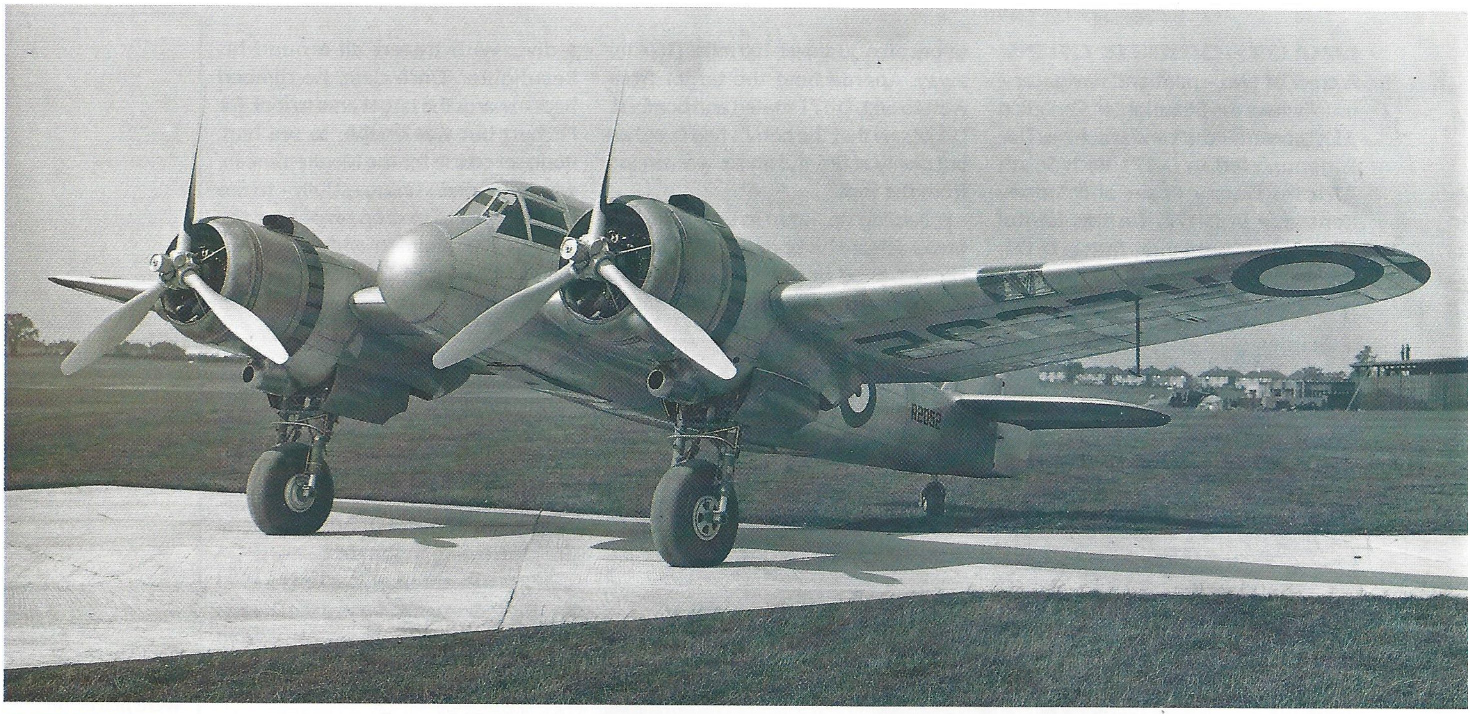
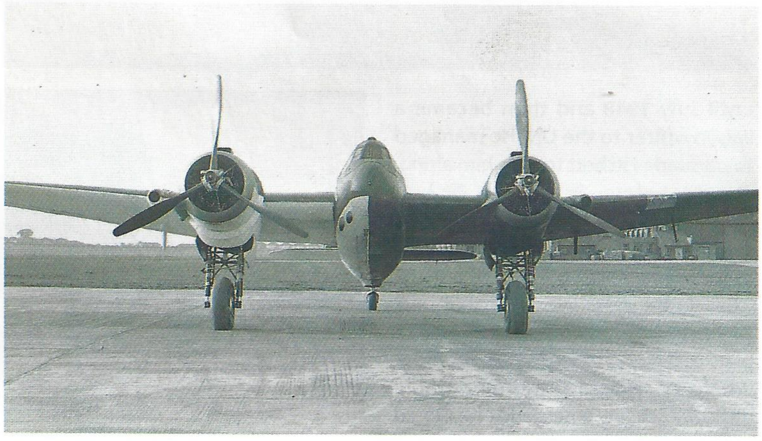



# First...

## Daniel Ford describes the first of the Beaufighters...

*The first Beaufighter, R2052 gleaming in natural metal finish at Filton, in July 1939.* BRISTOL



*Head-on view of the third prototype (R2054) showing the camouflage and white/black fighter undersides adopted by all four prototypes.* KEY–GORDON SWANBOROUGH COLLECTION

WITH THE BLENHEIM and then the Beaufort, Bristol had acquired a huge amount of knowledge in designing and developing twin-engined warplanes. With its origins in the one-off Type 142 *Britain First* commissioned by newspaper magnate Lord Rothermere (see the April issue), the Blenheim proved somewhat problematical to 'industrialise' and turn into a mass-manufactured type. That said, Bristol worked wonders with the Blenheim variants – it was indeed the right aircraft at the right time.

Dispersed production sites and the 'Shadow Factory' scheme meant that much attention had to be paid to modular elements and ease of construction. By the time the Beaufort torpedo-bomber came along (it first flew on October 15, 1938) the lessons of the Blenheim were well digested.

The virtues of this 'building block' system were not lost on the Bristol design team, led by Leslie Frise. The Beaufort could easily form the basis of a family of twins. Even as the Beaufort was preparing for flight test, a slim-line two-seat fighter, the Type 156, was sketched out.

This proposition the Air Ministry liked. Bristol were envisaging a cannon-armed night-fighter which could take the bulky early radar sets. The design also had potential for long-range Coastal Command applications.

A slim-fuselaged, two-seater powered by a pair of Bristol Hercules I-SMs was the result. It was essentially a new fuselage and powerplant package attached to Beaufort wings, tail and landing gear. This was referred to as the 'Beaufort Fighter' and a contraction of this became the type's official name.

Four prototypes were ordered and Specification F17/39 was written around the venture and such was the need that production examples were also included. In natural metal, R2052 first took to the air at Filton on July 17, 1939 – just ten months after the first Beaufort.

All four prototypes were used by the manufacturers and the Aeroplane and Armament Experimental Establishment at Boscombe Down, Wilts, for service acceptance and performance trials. The prototype quickly showed its metal with a top speed of 335mph (539km/h). It was wrecked on February 23, 1941, but by then its work as a concept prover was complete. The second example, R2053 was retired in November 1940.

The third and fourth examples (R2054 and R2055) were equipped to initial production standard. RB2054 joined 604 (County of Middlesex) Squadron at Middle Wallop to help speed introduction of the Mk.If to the unit. It was destroyed when it spun in at 'Wallop, 17 days before the first prototype was lost.

The fourth prototype was used for night-fighter trials with the Royal Aircraft Establishment, Farnborough, and the Fighter Interception Unit at Ford. R2055 was used to evaluate an automatic feed system for the awesome four 20mm cannon nose armament. As such it served with the Aircraft Gun Mounting Establishment at Boscombe Down. It was retired there in January 1942.

From the trials with the prototype, it was clear the Beaufighter would be much more than a stop-gap. It was soon to become apparent that this was no interim type, Bristol had created a very versatile and formidable fighter.