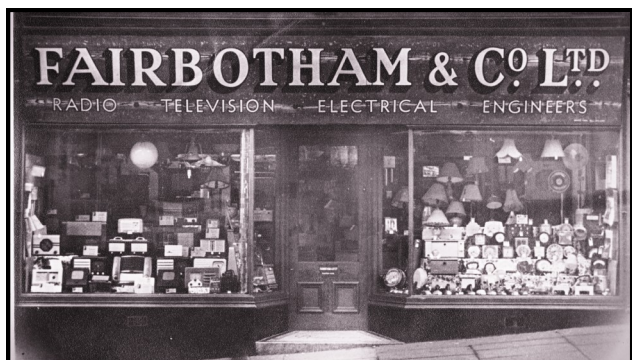


Flightdeck - The AirBand Shop

Part one - Lower Hillgate, Stockport.

July 1965, Dialstone Lane, Secondary Modern School, Stockport. Called to headmaster's office to discuss my further education options. This was a very short meeting, as I told him the "system" can't teach me what I want to learn, i.e. the family business and that my "apprenticeship" was already waiting. So it was, my working career started soon there after.



My father Frank, had started Fairbotham & Co Ltd and opened a shop at 47 Lower Hillgate in Stockport, after being demobbed from the R.A.F in the late 40's, where he'd served as a Radio Operator / Service Engineer and was involved in Radar development at Bomber Command. So I guess that's where my interest in radio and aviation has it's foundation.

By the time I started work, my father had moved the business across the road to the much larger premises of 58-62 Lower Hillgate and it was there, some 20 plus years later that Flightdeck would eventually be "born". We'd always stocked a wide and varied range of portable radios, including such popular brands as Grundig, Roberts, Sony etc and also the "exotic"



which I recall was a huge set with a very long telescopic aerial housed in the carry handle. Whilst this didn't have AirBand, it was certainly influential in generating my interest in "specialist" sets.

Looking back today, a model which caught my eye, or should I say "ear" from which I suspect caught the AirBand "bug", was the Shorrock MkV. This was a modified Decca TP85 radio, that was converted to VHF Air reception by the Shorrock Radio Development company of Blackburn and I have vague recollections of collecting stock, with my father, from Shorrock's workshop.

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As the years passed and of later models released by various manufacturers (the memories of which I recall here, are not given in any chronological order) perhaps the most conspicuous and popular with spotters' (because of it's budget price and pocket size), were the FX-184 and 213 from the Sharp Corporation. These were probably the first truly hand-held sets to hit the market and sold in vast numbers, thanks to their dedicated VHF Air Band which made their performance live up to the "Super Sensitive" logo on the FX-213 model. I'm sure Manchester Airport Spotters of a certain age group, who maybe reading this, will recall local spotter "Radio Roy", who could be seen regularly on the top of the multi-storey car park with a Sharp radio taped to his head, binoculars and note book in hand !

Around the late 70's early 80's, specialist brands of dedicated VHF Airband only and the first scanners started to emerge. Being able to monitor several frequencies within seconds, by scanning pre-set memory channels, provided the listener with much more ATC activity, thereby negating the temptation to go "tune about" in search of transmissions and something to listen to. This feature, was singularly I feel, the catalyst that sparked the huge growth in Airband monitoring that was to come.

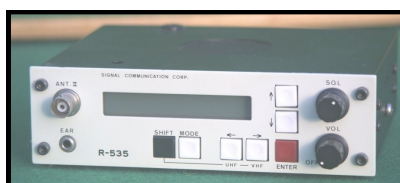
It was around this time, I bought (with my own money) a Regency Digital Flight Scan from Amateur Radio dealers, Lowe Electronics of Matlock. The D.F.S was a desk-top, 16 channel synthesised AirBand scanning receiver from America, the first of its' type on the U.K. Market, real state of the art stuff. This I had running in the shop, connected to a special transducer wedged between the display window and the support for the security shutters. This vibrated the glass (like a loudspeaker cone), allowing people outside looking in, to hear ATC radio traffic. I remember I put a sign up saying something like "you are listening to Air Traffic Controllers talking to aircraft". As a result of my ingenuity, we got orders and Fairbotham & Co Ltd became stockists of numerous sets and accessories from Lowes, without realising I was laying the foundation for what was to come.



The Signal Corporation of Japan was a name that soon became synonymous with high quality and very sensitive (generally) dedicated Airband Receivers. Their first scanner, the R512, was a crystal controlled model. This was a mains / 12volt set along the lines of car radio designs of the day and was supplied with a mounting bracket for "in-vehicle" use. It featured 8 memory channels, each accepting a plug-in crystal to control a receiving frequency, e.g. 119.40mHz, which at the time was allocated to Manchester Approach. Over time, Signal released several dedicated Airband receivers, R517, R528, R537, R550, but two models in particular were to become "The bench mark" for sensitivity, by which others were judged - the R532 and R535. The R535 covered both civil and military airbands, although somewhat bizarrely, coverage stopped 20mHz short, ending at 380mHz.



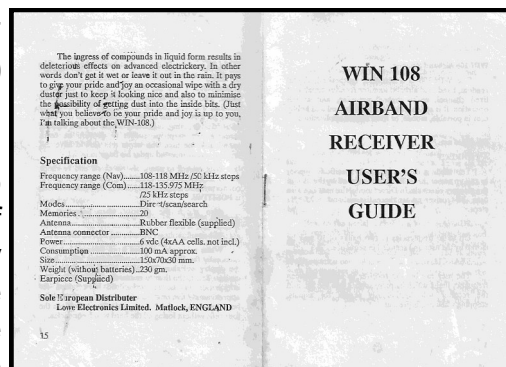
Both models were digitally synthesised, allowing the user to input the exact frequency of their choice and store in a memory. Common practice nowadays, but back then, this was ground breaking technology.



LOWE ELECTRONICS LTD.	
TRIO R820	The ultimate receiver for the professional or advanced listener. £790 inc. VAT. Carriage £4.50.
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SIGNAL R512	Air band Scanner, crystal controlled, 8 channel capability, fitted 5 channels. £138 inc. VAT. Carriage £1.50.
SIGNAL R517	Air band portable, tuneable and 3 fixed channel capability. £45.45. Carriage £1.50.
BELCOM AMR217B	F.M. Scanner, Marine or 2 metres, mains/battery operation. Fitted 8 channels. £120.75. Carriage £1.50.
DAIWA SR8	F.M. Receiver, Marine or 2 metres, tuneable or crystal controlled. £46 inc. VAT. Carriage £1.50.
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The Win108 was the first dedicated VHF AirBand digital hand-held scanner, with 20 memory channels in two banks of 10, selling for £179. I must have sold hundreds of them over the years. Prior to its' U.K. release by Lowe Electronics of Matlock, I'd felt quite honoured (my reputation seemingly having spread to the Far East !) to be approached by the factory in Japan, who offered me the sole



importation rights and sent me a pre-production sample to evaluate. I opted not to, as my company was financially structured for retail, not distribution. I kept hold of my unique example (identifiable outwardly by the aluminium control knobs, which were not used on production models) until a few years ago, when home move down sizing, meant the radio collection had to go.

Meanwhile, whilst these imported sets seemingly dominated the market, the Birmingham based Swinburne Aviation was flying the flag for U.K. manufacturing a niche range of models. Details of these can be found elsewhere on this site. I count myself privileged to have been one of (if not the only) Swinburne retailer, other than themselves. Ron Swinburne was a regular visitor to Hillgate delivering stock to me.



Sony were the only "big brand name" to get involved with AirBand receivers, initially with their TR8640. This was a dedicated receiver of traditional radio technology design, albeit with an unusual sliding cursor for tuning, rather than the more common place rotary knob. It featured a series of movable pre-set markers, which allowed the listener to move the cursor to an exact frequency (in theory), fine tuning was still required however when a transmission was heard. The model though that Sony really "hit the target" with was the Air 7, I'm sure many reading this will be familiar with, about which I have the following anecdote.

As had been the case with the Win 108, whereby the factory got in touch with me, a similar situation arose with the Air 7. At the time Fairbotham & Co Ltd, was an existing Sony dealer and my retailing of AirBand sets was well known to their area representative. He arranged a meeting between the U.K. New Products Manager and myself to discuss the viability of Sony launching the Air 8 (U.S. model) as the Air 7 in the U.K. The Japanese gentleman in question flew to MAN (from LHR) and I went to collect him, the date - 22nd August 1985, British Airtours B737-236 G-BGJL incident had occurred that morning and I was caught up in the ensuing mayhem trying to locate him. The Air 7 went on to be an extremely popular model, due to performance, audio quality, doubled as a "normal" FM radio, ease of use and simple programming. The last point particularly, was to become a thing of the past, as more complex receivers were to be released by specialist manufacturers.



Although the Uniden Bearcat UBC-100 springs to my mind as being the first multiband digital synthesised hand-held, there were others. The Black Jaguar (first with military coverage) and AOR's AR-900 and AR-1000 etc. However, of the early "next generation" receivers, one model really stood out from the rest, the MVT5000. This was first model from a new, then unknown Japanese manufacturer Yupiteru, a brand which for some reason was originally launched in the U.K. as Jupiter II. Yupiteru went on to become synonymous with quality hand held multi-band and AirBand receivers, those particularly notable included VT125, VT225, MVT7000 and the legendary MVT7100. They released others over the years, but these four models were particularly noteworthy for having above market average AirBand sensitivity.

In October 1985 F & Co held an open evening to celebrate refitting of the 58-62 Lower Hillgate premises some 20 years (approx) after moving from 47 Lower Hillgate.. As part of the refit, I had made by the shop fitters a dedicated Airband Monitors display cabinet, topped with an illuminated sign inspired by B.A.'s Concorde then livery. Unfortunately, of all the pictures I took at the time, only one shows part of the cabinet and what was to be Flightdeck's "origins".



Over the ensuing years, the turnover level being generated by my "Aviation corner" continued to grow steadily, reaching a point where it needed more space. So I moved all things "aviation" upstairs and took over what was then our audio visual demonstration lounge. The upward trend continued and after nearly two years of trading from the 1st floor, I took the decision to form a separate company, as by that time sales of aviation related items

had become nearly 25% of Fairbotham & Co's annual business. So Flightdeck Ltd was "born", but continued trading from Hillgate, thus allowing me to assess the viability of the venture as a stand alone company, with a view to an eventual move to somewhere near the airport.



My Concorde trip story: 24th July 1988

My then Shop Manager was amongst the group of winners in a sales promotion competition run by one of our suppliers, the prize being a Concorde Supersonic LHR "round robin" trip. This was an opportunity not to be missed and with help from the suppliers' area rep, I managed to "blag" an extra ticket for myself. There was however one small problem, I would be on holiday in Devon on the day of the flight !

Determined not to pass up this "once in a lifetime" experience, I worked out a plan. As luck would have it, on the day there was an early Plymouth – Gatwick flight, then the Gatwick - Heathrow rail shuttle, but timing was very tight. So after an early start, drove from Torquay to Plymouth Airport, caught the flight, used the inter-terminal Gatwick shuttle and made it time for the LHR rail shuttle, so far so good, but this was not to last. The LHR shuttle got delayed and I remember watching "precious" minutes tick away as the train remained stationary for what felt like an "eternity". Legged it across Heathrow to the B.A. Terminal and made it to Goodwood Travel's "Flights of Fantasy" check in desk, as the last boarding passenger.

Of all the memories I took from the day, two really stood out - the "shove in the back" on the take off roll, heightened by the lack of luggage in the hold and Sunday lunch of roast beef at Mach 2 over The Bay of Biscay !



Passenger Name Paul Botham Mr. A		Not transferable Not refundable	
Date and place of issue 20th 1988 CHARTER SALES GATWICK		Contract number 207 1902/7	
Check in & Report Instructions LONDON HEATHROW TERMINAL 3 DESK 32 ISLAND 2		Baggage allowance (Nil for infants)	
From LONDON	Center BA	Flight 900DC	Date 24 JUL 88
To VOID		Departure time 1155	



Flightdeck - The AirBand Shop

Part two - Wilmslow Road & Finney Lane, Heald Green.

Summer 1990 and some 25 years on since leaving school, I was now about to embark on a new business "journey". Having made what was for me, a truly momentous decision to leave the family business started by my father and the "comfort zone" I'd been used to for a quarter of a century. Whilst my decision to do so was heavily influenced by the growth of the turnover from aviation enthusiast related products, the core business which Fairbotham & Co Ltd had built up a strong local reputation for over five decades, namely supplying, installing and servicing of audio and video equipment, was fast being eroded by competition from numerous A/V retailers opening nearby, including a branch of electrical discount chain Comet, which opened a few hundred yards away. Lower Hillgate was rapidly becoming like Tottenham Court Road in London (where there was a high number of A/V and electrical traders within a small area).



So, 192 Wilmslow Road, Heald Green became Flightdeck's home for the next 9 years (this being the lease term). A major shop refit was undertaken, to get things how I wanted before "we" actually moved in, requiring substantial investment, which I hoped would be recouped over the tenure of the property.

It soon became apparent to me, that the move from Stockport (having sold my share holding to my business partner, who continued trading, but changed the business name to Hillgate HiFi) had been very much the right thing to do. Turnover continued to grow, as did my passion and enthusiasm for all things aviation. My situation was also helped by the fact that I no longer had the affairs of Fairbotham & Co to be concerned about. "Business" worry and stress had affected my father mentally for some years, for which he underwent regular psychotherapy treatment and practiced self hypnosis, something I was also to experience during the latter stages of Flightdeck's "Heald Green" years.

Looking back, did I have any qualms or misgivings about letting go of the business my father had created and built up? Only that of the sentimental variety, but as the saying goes "there's no sentiment in business".



So now my daily work life and a considerable amount of home life, was all about Flightdeck and catering to the ever expanding "plane spotter" and aviation enthusiast market. The core business was still around Air Band receivers in their various forms and associated accessories, but the larger premises meant I could expand our product range into many different facets of aviation interest.



Prior to opening, we held an open night for invited friends, customers and trade representatives, at which I had to carry out a duty I never liked doing, even to this day I still dread it - making a speech in front of people !



Next day, upon arrival at 192 Wilmslow Road to open up for the first day of trading, waiting to greet my wife Susan and myself, was a local chap who had the "honour" of being Flightdeck's first customer at the new premises. His name, Noel Fairhurst (who may have been known to some reading this), Noel went on to be not only our "oldest" customer, but a valued friend to both the business and myself.

Another area of expansion was that of attending more airshows with a sales stand, although with the exception of Woodford, which was always on a Saturday, the number of "doable there and back in day" Sunday shows within reasonable travelling distance, was a limiting factor. To do a show entailed an enormous amount of preparation, hard work and long hours.



A typical show weekend, such as RAF Cosford (pictured) would be - collect a hire van, pack up stock from the shop after closing on a Saturday, load up the ancillary show equipment stored at home consisting of marquee frame work, sheeting and clamps, display cabinet, folding 6' tables, folding display shelves and numerous odds n sods and the not to be forgotten toolbox.

Stupid o'clock early start Sunday to be on site by 7am, as set up would take three of us 2 - 3 hours, even then I would be regularly making "adjustments" during the day. As a crowd puller I used two p.a. loud speakers through which I piped recorded ATC chatter from Chicago O'Hare (October 1988) . This originated from a C90 audio cassette (remember those !) that had been posted to Flightdeck anonymously, and contained some very "entertaining" pilot / controller r/t exchanges that occurred during busy periods of aircraft movements, we sold copies at airshows and in the shop. The success of the Chicago tape spurred the idea for me to make other recordings during visits Stateside and I can still supply it as an MP3 file, should anyone want one. Also during airshows, if the Red Arrows attended, I'd relayed their display r/t - hearing Red One calling or rather shouting "smoke on, go !!" over the p.a.horns always gave me a tingle.

On 13th October 1991, Flightdeck hosted the first Manchester Aviation Collectors fair at the Heald Green Hotel .This was Inspired by me visiting other similar events at Heathrow, Amsterdam, Dublin, Frankfurt etc and getting to know several international traders who would eventually support the MAN fair, flying in from Holland, Germany, France, Switzerland helping to make the Manchester fair a truly international event. The MAN92 fair was memorable as one of Flightdeck's regular customers, helped to arrange a Robinson R22 helicopter be landed in the Heald Green Hotel car park early on the Sunday morning, something I'm sure wouldn't be allowed by ATC today !





Pictured collecting entrance fees Noel Fairhurst, who was Flightdeck's first customer at Wilmslow Road and an unpaid "ambassador" for the company. After two or three fairs at the Heald Green Hotel, a new venue was sought, due to demand from traders / dealers wanting to attend. So we moved to the Lancaster conference suite at the relatively new Terminal 2, but as with any venue, there were pros and cons. This choice was convenient for international dealers flying in, but unloading for others was a tedious trek from a service

entrance and involving a lift ride to get to the suite. "We" were eventually excluded from holding any further fairs at the airport by management, a decision which I later found out had been influenced by a "third" party, who shall remain nameless.

The Valley Lodge Hotel (as it was then known) was the final venue used (twice) and had probably the best display area in terms of space for traders and the easiest for loading/unloading, but financially it was the most expensive room to hire.

During the "Wilmslow Road" years, little changed fundamentally regarding scanner development, other than memory capacity increased and sets became more complex to operate, by virtue of the fact that keys had secondary functions and menu driven options were starting to appear. However, a couple of 'non radio' events did happen that are worthy of documenting here, one good and the other not so. Taking the latter first, this was what appeared and felt like, an armed robbery, which took place during normal opening hours. I was in the back at my desk, leaving sales assistant Chris at the counter, an individual entered who suddenly exclaimed he was going to throw up. I immediately ventured round the dividing screen to be confronted by a figure holding something 'weapon like' under a newspaper. Cash was taken from the till and a couple of scanners. Police attended soon after, but no one was ever caught of course. One thing that I do remember about that day, was that shortly after the assailant had fled, I had a very unsympathetic customer to deal on the phone, having explained what I had just experienced said "well that's nothing to do with me" !

The good event, was Flightdeck being asked by a TV production company to help in the making of a short film - "Plane Spotting", inspired by the 1996 movie Train Spotting, fortunately this was never aired.

The move to Finney Lane, marked the change of name from Flightdeck The Airband Shop to Flightdeck Aviation Emporium, the idea being to reflect a greater range of aviation products. The only downside of moving to Finney Lane was the fact that the premises were on the first floor rather than street level, as at the time it was the only retail space available within budget.

One feature / trend that was to become the biggest "thing" for plane spotters since scanners hit the shelves, was the birth of Virtual Radar, although this came about thanks to A.C.A.R.S. This digital communication system enabled airlines to send and receive messages to / from a specific aircraft via a data burst transmitted on several VHF Airband frequencies.

This led to a software / hardware package being developed and launched by Lowe Electronics of Matlock, Airmaster 2000. Comprising of a dongle which linked a scanner to a computer and via the accompanying soft-

FLIGHTDECK

AVIATION EMPORIUM CATALOGUE

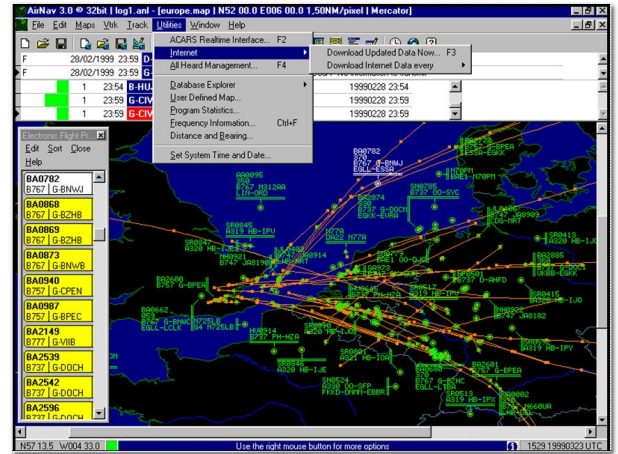


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ware program, Airmaster decoded the data burst into a “legible” text messages. Typically, these would contain flight related information i.e. weather, waypoint routing details, aircraft registration, eta's etc. Sometimes messages would contain GPS coordinates and it was from these that, in conjunction with a subsequent piece of software, the aircraft's position was plotted on a basic world map outline and so the dawn of Virtual Radar had arrived.

That program was called AirNav.

AirNav was developed and marketed by Andre Brandao of Portugal and I'm proud to say that Flightdeck was one of the few, if not the only UK retail outlet to sell this innovative product. This being the fore runner of the AirNav RadarBox.



Eventually as ATC technology evolved, aircraft began using Automatic Dependent Surveillance -Broadcast or ADS-B equipment and whilst this was post Flightdeck, coming during my AirBand-OnLine era, I feel it's significance warrants editorial space in this narrative.

Put simply, ADS-B is a surveillance technology in which an aircraft determines its position via satellite navigation or other sensors and periodically broadcasts it, enabling it to be tracked. This data is transmitted by the a/c on 1090mHz requiring a special receiver and aerial set up.

The first stand alone receiver to be marketed for the “enthusiast” was the SBS-1 by Kinetic Avionic, which was supplied with BaseStation computer software program. Once installed and the SBS-1 connected to a pc, a whole new world of aircraft spotting opened up, not through a pair of binoculars or a telescope but a computer monitor or laptop screen showing a “virtual ATC radar display”. In my opinion, this was as much of a “game changer” for us av-geeks as the introduction of scanning receivers. Now, not only could we hear a pilot's atc broadcasts, but also see his aircraft's position on-screen with all relevant spotting data i.e. Airline, aircraft type, registration and more.

Whilst Kinetic's SBS-1 was the first ADS-B receiver, personally, I always preferred AirNav's RadarBox with it's associated software, which came along some time later in direct competition to the SBS-1, I just found it more user friendly with a superior interface and still use it 24/7 today, nearly two decades on.

Returning to Finney Lane, one product area which saw significant sales growth there was that of aircraft display models. As well as the established smaller scales ie 1:600, 1:500, it was around this time that the meteoric growth in diecast models started to “take off” and even back then choosing what to stock was a headache, something I wouldn't relish having to do today with the dozens of new releases every month. “Hats off” to the likes of Aviation Retail Direct and Aircraft Model Supplies, in keeping abreast with the relentless amount of product out there.



The extra room we had, meant I could also stock larger “travel agent” models, mainly 1:100, although 1:72 and 1:50 crept in occasionally. Also, I was fortunate enough to acquire a few ex Woodford factory models, which were hung from the ceiling, notably a 1:50 Dan Air 146 and 1:25 L.I.A.T. HS-748.

Sadly though, Flightdeck's tenure of 252a Finney Lane was to be much shorter than I'd originally planned and various factors quickly combined to pressure me into making the sad decision to "call it a day". Of major influence was the fact that turnover had now levelled off, rather than the continuing year-on-year growth as happened with Wilmslow Road. I concluded that this was in some part due to changes in society, youngsters becoming more and more engrossed with monitor screens, rather than external activities eg plane and train spotting, as we did "back in the day". But also the rise of Internet shopping had resulted in more and more phone calls asking would I price match, particularly on scanners. This I'm afraid went against the grain for me, I was very much "old school" when it came to retailing. I had learnt from my father, that the art of selling was not just about a box, but also customer service i.e. product explanation and usage and aftercare were important.

The decline in turnover became such a major worry for me (running your own business doesn't stop when you lock the store, it stays "with you" 24/7) that it triggered a serious mental health problem, for which I sought counselling and help from the same the practitioner who had helped my father. This, coupled with the unfaltering support of my wife Susan, saw me through what was a very dark period psychologically in my life.

The final "straw" for me to call time on Flightdeck, came from experiencing an attempted mugging as I approached my car parked at the rear of the premises after closing one summers evening in 2002. Fortunately my cry for help was heard by staff at the takeaway, located below the first floor office space of 252A, with whom we shared the parking area and the assailant fled empty handed when they appeared.

On Saturday 28th September 2002, two days before my 53rd birthday, I got home and announced to my wife "that was it, I've had enough and have closed Flightdeck for the last time".

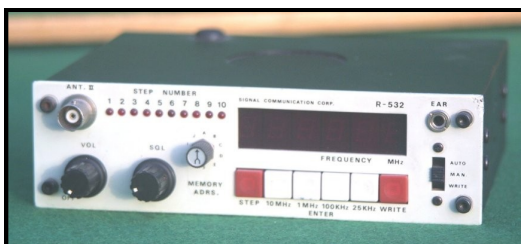
So the Flightdeck era of my life came to an end and whilst I did resume trading for a short time as AirBand-OnLine, motivation to keep a retail presence in this niche market was short lived.



First Woodford Airshow
was all a bit "heath robinson"



Piccadilly Radio did a live broadcast from
Flightdeck during the Hillgate era.



The "classic" Signal R532 scanner



Barton Airshow late 80's
Starting to get organised with show equipment,
display cabinet, tables etc