

Halton Apprentice Tribute



The RAF Apprenticeship scheme was launched in October 1919. Selection examinations were held around the country and in January 1920, the 1st Apprentice Entry comprising 235 recruits began their three year apprenticeship at RAF Cranwell, whilst permanent accommodation was being completed at RAF Halton. The Boys were signed on for 12 years' service from the age of 18 and assigned to the trade of Carpenter, Sheet Metal Worker, Fitter or Electrical. The Training Schools at Halton and Cranwell were eventually renamed No 1 and No 2 Schools of Technical Training, respectively in March 1920. Halton's first Apprentice Entry, No 5, arrived at the station in January 1922, at which time the rank of Aircraft Apprentice replaced the earlier term Boy Mechanic.

The RAF Apprenticeship scheme came to an end with the graduation of the 155th Entry in 1993. During the 71 years of Apprentice Training at RAF Halton over 40,000 Aircraft Apprentices successfully graduated. Among them is a holder of the Victoria Cross, four recipients of the George Cross, 220 have been awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and 249 have won the Distinguished Flying Medal. Approximately, twenty per cent of Apprentices were commissioned during their service careers.

The concept of apprentice training was not only to turn boys into experienced and qualified tradesmen, but also to turn them into men, and the moulding of character was considered of prime importance since Halton first began as an apprentice training school. In 1959 the Air Ministry set this aim: *'To produce advanced tradesmen of good education and to develop in them such qualities of character – sense of responsibility, leadership, and pride of service – as will fit them for a progressive career within the Royal Air Force.'*

The importance of the RAF Apprentice Scheme received recognition by Her Majesty the Queen when No 1 School of Technical Training was honoured with the presentation of a colour. The Queen's Colour is the highest award that a Sovereign can bestow on a service formation or Unit for distinguished service. The Queen's Colour was presented to a parade of 1,700 Apprentices on 25th July 1952 by Her Majesty the Queen in the presence of Lord Trenchard. The Colour is unique in being the only one in any of the armed Services which is paraded by non-commissioned servicemen, a privilege which normally only falls to commissioned officers. That year also saw the end of a short lived-lived scheme where all apprentices of the same trade were allocated to the same Wing. The arrangement was not liked and there was great relief when the entries were reunited again on the same Wing.

The badge of No 1 School of Technical Training incorporates a symbolic tree of learning derived from the beech trees typical of the Halton area. The motto "Crescentes Discimus" can be translated to mean 'As we grow, we learn'.



In planning the Apprenticeship Scheme, the Air Ministry clearly took their responsibilities towards the young boys seriously and it was considered necessary to provide some insignia to distinguish them from adult airmen "so as to check smoking and the forgathering of boys with men". The four-bladed propeller within a circlet, to be manufactured in brass, was approved on 17 April 1919 and worn on the sleeve of the left arm, being, of course, highly polished at all times.

As old as the RAF itself, Halton has inspired a strong and creative tradition of many facets which refuse to be bound by rank, time or service. It is difficult to define that tradition, which is in part the sense of belonging to an organisation. In part, it is the awareness that the education given at Halton was well rounded. Additionally, it is the recognition that Halton was a firm but tolerant guardian during that difficult transition from youth to adult. In most ex Haltonians there is an *esprit de corps* and pride. The Entry spirit slowly expands to become the Halton tradition as individuals recognise that each is a member of a community, the common basis of which is the Halton Apprenticeship. Ex Apprentices have served their country well and have forged a reputation for excellence which extends throughout the world. The Royal Air Force can look back on Halton and Trenchard's Brats with well founded pride.

An Apprentice Tribute has been erected at Halton directly outside the former entrance to 'Schools'. The building is now known as Kermode Hall. The sculpture was unveiled by Her Majesty the Queen on the 31st October 1997". RAF Apprentices are also remembered at the new National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire. It is named Halton Grove and a plaque is inscribed as follows:

'This beech grove is dedicated to the memory of all those boys who joined the RAF at Halton as aircraft apprentices from 1922 until 1993, and were known as 'Trenchard's brats'. The grove takes the form of the apprentices' respected wheel badge, the central trees denoting the propeller, with the circle of beech hedging completing the wheel. When approved, the apprentice badge was the only RAF metal badge to be sewn on to the uniform'



The 'Trenchard Brat' sculpture outside 'schools' at RAF Halton represents the, brass cube, test job undertaken during technical training and the Wheel Badge which was proudly worn by generations of apprentices.

"When beech leaves are falling, where - er we may roam, old memories come calling; of Halton - and home".

Mike Mason (98th Entry)