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The Day the Avro Arrow Died

It's been 50 years since Black Friday, the day the Avro Arrow was cancelled – and economic disaster spread like wildfire through the hills.

March 21, 2009 | [Jeff Rollings \(https://www.inthehills.ca/author/jeff-rollings/\)](https://www.inthehills.ca/author/jeff-rollings/) | [Heritage \(https://www.inthehills.ca/category/heritage/\)](https://www.inthehills.ca/category/heritage/)

The Avro Arrow brought my family to Dufferin. Well, not literally, but in the late 1950s both my parents and an uncle had good jobs in Malton, working for A.V. Roe Canada on the design and manufacture of what is now the mythical CF-105 Arrow interceptor aircraft.

Though neither of my parents completed high school, they were both earning fairly handsome incomes. They decided to move out of Brampton and bought a 140-acre farm along the banks of the Grand River in Amaranth. The farmhouse on the property had previously burned down, so they set about making plans to build a new home.



(https://www.inthehills.ca/wp-content/uploads/2009/03/avroArrow_mom1958_59.jpg).

The writer's mother, Peggy Rollings, making blueprints in the Avro Arrow engineering department, 1958.

My mom worked as an assistant in the Avro engineering department, and as a result she knew some of the test pilots. As she and dad visited the farm one day in the fall of 1958, they were buzzed by a low-flying Arrow – one of only five that ever flew – the pilot thinking it very funny that he managed to scare my mother senseless.

On February 20, 1959, only weeks after taking ownership of the farm and with the house not yet started, the Diefenbaker government in Ottawa abruptly cancelled the Arrow project. At four in the afternoon a blunt announcement came over loudspeakers at the Avro plant. Workers were to return their tools, remove all their personal belongings, and not expect to come back. My parents were both instantly unemployed.

The day of the cancellation became known as Black Friday, and it's easy to see why. The project employed more than 47,000 people, either at Avro itself, its sister plant Orenda Engines, or among its thirty major suppliers and 650 sub-contractors. Many of those employees lived in Peel, Dufferin and the surrounding region. It was estimated at the time that a quarter of Brampton's entire work force was employed in some way by Avro.

As workers headed home to shocked families who had heard the news on the radio, the region itself was thrown into economic chaos. Fat pay cheques, totalling in the order of three million dollars a week, had been flowing into the local economy for years. Brampton, with a 1959 population of about 14,500, was in

the midst of unprecedented expansion, as were all areas within commutable distance of Avro's Malton plant.



(https://www.inthehills.ca/wp-content/uploads/2009/03/avroArrow_Allengames77.jpg).

The Allengame brothers of Mono Road were all employed at AVRO's gas turbine division, later Orenda Engines. Bert, left, 25, just completing the technician's course; Stan, centre, 32, engine fitter sub foreman; Tom, 30, development blade shop. Photo from the AVRO publication Jet Age, 1952. Courtesy Region of Peel Archives / A . V. Roe Collection.

Diane Allengame, curator of the [Peel Heritage Complex](http://www.peelregion.ca/heritage/) (<http://www.peelregion.ca/heritage/>), also grew up with the Arrow as part of her family lore. Her father Tom and two uncles – Bert and Stan – were employed there. The Peel Heritage Complex maintains an ongoing exhibit dedicated to the [Arrow](http://www.peelregion.ca/news/archiveitem.asp?year=2009&month=1&day=18&file=2009118a.xml) (<http://www.peelregion.ca/news/archiveitem.asp?year=2009&month=1&day=18&file=2009118a.xml>), and pieces of it are drawn from Diane's own family archives. At this fifty-year anniversary of the cancellation, she can't help but see similarities with current-day economic concerns: "People were buying homes, cottages, cars. Then it all crashed around them. Sound familiar?"

Severance packages equal to one week's pay were provided, as was a meagre form of unemployment insurance, but the fact remained that there was a vast idle work-force. In the weeks following the cancellation, with desperation setting in, the Brampton Conservator carried many classified ads of the sort that said: "Ex-Avro worker. Will do anything."

The Orangeville Banner reported that "approximately 3,000 people surrounding Orangeville have been affected by the layoffs." A committee of Orangeville-area ex-Avro workers was formed, with the aim of addressing people's housing and employment needs.

Two weeks after the cancellation, in the March 5th Orangeville Banner, real estate agent R. Frank Hendry bought a large advertisement as an "Open Letter to Discharged A.V. Roe Employees." In a long and heartfelt discourse, he acknowledged that his business relied on getting listings, but went on to plead "don't list your property out of desperation," warning that there were "ruthless bargain hunters" working in the area, trying to take advantage of people's predicament.

"Perhaps the most difficult adjustment to be made by the unemployed aircraft workers involves the fact that they were living in what proved to be a false economy."

From a Brampton Conservator editorial, 1959

The banks also got involved, holding public meetings for all the people unable to pay their mortgages. In the case of my parents, my grandfather came to the rescue, putting up the princely sum of \$10,000, and thus eliminating the farm mortgage altogether.

A mass exodus from the region began, as former Avro employees left to pursue other work.



(https://www.inthehills.ca/wp-content/uploads/2009/03/avroArrow_rollout92light.jpg)

October 4, 1957, Malton : 12,000 people gathered to witness the first Arrow roll out of its production bay. Government officials, AVRO executives and military personnel sat on an elevated dais; the majority of the crowd on the tarmac was composed of AVRO and

Orenda workers and their families. Rumblings about the enormous cost of the project had already begun in the press, but for the men and women working in Malton, it was a day of unparalleled pride and optimism. Courtesy West Parry Sound District Museum.

Many of the upper echelon were offered opportunities at competing firms. In what became known as the "Brain Drain," most left for the United States, including more than thirty who became part of the NASA space program. The Brain Drain was a highly contentious political issue for years after the cancellation.

For the average worker on the floor, however, there was no similar demand. People were forced to take any job they could get in order to survive. Anne Allengame, Diane's mother, remembers being better off than some. "We always saved and paid cash for things, so we didn't feel the pinch too bad." Still, her husband Tom had to hustle: "A group of men in Caledon East got together. Every morning they'd set off in the car looking for work. Any kind of work."

Over the next year and a half, Tom held three different jobs, all of them menial labour. "There was a place we called the 'sweat shop' in Port Credit," Anne recalls. "Another group of men got together and started a boat-building business. They never went back to Orenda. Most of us just managed with what we had. A lot of the workers were farmers as well. I recall someone owed Tom money. You called in all your reserves, you know? You had to."

"We were in shock. I could see it in their eyes – many of the boys had got themselves into debt – it really got to me. I tried to get them all jobs."

Burt Scott, Avro Test Engineer, Memoir, Peel Archives

For those that moved away, families were uprooted too. My cousin Roxy Rollings, who at the time was living in the village of Churchville, near Brampton, recalls "I was just a young kid. I remember we would all run outside when we heard the Arrow coming, to hear the sonic boom. Then after the shutdown, it seemed like all my friends were leaving."

Eighty-six year old George Scott of Erin worked on experimental projects at Avro. He says when the shutdown announcement was made, "I was standing beside one of the planes. People's hearts fell out. I'm sure there was some crying. It wasn't exactly a surprise though. There had been rumours for months."

George points out that many of the people who moved away after the cancellation were newcomers to begin with. "People with aircraft experience from World War II had been coming from England, all over," he says. "They had moved in throughout the area."

After Black Friday, George says, "Rumours spread that aircraft plants in the U.S. were hiring. Carloads of men were heading off to Georgia, California, looking for work. They'd get hired on somewhere, and houses weren't selling, so they were left empty. I know people who just walked away from their homes and mortgages. We never heard from them again."

Ex-Avro-Orenda Employment Wanted

AVRO MEN

PLANNER, tool designer or machinist requires employment. Phone GL.1-3095

TOOL and gauge maker, seeks position in vicinity of Toronto, employed last seven years as tool inspector at Orenda Engines. Will consider any job allied to above qualifications. Phone GL.1-1469

WORK wanted, sheet metal layout, 10 years experience; also sales experience, 1/2-ton panel truck available. Former A. V. Roe employee, 10 years. Apply W. Brown, Box 213, Brampton.

SECURITY Guard with four years experience, would prefer job in same line. Please. Phone Butler 6-4190.

AVRO worker wants work in shoe factory on clicker or dyer machine, 17 years experience. Phone GL.1-4619

FORMER Avro worker wants work in factory as do-all saw operator, 10 years experience. Phone GL.1-4619

ILLUSTRATOR, technical or commercial, fully experienced black and white or color, previous experience in script and copy writing, also radio announcing. Apply 19 Alphonse Cres., Streetsville, Mr. Woolhouse.

EX-employee of A. V. Roe, experienced in Machine Shop, 9 1/2 years; also experienced truck driver five years. Phone BU.6-2376

P.ENG (Mech) desires employment in a Brampton industry, one year on construction costs and eight years airframe design with A. V. Roe. Good worker, adaptable, married, age 32. Any reasonable offer considered. GL.1-5382.

EX A. V. Roe worker wishes interior or exterior painting in homes, barns, etc. GL.1-6266.

EX A. V. Roe employee with five years experience in millwright work, and 4 1/2 years experience in electrical work. GL.1-4432.

FORMER A. V. Roe worker, experienced in sheet metal work, also painting, plastering, carpenter work or any property repair. GL.1-3760 or GL.1-0366.

EX Orenda employee, 20 years experience on automotive and aircraft engines, Class "A" license and tools. Phone GL.1-3413.

SPECIALIST Universal Miller, also General Machinist, experienced machine shop foreman with planning and estimating ability. Permanent.

FORMER A. V. Roe employee, experienced as punch press operator and truck driving, or any class of work. Phone GL.1-1922.

DESIGN draftsman, ex-Orenda employee experienced in sheet metal layout and losing, requires position. GL.1-6651.

FORMER Avro general machine shop and fitting experience, willing to try anything; own automobile. Phone GL.1-9189.

FORMER Avro worker, eight years, unskilled, would like work of any kind, chauffeur's license. Phone GL.1-5449.

FORMER Avro employee, 7 1/2 years tool and die making, started trade as apprentice to nautical and scientific instrument making in England, age 63 years young. GL.1-3363.

EX Avro assembler, age 26, former experience stock chaser and truck driver. Consider anything. Phone GL.1-1389.

FORMER Avro aircraft assembler for over six years, will try anything, have chauffeurs permit, also some experience farm and garden machinery. Phone Huttonville 129-R13.

DRAFTSMAN. Ex Avro, 16 years experience on aircraft, bus and truck. Phone Vic 783-W3.

30 years general office experience, scheduling, time sheets, wages sheets, procedures, planning. Former Orenda employee. Suit position where experience to mutual advantage. Phone Huttonville 96.

CUSTOMS man desires position experienced in custom, clearance, drawbacks, rating. Former A. V. Roe employee.—Phone TR.7-4102 Georgetown.

H.N.C. (mechanical engineer). Grammar School education, senior matric. 2 1/2 years aircraft stressing, four years indentured Foundry Apprenticeship and two years estimating. Seeking employment due to Avro lay-off. Phone GL.1-2313.

Ex - Orenda machinist requires work, would accept any kind of work with machines or tool-making. Seven years with Orenda, 30 years experience England. Phone GL.1-3035.

FORMER A. V. Roe worker, 25 years experience, Universal and Precision grinder in tool-room and production. Radial drill experience. Phone BU.6-2825.

GOOD handyman with 36 years experience in high class English cabinet-making and woodwork. 6 1/2 years employment with A. V. Roe in Rivetting

(<https://www.inthehills.ca/wp->

<p>Please phone GL.1-2111.</p> <p>FORMER Avro aircraft assembler requires steady position. Previous experience, service stations, long-distance truck driving, and office bookkeeping. Phone Huttonville 161-J.</p> <p>FORMER A. V. Roe employee flight service electrician and a-c radio mechanic. Has had radio and electronics training. Six years experience in domestic radio and appliance servicing. GL.1-4339.</p> <p>TRUCKING. Willing to do odd jobs in town of any kind. Have</p>	<p>Woodwork and Tube testing. F. J. Hutchings, 29 Mercer Dr., Brampton. GL.1-6336.</p> <p>FORMER A. V. Roe worker requires position, experienced aircraft electrician. Formerly electrical inspector. Phone GL.1-5812.</p> <p>AVRO WOMEN</p> <p>EXPERIENCED dictaphone typist, 60 w.p.m. requires full-time employment. Formerly in accounts department. Phone—GL.1-1257.</p>
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content/uploads/2009/03/avroArrow_classifieds.jpg) An order was issued in April, 1959, for the destruction of everything associated with the Arrow: the built and partially built planes, the assembly line, drawings, films, photographs – anything to indicate the Arrow had ever existed. George, who was kept on at Avro for about a year after the cancellation (“We were the chosen few.”) bore witness as the now infamous destruction was carried out.

“I had an office on the second floor overlooking the main hanger. From this debatable advantage spot I could see the Arrows being cut up by acetylene torches.”

Wally Walsh, Avro Supervisor, Memoir, Peel Archives

“They cut the planes up in sections,” he says. “The wings, the nose, the mid-section and the tail.” Then they broke them down further with hand tools, offering George a chance to take part. “As I walked by, the wreckers would say ‘Take an axe George.’ I’d put my head in my hands and say ‘I can’t.’”

Ultimately, no one ever took responsibility for the order to destroy all traces of the Arrow. Many insist it was simply standard practice after the cancellation of a defence contract. The federal government, including Diefenbaker himself, denied that any such order had ever been made. Some speculated that Crawford Gordon, president of A.V. Roe Canada, secretly ordered the destruction out of spite at the cancellation. Gordon was fired not long after and died of liver failure from alcoholism in 1967, having lost a three-million-dollar fortune.

A.V. Roe Canada itself ceased to exist in 1962. The only part of the company to survive was the much reduced Orenda Engine division, renamed Orenda Aerospace, and later Magellan Repair, Overhaul & Industrial.

In the years that followed, my parents survived the crash of the Arrow. Over the summer of 1959, they built a Beaver Lumber kit house themselves, though it was years before it had indoor plumbing. My mother spent the next decade as a full-time farmer – a fairly unconventional career for women at the time – but she had little choice. My father eventually got “called back” to a job at Orenda Engines, where he remained for nearly a decade. Diane Allengame’s father, Tom, and my Uncle Ed were also called back, and both remained at Orenda, commuting to work together, until their retirement in the 1980s.

"The collapse of the Malton empire can never be minimized, but its epitaph must surely include the recognition that for better or worse it left its mark on the growth and development of Peel County. There can be no turning back now."
From a Brampton Conservator editorial, 1959

Like Crawford Gordon, my parents' time spent working on the Arrow turned out to be the halcyon days of their working lives. There was other employment, of course, but the Arrow meant much more than a pay cheque. Never again did they get up in the morning feeling they were on the edge of something new, contributing to something so important. Anne Allengame says it was the same for Tom: "He became a tool-and-dye maker while working on the Arrow, and afterward, he never did get back to that. He was very glad to have been recalled, though, and I never heard him complain." His daughter Diane is more concise: "After that, it was just a job."

Perhaps George Scott says it best. Were his years at Avro the highlight of his career? "Oh yes. I was a nothing when I went there. But they valued our input. I felt like a hero all the time."

The real crime of the Avro Arrow cancellation lies not in the economic calamity it unleashed, nasty though that was. The lasting tragedy is that confidence and hope for the future were also demolished for so many of our residents on that Black Friday in 1959 – taken apart, like so many Arrows in a hangar.

While the money has been long forgotten, that sadness lingers still.

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Avro Weekly Payroll

What the "Produce for Peace" proposal could mean to Ontario in higher buying power can be seen in the following breakdown of the Avro payroll.

	RESIDENT BREADWINNERS	PURCHASING POWER WEEKLY	YEARLY
Metro Toronto	7,847	\$ 627,760	\$ 32,643,520
Brampton	1,169	93,520	4,863,040
Weston	762	60,960	3,169,920
Georgetown	644	51,520	2,679,040
Streetsville	298	23,840	1,239,680
Port Credit	274	21,920	1,139,840
Milton	256	20,480	1,064,960
Acton	242	19,360	1,006,720
Bolton	233	18,640	969,280
Orangeville	146	11,680	607,360
Newmarket	138	11,040	574,080
Caledon East	125	10,000	520,000
Etobicoke Township	2,506	200,480	10,424,960
Chinguacousy Township	1,209	96,720	5,029,440
Albion Township	369	29,520	1,535,040
Caledon Township	292	23,360	1,214,720
Peel County	3,402	272,160	14,152,320
Halton County	1,509	120,720	6,277,440

(https://www.inthehills.ca/wp-content/uploads/2009/03/Avro_Payroll.jpg).

About the Author [More by Jeff Rollings \(https://www.inthehills.ca/author/jeff-rollings/\)](https://www.inthehills.ca/author/jeff-rollings/)

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Flight Path of the Arrow

1951

Crawford Gordon, a long-time crony of federal Liberal cabinet minister C.D. Howe, is appointed president and general manager of A.V. Roe Canada.

1952-1955

Howe gives a green light for A.V. Roe (or Avro) to begin design studies and production of the CF-105 Arrow.

1957

John Diefenbaker's Progressive Conservatives replace the St. Laurent Liberals in Ottawa. The Conservatives take a dim view of project cost over-runs and delays. There is also debate as to the future of defence aircraft in an age of missiles. Crawford Gordon clashes repeatedly with government officials as he attempts to manoeuvre the plane to completion.

1958

At the peak of production, 15,000 people are employed directly by the Avro plant, and its sister plant Orenda Engines, in Malton. The project also involves thirty major suppliers, and 650 sub-contracting concerns.

25 March 1958

The Arrow takes her maiden flight. During the rest of 1958, the five completed planes make 57 test flights, totaling 61 hours in the air. Departing from Malton, they could often be seen thundering over the hills of Headwaters.

24 September 1958

Diefenbaker government limits the scope of the project and announces that a further review will be undertaken in six months.

16 November 1958

An Arrow crashes on landing at Malton. No one is hurt, but the plane's landing gear suffers extensive damage.

20 February 1959

black friday – morning

11 a.m. – A month before the review is scheduled, a surprise announcement is made in the House of Commons in Ottawa that the Arrow has been cancelled. A stunned silence descends on parliament, though both the Liberals and the CCF Party officially support the move. Phones begin ringing at the Avro plant as wives hear the news on the radio.

20 February 1959

black friday – aft

Crawford Gordon gambles that the government will be forced to reinstate the project when the sheer extent of unemployment created by cancellation becomes known. At 4 p.m., an announcement is made over the Avro plant loudspeakers. Virtually everyone is out of a job.

20 February 1959

black friday – eve

Diefenbaker goes on national television to explain his decision.

23 February 1959

The following Monday, approximately 17 per cent of the workforce is called back, to work on other projects.

April 1959

Avro's Fred Smye receives a call from the Department of Defence issuing an order for everything associated with the Arrow to be destroyed. Smye complies, but later calls it "the worst mistake I ever made in my life." Five Arrows that had flown, six more that were almost complete, even the assembly line itself are cut up using acetylene torches, and hauled away by a Hamilton scrap dealer. The Arrows are eventually turned into pots and pans. No one ever takes responsibility for issuing the order, though some argue it was simply standard procedure after cancellation of a defence contract.

20 February 1962

On the third anniversary of Black Friday, NASA puts John Glenn into orbit in a Mercury capsule. After leaving Avro, chief of design Jim Chamberlain went on to be a key Mercury designer – one of 33 Avro engineers and scientists who were quickly recruited to work on the Mercury, Gemini and Apollo programs. The overall exodus of talent to U.S. firms became known as the "Brain Drain."

Spring 1962

Avro Canada ceases to exist.

26 January 1967

Crawford Gordon dies in New York City of liver failure and alcoholism. Though he once drew a salary bigger than the president of the United States, he was fired after the cancellation, squandered a fortune of three million dollars, and died destitute.

1970s-1990s

Conspiracy theories abound, as do rumours that one complete Arrow escaped destruction. A man makes a death-bed pronouncement that he drove a truck with an Arrow aboard. An OPP officer claims he was assigned to close Airport Road around the Avro plant for four hours in the middle of the night, with no explanation why. Even seasoned reporter June Callwood, herself a pilot who lived near Malton, claimed to have heard the distinctive sound of an Arrow taking off one night after they were all to have been destroyed. Upon investigating the matter with Avro staff, she claimed to have received coy answers. Though the rumours persist, no surviving Arrow has ever been found.

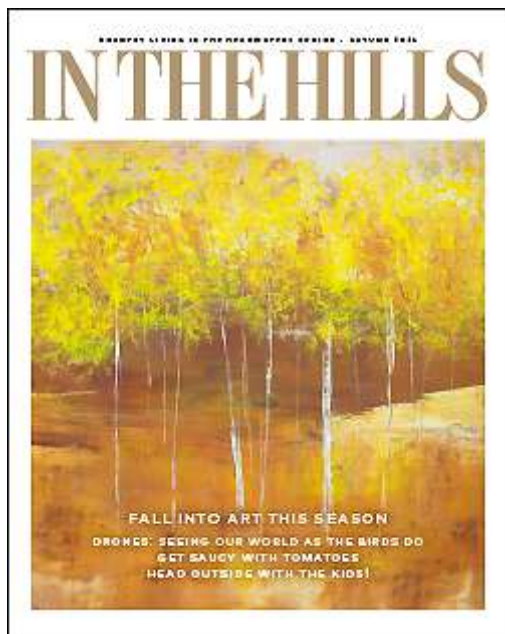
2003-2004

Avro's Malton hangars, purchased by Boeing, are demolished.

Present

Fewer and fewer Avro employees remain alive. First-hand accounts of what is possibly the single biggest event in the region's history disappear along with them.

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