

SOPWITH AIRCRAFT

Introductory remarks on the Sopwith Aviation Company Ltd.

Thomas Sopwith taught himself to fly in 1910 and passed his test for a Royal Aero Club certificate (No. 31) on 21 November that year. Entranced by flying, and determined to make both a name for himself and some money, he entered various air races during the next few years and established some aviation records. In February 1912 he set up a flying school at Brooklands with Fred Sigrist, originally his mechanic and later Works Manager at Sopwith Aviation. Sopwith soon realised that his main interest lay in aircraft design rather than flying training and therefore, later in 1912, he set up a design and manufacturing company in an old skating rink at Kingston. Completed machines were taken in dismantled form to Brooklands for test flying by the gifted young Australian aviator Harry Hawker, who also set records in the pre-war period using Sopwith aircraft.

Design of Sopwith machines was a co-operative effort with Sopwith, Sigrist, Hawker and Herbert Smith, leading draughtsman and later chief designer and R J Ashfield, the project engineer, all making contributions. The success of the venture led to expansion into buildings at Canbury Park Road, Kingston. A site at Woolston was acquired for the testing of seaplanes.

The Sopwith Aviation Company Ltd. went into the Great War as a supplier to both the Military and Naval Wings of the RFC of the remarkable little Tabloid, which served as the precursor of a range of very successful rotary-engined fighter aircraft. Orders from the Admiralty for the large scale production of Schneider, and later Baby, seaplanes ensured the commercial security of the Company. The first of the rotary-engined fighters, the 1½ Strutter, developed in 1915 and first flown in December of that year, began serving with squadrons in April 1916 and set Sopwith on the road to the excellent Pup, Triplane and, the most famous of all, the Camel.

Post-war the need to pay large sums in relation to the Excess Profits Duty led to the Company being wound up, with the Works closing in September 1920. However, it was reborn in November 1920 as the H G Hawker Engineering Company Ltd with Sopwith, Sigrist and Hawker amongst its first directors.

Details of Sopwith's Great War aircraft, both those which saw large scale service as well as those which saw operational trials, are to be found in the accompanying PDF document - ["Sopwith Aircraft of the Great War"](#).

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