

RAF Waddington International Airshow Report

Saturday 2nd July - Sunday 3rd July 2011

The Royal Air Force's premier airshow has for many years struggled to compete with the events held over the same weekend on mainland Europe, and to fully showcase its own resources to the public. That isn't to say that the team hasn't staged an enjoyable event for the general public more that, in the mind of the enthusiast, the show hasn't met the requirements expected for military and international participation. Each year though there have been some particular highlights, and 2011 would be no exception.



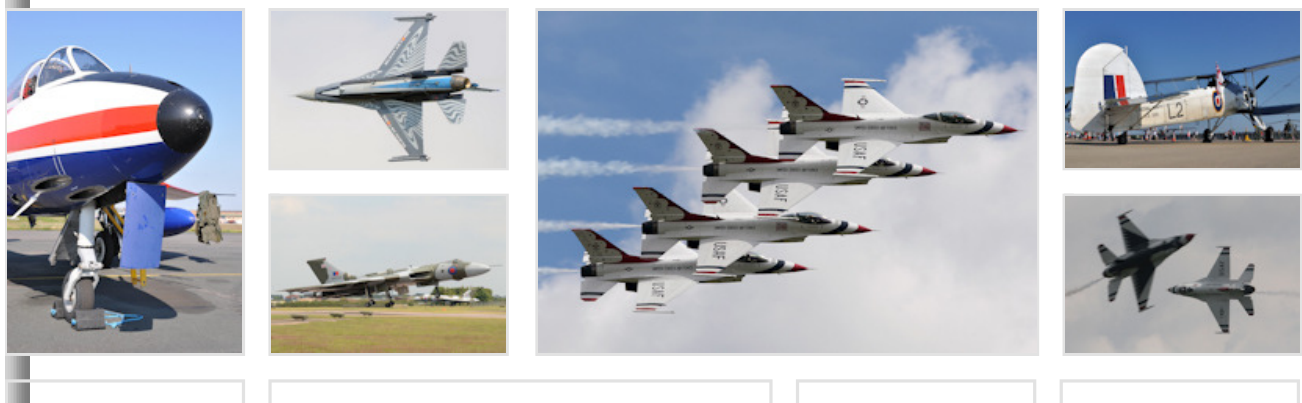
Phil Whalley reports for UKAR, with additional photography by the 'Airshows' team.

With the changing face of the airshow scene and continuing defence cuts and operational commitments taking their toll it is no surprise to anyone that any military based air display will suffer a reduction in 'heavy metal' content. Waddington though has continually suffered in comparison with the shows held at Beauvechain and Zeltweg over the same weekends. It is sometimes difficult to swallow apparently reasonable explanations behind various juicy items not being able to make it to the UK when they then turn up at events just a short hop across the sea. This year's show at Zeltweg for example, managed to attract a MiG-29, Me262, Dutch F-16, Mirage 2000 and the Saudi Hawks. There were other criticisms aimed at this year's event focusing on changes to traffic management and gate opening times, for which we'll turn to the UKAR rank and file for their experiences...



Undoubted stars of the 2011 event were the USAF's display team, The Thunderbirds, in their attractive white F-16s. They fly a different style of routine to their European counterparts such as the Red Arrows so perhaps it is best not to judge them as in competition. The Red's display, as also seen at Waddington, is a continuous, flowing, sky-filling performance of tight formations and dynamic manoeuvres. The Thunderbirds, in contrast, fly away from the airfield to form up into mostly the same four-ship grouping, interspersed by crossovers and mirror formations from the two-ship. Towards the finale of their show they carry out a four aircraft opposition cross, carefully positioned in a 'smoke and mirrors' manner so as to appear to send an aircraft head-on and over the crowd line. In fact it passes at an acute angle, but was close enough to require clearing one car park of people before the display could be allowed to commence. This manoeuvre took the team four attempts on their Friday rehearsal to 'nail', and takes the team some amount of 'dead air' time to set up.

The Thunderbirds are undoubtedly photogenic, and the mirror formation passes are particularly impressive, but the comedic preamble and the jingoistic commentary seem to some to be way over the top for a British audience. Yet they clearly caught the public imagination. Whether it was the noise of six F-16s, the overly-literal selection of loud rock, rap and pop music (apparently chosen by entering the names of each particular formation into a search engine), or a connection with the team's leader giving his instructions over the radio, the audience really got caught up in the display. It was the kind of reaction shared by a number of the displays during the day, proving that, once again, there is a vast chasm between what the enthusiast craves and what makes for a great day out for the general public. And therein lies the paradox. With a show full of jet noise, colour, spectacle, explosions and national pride, Waddington International Airshow 2011 had made great strides towards a return to form in the eyes of the general public, which obviously is a financial priority. There is a widening gulf though in what they and the enthusiasts see as a successful show, as some of the quotes illustrate below.





Taking a close second place to the Thunderbirds on the 'clapometer', 'Vulcan' (copyright Sean Maffett) made another rousing appearance at its home turf, with the people of Lincolnshire still clearly very fond of the iconic shape that used to fill their skies. Kev Rumens continues to set the pulses racing with his banking turns beyond 'the ninety'. Further classic jets continued to fill the void perhaps expected to be taken by more modern machinery with Team Viper providing an especially memorable performance in their classic Hunters and two Vampires from Royal Norwegian Air Force Historic Squadron with an equally sweet display.

The static parks included a number of highlights, such as the stunningly schemed Belgian F-16AM from 31 'Tiger' Squadron, the pairs of Typhoons from Germany and Italy, the Thunderbirds support C-17 and a Netherlands KDC-10, but consisted mostly of light aircraft. It was sad to see two of the recently decommissioned Nimrod R1s sitting forlornly as a stark reminder as to one of the reasons why the RAF is unable to put on a show of force of the days of old. Despite this the reappearance of the 'Blue Eagles' Apache and two Tornado GR4s carrying out the 'Role Demo' particularly caught the imagination of the public who are clearly empathetic with their exploits in highly dangerous locations, plus the continually well received displays by the Chinook, Hawk, Tucano, Tutor, King Air, Merlin HM1 and Black Cats were one of the indications of the effort by the armed forces to support what is their 'home' airshow.

Although the politics involved in its requirement continue to echo through the corridors of Whitehall the appearance by a USAF RC-135W 'Rivet Joint' added to the military content. Though the single pass on the morning of each day was a little high to be fully appreciated it did at least show willing to provide an insight into the future of operations from Waddington, following as it did from the 'station flypast' E-3D.



Regular visitor 'Mitch' Beulen displayed the Belgian Air Component's F-16AM Fighting Falcon, whilst two teams flying Extra 300s again illustrated different styles of display with the Blades once again greatly overshadowing their more sedate national team companions, this time being the Royal Jordanian Falcons.

As is often the case with such a vast display area, the display by the once OC of BMMF Paul Day in the Waddington based MSB Aviation Spitfire IXT was a little lost when flown in the gentle manner reminiscent of his previous position. The same could not be said of Nigel Willson in the Attitude Inc. sponsored Yak52. Perhaps initially seen as an odd display item for this show, the comparison worked in his favor as the well flown, less restricted routine displayed aerobatics at its best. Sally B made her welcome 2011 airshow debut at Waddington, with B-17 Preservation having made the decision to reduce the length of her season as a cost cutting measure. The North American OV-10B Bronco owned and flown by Tony de Bruyn is a welcome addition to the airshow scene having been around for a few years, sometimes seen as a visitor or on static but not shown off in the air.

Waddington 2011 attracted over 145,000 visitors over the weekend, most of who travelled without major issue and clearly enjoyed the show with frequent audible appreciation of the display acts before them. There were though some issues which hopefully will be reviewed before next year.

UK Airshow Review says

Comment, reaction and opinion from members on our active forums:

"Getting into the show was a disaster, for me and family anyway. Arrived at the A607 and through to Boothby Graffoe just before 0815ish. Freely moving and going well. However it all went the way of the pear and we then strangely got directed East along the road to the A15 (never been directed that way before, why this year?). This tiny stretch of road then took one hour to snail along, then after joining the A15, it took well over another hour or more to get up to the north entrance, by which time display had started and we reached the fence and WAVE as the Hawk was displaying.

Appalling Traffic Management then proceeded to pass us north past the A15 entrance and we had to follow the road around and back on ourselves to go south, past the main gate. Eventually we parked the car - four hours after first reaching the A607, guess

where..... Barn Farm!! I don't know who thought traffic should have gone from A607 to the A15, but what a disgrace and poor thinking!"

'iaint'

"We were 2.5 hours from stopping at the back of the traffic queue on the A15 to getting in at Barn Field. And what was it with all the corporate tents lined up along the flight line? Is there space in front of them for the great unwashed, or do they control that area as well? In which case does anyone know how much space is available for the general public to use (is it all towards the left of the site?) When we made it onto the site we parked our arses on the grass area in front of the Nimrods. Could see enough of the flying, but after stressing out with the drive in, didn't want to drag our chairs further in. Won't be going to Waddington again unless there are lessons learnt from the weekend and they are implemented!"

'maffie'

"Left King's Lynn at 8am Sunday, had a brilliant run up the A17 and didn't hit the queue until we reached the airfield boundary, but things seemed very slow at the gate. It took us best part of an hour to actually get parked, so we missed the E-3D. The T-Birds were the unquestioned highlight of the flying (although I found the first half of their routine much more compelling than the second), with the wonderful Bronco not far behind - Team Viper and the Vampire duo were also very worthy."

'RodMcKenzie'

"Was Waddington a good show or not ? I don't know as I never got in..."

As someone fairly local who has attended many of the past shows, we were told on the official airshow website and on local radio "Do NOT arrive early as you will be moved on and sent away" so we did as we have always done and arrived from the Metheringham side, which leads onto the A15, at around 9am. Normally we filter onto the A15 and they direct us to the Barn car park and traffic continues to filter in all morning etc.

This year we came to a grinding halt before the A15 and after 30 minutes we were on the A15 but were then told to go past the barn entrance and continue on the A15, which we did. We then moved one car at a time for the next hour and a half. We reached the WAVE, still we went on and then after over two hours sat in traffic we started seeing a queue forming in the OTHER direction coming towards us.

As we sat there we spoke to other motorists who were coming in from the Lincoln end (Bracebridge Heath) who had been told to turn around and come to the barn!!! They also had been sat for 2-3 hours and had no idea what was happening.

I then got out and went and spoke to a Police Officer who was stood with the mass of gathered 'Traffic Management Contractors', all of whom were just gathered in a huddle opposite the WAVE watching the flying rather than doing the job that some idiot had obviously thought they were capable of doing.

As I stood waiting to speak to the Police Officer, I was listening to the radio conversation he was having and it went along the lines of "Both car parks are at a standstill, keep turning them round and hope that they get the message...!"

I asked him where we were meant to be heading and what was happening and his reply was "Look mate, the car parks are chokka, there are seven mile tailbacks in every direction. They want you to head to Bracebridge heath but it's full. I doubt you're gonna get in, this is one massive foul-up on someones part..."

And that was that. I got back in the car and when we finally reached the lights at Lincoln, we headed home as I'm not wasting money to watch a bit of a display. I got a call in the afternoon from a friend who said they let him in at the barn just before lunch...

If they are unable to organise the traffic, or at least organise the muppets who they employed to manage the traffic, then they should make the show 'ticket only!'"

'Scrappydoo'