Welcome to the RAF Manston History Museum! We hope you enjoy your visit today and that you will recommend us to your friends and relatives. Also, we hope that you will re-visit in the future because there is so much to see and learn in this wonderful museum. It is dedicated not only to the intrepid pilots who flew the aircraft but also the brilliant engineers who created them and the skilful maintainers who kept them safely in the sky.

Manston has played a key role in UK aviation from the very inception of powered flight. The Royal Naval Air Service began operations here in 1916 during the First World War following re-location of its seaplane station from nearby Westgate-on-Sea. Manston was at its most busy during the Second World War and was a key base for RAF Fighter Command during the Battle of Britain. From the early 1950’s Manston was loaned to the USAF and was the first UK base for their Strategic Air Command. The USAF handed back the airfield in 1958 when the last of their fighter wings departed. From then the airfield has primarily been utilised for limited scale commercial operations until it was officially closed in 2014. However, the sharp eared visitor may still hear the unmistakeable sounds of high-pitched jet turbines in the vicinity as the airfield hosts a helicopter air experience and pilot training company.

The museum was opened in 1986 by a small group of enthusiasts originally under the guise of the RAF Manston History Club. It has grown steadily with input from many dedicated volunteers to become the significant historic aviation attraction that you will experience today. The buildings in which you stand were once aircraft maintenance hangars of the Mechanical Transport Squadron and date back to the very origins of the airfield. The museum has occupied these buildings since the mid-1990s and today boasts an extensive collection of exhibits illustrating the complete history of Manston, including 23 airframes.

Outside the front of the museum, you will have noticed the replica German V1 flying bomb from World War 2. The county of Kent became “bomb alley” for these terrible weapons. There is a fascinating map in the foyer which shows the impacts of hundreds of V1 launched against London but which fell on Kent during 1944 to 45.

We suggest that you begin your tour by means of the stairs in the shop which lead up to a series of display galleries. Of note is a model of the Manston railway which was constructed in 1919 to serve the airfield by connection to the main line at Birchington. This was eventually closed in the post-war years and today all traces have disappeared.

Next you will enter a gallery dedicated to the commercial period of the Manston airfield which was at its peak during the 1960’s and 70’s. There are many fascinating photographs with accompanying notes. For the lazy visitor there is a genuine waiting room chair something which seems to be so difficult to find in a modern airport. However, please don’t expect to be offered a cup of tea by the air hostess, she is but a mannequin.

Further on you will enter the World War 2 display area with multiple dioramas representing that era, leading down a ramp to the sound and light experience re-creating an air raid during The Blitz. Next up is the Armoury with a varied collection of weaponry associated with aircraft and airfield defence.

The first hangar area contains four iconic British jet aircraft from the 1960’s, comprising Hunter, Canberra, Buccaneer and Victor. Also, here you will find ubiquitous Martin Baker ejection seats which were fitted to these and other British jets of that period.

In the middle hangar the aircraft on display includes the diminutive Auster a veteran of Operation Market Garden (portrayed in the classic film “A Bridge Too Far”) which is in superb fly-away condition. Manston was one of the departure points for the operation. This hangar is dominated by a Wessex 5 helicopter which has been painted in the livery of RAF Search and Rescue. It represents the time when this type operated from Manston during the 1970’s although the role was performed by the RAF from the early 1960’s to the late 80’s. Their distinctive yellow helicopters were a regular sighting for the Thanet beach goers during the summer holidays. The eagle-eyed visitor may be intrigued by aircraft wing fragments located above the door to the shop annex behind the Canadair T-133. These are relics from a Fairy Swordfish and serve to recall the heroic “Channel Dash” engagement by Royal Navy Swordfish torpedo bombers in 1942. Six Swordfish took off from Manston to attack Scharnhorst, Gneisnau and Prinz Eugen which were transiting the English Channel but this attack failed and tragically all aircraft were shot down with only 5 survivors out of the 18 aircrew.

Moving on to the third hangar at the far side of the building, there are two notable residents which should be mentioned in this brief introduction. The red and white aircraft is the instantly recognisable Chipmunk utilised as the RAF primary trainer in the early post-war period, so popular that many hundred are still flying today. This example is presented as an aircraft of No.1 Air Experience Flight based at Manston with whom many thousands of Air Cadets gained their first taste of flying. The twin engine jet is a late example of the famous Gloster Meteor the only allied jet to see operation during World War 2. Manston was home to the very first squadron of these revolutionary aircraft from where they intercepted V1 flying bombs over Kent, a task which suited their high-speed capability.

From hangar three you can retrace your steps to the double doors on the opposite side where you can access the external area and inspect more aircraft, including Lightning, Jet Provost, Jaguar and Buccaneer. Not forgetting a rare example of the Iskra which was the first Polish designed jet and is much admired by our visitors from Poland.

On return to the shop and museum exit take a moment to view the display of a maintenance workshop from the First World War, a hark back to the origins of this building mentioned earlier on.

Once again, we hope you have a fantastic visit and we appreciate your support; any feedback will be taken into careful consideration, including on this Museum App which is a new venture for the museum. There is a Visitor Book in the foyer, and you can find our group home on Facebook.