During mid-2016 it was debated within the Engineering Workshop at HMP Hull, the possibility of manufacturing a product that would celebrate learner’s skills and talents and be linked to Hull’s future 2017 City of Culture celebrations. Notions were argued regarding building a replica of a monument within the city, perhaps relating to one of Hull’s manufacturing industries or to an icon associated with this great city. It was decided that an attempt to construct a half size model of Amy Johnson’s Gipsy Moth, named “Jason”, the Head of Learning and Skills was notified and he said that if we were to make a half size replica, then we may as well make a full size. Consequently, the City of Culture project was born and would combine the design and manufacture of a full size DeHavilland Gipsy Moth aircraft, as flown by Hull girl, Amy Johnson on her voyage to Australia.

To get an idea of the scale of the project, drawing specifications were sought, however the rights to these are owned by B.Ae Systems and DeHavilland and they would not release any information, as we did not have an original Gipsy Moth to refurbish. Therefore, we had to find differing sources of information from various locations in an attempt to create the best replica as possible. Drawings were obtained from America, we acquired more information by visiting Coventry Airport to photograph a Gipsy Moth that was currently being repaired and speak to people restoring it. B.Ae Systems were contacted for their advice and experience on how the best way to manufacture certain components. From that visit, two experienced B.Ae Systems employees attended the prison workshop to demonstrate to the leaners differing manufacturing techniques, as we wanted to produce as near to the original as possible.

A manufacturing team was assembled from the more forward-thinking Novus trained learners which were collated from previous cohorts. Individuals were selected based on their ability, attitude and engineering experience, with an emphasis on generating excellent communication and team working skills. Learners would develop the ethos of working towards completing the long term project, both on time and to the correct quality standards. Hopefully this would enhance their current skills and develop new skills aiding their personal development, so raising their opportunities of gaining employment upon release.

During the next six months the manufacturing overcame various obstacles, as no one involved had previously produced anything of this scale or had the manufacturing experience of the differing techniques that were used. The workshop even opened on training days to keep the momentum and enthusiasm, overall a great deal of learning and pleasure was accomplished as the project progressed, which became an immense learning curve for all concerned as constant amendments were made during production. External contractors of differing skills were used who all voiced their opinions and views concerning the correct manufacture.

As the final product was to be suspended in Hull’s Railway Interchange the guidelines for the materials and manufacture were very stringent, as the structural engineer’s advice and processes were followed. This absolutely brilliant replica aircraft had been produced with initially very limited learner knowledge and experience and the minimal of quality hand tools. Although, the workshop is designed to be a realistic and an enjoyable experience, on this occasion it exceeded all expectations and produced not just an excellent product, but something that will be appreciated and admired by people around the world for a long time.

Whilst the aircraft was installed in the station during the night it was broadcast live on television, the next day’s unveiling was also broadcast live on local radio with additional coverage on local and national television and was extremely popular on social media with thousands of positive comments. The whole media involvement gave Novus and the Prison Service worthy recognition relating to what can be achieved with prisoners and their abilities if it is channelled in the correct way.

The whole manufacturing experience gave learners, together with Sarah and myself a colossal sense of pride and satisfaction, this was endorsed by individuals at very high levels in all differing walks of life. Their feedback and comments gave everyone an immense lift and a real feeling of genuine success in producing something exceptionally special.