

From Ken Dickinson, Smiths Aviation

In the early-60s I was working on the design and development of the 'air data computer' for the TSR2 aircraft in the engineering laboratories at Smiths Aviation, Basingstoke, Hampshire. This unit converted pitot and local air pressures from capsule sensors within the air data computer to generate from complex gear train and cam systems analogue electrical signals from synchros and fed airspeed and altitude instrumentation in the cockpit.

I was approached by Smiths to provide support for BAC flight trials, initially at Boscombe Down and then at Warton on the Smiths aviation products (now Smiths Industries) onboard the aircraft, this meant taking 'crash courses' on the fuel gauging and navigato'rs downward looking sight which were produced at Smiths' Godalming factory.

As you are probably aware the airframes were produced at Weybridge and transported by lorry to Boscombe Down for final assembly and the first taxi-ing trials took place. If my memory serves me correctly, the engines came from RR Bristol.

After the initial trials at Boscombe, myself and my wife bought a bungalow on the new estate at Warton and moved lock, stock and barrel to a new life in Lancashire! I was located in the flight test hangar and at that time the aircraft had not arrived so I found myself sorting out Smiths Aviation referrals from the Canberras and Lightnings associated with flight testing.

At that time, other companies had representatives at Warton and we all became a part of the setup and members of the Lightning Club. I was joined by Derek Hughes who was recruited locally and was a well-known local footballer. The aircraft duly arrived at Warton and flew several test flights. It was known as the bomber with the wingspan of a Spitfire. When the crackling noise and the sight of it flying was very futuristic and exciting.

Unfortunately my 15 month stay at Warton came to a rather abrupt end through the government cancelling the project and I moved house back to Basingstoke and rejoined the Smiths Aviation engineering laboratory who were now working on the design of a miniature air data computer for the Harrier Jump jet. I know that complete aircraft still exist and have visited the one at Cosford. It still captures the imagination. The layout of the equipment bays for ease of maintenance was a credit to the designers.

I understand that some fuselages were used for gunnery practice at Foulness. I was fortunate to be able to re-house back in the south of England and I am aware that a lot of loyal staff lost their jobs. I still have fond memories of my time at Warton. I lost touch with Derek Hughes, but I do know he eventually joined BAC and married a local farmer's daughter at Wrea Green.