

Police Aviation News

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Special Edition

IPAR

DURHAM 40 YEARS



FIRST UK POLICE ASU 1962-64

40th ANNIVERSARY

The 1962 Chief Constables Conference was held in the seaside resort of Torquay, Devon. One of the organised events was a helicopter demonstration that was to lead to far reaching developments in the UK police use of aviation.

In the early 1960s an English helicopter company based at Oxford Airport, Kidlington, handled the UK franchise for the diminutive American Brantly B2 series of light helicopters. The Brantly entered production in the USA in 1960 and had arrived in the UK only in January 1962. For the type to be considered for a Home office sponsored trial before the end of the year reflected its above average potential. The decision on which force was to be selected to undertake the trial lay with the Home Office Research and Planning Branch. As this was only a recently formed branch and still finding its feet it displayed an understandable tendency to be easily swayed.

The Chief Constable of the 1,574 strong Durham Constabulary was Alec A Muir, the Chairman of the ACPO Research Committee that year. His enthusiasm for the Brantly helicopter ensured that the force selected to operate the UK type trial was his own.

Months later a yellow Brantly, registered G-ARZI, was delivered to the police headquarters, situated in old wartime buildings at Aycliffe on November 6, 1962. It was a proud moment for the Durham Constabulary. Although no one fully appreciated it at the time, and despite the fact that the unit was to be small and only available for a part of each week, they had the honour of launching the first helicopter air support unit in Britain.



1962

Chief Constables at the launch ceremony ©DC.

In his project launching speech Durham's Chief said "I look forward to the day when the police will own several [helicopters to be] based around the country". It was a long wait.

On its ceremonial delivery flight the Brantly was flown by Dick Dorman, a Canadian pilot employed by the Darlington based 'Heliconair Ltd.', run by Alistair Craig, brother of the British comedy actress Wendy Craig. In the early summer of 1963 'Heliconair' replaced the first machine with another later example of the Brantly, G-ASEI. Both aircraft were basic. No searchlight no video camera and definitely no thermal imager! It was a basic visual search daylight only operation using unstabilised binoculars and a portable police radio of uncertain reliability.

After the first day of demonstration flights, operations over Durham and the North Riding of Yorkshire were generally confined to Thursday's and Friday's each week. The prime reason for this choice was to ensure that at least part of the time was spent escorting cash transit vehicles to and from the banks on paydays. In the 1960s the majority of the working population were still to be won over to payment by cheque or

bank transfer, vast sums of money continued to be shipped by road in highly vulnerable armoured cash vans.

It was impossible to escort each of the numerous money vehicles from bank to factory; the random nature of the police helicopter patrol successfully put potential robbers off. No cash vehicle robbery took place in the period of the trial.



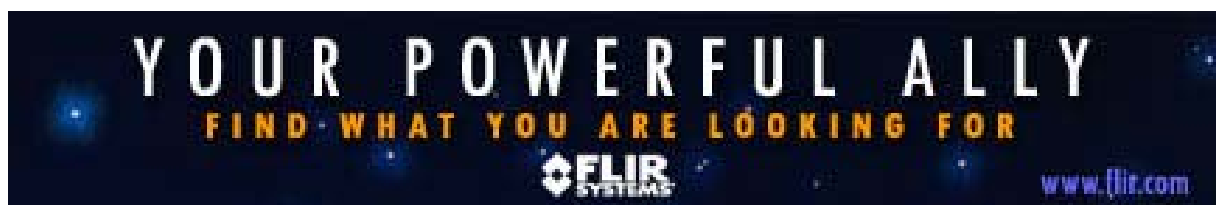
Sergeant Jack Blair with Dick Dorman the Heliconair B2 pilot

The Durham helicopter trial lasted far longer than originally envisaged. It continued throughout 1963 into the early part of 1964. The flight hours were jointly financed by the Durham Constabulary and the Home Office at a rate of £17.10s.0d [£17.50p]. The amount appears quite low in today's financial climate – it equalled the current weekly pay rate of the average police constable, or the cost of running two patrol cars.

The Home Office ran a tri-force helicopter trial on the M6 motorway in 1964. This overspent so heavily that the Home Office could no longer support the modest but successful Durham operation.

Although the experiment was economically flying a range of law enforcement operations, from traffic to crime patrols, it was not enough. In the eyes of those constantly seeking their own betterment, the operation had become the epitome of the British policeman, slow steady and plodding, even if displaying annoying signs of relative efficiency. Although it was quietly proving the case for the use of police helicopters, there was no longer any personal kudos to be gained from such an operation, something more startling was tried. The new trial of a Bell 47J on road patrol in another part of England – the M6 Motorway - was over-budget and drained the Home Office funds for the year.

The Home Office sent the message to Muir that due to a shortfall in their funds all future flying operations in his area were to be undertaken at full cost to the ratepayers of Durham. Faced with this unexpected withdrawal of central funding at short notice, and insufficient time to raise further funding from his local Watch Committee, Muir was forced to cancel further operations with the Brantly.



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GENERAL DIMENSIONS

Overall length	28 ft [8.53m]
Rotor Diameter	23ft 9in [7.24m]

WEIGHTS

Empty weight	1060lb [476kg]
Max TO weight	1670lb [757kg]

GENERAL

Fuel capacity	33 Gal [117 litres]
Rate of climb S/L	1400fpm [427m/min]
Max Speed	100mph [161km/hr]
Range [with reserve]	200 miles[321km]
Service ceiling	6000ft MSL [1829m]



*The BN2 Islander is based at Teesside International Airport – alongside the Great North Air Ambulance operation AS355F
[Photo; ©NEASU]*

The demise if the Durham helicopter trial was noticed in Fleet Street and industry. Some sections of the aeronautical and security press protested vehemently about the demise of the scheme, but it was all to no avail. The decision had been taken.

There were to be some further police helicopter flights in the county of Durham shortly after this period - including one specifically designed to impress the Home Secretary,

Roy Jenkins, when he laid the stone for the new Durham Constabulary HQ on January 16, 1967.

Roy Jenkins arrived to perform the task on a short flight from Teesside Airport in a four seat Brantly 305 accompanied by a smaller B2. Prior to landing he was given an airborne viewpoint of an "cops and robbers" set piece involving two security vehicles bearing appropriate roof markings. The helicopters landed in the County Hall complex and the Home Secretary was taken by motorcade to perform the ceremony at the new police site a short distance away. This demonstration was part of Chief Constable Muir's effort to promote a form of 'airborne bank guard patrol' which had featured heavily in the earlier trial. The move failed to win renewed government sponsorship.

In later years many whispers of misinformation grew up about the cancelled Durham trial, a number appeared in print. Much of this information implied that that it was Muir himself that had decided that helicopters were of no use to him. None ever explained why a man holding such a high post in the police should have taken sixteen months to have made that momentous decision, and then having chosen to cancel it at just the time the Home Office ran out of money. This, added to his subsequent attempts to start up another similar operation less than three years later, cannot be reconciled with the substance of the rumours. The whole of the Durham episode represented success where the M6 trial was a source of deep embarrassment to some in the Home Office at the time.

In the 1990s Durham finally joined other north-east police forces in the North East Air Support Unit based with two aircraft at Newcastle and Teesside Airports. The unit currently operates the Eurocopter EC135T1 helicopter with the highest number of hours [over 4,000] from Newcastle International Airport and a BN2 Islander from Teesside Airport.



Constable Chris Todd and Jack Blair framed by the Fenestron of the EC135T G-NESV the current unit helicopter [©DC].

Attempts by the unit to commemorate one of the pioneer air support operations were thwarted by bad weather but forty years on from the launch of the first UK helicopter

air support operation seventy-seven years old Jack Blair was invited to the North East base as guest of honour.

Jack, who still lives locally, was a Warrant Officer with the RAF during the latter part of the Second World War and flew as a flight engineer in missions over France and Germany. He was shot down into the sea at one stage and was protected by US P-38 fighters until a powered boat was dropped to them. They motored back to safety but – such were the needs of the time - had to fly 2 more missions before they were allowed their three weeks 'survivors leave.'

Two years after the end of hostilities he joined the Durham force and was a chief inspector when he retired.

Jack accepted the invitation to the air support unit at Newcastle Airport. Although PAOC restrictions did not allow Jack to go up with officers of the modern-day flying squad a training flight in a commercial helicopter was donated by Neil Clark, the proprietor of Northumbria Helicopters Flying School, a commercial company operating from adjoining premises [+44 (0)1661 871433 www.northumbria-helicopters.co.uk]

PC Chris Todd escorted Jack Blair on his visit. His grandfather worked with Jack in the police, his father was just joining as Jack left and it turns out his great Grandfather was in the force as well! All in all a fairly unusual family tradition.



A Brantly flying over the factory in the 1960s. © WWW.BRANTLY.COM

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From the IPAR Collection

Even before the Durham experiment was closed down others successfully used the diminutive Brantly B2. Perhaps the most memorable were the 1963 experiments undertaken by the Oxford City Police.

A temporary wooden kennel was slung on the side of the airframe and a police dog 'launched' from the hover.

They were sidelined by the intense activity brought about by the Great Train Robbery and failed to restart prior to the force being incorporated within the Thames Valley Police.

Other 1960s users of the Brantly series were Thames Valley Police and the Lancashire Constabulary.

The EC135, the UK's most Advanced Police Helicopter

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The Heliconair
National Police
Air Support Cluster
proposal - 1964

Shortly after commencing the Durham Constabulary contract Heliconair became aware of police needs for air support. They proposed a number of solutions including one that suggested basing helicopters in strategic locations across the United Kingdom for which each force would have been charged up to £4,000 pa.

It was an idea that just never seems to have gone away ... UK senior officers have been reinventing it – or something just like it - ever since!

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