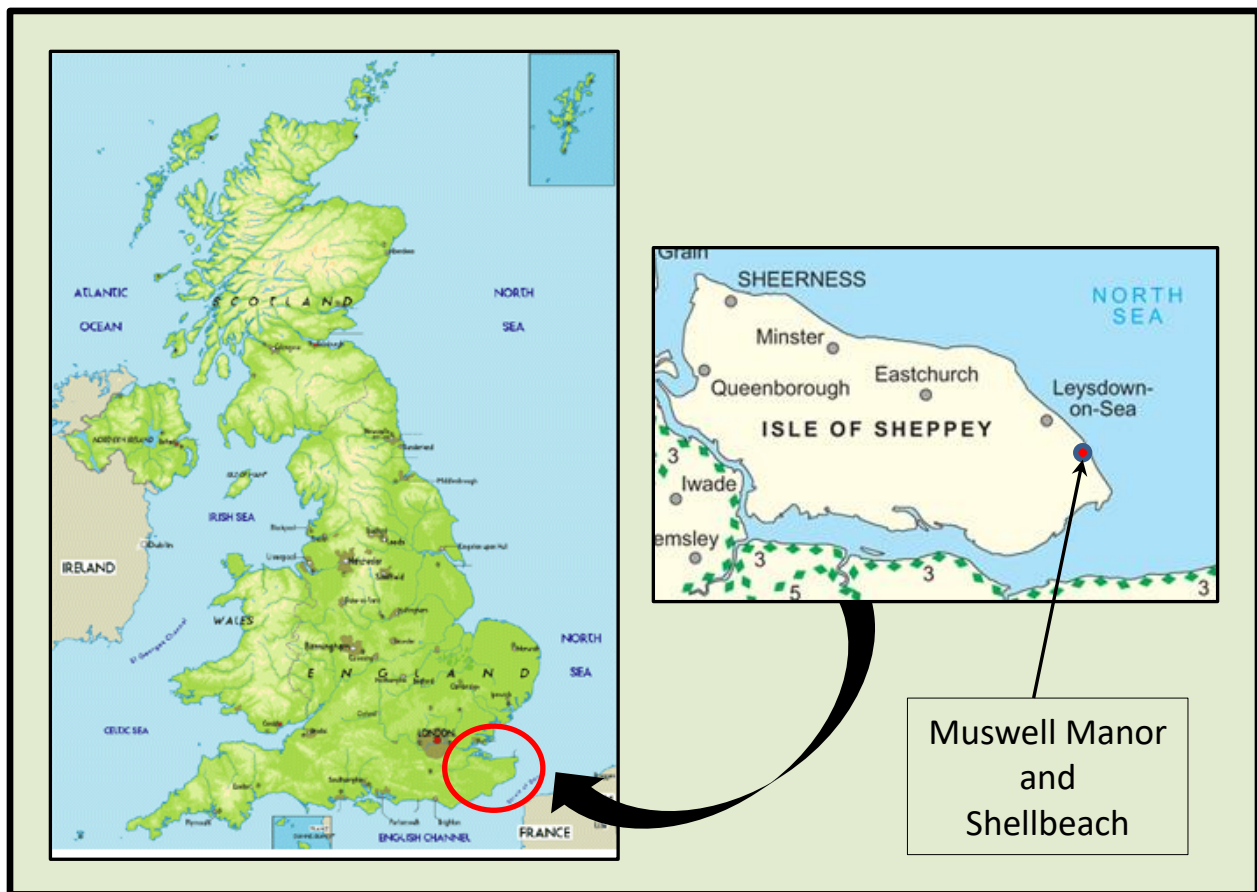


Royal Aeronautical Society Aeronautical Heritage Award to Muswell Manor

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Between May 2nd and May 3rd, 2009, a very important celebration took place at the site that many consider the birthplace of British Aviation and the modest beginnings of the aviation industry. More than 1000 guests, enthusiasts, pilots, and dignitaries gathered at the Muswell Manor Holiday Park, Isle of Sheppey, United Kingdom (UK), to participate on plaque and monuments unveilings, airplane fly-ins, and a fly over by the *Battle of Britain Memorial Flight*. The Royal Aeronautical Society, in keeping with the objectives of their *Heritage Awards Program*, unveiled a bronze plaque forged for the occasion. The plaque was awarded to Muswell Manor to celebrate and commemorate aviation achievements in the Shellbeach area; in which British aviation pioneers, working and flying in the area, “made an original and unique contribution to aeronautics of obvious significance” (see map below for the region and location of the Manor in question).



Geographical location of Muswell Manor on the Isle of Sheppey, Kent, UK, and the nearby Shellbeach coastal area

The building itself is historic and fairly old (original construction started in the 16th Century). It has been listed by the North Kent Coast Swale Borough Council as a Grade II building (a designation for historically significant dwellings) because of its architectural and aviation heritage. The Manor is located approximately

one mile south east from the town of Leysdown-on-sea, and about 200 yards from the shores of *Shellbeach*.



Aerial view of Mussel Manor, its adjacent Holiday Park, and the Shellbeach coast line



Muswell Manor is now adjacent to a holiday park used by summer vacationers. The Manor serves as the park administrative office, Bed & Breakfast and restaurant

To provide the proper background for the celebratory event, the current owners of the Manor, Terry and Sharon Munns, commissioned a replica of the door frame, made famous by the gathering of major British and American aviation pioneers 100 years earlier (more about this historic gathering later). Being a “listed” building restricts the changes that can be made to the outside of the Manor, ensuring that its original looks are maintained; however, the door frame replica addition was well within the allowed modifications. The award or plaque was mounted to the left of the door frame replica, and both were the centerpiece of the May events. The Royal Aeronautical Society plaque, which as mentioned, serves to promote and preserve

UK's aeronautical heritage, will be a constant reminder to visitors and historians alike; that "important aviation history was made here". This was an honor long overdue.



Classical style door frame replica specially built to celebrate the May 2009 Centennial.



Royal Aeronautical Society Heritage Awards Plaque unveiled at the Centenary events in May 2009

Historical Relevance of the Site to Aviation and the World at Large

The site is now referred to as *Muswell Manor Holiday Park*, which name is very close to the original "Mussel" and "Muscle" Manor spelling. Muswell Manor (henceforth called Mussel Manor when discussing its history) is the only active and remaining structure on the original site where three major events shaped the early history of aviation in the United Kingdom and the world. Major aeronautical accomplishments at the site and surrounding areas include:

- All aviation construction firms and assembly lines can trace their origins to the Short Brothers' factory, or workshop, built and operated on the adjacent land in 1909. This factory is widely

recognized as the first aircraft factory purposely erected to build practical airplanes in series. Since those early modest steps, the United Kingdom is today an aerospace powerhouse. This fact does not detract from the efforts that other airplane constructors in France were carrying out in order to develop their own assembly lines (mainly Maurice Farman and the Voisin Brothers).

- Mussel Manor and its adjacent flat fields were, for a critical time in its forming years, the initial headquarters and first flying grounds of the Aero Club of Great Britain. In February 15th, 1910, the Aero Club became the Royal Aero Club; and thus, UK's representative to the Fédération Aéronautique Internationale (F.A.I.). Many, if not most, of the fledging British aviators and pioneers learned to fly at the Club or under the sponsorship of the Club.
- With the support of the Aero Club of Great Britain members, and the sheer courage of J. T. C. (John Theodore Cuthbert) Moore-Brabazon, Frank McLean, and others, British "heavier-than-air" enthusiasts, aeronautical progress in the UK received its initial impetus; which a few months earlier, American Samuel F. Cody began at Farnborough. J.T.C. Moore-Brabazon (later Lord Brabazon of Tara) conducted at Shellbeach the first airplane flight by a Briton on British soil.

Mussel Manor, from February to November 1909, was the center of gravity of British Aviation. It attracted all the major players in a nascent aviation industry to a common place; where flying and aircraft construction coalesced as the only major activity. The personalities working, flying and creating in the quiet beauty of Shellbeach, helped transform the world forever. In fact, collectively, they are increasingly considered the "Founding Fathers" of British Aviation.

Historical Background

In late 1908, the aviation world was fully aware of the Wright Brothers' achievement in the new field of "heavier-than-air" flight. The Wrights were visiting Europe, in particular France, performing exhibition flights in their Wright *Flyer*, and trying to sell their airplane; a craft that had shown the skeptical Europeans that the two brothers from Dayton, Ohio, were the masters of the early science of flight. It was during these early months of 1909, that the British and American pioneers of aviation joined forces, starting a tradition that endures to this day. Three brothers, Eustace, Oswald, and Horace Short, were destined to be at the center of this British and American partnership, and the principal stimulus for the advancement of aeronautics in the United Kingdom.

The Short Brothers and the First Aircraft Factory

The Short Brothers were respected balloon manufacturers with a workshop under the Battersea Railway Arches, London. At the same time, members of the newly established Aero Club of Great Britain (as already mentioned, later named the Royal Aero Club), decided to purchase, and if necessary build, heavier-than-air machines. The Short Brothers, well known by the members of the Aero Club, were in a good position to facilitate their aspirations. The Shorts negotiated a license with the Wright Brothers in France, and won a tentative agreement to build six Wright Model "As" in Britain (basically Wright *Flyers* biplanes with some minor configuration modifications as desired by the Short Brothers).

To accomplish the manufacture, assembly and repairs of the airplanes, the Short Brothers leased 400 acres of land adjacent to Shellbeach, about 200 yards from a local home called Mussel Manor. In doing so, they set up the first aircraft factory in the United Kingdom and the world (see figure below).



Short Brothers factory near Mussel Manor and Shellbeach, Leysdown-on-sea, Kent

The factory was a 140 ft long by 45 ft wide structure, and within it, all the necessary tools to create the first assembly line in the world; albeit under more austere conditions. In March 1909, the contract was secured from the Wrights, and aircraft manufacture at Leysdown began; a truly historic moment for world aviation. At the time of the Wright Brothers' visit in early May, the factory employed 80 workers. Initially, the workshop contained the Wright *Flyer's* parts built at the Battersea works, which then were delivered to, and assembled at the Shellbeach factory. All aircraft companies in the world today can trace their origins to this building, which sadly, does not stand today.

In the meantime, the Short Brothers and the Aero Club of Great Britain located their headquarters at nearby Mussel Manor. The Aero Club members, although interested in aircraft construction, were determined to use the open flat lands of the Shellbeach area as their flying field. Frank McLean (later Lieutenant-Colonel Sir Francis McLean) helped purchase and prepare the land, previously used as golf links. This was the first airfield in the UK, purposely procured for aircraft flying operations. The site was opened on February 1909 and J.T.C. Moore-Brabazon brought his French Voisin aircraft "Bird of Passage" to the site; thus begun Aero Club flying activities in the area.

In late April J.T.C. Moore-Brabazon made three sustained flights, of 150 yards, 200 yards and 500 yards; and thus, achieved the honor of being the first British subject to fly in the United Kingdom. See picture below.



J.T.C. Moore-Brabazon in his Voisin named *Bird of Passage*

The Wright Brothers Visit Mussel Manor

On May 4th, 1909, the Wright Brothers visited the Short's workshop and Mussel Manor. They were taken to the site by Charles S. Rolls (of Rolls-Royce fame) on his newly acquired Rolls-Royce *Silver Ghost*. C.S. Rolls was a long time member of the Aero Club, and ordered the first Short Brothers' built Wright machine (Short-Wright No. 1).

The Wrights, according to a report published in the iconic aviation weekly *Flight*, (May 8th, 1909 issue, page 266) were very impressed with the facilities and the surrounding area, which they found very much suited for flying; perhaps it reminded them of the windy shores of Kitty Hawk, North Carolina.

Their May 4th visit to Mussel Manor for a lunch in their honor was recorded in the famous photograph shown below. The picture was taken in front of the Manor's entrance. As mentioned above, the current owners of Mussel Manor rebuilt the original door and sculpted frame much as it was at the time the picture was taken.

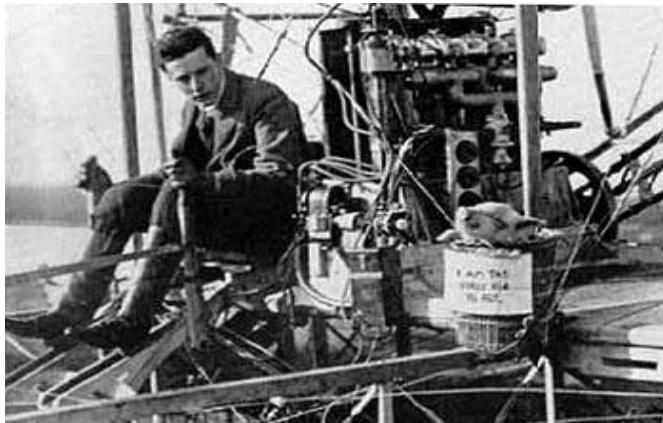


This picture above is sometime referred to as the “Founding Fathers” picture, and has been widely reproduced since 1909. Back Row T.D.F. Andrews (the Manor’s owner), Oswald Short, Horace Short, Eustace Short, Frank McClean, Griffith Brewer (later President of the Royal Aeronautical Society), Frank Hedges Butler (founder of the Aero Club with Charles Rolls), Dr Lockyer (astronomer), and Warwick Wright (a motoring aficionado). Front Row J.T.C Moore-Brabazon, Wilbur Wright, Orville Wright and the Honorable Charles S. Rolls.

JTC Moore-Brabazon exploits at Mussel Manor

On October 30th of the same year, flying Short No. 2 *aeroplane* (a Short Brothers’ modified Wright *Flyer*, and the second *Flyer* off the Short “assembly” line), Moore-Brabazon completed the first circular mile ever flown in a British aircraft; hence, winning a £1,000 prize offered by the Daily Mail (the Aero Club, in March 1910, had awarded him Pilot’s Certificate No.1).

Challenged by a local spectator’s comment that “Pigs might fly”, JTC Moore-Brabazon carried a piglet aloft, proving that “Pigs indeed do “fly”. This is considered by many the first live cargo flown on any aircraft.



J.T.C. Moore-Brabazon and his famous “flying pig”

In November 1909, the Aero Club, now the Royal Aero Club, moved its airfield and its flying activities to the nearby town of Eastchurch; thus ending one of the most seminal periods of aviation in the United Kingdom, and an early model of aeronautical collaboration and progress for the rest of the world. Soon after the pioneers moved to Eastchurch, the Manor was left behind by the activities taking place at the new flying grounds.

To emphasize its growing importance, Eastchurch hosted the 1911 Gordon Bennett Race, which ironically, was won by Haitian born, American pilot Charles T. Weymann, flying a French aircraft (a Nieuport 2 monoplane). Soon after, the Manor lost its relevance to the early flyers, and little flying was done in the area.

Previous Recognitions to Muswell Manor and Shellbeach

Muswell Manor received a plaque (located outside the building) during a 1999 celebration of J.T.C. Moore-Brabazon's flight 90th anniversary (see below); however, no direct recognition has been given to the building and its role in the Short Brothers' *aeroplane* manufacturing activities, and as the first headquarters of the Royal Aero Club. A memorial stone was also unveiled nearby by the grandson of J.T.C. Moore-Brabazon.



Picture of the Plaque unveiled by Lord Brabazon of Tara at Shellbeach, Kent, during the 90th anniversary celebrations in 1999.

The aforementioned memorial stone is located within the property of Muswell Manor, which is near the old Shellbeach flying grounds, to remind visitors of the historic events that took place in the area in early 1909. The stone inscription records the flight of J.T.C. Moore-Brabazon. The stone was made by Gordon Newton of Burslem Memorials and was funded by the Medway Branch of the Royal Aeronautical Society working in association with the Medway Aircraft Preservation Society, Sheppey Heritage Trust, Medway Heritage Trust and the Short Brothers Commemoration Society.



Picture of the Stone Memorial at Shellbeach, Kent

Although unrelated to Mussel Manor, there is an impressive memorial at the nearby Eastchurch (a major island town west of Shellbeach- see map above), that celebrates the association of the community to early British Naval Aviation (the first Royal Navy Air Service Station and the site of major naval installations prior and during World War One), and the former Short Brothers factory after the Short Brothers moved their assembly factory from Shellbeach to Eastchurch in January 1910.



Eastchurch Memorial, Eastchurch, Kent, commemorating the role aviation in the area

The May 2009 Celebrations at Mussel Manor

The ceremony was planned a few years in advance, but without assurances that a plaque would be installed there by the Royal Aeronautical Society or any other institution. The author approached both, the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics (AIAA), and the Royal Aeronautical Society (RAeS) for funding and support, in keeping with their respective heritage and historical programs. It was the Royal Aeronautical Society, understandably proud of their legacy, which accepted the nomination; and a Heritage Award plaque was constructed with the financial support of Bombardier Aerospace (Short parent company).

The day of the ceremony, Lord Brabazon of Tara, grandson of Lord Brabazon, unveiled the replica of the door frame and the RAeS Heritage Award plaque. Other key events took place that day, such a flyover of the *Battle of Britain Heritage Flight*, and the unveiling of a monument sporting a beautiful Wright Brothers *Flyer* sculpture made of a steel tubular frame. The sculpture was constructed by engineering students at nearby Kent College. Visitors dressed in “period” clothing, and a pair of Rolls-Royce *Silver Ghosts* antique cars added to the 1909 aura. There were homebuilt aircraft and other light airplanes flying in the area, including some that landed or over flew the site.

On the Manor’s grounds, a granite monument with a large inscription was unveiled. The memorial describes and highlights the importance of the Manor, Brabazon’s flight and the historic reunion of the “Founding Fathers”.



Mussel Manor as it appears today. Note granite monument on the Manor grounds, unveiled at the May 2009 event.



Close up of the granite monument on the Manor grounds.



Battle of Britain Memorial Flight flying over Muswell Manor during the ceremonies



Stell tubular frame sculpture of a Wright Model A highlighting the Wright Brothers legacy and American connection to the place. Note the *Battle of Britain Memorial Flight Avro Lancaster* bomber flying overhead



Rolls-Royce *Silver Ghost* antique cars were present at the May 2009 events. Charles Rolls drove the Wright Brothers on a *Silver Ghost* during their visit to Leysdown and the Manor in 1909



Lord Brabazon of Tara, grandson of Lord Brabazon, unveiling the door frame replica and RAeS plaque with other dignitaries, visitors and current Manor owners Mr. and Mrs. Munns

Now that the festivities are a recent memory, Muswell Manor stands today as a silent testimony to the birth of aviation in Britain. There is still enough to see and feel in Shellbeach and Leysdown-on-sea communities. For all those wishing to take a step back in time, when Great Britain was beginning to earn its wings, a visit to this rather isolated, but beautiful place, is a must for all aviation history minded enthusiasts.

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