

R.A.F. TO R.A.E.

THE LATTER DAYS OF THE 'FACTORY'

BY PAUL R. HARE

FOUNDED IN 1878, the British Army's Balloon Factory was intended to carry out exactly the duties its name implied but over the years its role expanded to embrace kites, airships and aeroplanes as well as balloons and as a result, in 1912, its name was changed to the Royal Aircraft Factory to reflect this.

Over the years the Factory gradually evolved, and expanded considerably, although not entirely without some controversy, until by March 1916 it employed a total of 4222 people.¹ That same month its efficiency was questioned in Parliament, amid wild accusations made by the maverick independent MP, Noel Pemberton Billing, that pilots were being murdered by sending them out in obsolete aeroplanes.

The allegations specifically regarding the Royal Aircraft Factory were investigated by a committee which comprised Charles Parsons, inventor of the steam turbine, and H.F. Donaldson from Woolwich Arsenal, and which was chaired by Sir Richard Burbidge, Bart., Managing Director of the world famous Harrods department store in London's Knightsbridge. The committee, although officially named 'The Committee on the Royal Aircraft Factory' is therefore usually referred to simply as the 'Burbidge Committee'.

Burbidge was a workaholic who had increased the London store's profits almost twentyfold between 1890 and 1914,² as well as expanding the trading turnover of the Hudson's Bay Company with which he was also associated, and clearly knew how to achieve business efficiency.

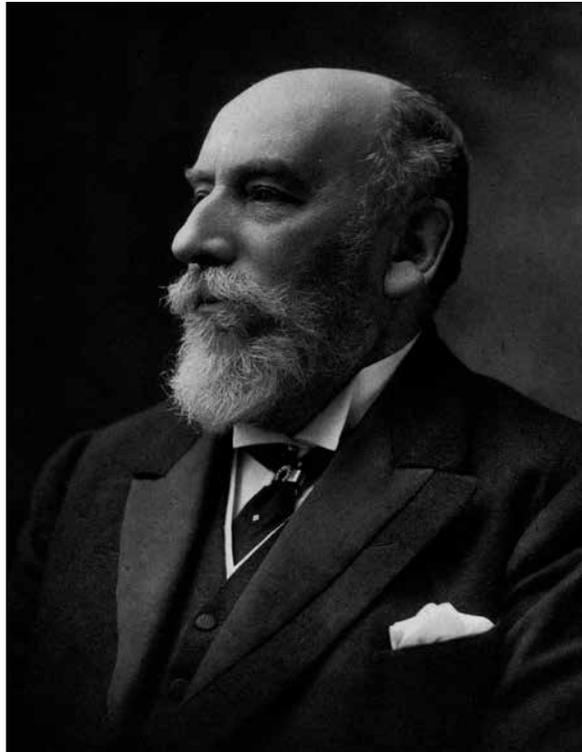
As might be expected with such a man in the chair, the report of the committee was completed with remarkable dispatch, and was presented to the Army Council that had commissioned it, on 12 May 1916. It confirmed that, although the War Office's requirements were being met, some improvements both in structure and administration were thought to be both necessary and possible.

The report also pointed out that manufacturing numerous spare parts in batches that were often too small to put out to tender, was an important function of the Factory but that it should be carried out as economically, and expeditiously, as possible.

The key points of the report's observations included:³

The whole administrative system appeared to be extremely elaborate with well over 500 people employed in clerical or Store keeping roles.

A clearer demarcation between experimental work and production would be beneficial.



Sir Richard Burbidge chaired the committee that investigated allegations of inefficiency at the Royal Aircraft Factory.
:Harrods

On its present wages a substantially increased volume of finished work could be produced.

Pay to heads of departments and others of high technical ability is too low to attract or retain many highly qualified gentlemen.

Administrative and stores staff are employed on a scale unknown in private works.

The report concluded with the suggestion that the Superintendent should be replaced by a three-man board of management with a Director, a head of Design, and a head of manufacture, all ranking equally and noted that;

The Director should be well equipped with previous commercial and scientific qualifications and experience. It is not considered essential that he should possess any intimate or previous knowledge of aviation. He should be selected for his recognised ability in administration and management.

Re-arrangement of the duties in store and offices should be left to the new board of management.

The Report was then given careful consideration by the newly created Air Board, chaired by Earl Curzon of Kedleston, former Viceroy of India and current Leader of the House of Lords, whose comments and observations were not made available until 19 July when, having been presented to Parliament, they were printed as a Government paper, (No.Cd8191)

Curzon stated that the Air Board were not *disposed to concur*⁴ with some of the Burbidge committee's recommendations and that they did not agree that the Factory should be placed under a Board of Management which, however suitable for private industry would be inappropriate for a military organization.

Instead they held the view that the Factory should be under the direction of a single superintendent *possessing the business experience and administrative capacity required for the role.*

Mervyn O'Gorman had, in their opinion, *rendered eminent public service* and would, in future, be best employed as a consulting engineer to the Director General of Military Aeronautics at the War Office.

Like Burbidge, the Air Board thought that the complaint that workmen were either inadequately employed or overpaid was best left to the new Factory Superintendent to investigate and resolve.

Apparently unaware of this, on 1 August 1916 Lord Montague of Beaulieu, in presenting a written question submitted to the House of Lords some time previously, asked when the contents of Burbidge's report would be made known and acted upon, before launching into a lengthy diatribe on the Air Services in general which in no way related to his question.⁵ In reply Curzon, as leader of the House, first criticised