

Keith Wood - Airborne radar development 1935

I was very fortunate as I arrived and reported the very day when they decided to set up a small team to look at the possibility of introducing radar into an aeroplane. At the time they had advanced to a point where the main transmitter/ receiver system at Bawdsey was detecting the flying boat at about 15 to 17 miles off the coast and they decided to split a small team off to see if it was possible to incorporate radar into an aeroplane to detect boats and other aeroplanes.

The problem that the young man who had been put in charge of this group – took us down to the main transmitter – introduced us to the radar and said “Well there you are – 2 tons of equipment and all we’ve got to do is get it into an aeroplane” – and that just about summed up the problem.

I spent the first week helping to move the main equipment from Orfordness to Bawdsey. They’d only just bought the Bawdsey Manor and then we went on from there to develop radar for the aeroplane and within about 18 months the 4 or 5 of us that were in that small team were flying in an aeroplane with radar picking up the Danish boats going into Harwich at about 4 or 5 miles.

In September ’37, which was about 18 months from when we started my boss Bowen had got contacts in London and found out that Coastal Command and the Navy were going to have fleet exercises in the North Sea on the 4th and 5th September and without telling anybody he decided that we would take our aeroplane and see if we could detect the fleet – and I emphasise without telling anybody.

I was lucky enough to draw the straw for going with him and we took off on September 4th at 5 o’clock in the morning with almost zero visibility at Martlesham aerodrome – we were content to do that because we had already produced a radar beacon for our own usage to locate back to Martlesham and we went off and picked up the Cork lightship and got our fixes and showed that the radar was working very well. Sometime later we had some of the biggest signals returned to us and they turned out to be from the ‘Courageous’ and its destroyer escort and so on.

The Navy is always very nervous about aircraft over their ships and they sent up Swordfish to find out what the aircraft was doing and so we had our first response from an aircraft – so it was a ‘double whammy’ as they would say nowadays and certainly the first time in the world that radar had worked on an aircraft and detected other boats and airplanes.

When we got back, having used our radar again to get back to the coast and get back to Martlesham, Bowen rang the Coastal Command operational controller, reported in the latitude and longitude of where all the ships were and this chap was absolutely astounded. “You mean to say you’ve been out there – didn’t you know the whole exercise has been cancelled because it was too unsafe for Coastal Command to operate” and you can imagine the effect that had on the Air Ministry and the Navy and before we knew where we were, we’d got a whole team of 30 or 40 different trades and airmen and what-not.

If you spent time at Bawdsey Radar Station or have stories to tell about events in and around the station please do get in touch with us!