

SOUTH AUSTRALIAN AVIATION MUSEUM

SIGNIFICANT AVIATION EVENTS

History of the South Australian Aviation Museum Inc

Part 1: Foundation and the First Seven Years: 1984 – 1990

The origins of the South Australian Aviation Museum can be traced to June 1984 when around two dozen individuals attended a meeting at the Maid of Auckland Hotel in Edwardstown. Most had responded to an invitation placed in a newspaper by Bob Jarrett, seeking persons interested in historic aircraft recovery and restoration. They had noted that South Australia was the only mainland state without an aviation museum. The meeting led to the formation of the *South Australian Aviation and Warbird Restoration Group*.

Key people who shared an interest in historic aviation and were involved at this embryonic stage included:

- David Byrne, a teacher and former PNG Patrol Officer. While working in Alice Springs he had been instrumental in establishing the Central Australian Aviation Museum.
- John Hillier, an industrial engineer who had acquired an Avro Anson from a South Australian farmer in 1982 and who was keen to restore it.
- Barry James, a public servant who had trained with the Royal Aero Club of South Australia in the 1960s.
- Bob Jarrett, who owned service stations in the Salisbury area. Inspired by Langdon Badger's Spitfire recovery and restoration, Bob had recovered a P-39 Airacobra from Papua New Guinea in 1982.
- Sandy Powell, a wartime Sunderland pilot who worked with the Smith Motor Company of Port Adelaide. He built the Museum's Fokker Triplane replica. Sandy died in 1990.
- Barry Williams, a telecommunications electronics technician whose interest in aviation came from his father who flew Spitfires in WWII.

A museum premises had already been identified at 10 Elizabeth Street, Glenelg, located behind the former Pier Hotel in an old garage. This was a 30 x 35 metre building that required plenty of work to make it presentable. The Museum¹ was formally incorporated on 1 August 1984, as the *South Australian Aviation & Warbirds Restoration Group Inc*. Bob Jarrett was the first President.

The initial ethos of the Museum could perhaps be described as something like a co-operative, whereby historic aircraft owned by individuals could be displayed and restored in the same location. However, the museum itself quickly came into ownership of donated aircraft and artefacts, the first being an Avro Anson donated by Reg Franks, a Mallala farmer (John Hillier later donated his Anson to the museum as well). Together with the Anson, in its

¹ For simplicity the entity will be referred to as the 'Museum' even though it did not technically become a museum until 1990.

early days the museum also housed a Wirraway, an Airacobra and a Canberra in various stages of repair.

The first Museum newsletter was printed in late 1984. It discussed such items as the status of the Anson restoration (still a regular newsletter subject three decades later!), work on the garage, relations with Glenelg Council and the fact that the only source of income was from barbeque nights (\$100 had been raised). There was also a note about correspondence from the then State Minister for Tourism who had stated that:

... the government saw little value in an Aviation Museum in Adelaide.

In early 1985 Bob Jarrett inspected an Anson for sale at the Moorabbin Aviation Museum in Victoria. Subsequently this was purchased by the Museum for \$2,500 following pledges of financial support from members. In April the Anson was towed from Melbourne by simply welding it to a four-wheel trailer. The sight of the Anson being towed through the countryside led to further offers of Anson parts, and after a drama with two of the trailer wheels coming loose, the load was finally delivered to Glenelg.



An Anson is loaded onto a trailer for transport from Moorabbin, Victoria in 1985.

In mid-1985 the Museum received advice from the History Trust of South Australia about what was needed to achieve formal accreditation under the National Standards as a museum. This involved the entity being not-for-profit, being open to the public, providing an educational benefit to the community and having a formal collection management policy. There were also guidelines involving financial management and security and insurance. For a disparate group of 'can-do'

volunteers, it was clear that an enormous amount of work and resources was needed to obtain the accreditation.

At this time the first Open Day was held, and membership fees were set at \$24. By the end of the year the Museum had funds of \$655. During the year acquisitions had included another Anson (the fourth) and a Jindivik drone that was recovered from outback SA. However, other potential acquisitions including a Mirage and a Vampire all fell through. A valuable addition to the displays was a Sabre purchased by Bob Jarrett.

The start of following year, 1986, saw much activity at the Museum. The newsletter, which entailed significant cost to print regularly, was renamed *Props and Mags* and various souvenirs were planned for re-sale, such as iron-on patches, T-shirts, badges and tiepins. During the Australia Day long weekend, Channel 10 televised its popular Birdman Rally

event from the Glenelg Jetty (it would prove to be the last) and the Museum benefitted from increased visitor numbers owing to its proximity to the event.

During the year the Cheetah engine was run for the first time in forty years; and a Frazer Nash FN-5 Gun Turret (as fitted to Lancaster and Wellington bombers) was donated by the City of West Torrens. A key acquisition was a Winjeel bought from a museum in Narrelan, NSW, for \$2,000. Ultimately this was only achieved through loans from members making up half this amount: some years later the loans had not been repaid and were instead converted into donations. Also, member Michael Muelders purchased a Vampire for display at the Museum.



Bob Jarrett's Sabre, with an Anson behind it, in the cramped garage at Glenelg in 1985.

By September various formalities such as the adoption of a new constitution enabled a name change to the *South Australian Historical Aviation Museum Incorporated* to come into effect. However, 1986 also saw the emergence of development plans for the Glenelg foreshore, which meant the Museum would need new premises. Subsequently a number of locations were investigated including Gawler airfield, a Tramway shed at Hackney and a site in a new development at Port Adelaide.

Only towards the end of the year was an old warehouse found at Mundy Street, Port Adelaide, following an appeal to the Premier's office. It was of suitable size and could only be used on a temporary basis, but the Museum was grateful to accept the offer of the site. This building had originally housed a flour mill and was in filthy condition when the Museum began the moving process at the start of 1987. Rene de Koning recalled:

When the Museum moved into the Flour Mill it had previously been used as a storage facility for feed pellets for the live sheep export trade and the floor was covered in a thick layer of them. When walking on them they made a strange crackling noise and as we were shovelling them out we soon discovered why, as they had become home to thousands of cockroaches. Fortunately, nobody had a phobia for them.

After much effort, the Museum was relocated and officially opened in the new premises on 1st March 1987. It would open to the public every Sunday. Some months later entry fees were introduced: \$1 for adults and \$0.50 for children.

During the year talks began with the RAAF over the acquisition of bent prop blades from ARDU Dakota A65-114 which had made an emergency landing at Edinburgh in October 1986. With news that the aircraft was permanently withdrawn from use the Museum made overtures to acquire it as a loan item. This was refused with the unfortunate advice that the

Dakota would probably be sold via tender. However, this had the effect of making the Museum realise it would have to get serious about fund-raising in the future.

Also at this time, Pearce Dunn's *Warbirds Aviation Museum* in Mildura closed down. This would eventually have a positive effect on the South Australian Museum, with the first of several ex-Mildura items acquired being the remains of Fairey Battle N2188. This had been recovered from mangroves near Port Pirie airport some years earlier, and it would become one of the Museum's most important artefacts.



The entrance to the Museum at Mundy Street, Port Adelaide.

At the October 1987 Annual General Meeting, Armand Lisman became the second President of the Museum, replacing Bob Jarrett. Soon afterwards a Sheppard CS2 homebuilt aircraft joined the collection, and a privately owned Sea Venom was placed on display (this would subsequently join the Museum on a long-term loan basis when the ownership group was dissolved and there was nobody to fund restoration). However, efforts to become formally accredited as a museum had still not been successful: more work was needed on Museum policies and procedures.



Battle N2188 following arrival from Mildura in 1986.

The following year, 1988, saw the Museum involved in various public events held as part of the Bicentenary Celebrations. Among these was an air show at Edinburgh attended by 40,000 people. The Museum contributed a display (including the Winjeel) which was a great success and raised \$1,000 in funds.

In 1989 an unusual source of revenue was when the Museum won a tender to clean a DC-3 used for children's parties at

McDonalds in West Lakes. The Museum received \$1,750 for work that took 32 members just one day. During the year a Schneider Glider was acquired, and a deal was completed for the Museum to acquire a 12.5% share in an ex-Mildura Vampire. Seventeen Museum members owned the remainder of the aircraft.

By late 1989 the Museum had been operating for five years and much had been achieved in that short time. From very humble beginnings the Museum now boasted an annual income of almost \$18,000 and was open on weekends and public holidays. In September Brian Houlson became the third President, and soon afterwards Stephen Nitschke's restored Merlin engine roared to life.



The Winjeel being towed to Edinburgh for the 1988 Air Show. To enable this Barry Williams got it specially registered as a trailer!

The problem of formal accreditation remained, but much improvement in all aspects of operation of the Museum had been achieved. This led to a second formal application being made to the History Trust of SA and this was ultimately successful. Full accreditation as a museum under the National Standards for Museums and Galleries was awarded in June 1990. This would enable further expansion including access to government resources.

An initial benefit of accreditation was the transfer of various aviation items from the Birdwood Motor Museum. Most significant of these was Gipsy Moth VH-ULJ which had escaped from New Guinea in 1942. The year 1990 also saw further acquisitions of an Aero Commander, wrecked Chipmunk VH-UEK and another ex-Mildura aircraft in Meteor A77-851, which was purchased for \$5,000.

However, 1990 also saw argument and division over the future direction of the Museum. At a special meeting in January, Bob Jarrett outlined plans to move the Museum to a new commercial development at Parafield. The proposal was rejected as it seemed far beyond the Museum's financial resources and would also destroy the goodwill the Museum had built up in being part of the Port Adelaide community.

By the middle of the year a connected matter that had been causing simmering tension for some time came to the fore. This involved differences in the interests of aircraft-owning members who wanted the Museum to support their restoration activities, versus the wider best interest of the Museum itself. Accordingly, a motion was passed to amend the Museum's constitution so that members who found items available for acquisition would give the Museum the first option in acquiring such items.

In 1991 both Bob Jarrett and another member, Michael Muelders, decided to part ways with the Museum. They took with them an Airacobra, Sabre and a Vampire among other items, and went on to found the *Classic Jets Museum* at Parafield. This had a focus on restoration activities and has operated successfully for many years.

Bob Jarret was a great loss to the Museum. He had been the driving force behind its creation and had done much to see it grow and develop in the first seven years. However,

the whole episode had been quite a bitter experience for those involved, and arguably the Museum was in a much better state without such divisions.

Paul Divett & the SAAM History Group

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NB: Paul Divett did extensive research into SAAM's history over 2017-18 and his manuscript was extensively edited for readability. A copy of the long version is held in the SAAM archives.