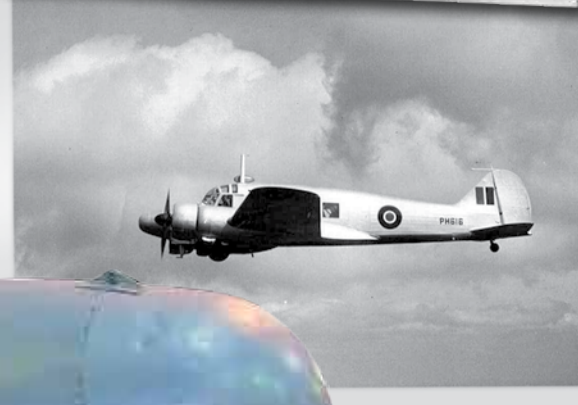




The Anson design first flew in 1933 and went on to achieve a higher production total than any other Avro aircraft. When the last new example left the Avro works nearly 20 years later, it was still the same honest, dependable partner that won pilots' hearts and supply contracts in those nervous between-war years. We follow the history of this captivating blend of sound design and pure magic.

ANNIE'S SONG



She's not glamorous, fast or particularly nimble, but ask any of the pilots who've flown her to name their favourite aircraft and our dear old Annie will usually be the first name they'll mention. Mike Collett has been heard to say that, if we could keep only one of the collection, it would have to be the Anson. That's easy to understand, even on the ground. There's a simplicity and purity to her design that's irresistible, and her cockpit has possibly the most evocative atmosphere on the planet.

The foundation for the Anson was laid down in May 1933 when Sir John Siddeley of Armstrong Whitworth met with G.E. Woods-Humphrey of Imperial Airways. The airline had requested a four-place monoplane for private charter. Among the technical innovations under discussion was a retractable undercarriage to provide higher speed and better fuel economy.

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A specification crossed the desk of A.V. Roe, and he called in a promising young designer named Roy Chadwick. Chadwick was yet to design his first complete aeroplane, but he'd shown promise in his work on the Fokker F VIIIB, which Avro were building under licence. A.V. suggested that Chadwick base his design on the Fokker which, though spectacularly slow, was a strong and reliable workhorse. The young draughtsman was enthusiastic about the project. He arranged meetings with Imperial's technical adviser, Major R.H. Mayo, who would later conceive the Short Mayo composite flying boat.

Chadwick's concept retained the one-piece wing of the Fokker, but otherwise was a completely new design. The plans that he presented to Mayo showed a modern, streamlined aircraft with a single low wing and twin radial engines. Designated the Avro 652 it accommodated two pilots in an enclosed cockpit and four passengers in a spacious cabin. By positioning the forward spar between the cabin and cockpit, Chadwick cleverly de-cluttered the passenger space, making the new aircraft an attractive charter prospect. Two 270hp Armstrong Siddeley Cheetah engines were predicted to yield a 150mph cruise and a 600 mile range.

Imperial Airways appear to have spent a considerable time in judgement, but eventually, in April 1934, they ordered two 652s for evaluation.

The mid-thirties were characterised by growing global unease at the aggressive stance of Germany. Though 1939 would find Britain woefully under-prepared, some foresight was shown in the commissioning of new aircraft types.

This page, top: Ansons lined up for assembly at Woodford C.1948. Note the Tudors in the background.

Opposite page, anti-clockwise from top: King George VI visits Newton Heath in 1939. He is flanked by Roy Dobson (left) and Frank Spriggs (right). The prototype Anson under construction at Newton Heath. Avro 652A on test flight. Then and now: Anson 1 Cockpit (note gunsight) alongside G-VROE's worn but welcoming control cabin.

Among these was an Air Ministry service requirement for a general reconnaissance aircraft. Roe and Chadwick saw that the specification corresponded closely with that of the 652 and quickly developed a military version, designated 652A.

The first flight of the 652 was on January 7 1935, when test pilot Frank Tomkins put it through its paces. Handling was found to be vice-free and work accelerated on the second machine to fill the Imperial Airways contract.

The first 652 was named *Avro Avalon*, with the second being christened *Avatar*. This was very quickly shortened to *Ava*, reportedly because *Avatar* had been discovered to have a profane meaning in an unidentified language. The editor, demonstrating his usual affinity with schoolboy humour, has done extensive research to identify both the language and the profanity but has so far failed in his quest. Anyone with the necessary linguistic skills and/or a similarly childish sense of humour should provide an answer by e-mail. The world needs to know.

Chadwick completed his design of the military 652A in May 1934. This carried a mid-upper gun turret and forward-firing fixed machine gun. The extra drag of the turret was compensated by uprated engines, now delivering 295HP, and maximum speed increased by some 10mph.

Competition for the Air Ministry contract came from Airspeed, in the form of a design that would become their excellent Oxford trainer, and de Havilland with the DH89M Dominic, a military version of their redoubtable Rapide biplane. Eventually both Avro and de Havilland received orders to produce a single prototype for evaluation.

The first flight of the 652A, at the hands of Bill Thorn, with Tomkins as P2, was less satisfactory than its civilian sister. The prototype



demonstrated unpleasant, and potentially dangerous, longitudinal instability. The tailplane span was increased, necessitating a reduction in the size of the rudder. The aircraft's fore-and-aft nervousness disappeared, with no loss of yaw control from the reduced rudder.

The prototype 652A was trialed directly against the Rapide/Dominie from de Havilland

The prototype 652A was trialed directly against the Rapide/Dominie from de Havilland. The latter is a loveable old bird, but a comparative glance at the fabric and string DH89 and the sleek, retractable Avro instantly suggests what the competitive trials demonstrated. The 652A soundly out-performed the biplane in every criterion. The RAF were pre-disposed toward the Avro machine anyway because of its modern looks. Realising their importance on the world stage, they were keen to leave their staid biplane image behind.

Further displays ensued, with extensive trials for endurance over the North Sea. The Avro performed beyond expectations, though shortcomings were discovered with maintaining trim. With one or two pilots up front all was well, but when passengers moved around in the rear compartment, the resulting trim changes made long flights extremely tiring. Minor changes to engine position and the re-positioning of some equipment resolved the


problem and the type became noted for its relaxed, easy flying characteristics - an important consideration on an aircraft capable of remaining in the air for 3-4 hours.

Satisfied, the Ministry issued Air Staff Requirement 23, sanctioning the full production of the 652A, to be christened *Anson*. An initial order was placed for 174 aircraft, but was so badly tied up by administrative red-tape that months went by, with Avro becoming uncertain whether the contract was real. The threat of redundancies loomed over Newton Heath. It should be remembered that this was a time of global depression, so it's hardly surprising that discontent began to spread among what had always been a happy and cooperative workforce.

Works Manager Roy Dobson jumped onto a canteen table. Never one to mince words, he told them to stop being so bloody daft

to deliver an impassioned speech. Never one to mince words, he told them to stop being so bloody daft. Always a popular leader, Dobson succeeded in making his point and the workers returned to the shop floor.

Eventually the order was finalised and Avro began the volume production of what was to become its largest manufacturing project. When Anson building finally ceased in 1952, Avro had produced 8,138, while a further 2,882 were made in Canada by Federal Aircraft Limited. The type would continue in RAF service until 1938. In its long career it had served as a bomber, a reconnaissance machine, a multi-purpose trainer, a search and rescue platform and a coastal defence aircraft to name just a fraction of its accomplishments. It had spotted submarines in the Channel, brought safety to downed airmen and even fought off a superior force of Messerschmitt 109s.

Faithful Annie might be no greyhound, but you could always trust her to get you home. 

When the lay-offs finally began, a strike meeting was called. Works Manager Roy Dobson (later Sir Roy Dobson) firmly believed that the promised volume order would materialise. Fearing that a walk-out would compromise the process, he jumped onto a canteen table

FEARSOME ANNIE

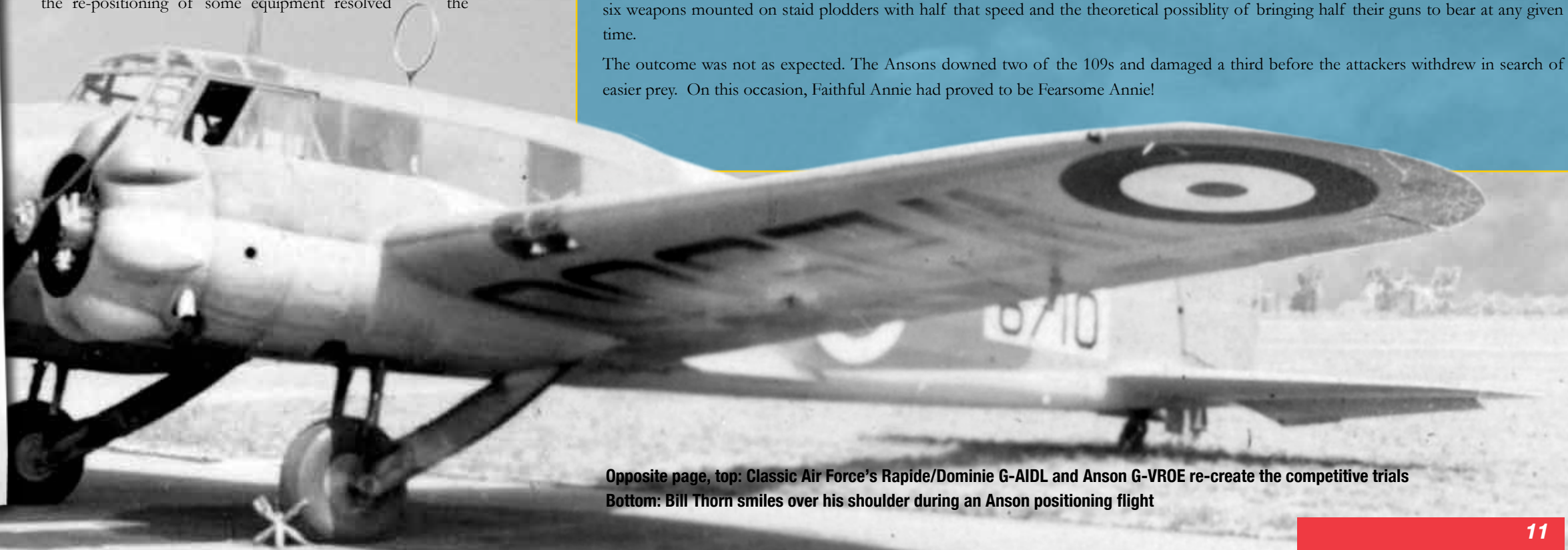
I'm aware that I've written about this incident before, but it's such a great story that it's repeated here without apology.

The Anson 1 was equipped with a manually operated turret amidships, mounting a .303 Vickers K machine gun. Turret rotation was powered by the gunner's legs, so it can't have been the most accurate of installations. Even the far more advanced powered turrets fitted to bombers like the Lancaster had a very low hit rate, so it's not surprising that few hits were scored by the Anson's rear protection. A vicious rumour existed that the Luftwaffe were equipping their aircraft with a barn door.

The pilot's teeth consisted of a fixed .303 firing forward. To hit his target he had to aim the whole aircraft at an enemy who was nearly always faster, more manoeuvrable and highly motivated to make him miss.

So it's not difficult to imagine the feelings aboard three Ansons on coastal reconnaissance in June 1940 when a wolfpack of nine Messerschmitt Bf109s jumped them. The opposing forces consisted of thirty-six machine guns, mounted four-deep on 300+mph killing machines, versus six weapons mounted on staid plodders with half that speed and the theoretical possibility of bringing half their guns to bear at any given time.

The outcome was not as expected. The Ansons downed two of the 109s and damaged a third before the attackers withdrew in search of easier prey. On this occasion, Faithful Annie had proved to be Fearsome Annie!



Opposite page, top: Classic Air Force's Rapide/Dominie G-AIDL and Anson G-VROE re-create the competitive trials
Bottom: Bill Thorn smiles over his shoulder during an Anson positioning flight