

The Spitfire Fund 1940

The Spitfire Fund began almost by accident and was not organised by the National War Savings Movement, but rather a spontaneous outpouring of donations from people at home and around the world for the building of aircraft for the RAF. It was the first example of a concerted effort by large groups to donate money to the war effort and may have been the spark that ignited the National Savings war savings weeks that followed.

In May 1940, just as the last men were leaving the Dunkirk beaches, Max Aitken, better known as Lord Beaverbrook, the Minister of Aircraft Production, received a cable from a Jamaican newspaper, the *Gleaner*, asking him how much it cost to build a bomber. He picked a figure out of the air of £20,000 and a week later another cable advised that £20,000 had been credited to the account of the Minister of Aircraft Production. The money had come from the readers of the *Gleaner* who felt they would like to participate in the Battle of Britain which seemed about to commence. A week later the *Straits Times* of Singapore cabled £250,000. Jamaica was well on its way with its second £20,000, and the Gold Coast hastened to cable £100,000.

Towards the end of June, a Canadian mining millionaire, Sir Harry Oakes, cabled from the Bahamas saying he would like to buy a Spitfire for presentation to the RAF. How much did a Spitfire cost? A round figure of £5,000 was chosen as a suitable amount. The actual price was more, but this was seen as the limit of public contributions to each aircraft.

Then, in July 1940 a story appeared in a national newspaper stating: 'Lord Beaverbrook acknowledges with gratitude the sum of 30 shillings sent him by a housewife in Stamford, Lincolnshire.' The money had been put aside for a holiday.

This started the ball rolling....

A Wolverhampton Alderman told the editor of the *Express and Star* that it might be a good scheme for Wolverhampton to try and buy a Spitfire and present it to the nation. "I read they cost around £5,000, here is my cheque for the first £50." In a few days the total had reached £6,000. This started a challenge to other cities and by the end of July Worcester was in the lead with two Spitfires. By this time the colonial fund had reached total contributions of £1,600,000, enough for 40 heavy bombers and 160 Spitfires. By the end of July £2,048,521 had been given by members of the public to buy Spitfires – over 400 of them!

A 'shopping list' was produced so people could choose what their contributions had bought, some examples below:

Fighter

1. Spitfire £5,000
2. Fuselage £2,500
3. Engine £2,000
4. Wings £1,800
5. Tail £500



Spitfire Fund Badges

Smaller items:

1. 6 screws 6d
2. Control cable 1s 6d
3. Engine switch 2s 6d
4. Spark plug 8s
5. Compass £5



Bomber

1. Lancaster £25,000
2. Fuselage £10,000
3. Engines (each) £2,000
4. Guns £1,600
5. Tail £1,000
6. Bombs
 - a. General Purpose £22
 - b. Armour piercing £100



Reverse of bus ticket

By the middle of August, the Spitfire Fund stood at £3,000,000, and by the end of 1940 the figure had reached £10,000,000. Each savings group that raised enough for a Spitfire could have their name painted on the side.

Even prisoners of war got in on the act. Inmates of Oflag VIB donated a month's pay and, via the Red Cross, it went to a Spitfire called "Unshackled Spirit".

Spitfire "Dorothy of Great Britain and Empire" was paid for by a fund made up entirely of women and girls of that name.

Uruguay, diplomatically neutral, funded 17.

Many countries donated enough for entire squadrons to bear their name, including No.74 (Trinidad), No.167 (Gold Coast) and No.114 (Hong Kong).

Spitfire “Fun of the Fair” was named after an appeal by various circuses, fairgrounds and carnivals, set up in a bid to counter accusations the travelling community was shirking war duties.

More than 1,400 appeals were set up and the funds raised enough for about 2,600 Spitfires but incomplete records mean fewer than 1,600 named aircraft can be traced.

Mark Harrison, professor of economics at the University of Warwick, says:

“Only after ensuring the supply of Spitfires did the government worry about how to pay for them. The funds were like today’s ‘sponsor a panda’ and ‘buy a metre of rainforest’ appeals. In any immediate sense these make no difference to the number of pandas or the amount of rainforest. Spitfire funds did not pay for Spitfires, but they were still an essential part of the war effort. Without them the war would eventually have gone less well in one aspect or another. There would have been a cost.”



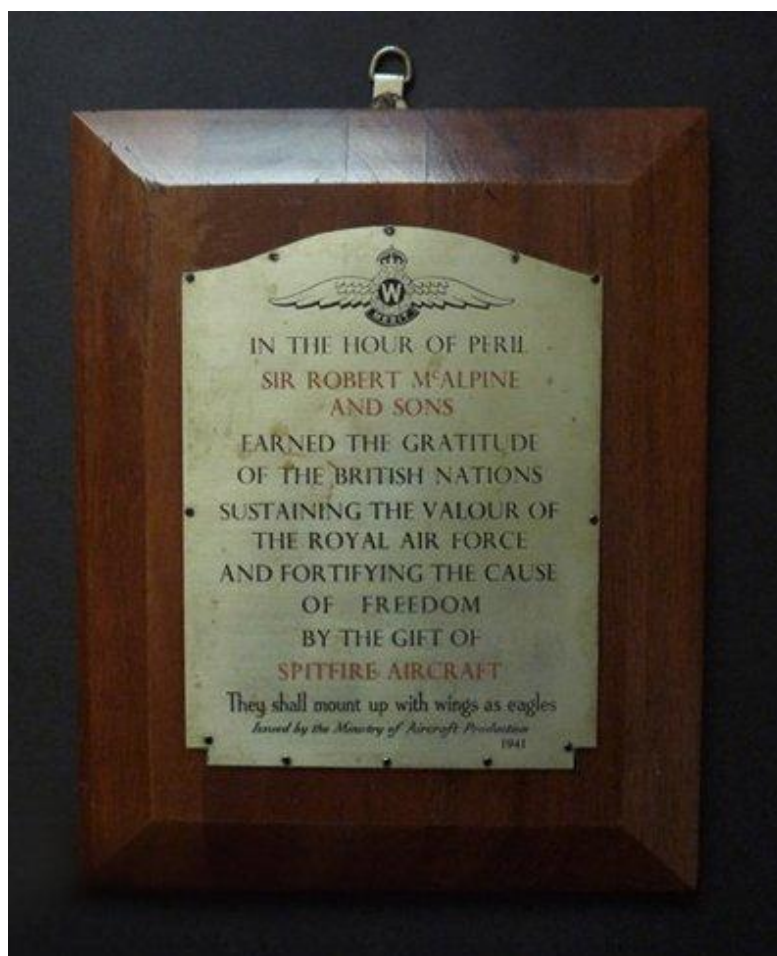
Dealers selling Vauxhall and Bedford vehicles got together to raise money for the Spitfire Fund. At the end of the fundraising period, they had been able to ‘buy’ a Spitfire and each dealership was given one of these plaques to hang on their wall which says: “The holder of this emblem is a shareholder in the Vauxhall-Bedford Spitfire, presented to the nation October 1940.” Individual people who had helped to save were each given one of the Shareholder’s badges seen left.

On Christmas Day 1941, in the City of Peterborough, England, Councillor Mrs. Bryant, received from the Air Ministry for Aircraft Production a plaque to commemorate the raising by the city during her Mayoralty, of £5,600 for a Spitfire. The plaque was of engraved steel mounted on oak and below the wings of the RAF and the word "Merit" was the inscription:

"In the hour of peril the citizens of Peterborough and District earned the gratitude of the British nations, sustaining the valour of the Royal Air Force and fortifying the cause of freedom, by the gift of Spitfire aircraft. They shall mount up with wings as eagles."

In the following January at the City Council meeting, Mrs. Bryant presented the plaque to the present Mayor, Mr. H. J. Farrow, who thanked her, and said it would be placed in his (Mayor's) Parlour.

I have not been able to gain access to the Mayor's Parlour in order to check that the plaque still remains there. However, below is a picture of a similar plaque, presented to the company of 'Sir Robert McAlpine and Sons'.



Spitfire Fund Plaque

Everyone likes a celebrity, and it is nice to be able to include one here. The letter below bears the monogram GF in the top left-hand corner. This is none other than the famous singer and actor at the time, Mr. George Formby. When I bought this letter, it was because it mentioned Spitfire Brooches, but on seeing the signature, "Beryl Formby", George's wife, and the monogram, there was no doubt regarding the provenance. Although it is crossed out, we can see that the letter, which is dated 7th August 1941, was sent to Mr. S. Fisher, 63, West Road, Shoeburyness, Essex.

GF

Grosvenor House,
London, W.1.

7th August, 1941.

~~Mr. Fisher, Esq.,~~
~~63, West Road,~~
SHOEBURYNESSE. Essex.

Dear Mr. ~~Fisher~~,

Mr. Formby wishes me to thank you very much for your Postal Order for 10/- being the proceeds from the sale of Spitfire brooches, one of which you very kindly sent along.

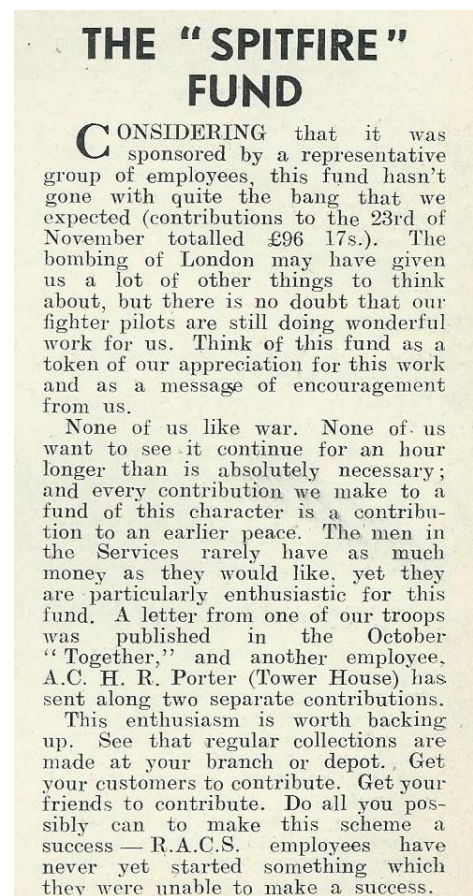
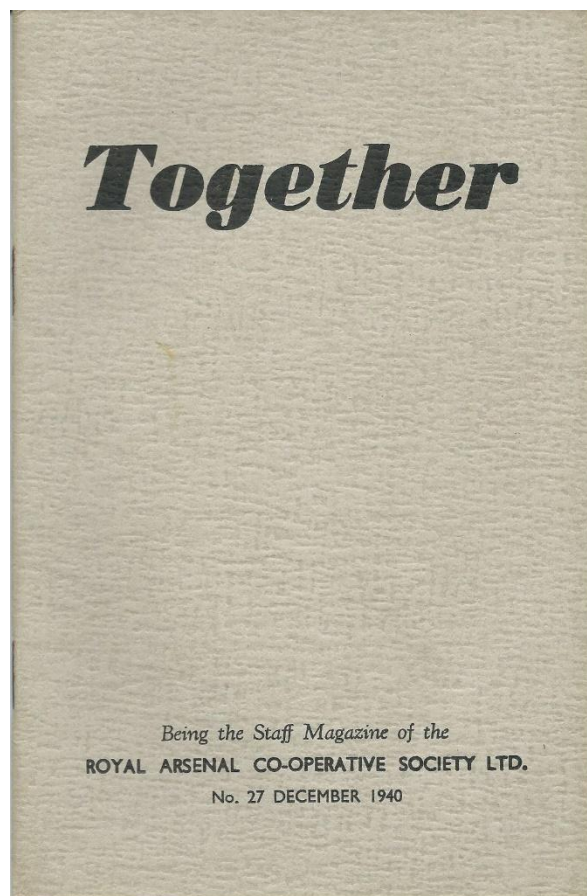
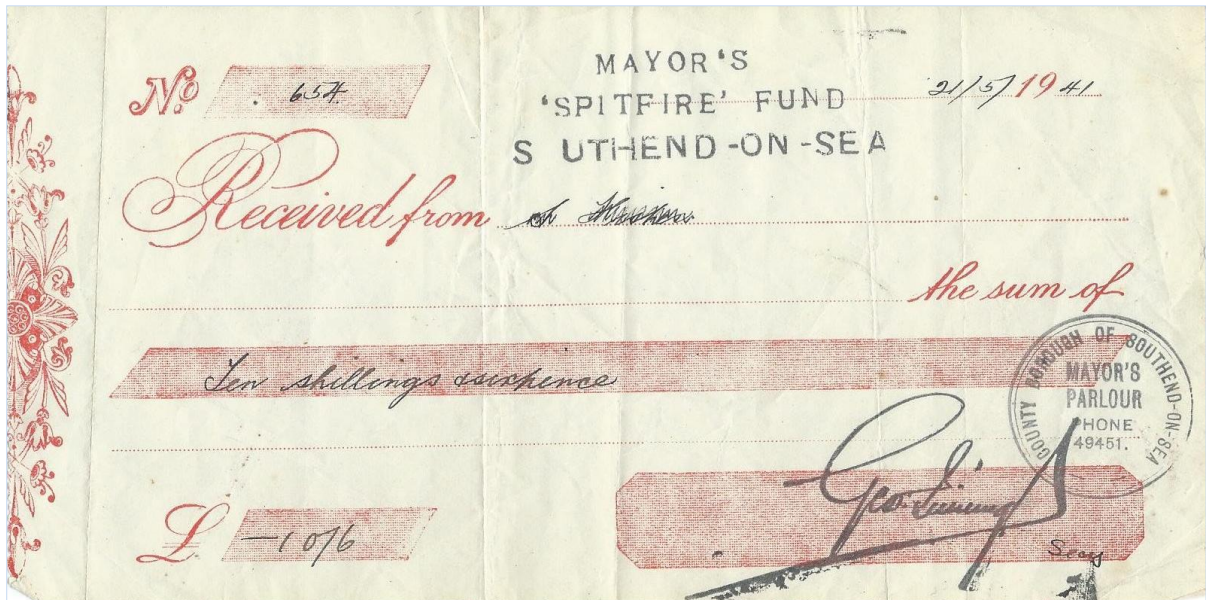
It is certainly very pretty indeed and I must say you have done very well indeed. I have never seen anything so very nicely made and will certainly do as you say and auction it later on.

Mr. Formby joins me in sending you all good wishes.

Yours sincerely,

Beryl Formby.

Below is a receipt for ten shillings and sixpence received from Mr. Fisher and paid into the 'Mayor's Spitfire Fund' Southend-on-Sea. Mr. Fisher was very busy raising money for the 'Spitfire Fund' and I see no reason why we should not know his name, even though someone has crossed it out.



'Together' was the Magazine of the 'Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society'. The article on the right from the Magazine was a call to staff to try harder raising money for the 'Spitfire Fund'.

The following story appeared in 'The War Illustrated' dated March 28th, 1941:

£10,000,000 in Gifts for Aircraft

From time to time the Ministry of Aircraft Production has acknowledged the receipt from the public of sums of money, large and small, for the provision of more bombers and fighters. These contributions have included both individual gifts and the combined result of little amounts saved with difficulty, but good-will by humble citizens who recognise in this way their debt of gratitude to the Royal Air Force. On March the 7th Lord Beaverbrook issued the following statement:

'Through the generosity of the public, through the gifts we have received from warm-hearted people at home and abroad, we have been able to carry out a splendid enterprise. Without any appeal by the Government, more than £10,000,000 has been sent to us for the provision of aircraft for the defence of this island and for our offensive operations overseas. We propose therefore, to devote to the benevolent funds or service charities of the three fighting Services and the Merchant Navy 10 per cent of the money sent us after the end of March. It is our belief that by doing so we shall interpret the desire of the public to unite their gratitude to the valiant defenders of freedom with their determination to strengthen the squadrons of the Royal Air Force.'

There was no end date for the Spitfire Fund, but after around April 1941 donations began to slow down, particularly after the Battle of Britain had been won the previous year. It is likely that the National Savings Campaigns that followed, particularly the Savings Weeks that took place each year, took over from the Spitfire Fund for most people. The Spitfire Fund was a simple donation, you gave your money for the cause. National Savings were also to be used by the Government to spend on winning the war, but as these were 'savings', the money was only a loan, and you got it back when you needed it.