

'GROC's Second Trilogy' (DEC) (Final Monthly Episode) - Part 7

By Geoffrey O'Connell (Continued from November mag - Part 6)

On page two I recounted how the newly formed Fairthorpe Ltd., moved into premises alongside Motorwork Ltd., in Chalfont St Peter, in 1954. The founder of Fairthorpe was Air Vice Marshal Donald 'Don' Clifford Tyndall Bennett (14th Sept. 1910-15th Sept. 1986) who was born in the City of Toowoomba, Queensland, Australia. Nowadays Toowoomba is some 76 miles/122kms due west of Brisbane. He was the youngest of four sons born to a Queensland stock and station agent and a grazier and his English-born wife. He was brought up in a strictly Methodist family with the result that he did not drink alcohol, smoke or use profane language which caused some difficulties for his air force colleagues.

After a period working in his father's business, he joined the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) in July 1930 and in August 1931 transferred to the Royal Air Force (RAF) but on the 11th August 1935 he transferred back to the RAAF. Only ten days later he married a Swiss lady, Elsa Gubler at the Winchester Registry Office. Proving himself a busy man, in January 1936 he joined Imperial Airways Ltd., as a civilian pilot. The company was a long-range airline mainly servicing the British Empire, including Australia, India, the Far East including Hong Kong and Malaysia, and South Africa.

After the outbreak of WW2, in July 1940 he joined the North Atlantic air ferry service bringing American and Canadian aircraft to Great Britain and on the 25th September 1941 he re-joined the RAF.

At the onset he flew Armstrong Whitworth Whitley and then Handley Page Halifax bombers. Between the 27th and 29th April 1942 Bennett was part of a total of 54 Halifax's and 23 Avro Lancaster's which were sent to attack the German Battleship Tirpitz which was berthed in a tributary fjord to the Trondheim Fjord which lies on the western coast of Norway.



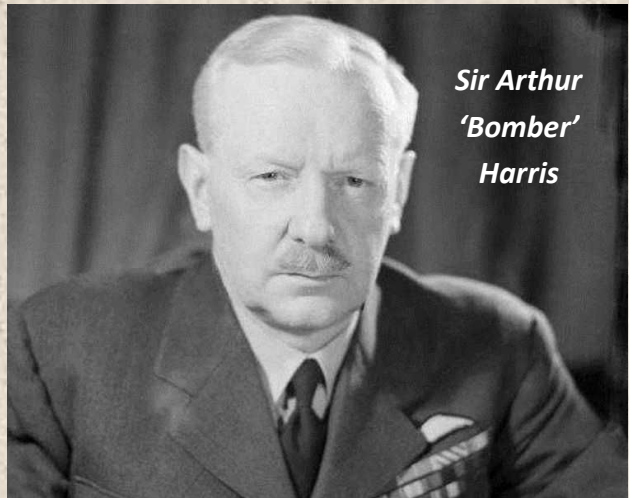
***Air Vice Marshal Donald 'Don' Clifford
Tyndall Bennett***



During those air raids some 7 aircraft were downed by anti-aircraft fire amongst which was Bennett's Halifax which had taken off from RAF Lossiemouth (North-East Scotland) on the 27th April. Fortunately Bennett, then a Wing Commander, and his crew of seven managed to parachute

to the ground comparatively safely. Four of them, including Bennett, evaded capture by the German troops and made their way to war neutral Sweden. There they were interned for various periods of time before being sent back to 'Blighty'. Bennett took a month, almost to the day, to arrive back in England after being shot down. * The other three of the party were captured and became POWs.

On the 5th July Bennett was promoted to Acting Group Captain at which he was summoned by Sir Arthur 'Bomber' Harris, ** the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief RAF Bomber Command, to form and command the Pathfinder Force (PFF) within Bomber Command. It had been established very early on in WW2 that the lack of accuracy of our Bombing enemy targets and the too high loss of aircraft and their crews was causing great anxiety. The reasoning was that a dedicated unit – the Pathfinder Force - which operated immediately prior to the Bombing raid would follow the specified route to be taken by the bomber aircraft, indicating the various navigation turning points with coloured flares after which on reaching the target they would drop flares and or coloured markers.



*Sir Arthur
'Bomber'
Harris*

**For that escapade he was awarded a DSO (Distinguished Service Order) on the 16th June 1942.*

***Air Marshal Harris had been knighted on the 14th June 1942. He commented that Bennett was the most efficient airman he had ever met. He also advised that Bennett could not suffer fools gladly and by his own high standards there were many fools*

The outstanding improvement in the accuracy of the bombing raids was self-evident. The headquarters of PFF was at RAF Wyton, near St Ives and in those days of yore it was in the county of Huntingdonshire. In 1974 the latter became a part of the county of Cambridgeshire. Initially PFF was made up of five squadrons of different aircraft, one each from the Bomber Command Groups. They were Halifax's, Avro Lancaster's, Short Stirling's, Vickers Wellingtons, as well as Wellingtons and de Havilland DH.98 Mosquitoes which operated from airfields close to RAF Wyton. By 1944 the PFF had been upgraded to the most suitable aircraft for their undertakings, namely the Lancaster's and Mosquitoes and by May 1945 Bennett controlled eleven Mosquito Squadrons. It has been suggested that often and strictly against the regulations, he would pilot a Mosquito to watch over the marking of the specified route, the targets and the following bomber attacks. *'Go get em tiger'*.

In January 1943 PFF became No. 8 Bomber Command and Bennett was promoted to Acting Air Commodore. In July that year he was awarded the CBE (Commander of the Order of the British Empire) and in December, aged thirty-three, he was promoted to Acting Air Vice Marshal, the youngest officer to ever hold that rank. In June 1944 he was awarded the CB (Companion of the Order of the Bath). At the war's end, of all the RAF Bomber Group Commanders only Bennett and Air Vice Marshal Edward Barker Addison were not knighted. A week after the formal German surrender on the 7th May 1945, Don Bennett resigned his RAF commission on the 14th May. That was the day he won Middlesbrough West by-election, but his victory was short as he lost the seat at the 5th July 1945 General Election. Bennett stood for election at the 1948 Croydon North by-election and at Norwich North in 1950 without any success. Undeterred he was a candidate at the 1967 Nuneaton by-election but again without a victory.

All that political carry-on did not interfere with Don Bennett's business activities. The British Latin American Air Line was renamed the British South American Airways (BSAA) before operations began on the 1st January 1946. Their General Manager was one Don Bennett who made the airlines first inaugural flight aboard the Avro Lancastrian *'Star Light'* from the newly opened Heathrow Airport. On the 30th January 1948 Avro Tudor *'Star Tiger'* bound for Bermuda disappeared over the Atlantic Ocean. The airlines other Tudors were grounded whilst an investigation was carried out. Bennett went public, criticising the BSAA boardroom, which action was met by a request for him to retract his remarks or resign. Bennett would do neither and was dismissed from his position in February 1948.

Not to be too downhearted Don Bennett formed Airflight Ltd., as a charter and cargo airline in 1948 which became involved in operating during the cold war Berlin Airlift from 1948 to 1949 with two Avro Tudors. When the Berlin Airlift ended, amongst other charters, the company's aircraft were deployed to carry troops to the Suez Canal Zone, Egypt, for the British Government.

Very unfortunately on the 12th March 1950 a rugby union enthusiasts charter flight from Dublin to RAF Llandow, Glamorgan, went badly wrong with the aircraft crashing close by Sigingstone hamlet in the Vale of Glamorgan, Wales. * The death toll was 75 passengers and all 5 crew with 3 survivors. After that tragedy, some 7 weeks later Airflight was merged with another of Don Bennett's companies, namely Fairflight Ltd., which was sold to the Freddie Laker company, Air Charter, in 1951.

**They had been to watch the Welsh Rugby Union team play against the Irish team in the Five Nations Championship at Ravenhill Stadium, Belfast. Sigingstone hamlet is: 7½/10½ miles/12/17kms from Bridgend to the north-west; 11/14 miles/18/22½kms to Barry to the east; and 1¾ miles/2.9kms to Llandow motor racing circuit to the west. Until 15th March 1957 the location had been RAF Llandow between 1940 and 1957.*

In 1954 it was the turn of Fairthorpe Ltd. which set out to manufacture fibreglass bodied sports cars in kit or completed form. The first two offerings, the rear engined Atom and the front engined Atom Major were rather unsuccessful. They were followed by the two-seater Electron, which was a very fast, Microplas of Mitcham in Surrey bodied, sports car which handled well but the Coventry Climax engine (sohc, 1098cc) resulted in the product being rather expensive, costing the same price as a well manufactured production car.



Rear engined Atom



Front engined Atom Major

Fortunately a John Green left his employment with Daimler in Park Royal and joined Fairthorpe as General Manager probably around about 1956. His arrival greatly improved the standards of production and at the rear end of the factory and somewhat out of view he was designing and making a new product, the two-seater Electron Minor which was introduced in 1957. The chosen engine was the more affordable Standard 10. The vehicle possessed amazing

roadholding, was economical in respect of fuel consumption and was very quick. With the then financial laws in place, as a kit car purchase a buyer would only have to find some £450.00. Please note I have dodged from making that to this year's value! It has been stated that the next few years sales of the Electron Minor were in excess of 500 or 700! Take your pick.

The Chalfont St Peter factory was occupied from 1954 to 1961 after which the site changed to Station Road, Gerrards Cross from 1961 to 1964. Between 1964 and 1973 Fairthorpe Ltd. moved to Denham Aerodrome, Denham Green Lane, Denham. There Bennett already worked with Dart Aircraft Ltd., who had been based at Dunstable, Bedfordshire. Nevertheless, he was not a gentleman to rest on his laurels. When Blackbushe Airport, located in the north-east corner of Hampshire, was closed on the 31st May 1960 by the Ministry of Civil Aviation, Don Bennett purchased a large chunk of the site for £12,000.00 from the Calthorpe Estate, the balance of the area reverting to the commoners of Yateley. He then commenced proceedings to reopen the Airport as an aviation facility on 325 acres of the location, at which pursuit he was successful. Blackbushe commenced as a flying club and operator of executive aircraft on the 6th October 1962. In 1973 Don Bennett sold the airfield to one Douglas 'Doug' Arnold.

Air Vice Marshal Donald Clifford Tyndall Bennett, CB, CBE, DSO passed away on the 15th September 1986, aged 76, at Wexham Park Hospital, Slough then in Berkshire but until 1974 in the County of Buckinghamshire. He died on the designated Battle of Britain Day and was survived by his wife, daughter and a son.

Lastly and rather more briefly than the preceding two gentlemen is John Green (1931-2005) whose inclusion in the Trilogy was outlined at the outset of this 'carry-on'. Not only did John greatly assist in the racing preparation of my first competition car but he sold me my second 1960s circuit 'chariot'.



AC Aceca



Daren Mk 1

That was a Jaguar engined AC Aceca (straight 6, dohc, 3781cc, XK engine), one of three such cars which it is maintained led to the creation of the AC Cobra. In the USA the latter is titled the Shelby Cobra and the AC Shelby Cobra.

It was after our friendship that John constructed the Daren Mk 1 in 1967. The GT car was so named after his son, that is Daren not Mk 1. It had a space frame enclosed by an aluminium body fitted with a 1600cc Ford Cosworth

engine (straight 4, dohc, 1594cc) and a Hewland Mk5 gearbox. I understand the car's first outing was at the 1000km Nürburgring on the 19th May 1968. The fibre glassed bodied Mk 2. version came about due to a change in the minimum weight restriction and motor raced in 1970. Eight were constructed fitted with various engine sizes and makes. In 1971 the Daren Mk 3 was launched of which six were manufactured, once again with a variety of engine capacities and makes.

And thus endeth the Second Trilogy. I trust your reading of the same has been enjoyable.

Grumpy Geoffrey O'Connell