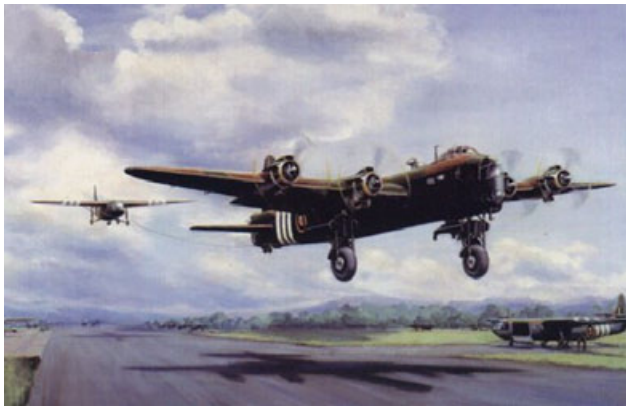

STERLING WORK IN SOUTH MARSTON

By Tony Leathart

The Short Brothers Ltd Stirling, named after the Scottish city, was the RAF's first operational four-engined bomber and was, in its day, a very advanced and formidable aeroplane. It went into production alongside the Sunderland Seaplane at the Rochester factory on the Medway in Kent.

The Stirling weighed over 20 tons, had a wingspan of over 87 feet and the fuselage was 99 feet long; four three-bladed aluminium propellers were over 13 feet in diameter. Out of a total of 2,383 aircraft manufactured, not a single one has survived to this day.

In August 1940, when the Rochester factory was bombed and the Belfast factory was also attacked and badly damaged, MAP, the Ministry of Aircraft Production, switched much of the Stirling production to a new factory in South Marston. Building work on the factory started in January 1940, but a hasty change of plan was ordered by MAP officials when they saw the size of the building that was taking shape. They felt that it presented too large a target from the air, so it was replaced by two pairs of final assembly hangars supported by other sub-assembly factories dispersed around the Swindon area. The South Marston assembly works, named FS2, employed nearly 500 people producing around twelve aircraft a month. It survives today in the Thornhill Industrial Estate; one pair of hangars occupied by Crocodile Packaging and Young European and the other pair by Nissin UK.

Two other identical shadow factory sites, each over 85,000 square feet, were also built in 1940. Fuselage front centre sections and nose sections were manufactured at the F Factory behind what is now the Speedway Stadium on Lady Lane at Blunsdon St Andrew. The workforce totalled around 1,000 people. More recently, the factory was demolished to build a housing estate.

The fuselage sub-assemblies were delivered to the identical W Factory at Friars Hill just beyond Sevenhampton, now occupied by Ellipsis Farms.

Some 700 people were working here to assemble and equip the fuselage (less rear section).

The fuselage was then towed by a farmer's tractor on village roads to the assembly works at FS2 South Marston.

Short Brothers also leased four bays on the north side of Great Western Railway's sheds in North Star Avenue near where the Oasis is today. This large shadow factory of 321,000 square feet produced around eight sets of wings and twenty-six rear fuselage sections a month, which were delivered to FS2. Clare's Retail Equipment Ltd later used these buildings to manufacture shop fitments until they were finally demolished in 2008. Some wings were also produced at FS2 and smaller parts were machined at a workshop on the site next to the present fire station which is now occupied by Aldi.

At FS2, when the complete aircraft was ready for engine runs and flight testing, it was towed out of the hangars as seen in this photo which shows, in the background, the old Manor House, now demolished to build Manor Park.

This apron in front of the hangars was levelled to produce a large bund opposite Gordon Cottage. The aircraft were towed, or in some cases taxied under their own power, across the road to the FS1 flight shed for pre-flight adjustments, before taxiing for flight testing to the airfield where two 1,000 yard concrete runways had been constructed. These were painted with woodchips dipped in camouflaged paint while sections of hedges were also spread across them when not in use to complete the deception.

FS1, of course, became the Crown Timber site and the airfield was bought by Honda about 30 years ago. The first Stirling took off from here for delivery to the RAF at the beginning of 1942, but by the spring of 1943, the production of the Stirling bombers was wound down with the intention of producing Lancaster bombers in South Marston. However, the Spitfire took precedence.

Senior villagers will look back on those war days with pride. Terry Sansum remembers, as an excited boy, seeing the Stirling taxiing across the road to FS1 with its engines roaring.