**SOFFAAM VISIT TO RAF COSFORD 12 MAY**

At 7.30 on a damp and misty morning, 39 SOFFAAM members and friends assembled at the FAAM to take their seats on the coach for the trip to the RAF Museum at Cosford, Wolverhampton. As we travelled north, the weather improved and by the time we arrived we found the impressive Museum buildings bathed in sunshine. Our party split up into groups, some to take part in a guided tour, others to explore the museum independently.

It soon became apparent that this is an enormous museum, spread among two linked displays in Hangar 1 and a huge, futuristic structure housing the Cold War Exhibition. (A short video showing the construction of this building and the installation of bombers and fighters inside can be seen on the Cosford Museum website.) It would be difficult to avoid a mere catalogue of the huge variety of aircraft, weapons and equipment on display, but to choose just a few examples, RAF bombers on display include all three V-bombers, a Lincoln, Mosquito and Canberra, also one of only two remaining TSR2s. RAF fighters are well represented, ranging from a Hurricane and a realistic full scale model of a Spitfire, several Harrier variants, Meteor (represented by the “prone pilot”demonstrator) Hunter and Vampire. Enemy aircraft include a Fw 190, a Fieseler Storch F156, Me 163 Komet, and what must be a very rare surviving Me 410, also an Argentinian Pucara. The rocket-powered Saunders-Roe SR53 demonstrator, drawing its inspiration from the Komet, is also on display. Equipped also with a gas turbine engine, this could have been a precursor to manned interceptors with better climb performance than the Lightning, but its development was curtailed by the rapid development of surface-to-air missiles.

Transport aircraft are very well represented, ranging from the VC10 on display outside the museum to the Avro York, Comet, Argosy and a Ford Tri-motor. It was particularly interesting to take a tour of the Short SC5 Belfast XR 371, named “Enceladus”, one of only two remaining aircraft of this type. We walked through its cavernous cargo interior and then visited the spacious cockpit, with seats for four crew. When retired from RAF service, several of these aircraft had been bought by a commercial company, Heavy Lift, although some had to be leased back by the MoD to support the logistic pipeline during the Falklands conflict.

There was an eclectic display of bombs and missiles on display, including the first all-British atomic bomb “Blue Danube”, a re-engineered version of the 10 kiloton Hiroshima bomb. The bomb bays of RAF V- bombers were designed to take this and subsequent weapons, although the Vulcan was later adapted to carry the Blue Steel stand-off weapon. Also to be seen was the US-designed Skybolt, which would have given the V-Force a 2000 km stand-off capability but was cancelled before entering service. Other nuclear weapons on display included “Yellow Sun”, the first British fusion or “hydrogen” bomb to be deployed. Conventional missiles included a great variety of air-to-air and air-to-ground missiles, such as the Cold War Bloodhound and Thunderbird. Firestreak and AMRAAM missiles were to be seen, as well as Intercontinental and tactical nuclear warhead rockets, such as Thor and Polaris. Finally, in this area, it was fascinating to see the Polaris “Chevaline” system, with its two warheads and Penetration Aid Carrier, developed at vast cost and under conditions of highest secrecy by successive UK Governments and entering service in 1982.

The background to the development of these nuclear systems was the so-called “Cold War”. Cosford’s National Cold War Exhibition makes a magnificent contribution to understanding the all-pervading climate of fear that enveloped the world after the establishment of the so-called “Iron Curtain”. Opened by HRH Princess Anne on 7 February 2007, the Exhibition houses 19 aircraft, tanks, vehicles, models and memorabilia. A Lightning fighter, suspended in the roof in a vertical climb attitude, makes a striking impact, while the sheer size of the V-bombers reminds us of the extent to which Britain contributed to the defence of the West. From the same era, we saw the Centurion tank, a successful British design that was exported widely and formed the precursor to the modern-day Chieftain.

As our visit drew to a close, the SOFFAAM party assembled for a group photograph, before re-joining the coach for the trip back to Yeovilton. All agreed that it would have been difficult to have seen everything in this splendid Museum, but we all took away varied memories of a unique collection of aircraft and artefacts. Many thanks to Rosanne for organising the visit.