fought literally through, into the 1950s to stay at Hursley and it's perhaps summed up by how vociferous Joe Smith was in his fight that when Joe Smith died in 1953, within a couple of months, because it sent out notices to people telling them they're moving. But it took them another five years from then to actually get them out of Hursley completely.

**Julian:** And Hursley house before the war and before the arrival of Supermarine was quite a magnificent country house. Did it ever return to that sort of former glory?

**Dave:** No. The simple answer to that. Hursley already was somewhat rundown. I mean, the Cooper bitterly complained about the death duties that the government imposed in 1940 after the death of Sir George Cooper. That didn't make them poor, but it certainly took a large chunk of the money and maintaining a large estate in the post-war years was always a problem. And if you add to that what in the end worked out as about 17 years of occupation, by an industrial organization whose interest is not in the preservation of oak paneling, most of which have been removed and stored, but in the business that was involved, then it took a battering. In the 1950s, when it became clear that Sir George was never going to move back into Hursley house, he was already living up at Merdon Manor near the estate, but just slightly away from it.

**Julian:** That's the younger Sir George, the son?

**Dave:** That's the younger George. That's George James Robertson Cooper, Captain Sir. George. In the post-war period, it became clear they are never going to move back in there. Lady Cooper had gone, the house have been, basically turned over to this industrial site, so he kept it as a revenue stream. The oak paneling that once had adorned the halls of Hursley Park and the screen at the entrance, originally that's a 17th century paneling from Winchester College's chapel, by the 1950s and I think in 1960, it was actually returned to Winchester College, by then, of course they'd already re-paneled their chapel and instead it was put up in New Hall in Winchester College. So if you ever go to Winchester College, if you get a chance to go into the New Hall there, they restored it a few years back, absolutely beautifully restored. That paneling is very largely the paneling that once graced the halls, as you came into Hursley Park. The Screens have been put up by Supermarine and continued to be put up by IBM but it could never be restored to its original state.

**Julian:** Yeah. And is there any lasting evidence in the estate today of its occupation?

**Dave:** Strangely enough, not really. When Supermarine used the estate one of the first things I mentioned that they built a large hangar near the kitchen garden that they used for their drawing office, that actually remained in use by IBM, much altered and that they knew as X Block. And gradually over the years, other buildings were erected around it. The idea at Hursley has always been that in that area, industrial type buildings could be done maintaining the pristine view from the actual house to the south, but to the east buildings were put up. And so their D, D east, Galileo center, were built around that drawing office. But in 1995, that was demolished and so what you actually have is this void in the buildings where it used to be, and that's pretty much the same down at the experimental hangar. The experimental hanger by the school used to be a large industrial building, it carried on through, into the 1980s, where it was used by a haulage firm. When that was demolished, the land was stripped and cleaned for very good reason. In the early days of both the Spitfire and then more particularly the later jet fighters where all sorts of new technologies were being invented to enable the supersonic or transonic flight, the care for chemical disposal wasn't quite such a high quality. And so the soil had been contaminated at the time and though that was cleared in the sixties, it's now still just vacated area.

**Julian:** Thank you, Dave. thanks for a truly fascinating account of one particular period during the history of the Hursley Park Estate. That's the end of this week's episode. My thanks today for talking

to me, it's been a pleasure. As I mentioned at the beginning, Hursley Park is rich in history and so we hope to persuade Dave to come back to share some more of his vast knowledge in a future podcast.

**Outro:** We hope you enjoyed listening to today's episode. If you would like to find out a little bit more about what we've been talking about, then please visit the website, [www.winchesterheritageopendays.org](http://www.winchesterheritageopendays.org), click on Hampshire HistBites, and there you'll find today's show notes as well as some links to more information.

Thank you.