

“Star of Stone”

The matter of starting a fund to buy a Spitfire was first mooted at a meeting of the Rotary Club held on the evening of 21st August 1940, when members adopted a resolution to inaugurate a fund for the purchase of a Spitfire by the town and its surrounding district.

Within ten days, a preliminary meeting had been convened by the Club with representatives of the Stone Urban and Stone Rural District Councils in attendance. The Chairmen of both councils were asked to put the matter before their members, which they appear to have done without delay, obtaining their utmost support. At the Urban District Council Meeting Councillor R. F. Goodill remarked that Stone had never lagged in its spirit of patriotism and thought that the council should make the greatest possible effort in support of the Rotary Club's welcome proposal.

On 20th September 1940 a public meeting was held to set up an organisation to raise the necessary £5,000 which was the cost of production of a Spitfire fighter aircraft. It is reported that there was a large attendance, which included members of many organisations and industrial concerns. The Member of Parliament for Stone, Sir Joseph Lamb, took the chair. It was moved and agreed that “the suggestion of Stone Rotary Club should be adopted and a fund started”. The Directors of John Joule and Sons had met that day and had decided to start the fund with 100 guineas. A Spitfire Fund Management Committee was then elected with the following as officers: President: Sir Joseph Lamb, M.P. Chairman: T. A. Beardsmore, OBE. Secretary: S. C. Blood. Treasurer: Capt. P. Pollard, MBE. The two district council chairmen were to be joint vice chairmen of the committee. It will be noted that the chairman, secretary and treasurer all held equivalent offices in the Rotary Club of Stone.

It should be remembered that the sum of £5,000 was a very considerable one to raise in those days. It represented ten times the annual salary of many professional people and would have purchased a whole row of semi-detached houses! The appeal got off the ground quickly. The Rotary Club, small though it was, gave an initial donation itself of £100. The Rural District Council Chairman donated a set of silver maundy money to be sold in aid of the fund. Lotus Ltd gave £100, plus a promise to back every £1 raised by its employees with a further £1.

Within a month the fund had passed the £1,000 mark. Area sub-committees were set to work to raise money in the rural parishes, including the four ward committees that were formed in Eccleshall. Sports clubs too arranged events to raise money. There was even a “sherry dansant” in aid of the fund at the Crown Hotel. Schools joined in. Musical and dramatic performances were organised. An auction alone raised £250 and, in due course by the end of the summer of 1941, the target of £5,000 was achieved with a final donation from a generous anonymous donor.

At the final meeting of the Spitfire Management Committee it was decided that the aircraft should be named “Star of Stone”. The cheque for £5,000 was handed over the following week to Sir Joseph Lamb M.P., representing the Minister for Air, by the chairman of the Spitfire committee and President of Stone Rotary Club, Mr T. A. Beardsmore. An R.A.F trumpet fanfare was played to mark the opening of the presentation ceremony at which Sir Joseph Lamb uttered a warning against wishful thinking in regard to the war and eulogised the Russian army and people for the magnificent stand they were making. Two months later an Anglo-Soviet Friendship Committee was formed in Stone

The end of the story of Stone's Spitfire was however to be a sad one. In September 1942 a plaque was presented for display in the Stone R.D.C. offices, on behalf of the Minister for Aircraft Production, to commemorate the raising of the money, but the occasion was tinged with sadness, for news had been received only on the previous morning that the Star of Stone had failed to return from a sweep over occupied France and that the pilot, a Norwegian, had been killed.