

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - September 2012

Berkshire's Lady Fliers

The September meeting of the Wargrave Local History Society was an illustrated presentation by Geoff and Val Beckett.

Geoff recounted the history - which was punctuated by contemporary quotes about the fliers read by Val - from Balloons to Spitfires.

The first balloon built for flight was that made in 1783 by the Montgolfier Brothers in France. Although the hot air would lift the balloon into the air, it did not actually 'fly'. The first balloon to do that was made just a fortnight later, by Jacques Charles - with a hydrogen filled balloon on December 1st 1783 - also in France. The next major development was by an Englishman, Charles Green, who realised that coal gas would be much safer to use than hydrogen. His first ascent was on July 19th 1821, in celebration of the Coronation of George IV. The hot air balloon was then 're-invented' by a Berkshire man - the Revd John Bacon - (Vicar of Cold Ash) in 1902. Already an experienced balloonist, he used a petrol burner to give the 'lift' required - although he did not live long enough to see it fully developed. It was only in the 1970s that the modern type of propane gas burner came into use for hot air balloons.

After Charles Green's 1821 flight, the Coronation of William IV in 1831 was marked in a similar way at Windsor by a Mr and Mrs Graham. For a similar event for the State Entry of Queen Victoria in 1837, however, rain had made the balloon envelope wet, and therefore heavier than usual, so only Mrs Graham was able to ascend. This - her 35th solo flight - landed at Perry Oaks farm, now the middle of the present Heathrow Airport!

Revd Bacon's daughter, Gertrude, also became a balloonist. On one occasion, having left Newbury, they became concerned that they could hear the sound of the sea, so descended rapidly - landing just clear of the Bristol Channel. A photograph of John and Gertrude showed the effect of the barbed wire they encountered on his trousers!! Another of the early Berkshire lady fliers was Violet Kavanagh, who flew from Maidenhead - where she lived. She made over 300 balloon flights, and went on to become one of the first women to fly an aircraft. Then, from Wokingham, came Winifred Spooner. She was a well known flier before Amy Johnson, having gained her licence in 1927 (only the 16th woman to qualify for one). She set up an 'air taxi' business, and was one of the founder members - in 1928 - of the Berks, Bucks and Oxon Flying Club, and was considered a better pilot and navigator than Amy. Winifred was elected to the Guild of Air Pilots and Navigators in 1930 - the same year as she also received the Freedom of Wokingham for her gallantry in saving another after an air crash at sea. Her aim had been to 'show that a woman could be every bit as good a pilot as a man'. Sadly, she died in 1933, as the result of influenza.

Winifred had flown in the Kings Cup Air Race - flying a Southern Martlet aeroplane. This had been designed by Fred Miles - an entrepreneur who had left school at 13 to start his first business. Like many at the time, he took a '5 bob flight', and from that knew he wanted to be involved with aviation, and in particular to design aircraft. Aged about 22, Fred met Cecil Pashley, and they set up Southern Aviation - the Martlet being their most successful design, and bought what became Shoreham Airport. One of the members of the flying club they set up there was Maxine Freeman-Thomas - known as Blossom - husband of Viscount Ratondone. She soon fell in love with her flying instructor - Fred. At the time, to be involved in a divorce for people of Fred's background was uncommon. Fred moved to South Africa, taking one

little bi-plane with him. But Blossom's effect on Fred was such that he sold his plane for the fare home, and then set up an office with her at Sevenoaks. They designed the Satyr, which they had built for them near Bristol, and on his way back to Shoreham one day, Fred dropped in to Woodley Airfield, to see Chales Powis. Soon after, Fred and Blossom moved to a caravan at Woodley. Blossom went on to become the 'mother of the company' (Miles Aircraft) - although she probably did not pilot a plane much (if at all) having lost the sight of one eye in an accident some years previously. She did, however, oversee the work to design and make the Sparrowhawk for Fred to use in the Kings Cup in 1935. Miles aircraft came 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 5th that year!

Amongst the ladies who learnt to fly at Woodley were Pauline Gower and Dorothy Spicer - both daughters of wealthy MPs. They were both amongst the 9 lady fliers in a race to mark the opening of the Woodley Aero Club - others including Amy Johnson and Winifred Spooner (who had the fastest lap time, but also the highest handicap).

Pauline became the head of the women's section of the Air Transport Auxiliary in 1939, and amongst the pilots she recruited was Joan Hughes - who had first flown an aircraft aged 15 (although a minimum age of 16 applied to get a licence!). Although initially the ladies were only supposed to fly Tiger Moths, they eventually came to fly all types of aircraft - including the heaviest of the bombers - to deliver them from factories to RAF squadrons or maintenance bases. Lettice Curtis was another local flier - generally accepted as 'the best' ATA pilot - male or female. The variety of work they undertook is apparent from just 1 day in Lettice's log book - an Anson from White Waltham to Brooklands, a Wellington from there to Little Rissington, a Spitfire from there to Wales, and then a Mosquito to Ford (in Sussex). An hour's wait whilst a Mustang was prepared was the only break in the day, before she took that (a type never flown before) to Lichfield, picking up an Anson to go to Castle Bromwich, before another Wellington to be brought to White Waltham. Joan Hughes became the only woman qualified to instruct on every type of aircraft. A diminutive lady, she was the first to fly a Stirling bomber - Lettice being the first woman to fly a Halifax. All this work was done without radio or radar - they navigated with just a map, watch, and their eyeballs.

After the war, Joan Hughes became an instructor at White Waltham, and later chief instructor at Booker. Some of the aircraft used in the film 'Those Magnificent Men in Their Flying Machines' were built at White Waltham - one was too small for any of the men to get into, so Joan did the test flight - and (dressed as an amorous Frenchman) did all the flying scenes with it in the film.

Extracts from Geoff's book 'Brushes with Aviation' which includes many of his illustrations, can be found at www.geoffbeckett.com. The book also includes stories about Berkshire's gentlemen fliers, its airfields, and the aircraft built in the county.

The next meeting takes place on Tuesday, October 9th, when Professor Ted Collins, President of the Berkshire Local History Association, will talk about Horses on and off the Farm, and explore the ways that working horses were used not only in the the agricultural setting, but also in towns, whilst on Tuesday, November 13th, Clive Williams will speak about The Nabobs of Berkshire - the merchants of the East India Company who subsequently returned to Britain and mostly settled in the Thames Valley in large mansions - many of which still survive, and then on Tuesday, December 11th, the Society will hold its Christmas Party.