



# HELM



## Heritage of East Lake Macquarie

Find us on **facebook**

**JUNE/JULY 2021**

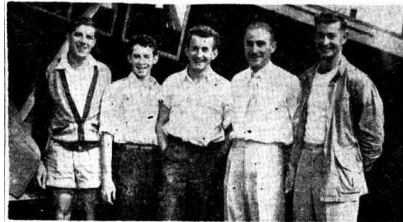
email: helm2281@gmail.com

### THE SKY IS THE LIMIT

Newcastle's first airfield operated at **District Park, Broadmeadow**, from 1929 to 1963, now the home of the Knights, the Jets and Harness Racing. Operated by Newcastle Aero Club, and built on a grassy paddock, it suited the smaller planes of the time such as the Tiger Moths. An alternative site at Hexham was discounted as too expensive to drain and improve the Swamp. Two young pilots bought an Avro 504, establishing an air service to Sydney in 1929. Flying training began in 1934. An early visitor was Sir Charles Kingsford Smith. *RNAC/NHerald*



Newcastle Surfmen To Fly To Perth



Broadmeadow; Surfmen, including Swansea's Keven Harman, fly Broadmeadow to Perth in a Dragon Rapide, 1951.

The runway proved too short as planes became bigger; especially for the military in WWII. Several overshot the landing strip ending rather dangerously onto the roadway, the rail line or the storm water channel. An American plane carrying troops created a spectacle by sliding into the drain, revealing a painting of a bare-topped girl on its nose. An attending policeman ordered a top to be painted into place on the "lewd" picture. On another occasion one of the catalinas lost its way and landed there with difficulty. The area was becoming increasingly built up with houses, obstacles and antennas and nowhere to expand to.



The search for a new location led to **Williamtown**. Here land had first been settled by K Snodgrass in 1840, later joined by W Harvey to set up dairy farms, which supplied Raymond Terrace Coop Dairy and Produce (est. 1904). The land was ideal to relieve the pressure on Broadmeadow; and still in proximity to Newcastle's steel mills and coal mines. 1940 saw the construction of four runways through the Commonwealth Unemployment Relief

Program. In 1941 the **RAAF** took over; joined in 1942 by some American forces. 888 personnel were stationed there at its peak; including 115 WAAAF women. The base conducted air training; and provided strategic protection for the essential port facilities and steel industry of the Hunter region. In 1950 the main runway was upgraded to become the first concrete runway in Australia. The importance of Williamtown RAAF base to our history was recognised in 2004 when it became heritage listed. Currently there are some 3,500 personnel/workers at the base; which also serves as the site for Fighter World Museum. *L Wetherall/RAAF/Wikipedia*



Broadmeadow	1
Williamtown	1-2
Dalkeith Hilder	2
Lake Mac Airport	3
Matt Hall	4

**Thank you to Pat Conroy and staff, kindly supporting the community; and encouraging the preservation and sharing of our heritage.**

After the war ended, the Federal Govt. agreed to the RAAF base being used for **civilian flights**; the first flight by TAA (Trans Australia Airlines) touching down in **Williamstown**, February 1948, carrying 18 passengers on a stopover from Sydney to Brisbane. The terminal became known as the the “Tin Shed”. It soon provided a connection to regional airports; and a shuttle service for workers in Newcastle, especially BHP. The 70’s and 80’s saw an increase in the demand for travel, with many regional airlines such as East West; and AirNSW yellow “Big Canary” using the facilities of the first true terminal building, constructed in 1975. Upgrades have continued as the airport was passed on to private enterprise in the 90’s; followed by low-cost competition in 2000; and Belmont closing in 2005. It became Australia’s 13<sup>th</sup> busiest airport incorporating international flights and accommodating some 1.25 million passengers a year prior to Covid. *Source: Newcastle Airport.*



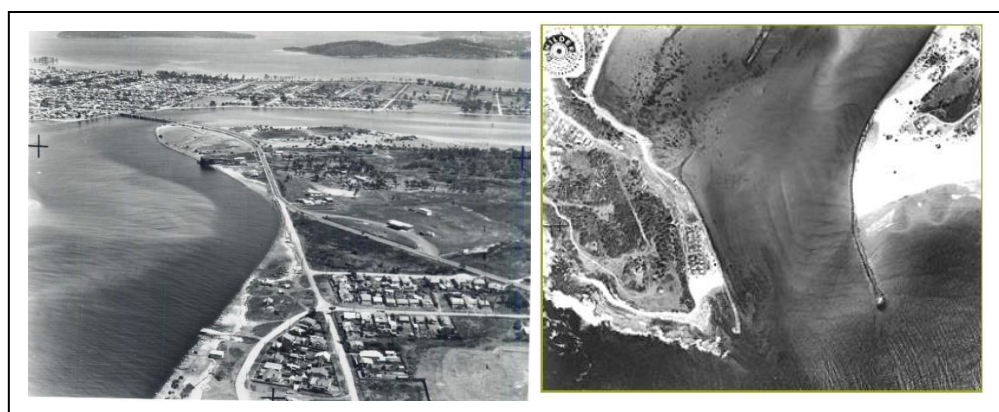
**DALKEITH LLEWELLYN HILDER** Keith was a member of Newcastle Aero Club since it’s inception resulting from a love of flying which led him to become a trainee pilot and gain his pilot’s licence just before WWII began. During his life he displayed a keen interest in aerodrome development. Keith was born in 1911 in Kurri Kurri. His parents died when he was at a young age, and he was placed into an orphanage. He ran away from there to live with his grandmother at Grenfell. Always independent and enterprising, he began to sell newspapers to supplement money for himself and his grandmother. He left school at 14 and took on an apprenticeship as a fitter and turner in Grenfell. From there he moved to Newcastle to further his skills at Tech, eventually becoming a teacher in welding with the Dept. of Education. Just as war was about to breakout, he gained his aircraft engineers licence. During the war he carried out specialised maintenance of RAAF equipment; and an overhaul of RAAF marine and engineering.



With an inventive mind, and entrepreneurial flair, Keith branched out in various directions. In 1940 he established Newcastle’s first aerial photography business. During the 1940’s he designed and constructed a low-cost single seat monoplane which conformed to Civil Aviation Authority specifications.



Moving in yet another direction, he formed a partnership with Gordon Lewis in producing Surfmaster fishing reels. In 1948 it was noted in Dun’s Gazette that his sports goods manufacturing was trading as “Halcyon Products”, from King St. By January 1949 he had 10 skilled employees and spent 2,000 pounds tooling up to produce the reel which had 63 parts, including screws. Keith was very exacting in his requirements - every tool, tin or screw had to be replaced exactly where it was found to ensure that the small factory did not become a mess. The factory had difficulty in keeping up with demand as orders began to come from New Zealand, Tasmania and overseas, even Norway and Scotland. He sold the business in the early 1950’s with suggestions for making further improvements: lightweight aluminium construction; anodising to make it resistant to corrosion; and be able to be dismantled on the beach. During the 50’s 50,000 reels were sold. Despite his intense interest in the design and production of the reel, Keith was not a keen fisherman. His preference was for flying and shooting.



He died suddenly in 1976, aged 64 due to a heart attack. *Left: Aerial photos by Keith Hilder of Swansea Channel (with the coal gantry being visible); and Swansea Heads. c.1960s. Sources: Lake Mac Airport; Aust Fishing Museum; LMCC Community History; Wikipedia.*



**“LAKE MACQUARIE AIRPORT, ALSO KNOWN AS PELICAN AIRPORT, BELMONT AIRPORT AND AEROPELICAN, EXISTS TODAY BECAUSE OF THE VISION OF ONE MAN, KEITH HILDER.** Keith had a love of flying. His passion transcended everyday fantasy and saw him turn his dream into the living reality that the cities of Newcastle and Lake Macquarie now enjoy.”

*Source: Lake Macquarie Airport*

When it became obvious that Broadmeadow airfield would close; and Newcastle Aero Club would relocate to Rutherford it was time to act on his vision for the future. He recognised that an airfield closer to Newcastle and Lake Macquarie than Williamstown, which only offered one arrival and one departure flight a day, was needed. In 1959 he located 27 acres of land at Pelican and acquired miner’s rights and a 25 year lease. He met the challenge of the scrub and swampy land, by draining, clearing and obtaining fill from local coal mines. By 1964 there stood an airstrip, 2 hangers, and a flight control centre. Accommodation was provided for country people learning to fly. This was the “world’s first Aerotel”. Then ensued a long battle with bureaucracy to become licenced. A special licence was granted to allow a passenger service to operate to Sydney in 1967. Aeropelican Air Services was established in 1968, with a full charter licence granted in 1971.

After Keith died in 1976, Aeropelican was sold to Masling, a company associated with Ansett ANA. The flights continued and over a million passengers travelled in 25 years. Aeropelican went into administration when Ansett folded in 2001; and the service ended in 2005.

*Source: Lake Macquarie Airport*



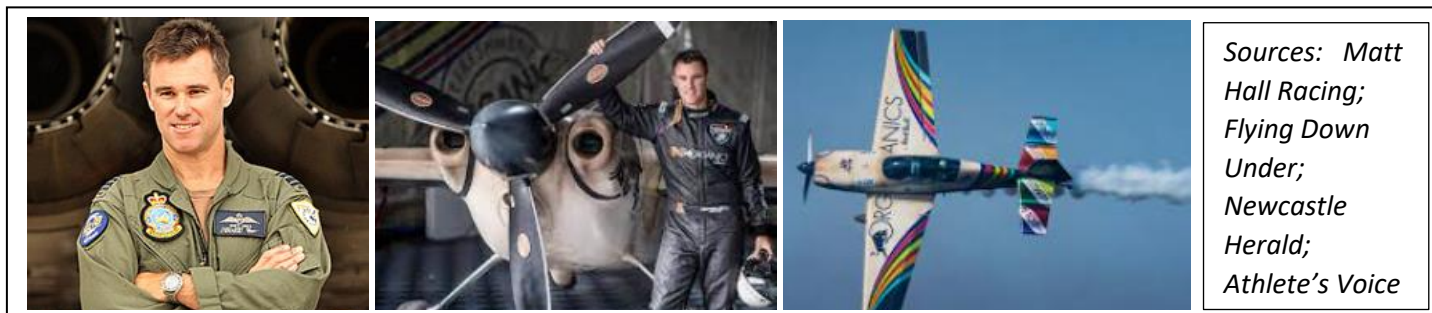
After several attempts to revive the airport, negotiations were finally successful in 2014, with a consortium that respected Hilder’s vision. Fortunately, the land had been zoned for an airport and related infrastructures, which protected it from development. The rejuvenation now features aerobatic flights, skydives, helicopters, medical rescues, microlight and gyroplane flights. It will provide an interesting spectacle for those traversing along the Fernleigh Track extension opposite the airfield, being constructed adjacent to the Highway by LMCC.

**WESTPAC HELICOPTER RESCUE SERVICE.** 2017 added a new dimension to the airfield facilities with the opening of a purpose-built aeromedical base at Belmont (with another built at Lismore) to provide mid-air emergency aid, inter-hospital transfers, search and rescue missions; taking 6 months to complete at a cost of \$5.5 million. The service had started in Newcastle with an all-volunteer crew of local surf life savers in a Bell 47 helicopter during summer weekends in 1975. In the 1980’s the heavily community sponsored service expanded to carry paramedics and doctors on board to assist with emergency responses. Greater corporate and community support allowed operations to be carried out 24/7. A permanent base was established at District Park, Broadmeadow Upgrades witnessed a longer bodied helicopter in 1984; and in 1989 the “Angel One Appeal” in the Hunter helped fund a twin engine chopper. A setback came in 1993 with an accident in the Barrington Tops which left the helicopter beyond repair. Another base was added in 2000 at Tamworth.



The service is now known as the Northern NSW Helicopter Rescue Service; and in 2017 commenced a 10 year contract for \$150 million administered by WHRS and NSW Ambulance, operating from Belmont, Lismore and Tamworth bases. Headquarters and major maintenance remain at Broadmeadow. *Rescue Helicopter/Herald.*

**MATT HALL** is one of the partners in the consortium for Lake Macquarie Airfield, basing Matt Hall Racing there. Matt was born in Scone in 1971 and is a third generation pilot. His grandfather flew transport planes in WWII; his father, an engineer with the power stations, had a passion for flying. The family moved to Mandalong, and father and son often flew from Pelican airfield. Matt began to fly gliders and gained his aircraft pilot's licence at 18. At first working for the Tax Office to pay for flying lessons to achieve his early ambition of becoming a commercial airline pilot; he realized that if he joined the RAAF he would be paid to fly the high powered fighters. Joining the RAAF in 1991, he topped many courses to become a Fighter Pilot, then a Fighter Combat Instructor; rising to Wing Commander. He remembers his first flight in an F/A-18 Hornet at a top speed of 1,915 km/h. On exchange to the USA for 3 years, he embarked on a tour of duty to the Iraq war, flying over 500 hours including combat. He has been awarded both American and Australian medals. Aerobatics had become his new challenge whilst in The States, travelling to many air shows and aerobatic competitions; and being coached by many of the American competitors and performers. He returned to Australia and established a family life with Pedita, who was a doctor in the Air Force and flew in many planes as a flight surgeon. The decision was made to leave the air force in 2009 due to the dangers of war-time flying; and the instability of transfers and relocations in a RAAF career. Following his new passion, he became the first Australian to take part in the Red Bull air races in 2009. Despite being the "new guy", Matt came third in his first season, followed by several seasons of second place; ultimately world champion in 2019.



## LOCAL HERITAGE EVENTS:

HELM thanks **Teresa Purnell**, snake catcher and natural history illustrator, for giving us an entertaining afternoon in Swansea Library with tales of her Chinese family and their days in Hamilton and Swansea. We heard of Teresa's ancestors' arrival in Darwin from Hong Kong in the late 1800s and of time on a tobacco farm in Quirindi before opening a fruit shop in Beaumont St, Hamilton.

Teresa told us of the importance of family and the family business in her life along with many hilarious tales of opening wooden fruit and vegetable boxes with a tomahawk, introducing her school friends to her different lifestyle and the antics of her Mum, Phyllis Mook, "Newcastle's jitterbug dynamo". We learnt how the family's and Phyllis's reputation follows Teresa, when members of our audience recalled their memories of queuing up at the family's restaurant, Chung Hing Café, with their own pots for a take-away Chinese meal. And one particular Swansea character in the audience recalled being chased down Wood St, Swansea, by Phyllis's father late one night, when he delivered her home on the back of his motor bike.



**Swansea Secrets Festival** was held over 4 days at ARTea's Gallery and Garden. A cultural celebration was organised, sharing little known facts through art, food, history and Aboriginal Culture. Featured were local artists; Bush tukka morning tea; a virtual tour of Swansea's iconic waterway "Channel-ing our past" by HELM; and an Aboriginal Culture bus tour from Redhead to Swansea Heads.

**Share your story and memories at HELM to preserve our heritage for the future!!!!**

© Material contained in this publication is not available for use, duplication or modification in any other publication without the express permission of the editor; published under the auspices of Lake Macquarie and Districts Hist Soc Inc. Whilst every effort is made to ensure the accuracy of information in the newsletter, it cannot be guaranteed.