

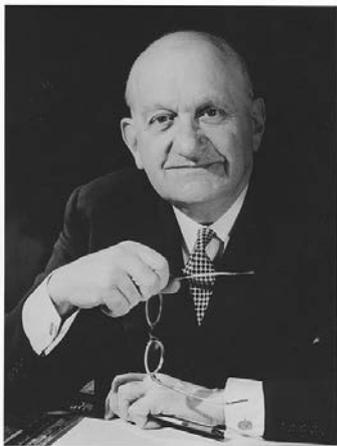


## Fairlop's 20th Century Heroes of the Air

### Background information

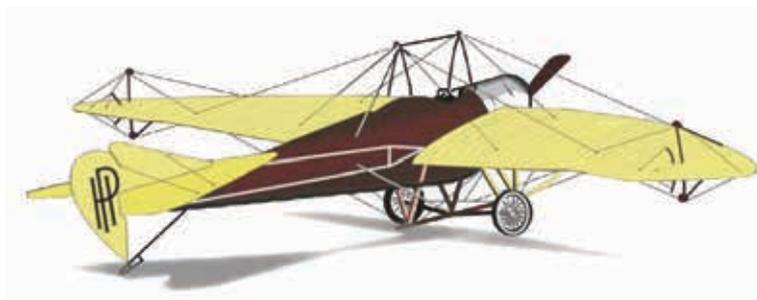
Fairlop Plain's name, suggesting a wide flat area of grassy land, is a clue to why it was so attractive to aviation pioneers before tarmac runways were the norm. However, looking across Fairlop Plain today, over the golf course and the lake beyond, it's difficult to imagine the significant role the area played in Britain's aviation history during the first half of the 20th century. Although almost all trace of Fairlop's airfields on the ground have disappeared, it is still possible to catch glimpses of Fairlop's "Heroes of the Air" through small pieces of infrastructure, letters, photographs, newspaper articles and plans.

The first successful controlled and sustained aeroplane flight was made in 1903 by the American brothers, Orville and Wilbur Wright, in Kitty Hawk, North Carolina. Within a short time the nearby Thames-side marshes at Barking were also home to early aviation pioneers. In 1909 Frederick Handley Page opened Britain's first aircraft factory at Barking's Creekmouth. For a short time in 1912 Handley Page leased the Fairlop Oak playing fields as a test ground for experimental aircraft when the Thames-side marshes were too waterlogged to take off and land safely.



**Sir Frederick Handley Page**

(courtesy Handley Page - fair use)



**Handley Page monoplane Type E HPS also known as E/50 nicknamed 'Yellow Peril'**

(David Martin)



## Fairlop's 20th Century Heroes of the Air

It was from here that his test pilot Edward Petre, a trained architect, tried out the first successful monoplane made at Creekmouth. He made a pioneering flight from Fairlop, across London to Brooklands in Surrey.

He flew in an open cockpit, wooden framed, cloth covered aeroplane nicknamed the "Yellow Peril" after its anti-corrosion paint. There were no modern navigational aids. He found his way by map, peering out of the cockpit and searching for landmarks along the River Thames below! It's not surprising that to withstand the wind and cold early pilots wore leather, wool-lined flying suits even in the height of summer.

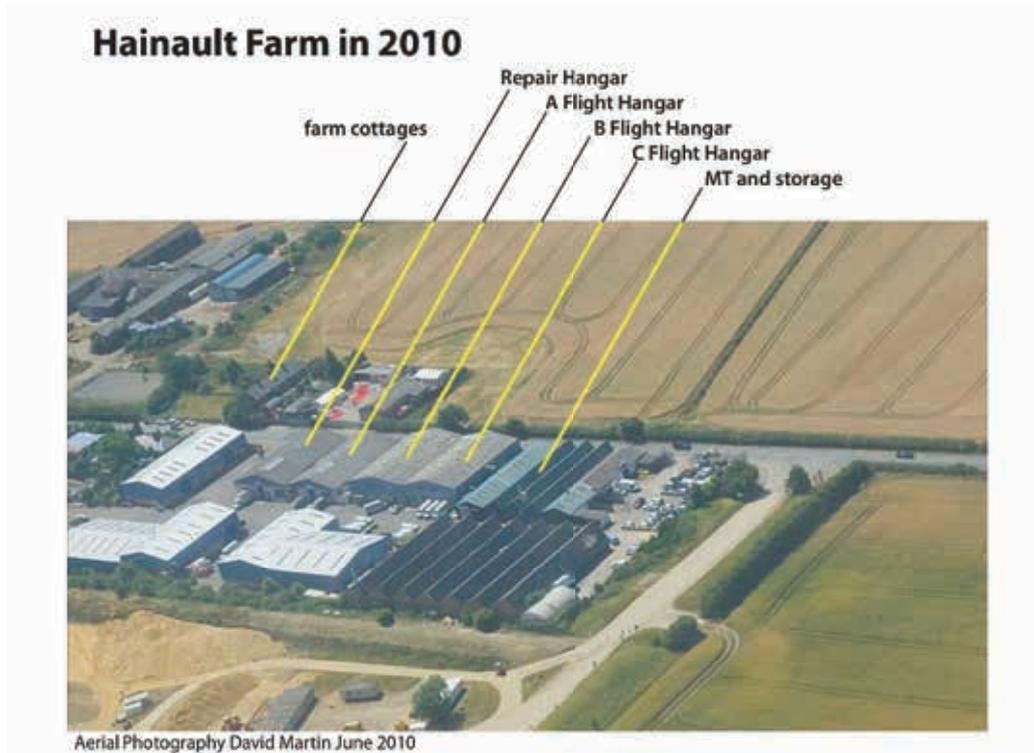
Edward Petre and his older brother Henry were attracted to the new, exciting world of aviation by Frenchman Louis Bleriot's pioneer flight across the English Channel in 1909. Both brothers were born at Ingatestone, Essex. Henry, a trained solicitor, had originally built his own aeroplane, with design advice from Edward. Both eventually became test pilots. Henry survived to old age, despite the perils of early flying, and became a founder member of the Australian Flying Corps. Edward was not so lucky. He died on Christmas Eve, only a few months after his flight across London, crashing in Yorkshire whilst flying from the Brooklands aeronautical centre to Edinburgh.

As aircraft became more efficient, both the British Army and the Navy began to recognise that planes might play a part in any future warfare. In 1912, the Army established the Royal Flying Corps, although their aircraft were initially only valued as tools for aerial reconnaissance and target spotting. The Navy also began experimenting with developing aircraft, which could carry machine guns, bombs and other armaments. In 1914 the Navy established the Royal Naval Air Service.

In July 1914, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia, followed by hostilities between Russia and Germany, creating worldwide turmoil. On 4th August, after Germany had invaded Belgium and threatened France, Britain declared war on Germany.



## Fairlop's 20th Century Heroes of the Air



Both the Royal Flying Corps and the Royal Naval Air Service were based on Fairlop Plain during WW1. There were two airfields, one at Forest Farm, Forest Road, the other at Hainault Farm, Hainault Road. A training depot for The Royal Naval Air Service was based on the old Handley Page Test Site at Fairlop Oak Playing Fields by Forest Farm, and conveniently near to the Fairlop Station's goods yard. There were hangars, workshops, offices, fuel stores and living quarters with baths and toilets. Victorian cottages used as Officer accommodation and the Officers Mess can still be seen nearby.



**Victorian building plaque on the Officers quarters at Forest Farm.**  
(David Martin)



## Fairlop's 20th Century Heroes of the Air

The Royal Naval Air Service also initially used another site as a landing ground, fields at Hainault Farm, Hainault Road. However, in February 1915, this area was taken over by the Royal Flying Corps and then extended. The Officers for this site were billeted in Hainault Farm farmhouse. Offices, regimental buildings, aircraft hangers, an Officer's mess and even a sewage works were eventually built to serve this airfield.

Because of its location between the coast and London, aeroplanes based on Fairlop Plain were crucial for home defence. Hainault Farm was designated a "night landing ground" and used by aircraft intercepting German bombing raids targeting London. Until late 1916, Germany favoured Zeppelin airship for night-time raids.



**Zeppelin L31**

(Potters Bar History Society)

Until British technology improved, they were bigger, faster and more deadly than British aircraft. However, in September 1916, Alfred de Bathe Brandon, a pilot based at Hainault Farm was involved in an event which played a pivotal role in convincing Germany that the day of the Zeppelin had passed. His role in destroying Zeppelin L33, and the complete destruction of another Zeppelin at Wickford, became national news. It is thanks to the huge improvements in British weapon and aircraft design and the bravery that night of men like de Brandon, that Germany realised Zeppelins no longer guaranteed them supremacy over the sky.



## Fairlop's 20th Century Heroes of the Air

However, flying continued to be incredibly dangerous. Many airmen died before peace was reached. They included Second Lieutenant Harry Jassby, a Canadian who joined the newly formed RAF. He flew from Forest Farm and was killed in a flying accident a few days before war ended. Despite being Jewish, he is buried in St. Peter's churchyard, Aldborough Hatch, where he is remembered each November on Remembrance Day.



**Harry Jassby and his grave**  
(David Martin)

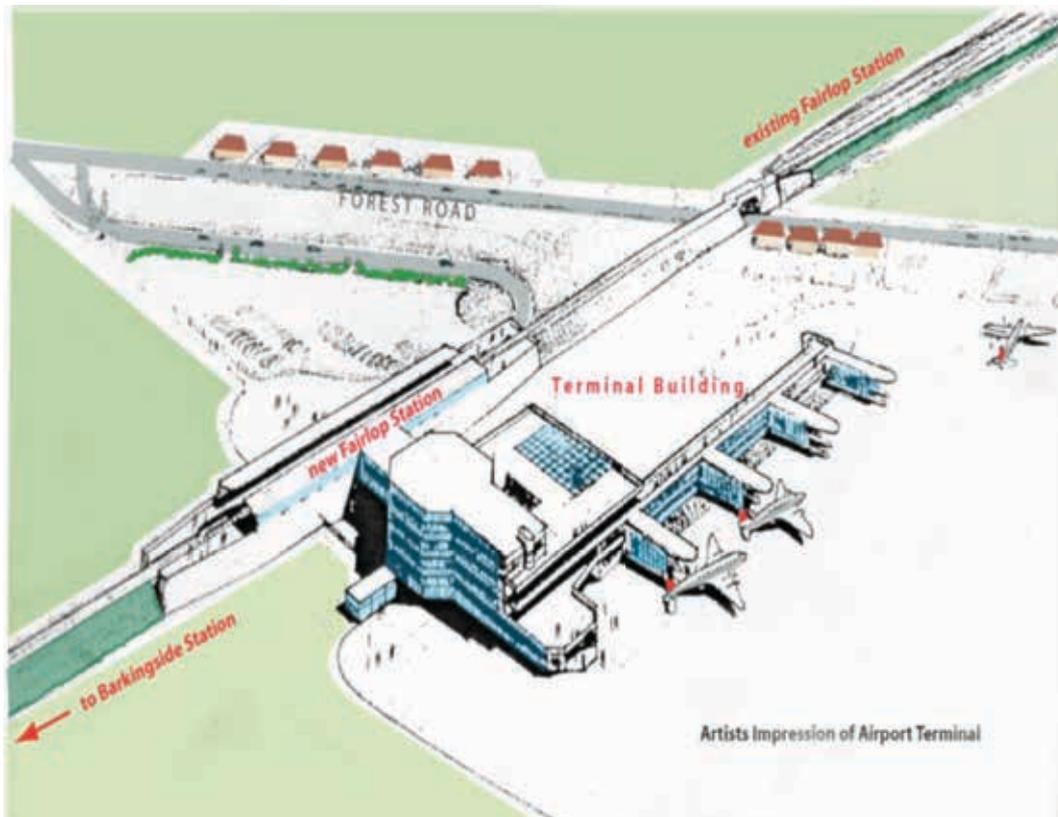
Soon after de Brandon's Zeppelin encounter, aerial navigation was improved with the help of the aperiodic compass. It was developed by Arthur Hughes at the Husun Works, New North Road, near both Fairlop's airfields. Previously, pilots only had maps and conventional compasses as navigational aids. A new compass, which enabled north to remain constant even when an aircraft underwent a hard turn, was priceless. Arthur Hughes was awarded the OBE for his part in its development.

Armistice came in November 1918, by which time the Royal Naval Air Service and the Royal Flying Corps had been amalgamated into one body, the Royal Air Force. Aircraft were still stationed at Fairlop until the following summer when Hainault Farm's land returned to crop production and most of the Forest Road site reverted to playing fields. For a short time between 1920 and 1923, the end nearest Fairlop station became a civil airfield, but this was soon abandoned.



## Fairlop's 20th Century Heroes of the Air

In the early 1930's the local Ilford Borough Council investigated the feasibility of purchasing land near the site of present day Fairlop Waters Country Park and developing it for civil aviation. These plans were thwarted when the City of London Corporation proposed a similar scheme with more capital behind it.



However, the outbreak of WW 11 in September 1939 put an end to any civil airport plans. In September, 1940, the Royal Air Force requisitioned the land for use as a military aerodrome. All necessary infrastructure was built to make the aerodrome operational, including military buildings and three concrete runways.

A year later, in October 1941, No. 603 (City of Edinburgh) Squadron was to be the first of many squadrons to begin operations from Fairlop, with Harold Bennett, from Plumstead, south east London, the first to fly operational. A small section of the runways is used as the entrance road to the club house.

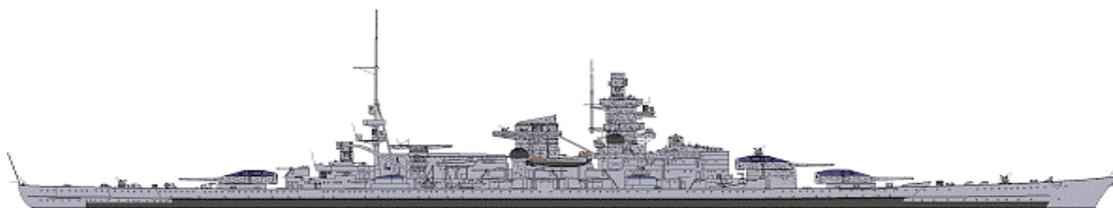


## Fairlop's 20th Century Heroes of the Air



*Just back, wobbly knees.* Harold Bennett aboard  
Spitfire VA W3502 HB - Wolds & Buckrose  
(Harold Bennett)

Spitfires, Hurricanes and Typhoons and Mustangs all flew from Fairlop. Airmen from around the world based there saw aerial combat at home and abroad. They but also escorted bombers, provided cover for U.S.A.A.F (United States Army Air Force) aircraft and patrolled the skies above naval convoys. When the German battleship Scharnhorst attempted to sail through the English Channel, it was airmen from Fairlop who helped engaged German aeroplanes in dogfights whilst bombers tried to locate the battleship, which successfully escaped.



**Scharnhorst**  
(kbismarck.com)

RAF Fairlop ceased operations in March 1944.



## Fairlop's 20th Century Heroes of the Air

From June 1944, Fairlop was the base for No. 24 Balloon Centre which supplied the equipment, and personnel from the Women's Auxillary Air Force manning London's defensive barrage balloons. These Blimps (as they were affectionately known) were winched into the air using thick steel cables designed to damage low-flying enemy aircraft, forcing them to divert into the path of anti-aircraft guns. With the development of more sophisticated aircraft and rocket weaponry, and the end of war in sight, the No. 24 Balloon Centre was disbanded in February 1945. The aerodrome was decommissioned in 1946.



**A Barrage Balloon close hauled**  
(Ronald Bullimore)



## Fairlop's 20th Century Heroes of the Air

Although the City of London Corporation still had plans to develop an airport on Fairlop Plain post-war, government policy centralising control of civil airports and visibility problems from smoke pollution made the project unrealistic. In 1955 the land earmarked for an airport was sold to Ilford Borough Council and, after being used for gravel extraction and refuse disposal, has been developed as an "open space" for the enjoyment of the whole community.

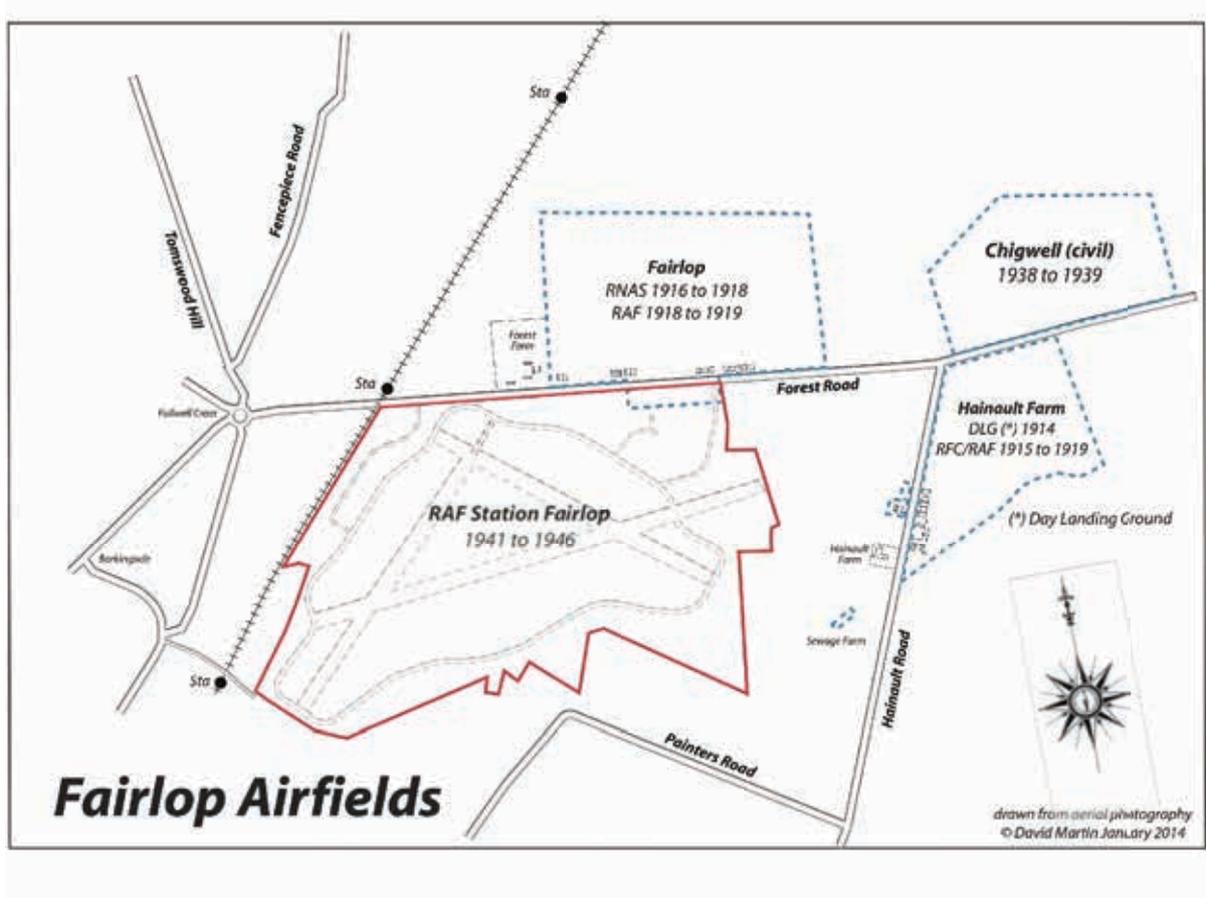
The annual Remembrance Day Ceremony hosted by the Fairlop Heritage Group, and the Commemorative Sculpture dedicated to those who served at Fairlop's three airfields in two World Wars, are a lasting testament to Fairlop's "Heroes of the Air".



**The Memorial on 11 November 2013**  
(David Martin)



## Fairlop's 20th Century Heroes of the Air



The airfields on Fairlop Plain  
(David Martin)