

Deputation to the Southampton City Council, Alan Matlock

Planning and Rights of Way Panel Tuesday, 2nd November, 2021 4.00 pm

Re: Agenda item 5: [Planning Application - 21/00915/FUL - Former Fords, Wide Lane](#)  PDF 691 KB

Good afternoon, I'm Alan Matlock, Chair of the Southampton-based Spitfire Makers Charitable Trust.

81 years ago, in September 1940, the main Supermarine factories in Woolston were bombed out of action and production of the iconic Spitfire was dispersed to requisitioned premises all across Southampton and beyond.

Across the city we have now identified the location of well over 30 premises where production continued and collected many personal stories of the women and men who worked in them. We've just commissioned the first of the commemorative plaques we want to see placed at all these sites - Spitfire jettison fuel tanks and air filters were being made in Shirley Parish Hall.

Sadly, only half a dozen or so of the actual buildings are still standing. So, imagine our delight and amazement when the news emerged in the summer this year that not only had another Supermarine facility survived but that this one was of a size that dwarfed and a significance that surpassed all the others!

The Original Spitfire Flight Shed emerged from hiding, like a species thought to have been extinct, just where it had always been. But that feeling of delight was mixed with immediate concern when we realised that the Flight Shed was the subject of a Planning Application which would see it demolished and replaced by "four industrial units with associated parking".

This building was erected on what was then the southern edge of the Airport which, only a few short years before, had witnessed the maiden flight of the Supermarine fighter.

With the massive order for 310 Spitfires from the Air Ministry, additional space was needed: for construction at Woolston and assembly and testing at the Airport. This new Flight Shed was built to conduct the essential testing both on the ground and in the air.

When the Inspectors were satisfied, the Spitfires were ready to be flown off to the RAF stations, usually by the men and also women pilots, of the Air Transport Auxiliary.

In the summer of 1940, when the Battle of Britain was at its height, nearly every Spitfire that flew against the Luftwaffe had been produced in Southampton and every one of those had had their final preparations for flight testing inside this facility.

Unsurprisingly this provokes strong emotions. Nearly 50,000 people have now signed the online petition and comments, including one from 100 year old Spitfire pilot **Bowan Williams**, have centred on the role that this unique building played in helping to turn the tide of the war in Britain's Darkest Hour. Many also reflect on how such a key building could help future generations to understand and value their local and national heritage.

Damion Coates wrote: "My Grandfather worked on the Spitfire and probably worked in this shed. Does the world really need ... more generic warehouses? I think not. This shed is one of a kind!"

Two of Britain's foremost authorities on the Spitfire, prolific authors and broadcasters, Dilip Sarkar and Paul Beaver have also sent messages of support.

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Dilip Sarkar MBE for 'services to aviation history' and Fellow of the Royal Historical Society said,

"This Flight Shed was the vital focal point in the production of the Spitfire. I urge the planners to think again, ensure the Flight Shed is retained and to raise awareness of its vital historic significance."

Paul Beaver, Fellow of the Royal Aeronautical Society, Chair of Aeronautical Heritage at the Royal Aeronautical Society and Honorary Group Captain, No 601 Squadron, RAF Reserves said,

"The heritage which surrounds the Spitfire must be protected and retained for a new generation of young people to witness and understand the values of engineering excellence and entrepreneurial skill it represents. To wantonly sacrifice the Southampton Flight Shed for short term gain is both reckless and wrong."

He adds, "When Southampton is campaigning to become the next City of Culture, it seems careless to ignore the heritage of engineering which is so culturally important to the City."

The City Council website agrees:

"Southampton is integral to the story of the Spitfire. The bravery of Southampton people in continuing to build the Spitfire under constant threat of enemy bombing raids was crucial in the protection of England, and the Allies' eventual victory."

In his famous "The Few" speech Churchill also said that "the frontline runs through the factories..." This is that factory!

The tenets of the Spitfire Makers Charitable Trust are: **Commemoration, Preservation and Education** and all three are the focus of what we want to achieve across Southampton which is so often known as "The Home of the Spitfire".

This Original Spitfire Flight Shed, properly commemorated, properly preserved could once again be the focal point of Education about Supermarine's proud heritage in our City for generations to come.





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