

Sopwith Baby

DRAWINGS BY JOHN BOX & MICK DAVIS



The Sopwith Baby was a direct descendent of and indeed a very similar aircraft to the float-equipped Tabloid with which Howard Pixton won the Schneider Trophy at Monaco on 24 April 1914. The original version, known unofficially as the Sopwith Schneider, was put into production in November 1914. It was equipped with three floats and powered by a 100hp Gnome Monosoupape engine neatly enclosed in a streamlined cowling and fairly powerful for an aircraft of its size by the standards of the time. It had a triangular fin and some of the very early versions relied on wing warping for their control. Later versions were fitted with ailerons. Virtually at the same time, the shape of the tail fin was altered to have a curved leading edge and increased area.

The Schneider was operated in an anti-Zeppelin role from a number of coastal RNAS stations. An ingenious scheme to extend its range saw it carried on the shallow draught paddle steamers *Killingholme* and *Brocklesby* and it was also flown from a platform fitted to the seaplane carrier *Campania*. Light cruisers of the North Sea Patrol and trawlers were also used to carry Schneiders afloat and thus increase their range. In these cases, the aircraft would be lowered onto the sea and taken off from the water. It has to be appreciated that, while they could be flown readily off fairly calm water, they were not robust enough for operations in the open sea and many suffered damage.

In this role, the Schneider was mainly armed with a single .303 calibre Lewis gun fitted to fire upwards through an aperture cut in the centre section of the top wing although a variety of other weapons – carbines, shotguns etc were often carried in its early operational career. These were sometimes hand held but some were fitted to fire obliquely past the propeller arc. It could also carry a variety of small bombs – the most common fitment being the standard ‘small bomb carrier’ with its load of four 20lb Hales bombs.

The major difference between the Schneider and the Baby was that the latter was fitted with a more powerful engine, the 110 or 130hp Clerget. Larger than the 100hp Monosoupape, these required a larger cowling and this feature, an open fronted ‘horseshoe’ shape provides the easiest means of differentiating between the two types of machine.

The Sopwith Aviation Company built all of the original Schneider floatplanes, but production of the later Baby was shared between the Blackburn Aeroplane Company, the Fairey Aviation Company and Parnall and Sons. While all were supplied with drawings and an aircraft as a pattern, inevitably there were differences between the products of each company. Those built by Blackburn at the Olympia Works in Leeds were the closest to the original design. Those built by Fairey at Hamble differed in a number of ways. Their wings had rounded tips and were fitted with adjustable trailing edge flaps [the first production aircraft to be so equipped] giving increased lift at takeoff, a square cut tail fin and improved floats. Those built by Parnall at Bristol retained the original Sopwith tail fin and floats but were fitted with Fairey wings.

Babies were employed in the same duties as the earlier Schneiders. They saw service both around the British coast on anti-Zeppelin and submarine patrols and also, carried by the early seaplane carriers HMS *Vindex*, *Engadine* and *Campania*, for raids against Zeppelin sheds at Tondern and for scouting work for the British fleet. Four Babies from HMS *Vindex* were deployed to Dunkirk on 24 June 1916 and in May the following year this number was increased by a further nine. Here they were used to support the local land-based fighters until they were replaced by Sopwith Pups.

In the Mediterranean and Aegean Sopwith Babies again served in a number of capacities. They were stationed ashore at Thasos, Otranto and Imbros and aboard the seaplane

Sopwith Baby 8207, 100hp Gnome Monosoupape, was delivered to Killingholme 12 May 1916 for anti-Zeppelin and submarine patrol work in the North Sea. This machine was wrecked on 24 June 1917.

:Ferguson Album

