

Shorts:

THE PERENNIAL THORN

In his latest article on the political aspects of some of the most significant episodes in the evolution of Britain's post-war aircraft industry, Prof KEITH HAYWARD FRAeS turns his attention to a company that posed a particularly awkward problem for several UK governments owing to its unique ownership structure and politically sensitive geographical location

SHORT BROTHERS, often abbreviated just to Shorts, was a thorny problem for successive British governments. As a uniquely state-owned aircraft manufacturer from 1943 — and later located in Northern Ireland, a politically sensitive part of the UK — Shorts faced a problematic future that could not be left to the “invisible hand” of market forces. This kept the company out of both the rationalisation of the 1960s and later, nationalisation in the 1970s. The political context of Shorts was acutely underlined by the effects of the sectarian “Troubles” of the late 1960s, and, despite wanting to disengage from the company, the British government was again constrained by uniquely Northern Irish issues.

HISTORY OF AN ANOMALY

Based at Rochester in Kent, Shorts was nationalised as an emergency measure in 1943. The company's connection with Belfast dates from 1936, when it became co-owner — with shipyard Harland & Wolff — of a shadow factory, Short

& Harland Ltd, sponsored by the Air Ministry, before moving entirely to Belfast in 1948.

The post-1945 environment was not kind to Shorts. Its flying-boat expertise was obsolete and its comparatively conventional design offering for the “V-bomber” specification — the Sperrin — was quickly superseded by Vickers' Valiant. The company's single-engined carrier-based Seamew anti-submarine aircraft was not a success either. One bright spot, however, was the development of a capability in electronic technology that would eventually provide an *entrée* into work on guided weapons. Increasingly, Shorts would come to depend on sub-contracting to mainland companies and its political salience as a major employer in Northern Ireland.

Shorts was associated with several important post-1945 non-company programmes, including the English Electric Canberra and the de Havilland Comet. Shorts' most important civil contract, however, was for Bristol Britannia production work. The relationship with Bristol was underlined in 1954 when the latter acquired

BELOW Two Short Sperrins were built to Air Ministry Specification B.14/46 for a long-range jet-powered bomber. The first, VX158, made its maiden flight on August 10, 1951, from Aldergrove in Northern Ireland. The second, VX161, seen here at Farnborough in July 1955, made its first flight at the same location on August 12, 1952. MIKE HOOKS



ABOVE Shorts designed and built two prototypes — XG900 and XG905 — of the S.C.1 experimental jet-powered vertical take-off and landing (VTOL) aircraft, fitted with four vertical-lift engines and one horizontally mounted for conventional flight. Both had completed transitional flights from vertical to horizontal flight by the end of 1960.

a 15 per cent share of Shorts in support of the Britannia contract. When the government began to urge rationalisation on the industry in the late 1950s, Shorts and Bristol began to consider a full merger. Talks continued until 1959, when the government intervened to block such a move.

The Ministry of Supply (MoS — to become the Ministry of Aviation from October 1959) had realised that a merger would effectively turn the government into a risk-sharing partner on the Britannia, which was already in some difficulty and attracting political criticism. The MoS felt that Bristol was perhaps not the best-placed company to support Shorts and employment in the Province. The Ministry's assessment of Shorts' overall position in late 1958 was bleak. There was little prospect of work after the Britannia — a lot depended on developing a new military transport, further Canberra sub-contracts from English Electric and guided-weapons work.¹

Shorts' problems were intensified when it was dropped from participating in what became the British Aircraft Corporation's TSR.2 strike aircraft. The company had been partnered with English Electric to build a V/STOL lift platform based on technology it had developed for its own S.C.1, but the Air Ministry preferred a Vickers/English Electric team. The government covered Shorts' immediate financial problems with a £74m loan from the Northern Ireland administration,² but its future remained problematic. The MoS predicted that, in the best possible case, 8,500 employees would be cut to 2,000. Despite the failure of the joint programme with English Electric,

a link with a mainland company remained desirable, associating Shorts with a larger and more diversified company that could maintain employment in Northern Ireland.³

THE BRITANNIC / BELFAST

The Short Belfast military transport represented perhaps the company's biggest element of government support. A four-engined turboprop, the Belfast became the largest British-designed transport ever to enter service with the RAF. Shorts had proposed the original “Britannic” design in 1957 to meet a long-distance heavy freighter requirement (the Handley Page Hermes/Blackburn Beverley replacement) which was accepted as the Belfast in 1959.

A Handley Page freighter proposal was rejected, as it would “reverse the policy of progressive rationalisation” of the aircraft industry. Moreover, Handley Page had no “long-term future except in association with some other company”. [See the author's *Decline & Fall in TAH30 — Ed.*] Shorts, however, was an exception, as the Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, informed the Cabinet:

“[It is] of direct concern to us not merely because we own the company, but also because it provides one of the main sources of employment in Northern Ireland. To award the contract to Shorts would not merely postpone disastrous redundancy; it would also offer to Shorts a chance of surviving and possibly playing a significant part in the production of further aircraft for the expanding freighter market.”⁴

Despite its advanced avionics — it was the