



BIGGIN HILL AIRPORT BUGLE

News from our Airport at Biggin Hill - established 2005



CLUB AND AIRPORT NEWS

BIGGIN HILL AIRPORT SOCIAL CLUB LTD

In Ass. with BigginHillReunited.co.uk

ISSUE No. 103

www.bigginhillclub.co.uk

1st September 2013

RAPIDE FLIGHT CONTINUES

With Laurie (Harry) Harris
From issue 102...!

After a night stop at Lake Victoria Hotel Entebbe, the next leg of the journey to Capetown begins:



20 December 1963... Four days left before Christmas – It was looking good! Our next leg was right down the length of Lake Victoria and beyond to a place called Tabora in Tanzania – or Tanganyika as the old colonials still insisted on calling it. We took-off early and seemed to be flying over Lake Victoria for ages before we finally reached the southern shore, passing by Mwanza off to our left. Another hour went by before Tabora appeared over the horizon. We were met on our arrival by a kind old British gentleman, now retired and living in a wooden-type bungalow just a short jeep ride away from the airstrip. Upon clearing Customs

and Immigration he insisted on us joining him for lunch which we readily accepted.

After a most welcome meal he drove us back to the airstrip where we thanked him for his hospitality, bid him au revoir, and took to the skies once more, heading for a place called M'beya. It was pampas-type grasslands nearly all the way. Real lion country so we'd been told so I didn't relish making a forced landing there! I flew reasonably low so the girls could search for any wildlife. We didn't see much though, just an occasional gazelle or two. Then we caught sight of a large flock of flamingos rising en-masse gracefully into the air from the waters of a small lake; a most beautiful sight with their great pink-tipped white wings slowly flapping up and down. Shortly afterwards I saw a pride of lions but they rapidly disappeared on hearing our approach before I could alert the others. As the high ground came into view I map-read to find M'beya which lay partially hidden in a ring of hills. We had previously been warned by the Royal Aero Club that it was a difficult place to find in poor weather conditions so I was glad that they still held good for us.

The good weather enabled me to find M'beya without much difficulty. We landed safely and were marshalled into our overnight parking spot before disembarking. The Controller was an Englishman, the first one we had come across since leaving the UK. As we were the last expected arrivals of the day

he decided to close the airfield for the night. After refuelling and paying the landing fees, he then drove us all to the Government Rest House where he later joined us for a meal and drinks after we had all showered and changed. He had been a RAF Pathfinder Squadron Leader in WW2 flying Lancaster bombers and so Don and he had many a tale to tell to each other, with myself a patient but interested listener. He was most helpful when we enquired about our next day's flight and gave us some much valued advice.

I slept deeply that night. The constant flying was beginning to tell. We were averaging about seven hours per day and although I really enjoyed it, with many new places and experiences, nevertheless I felt like a break now and then to close my eyes for a few moments rest. I fought off the growing fatigue, consoling myself with the realisation that we were now in the final stages of our long odyssey having left most of the problems behind us. My one and dedicated intention now was to get ourselves safely through to the end of our journey. As I grew closer to our destination and pondering the thought of collecting those bets back at Biggin Hill later on, I was determined not to let anyone or anything stand in my way and ruin it all.

21 December 1963... Another early start which the girls especially young Jillie, didn't appreciate too much, and with the early morning tropical mist still

lingering in the hollows, we bade farewell to our kind hosts and got underway. Once airborne I climbed overhead before setting course and waggled the Rapide's wings to all those waving below. Before long we had crossed the border into Nyasaland, or Malawi as it is now called having just recently gained its independence. After reaching Lake Nyasa I descended to about a hundred feet or so above the water so we could search for anything of interest. It wasn't too long before I spotted some Hippopotamuses splashing about in the shallows and banked the Rapide to give the girls a better view. Soon there were crocodiles and lots more wild-life to be seen. Native fishermen tending their nets waved to us as we passed overhead; the girls were very excited by it all. Things were beginning to get interesting for them. We were all now in high spirits again.

Finally we left the long lake and headed southwest towards our next destination Lilongwe 'Karonga'



where we eventually landed and refuelled. The English Commandant in charge of the field was rather off-handed with us, which I thought a bit odd considering that it wasn't every day that an old biplane dropped in there en-route from England to Cape Town with six English people on board. I wasn't expecting a fanfare of trumpets exactly, just a warm welcome smile and cheery hello would have sufficed. He wasn't about to give either and was very matter-of-fact in his attitude towards us all – the miserable tyke!

With formalities concluded we were airborne again within the hour; next stop Salisbury in

Southern Rhodesia (now Harare in Zimbabwe). By now the blue sky was giving way to large cumulus build-ups with showers of rain descending from them, but still with excellent visibility in between the showers and only slight deviations from course were required to avoid them. The jungle clad hills seemed to stretch forever into the distance with little signs of life to be seen anywhere. We crossed the mighty Zambezi river where I pinpointed my exact position on a prominent bend, but with little wind to speak of, and hence practically no apparent drift, any corrections necessary were minimal. Before long I picked up the radio beacon at Salisbury Airport and shortly afterwards, I made contact with the Air Traffic Controller.

It had been a long day's flying from M'beya and I was looking forward to our arrival. Then suddenly after a pause, the English Controller calmly informed me that as this was their International Airport they couldn't accept us there and we would have to proceed to the 'Light Aircraft' field called Mount Hampden, a few miles away from Salisbury. I tried negotiating with him to allow us to land as I was getting rather short of fuel after the long flight and didn't know where this Mount Hampden was. I pointed out that we had been landing at International Airports since leaving England with no problems. He was adamant though and was not even prepared to discuss the matter further and practically ordered me to go there! Not having a clue which direction to fly, he gave me (somewhat reluctantly I felt) a bearing to steer. Eventually I found the place, or rather the edge of it because the rest of the field was by this time sitting under an enormous tropical thunderstorm! I could barely see the perimeter track around the edge for the heavy torrential rain. My fuel gauges were now registering quite low and I had no intention of

hanging around in the vain hope that the storm would clear in time for me to attempt a landing. Therefore I returned back to Salisbury Airport on the reciprocal track, explaining my predicament and insisted on a landing clearance.

The same Controller reluctantly conceded and I alighted on the runway with tanks almost touching the zero marks. As I was being marshalled-in, the Controller then told me on the radio, in a somewhat highfalutin accent, to report immediately to the Tower with my licence and documents. All this time there had not even been one single aircraft movement at the field except for a BOAC Comet which was about to embark its passengers ready for departure.

I left Don to take care of the necessary formalities whilst I proceeded upstairs to the Tower. The toffee-nosed colonial wimp I was speaking to over the air demanded to see my licence and spent quite a considerable time examining every single page, explaining in a 'plum-in-the-mouth' voice, not raising his eyes from my licence as he spoke down to me, with his feet up on the table, that Mount Hampden was the light aircraft field and I had no right to land at their International Airport. My blood rose at this pathetic attempt to humiliate me and I asked him what sort of reception was this, having just flown all the way from England with a family of children, surmounting all the trials and tribulations of African bloody-mindedness en-route, to be greeted in such an abysmal manner by one of my own countrymen? He remained silent, still perusing my licence, then without even looking up tossed it contemptuously back across the counter and told me I could go. I was spoiling for a showdown with him, especially after the cool reception from the previous twerp at Lilongwe, but decided to swallow my pride and retreat before I did or said something I might later regret.

I realised by this time that fatigue was getting a grip on me and that I would do well to control my rather pent-up emotions, thereby avoiding a violent confrontation with this snotty-nosed bureaucrat. I was sorely disappointed with his attitude though having negotiated the wilds of the African Continent, believing that at long last I was finally entering civilisation again, only to be treated in such a contemptuous way. If they regarded a fellow Englishman in such a patronising and condescending manner how then did they deal with the poor natives? Little wonder we lost the British Empire!

Still smarting from my encounter I met up with the rest of them and we took a taxi to a hotel recommended by the jovial black taxi-driver. I thought as I chatted to him on the way into town how much longer this lovely place would be flying the Union Jack? Not much longer as it transpired which didn't surprise me! The single-storey hotel was excellent and after a good bath we were ready for the wonderful meal and some relaxing drinks that followed. I don't even remember my head hitting the pillow that night – I was 'out for the count' as they say.

22 December 1963... Three days to Christmas and we were now on the homeward stretch! I wasted little time at Salisbury airport on getting away from the place but I almost came to grief on the take-off. I suppose it was a mixture of complacency, now that I was getting quite used to handling the Rapide, and the previous day's escapade that was still bugging me, that accounted for my next actions. I had spun the aircraft around at the end of the runway and gunned the throttles fully open before properly lining her up, consequently it started to swing off to one side. Looking back on it, I should of course have abandoned the take-off attempt and taxied back to have

another go, but I suppose pride must have taken precedence over common sense at that point and I foolishly attempted to correct the swing and continue with the take-off. I veered from one side of the runway to the other before managing to heave her into the air, without damage fortunately. I was not sorry to see the back of Salisbury!

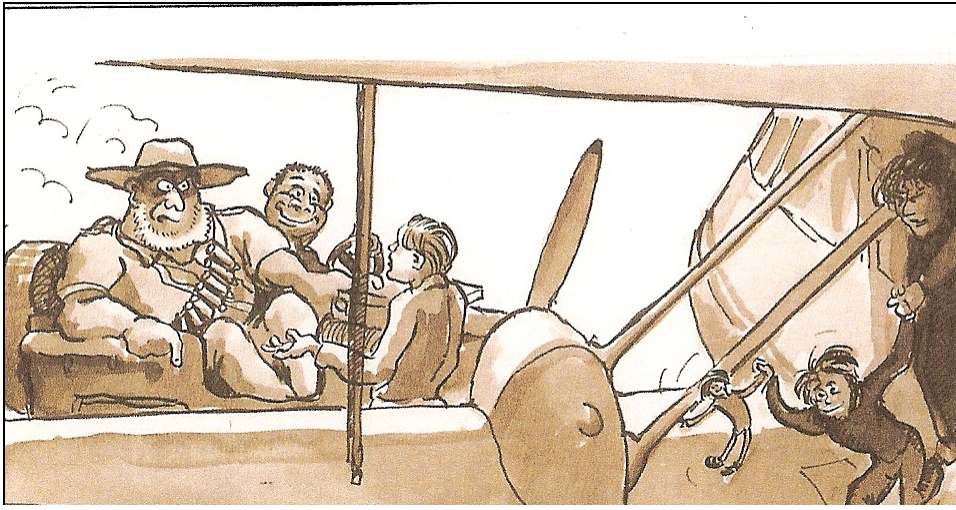
That incident fetched me sharply to my senses though and made me realise that unless I took a firm grip on myself and fight off this creeping fatigue it would spell disaster for us all. With such a relatively short distance to go to reach our final goal, compared to the vast distance we had travelled so far, I simply had to keep command of the situation and soldier on to the end, if not for myself at least for the sakes of Don, Anne and those three young girls behind me.

We bypassed Bulawayo and droned on ever southwards towards the border, with not more than a few miles to go to the Limpopo River, marking the boundary point between Southern Rhodesia and South Africa. Suddenly that confounded starboard engine began to misfire again! Within minutes it became so bad that I had to close the right-hand throttle right back to the idling position. I began searching around for a suitable place to make a forced landing of which there seemed to be a variety of likely spots, but I was set on at least crossing the border before I had that option forced upon me. As the Limpopo drew closer, and even with the left-hand engine now going full bore but no longer able to maintain altitude, we descended ever lower, obeying the long finger of gravity that pointed downwards. I began searching frantically for a place beyond the river to put her down. The crazy thought crossed my mind that if we were going to crash, then at least let it be at our destination – South Africa !

The Limpopo River finally came up and there was Beitbridge, the border crossing point. What shall I do now I thought? Where will I put her down? My questions were answered because suddenly I saw it; just a little further ahead on my right-hand side I caught sight of an airstrip, just inside South African territory! Without further ado I made a beeline for it and having arrived overhead, circled it once to make sure it was okay, and with the left-hand engine still going flat-out I approached and landed. We'd arrived at Messina in the Transvaal!

After landing I taxied to a concrete parking area and was soon surrounded by a lot of natives. I shut the engines down and quickly climbed out with Don, ahead of the others, to explain our circumstances. Within seconds of me disembarking a jeep came screeching to a halt in a cloud of dust alongside the Rapide and out of it jumped this bearded ox of a man with a wide-brimmed hat and a bandolier of bullets strung diagonally across his enormous chest. "*Vot you fellers tink you doing landing on my private strip huh?*" With as much grovelling decorum as I could muster I explained our predicament. At that moment Anne and the three girls began climbing out of the plane also. He took one look at them and then ordered us all into his jeep saying "*Neffter mind, my Kaffirs will take care of it – you lot come wid me yah!*" We were in no position to negotiate terms and meekly crammed into his jeep, wondering where he was taking us and what lay in store at the end of the ride!

After a hair-raising drive we arrived in a cloud of dust at a beautiful old Dutch-style bungalow, surrounded by well-groomed lawns tended by a handful of curious 'Kaffirs' as he called them. We were then given the most sumptuous meal imaginable whilst he listened wide-eyed to our tale.



He all but insisted we stay the night, but with lots of sincere apologies we made him realise that we simply had to press-on to Cape Town if we were to arrive there by Christmas. We would dearly love to have sampled some more of this wonderful Boer hospitality but time was running out for us. Appreciating our situation he graciously accepted our reluctant refusal, drove us back to the airstrip, stopping on the way at the Border Customs point to get our passports stamped, then back to our aircraft. Sure enough his so-called Kaffirs had fixed the magneto problem and having successfully checked them during an engine run, we again took to the air, waving frantically to them as we sped past. What a wonderful reception. How different from the ones we had experienced when we arrived in Southern Rhodesia! I felt that at last, after all we had been through we had finally reached civilisation again.

As we climbed away over the Blue Mountains (as they were apparently called), and left the Limpopo behind us, the feeling engulfed me that at last we had reached the country of our destination, even though we still had over a thousand miles yet to go to Cape Town.

Before the forced landing at Messina our destination had originally been Peitersburg, however, as we had already taken on some extra fuel at Messina we could now push on further.

The Gruff but kindly Boer has suggested that the best place for us to night-stop would be Potchefstroom. This was beyond our range though so we headed for Pretoria first to refuel.

With the excellent summer weather we were now enjoying, finding Pretoria was a relatively easy task, and before long we were approaching to land. After refuelling and a quick turn-around we were soon back in the air heading for Potchefstroom, taking in all this new and unusual scenery on the way. The lovely and well laid-out towns and villages were a sight to behold as we passed them by. The sunny summer's afternoon gave excellent flying conditions and we cruised on steadily for mile after mile, admiring the scenery as we went. I was now savouring a warming comfortable feeling, with smug satisfaction, in the knowledge that here we were in South Africa at last. We had actually made it despite all the previous reservations, but it's a very big country and we still had lots more flying to do before reaching Cape Town.

Somehow or other I found Potchefstroom and landed. The friendly greeting they gave us on arrival adequately made-up for the miserable reception we had been given in Rhodesia and our spirits rose high. It was a military training field and during WW2 many an RAF cadet had received his 'wings' training here. It was their

first sight of a Rapide since the war and they swarmed all over it in admiration. We were quickly whisked away to a nice lodging house in this quaint old Boer town where we were treated as guests of honour. After dinner we strolled around town in the warm summer evening air taking in all the sights and admiring the old Dutch-style architecture of the place. I contemplated in awe the civilised and hospitable reception we received wherever we showed our faces. There we were on the other side of the world from England, separated from the rest of western civilisation by the vast expanse of darkest Africa. What a wonderfully satisfied feeling crept over me. Now nothing could stop us; the finishing post was almost in our sights. I slept soundly that night!

23 December 1963... This was to be our final day of travel but a long day's flying awaited us so we made an early start; our last one we hoped for some time to come. The next stopping point was to be the big gold-mining town of Kimberley close to the Orange River. With the good summer weather still holding it was an interesting but uneventful trip and we could see the huge opencast diamond mine of Kimberley from afar. Don pointed it out to me as he had seen it before, saying rather rudely "*That's the biggest made-made hole in the world – barring Christine Keeler's that is!*"... The Profumo affair was still big news when we left the UK.

The restaurant within the main terminal at Kimberley airport provided us with adequate refreshment for our next leg which was to a place called Victoria West in the Cape Province. So without further ado we took to the air once more. Jillie was being very obstreperous by now and becoming quite a handful – poor Anne was almost at the end of her tether. So when we eventually landed at Victoria West she insisted we give

the children a break of a couple of hours before continuing with our journey, much to Don's annoyance. On return about an hour later, having refuelled previously and paid all the requisite dues, we climbed on board for the final leg to Cape Town.

By now the afternoon heat had made the cabin air quite oppressive, and even though I slid both my side-screen windows in the cockpit wide open, it did little to relieve the situation. Before long they were all fast asleep with their faces wreathed in sweat. Jillie was stretched out on the floor still clutching her favourite teddy bear. We droned on and on and the scenery gradually changed to sandy desert as we travelled across the Great Karroo. The Drakonsberg Mountains came into view to our left and by this time my eyes were getting heavy with fatigue. Glancing back over my right shoulder occasionally I saw them all still sound asleep.

How I envied them and longed to close my eyes also and rest awhile! With strained eyes glued ahead, desperately trying not to doze off, it suddenly dawned on me that the hazy horizon had begun to change colour to a dull purplish blue hue. I took my sunglasses off to make sure I wasn't seeing things but there it was! What I could see was the Southern Ocean beyond which the next piece of land was the Antarctic! We had actually come to the end of Africa at last. I yelled with joy, which woke them all up with a start, and immediately called them to come up front one by one to see for themselves. What a moment that was – I felt so thrilled.



Eventually the famous Table Mountain came into view with its

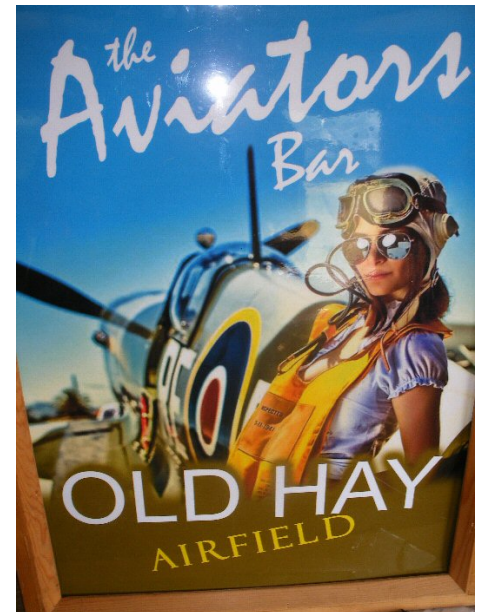
tablecloth of lenticular cloud hugging the summit. I suddenly realised that I had better talk to someone over the VHF radio so I called the D.F.Malan International Airport to ask them for entry instructions into their zone. They replied telling me that the grass aerodrome called Youngsfield I should go to was situated about ten miles southwest of them, not far from Table Mountain, and then they gave me an approximate heading to steer. I managed to find it without much trouble and circled overhead once to check the landing direction from the windsock. Completing the circuit I commenced my approach to land, crossing the boundary hedge a little on the fast side and made a rather bumpy and undignified arrival – not one of my best landings by a long chalk but I put it down to a mixture of fatigue and excitement. As we taxied in towards the hard-standing close to the hangars I noticed a big crowd of people standing near by. The marshaller had indicated for me to stop right in front of them, which rather puzzled me? I shut down the engines and sank back in my seat with a mixture of intense relief and satisfaction, hardly able to comprehend that we had made it at last, and in one piece too. Then as the back door opened I heard a cheer go up from the crowd of people as they came surging forward to greet us. I couldn't believe it – they were actually there for our benefit? I was the last to deplane and everyone swarmed around us shaking our hands and hugging the children. It took me some moments to arrive at the truth of it. It appeared that Don had already briefed his friends about our ETA (Estimated Time of Arrival), probably by phone at the last port of call, and they in turn had the Press out there to meet us. Now I began to realise his urgency at wanting to leave Victoria West without delay. Faced with all this publicity I felt most embarrassed. I

didn't know where to hide my face but I put on a brave and rather forced smile and said my bit to the reporters, although I've no idea now what words came out!

So there it was! We'd made it all the way from England, on the other side of the world, to the bottom of Africa in our tiny 'Bamboo Bomber' as the RAF used to call our small, flimsy wood and fabric aircraft. Dear old G-ALGC had done us proud, and despite the occasional hiccup, she had fetched us all those thousands of miles to our destination in safety. It had taken us almost seventy flying hours from Biggin Hill to Cape Town, and we achieved it with just one day to spare before Christmas 1963.



OLD HAY 'FLY IN' WEEKEND



A truly magnificent weekend with a good attendance – double hog roast and a bar designed around an aircraft interior complete with proper airline seating. The main structure of the bar being made from pallets and other discarded materials, ingenious but effective.

It would be stocked with a variety of barrels of ales, some of which the editor had never heard of or tasted, cheers!

The bar was no sooner built than the helpers decided they needed some refreshment, instead of doing what they were supposed to be doing. It was hot outside!



Setting up the Hog Roast Bar-B-Q



Note the amount of wood required in the larger picture where Colin Harris is wiring the Hog's to the roaster and wrapping in foil to enhance the cooking time.

Once the fire was lit it produced a lot of smoke initially, but some serious heat from the embers for the next 8 hours of slow cooking



An immaculate Tiger Moth makes an early arrival at Old Hay



A pair of elegant Stearman's



'Bunny' Newman, former owner of Avicraft Model Shop chatting to Colin Harris, (Auster owner and model aircraft enthusiast).



This Yak sports a very nice colour scheme.



Several Model Aircraft enthusiasts attended the show with some very expensive looking model aircraft which they flew in some incredible attitudes.

When you see their displays it is amazing that they are able to maintain control of these flying machines which are incredibly fast and quite large.

Some even displayed in the dark..!



Capt Peter Adams of Air Search London & South East.

The editor stayed late to capture a night flying display with model aircraft with illuminated wings.



A British Airways tethered hot-air balloon is illuminated as the model aircraft perform their tricks nearby.

Classic cars were another static feature at Old Hay along with other vehicle owners.



Classic Ford V8 extensively modified to that of the street car fraternity.

The car below is a Royale kit car based on an early BMW sports car.



A group of Army enthusiasts, with their armoured scout vehicles.



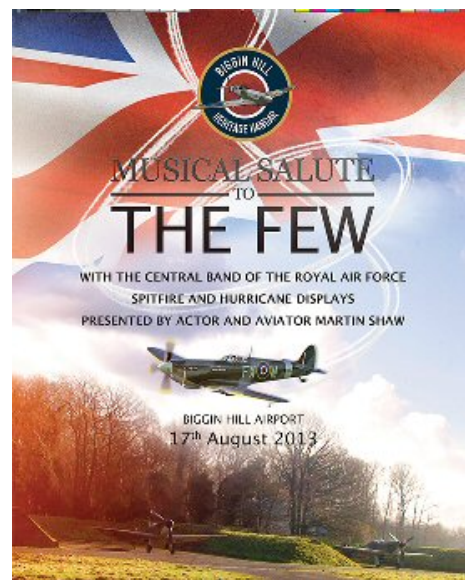
This corner of the large campsite looked somewhat like an Indian village with Wigwam type tents.



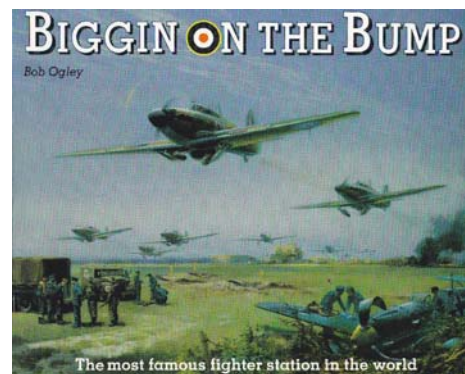
The weather at Old Hay remained hot for whole period of the show and the attendees soaked up the sunshine, most left with a good tan.

MUSICAL SALUTE TO 'THE FEW' AT BIGGIN HILL

Whilst we will probably not see another air show at this airfield the musical tribute was very poignant and spectacular and probably a good way to accept the past.



The gates opened at 3 o'clock and already there was a large crowd of people with their chairs, tables, cooler boxes and umbrella's all heading for a prime viewing position in front of the stage.



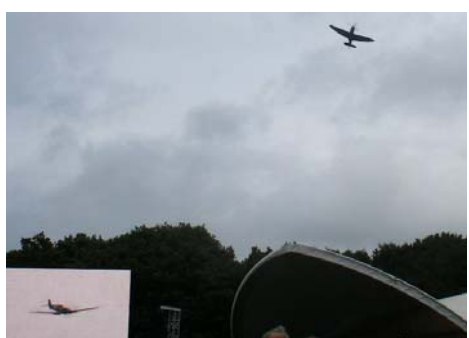
This Union Jack was raised, albeit on a stick, it flew for the whole day



The concert was introduced by the Mr Bob Ogley, author of his famous book **'Biggin on the Bump'** gave a rousing speech. Bob can be seen on stage via the large TV screen link.



Martin Shaw (actor / pilot) narrated the **'main music event'** with well researched film clips from WWII as a Hurricane and Spitfire flew over the stage whilst the Royal Airforce Central Band played



appropriate music to the familiar sound of the Merlin engines above.

Synnergeventsuk have produced another magnificent event and should be congratulated.

