

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - October 2020

The Heroes of Woodley Air field

As Wargrave Local History Society's experiment with the Zoom program had worked well, it was able to hold its October meeting using the same process, with even more members able to enjoy Joy Pibworth's presentation on "The Heroes of Woodley Airfield".

Joy began by explaining that she had researched the derivation of the road names in the part of Woodley that occupies the former airfield site, which are based on fliers or aircraft with a local connection. Even the local bus stops bear names such as Sunderland Close or Spitfire Way

There had been a number of areas in and around Reading where early fliers had met,

such as Yeomanry House, Coley Park, Northumberland Avenue and Whiteknights in the early 1900s, where the adventurous could have 'joy rides' for 5/-. After WW1, interest in private flying grew. A meeting of about 60 local enthusiasts was held at the Reading Garage, in Cork Street (where the Broad Street Mall is now), who formed the Berks Bucks and Oxon Flying Club. The members included Winifred Spooner, from Wokingham, only the 16th woman in Britain to gain a pilot's licence.

On the area between Woodley and Hurst known as Hadleigh Heath (from which the present Headley Road derives its name) there was a 100 acre field, and in 1928 it was bought to become Reading Aerodrome. A local press report said that "After lengthy consideration by leading world aviation experts it has been generally agreed that the site in question is likely to prove one of the finest aerodromes in the country". Another Reading garage, Phillips and Powis, in Erleigh Road, set up a flying club and school and held open days on the 100 acre field in 1929 - aiming to attract ladies as well as gentlemen. At one such gathering, Mrs Blossom Miles, Mrs Handley Page, Mrs Powis and Mrs Heelas were pictured, with ladies flying in from various parts of the country - and a prize being offered to the most punctual!

Phillips and Powis had built a factory to make 2-seater planes designed by F. G. Miles at Woodley. They were capable of 90 mph and returned a consumption of 23 miles per gallon. Activity on the airfield (and it was a grassed field) saw displays by barnstormers, and the chance to take cheap trips in a plane - Alan Cobham's Flying Circus offered such, and Sam Cody, the American showman, was another who landed there.

Women were seen as an important market for planes at that time, as well as being a support to male aviators. One of those was Maxine Miles (known as 'Blossom'). With her first husband, Inigo Freeman-Thomas, she had joined the Southern Aero Club at Shoreham. Her husband bought her a De Haviland Moth - the idea being that she would fly him to India, where Inigo's father was Viceroy. Her flying



instructor was Frederick George Miles, (usually referred to as FG Miles) and she soon qualified as a solo pilot. Maxine and Frederick fell in love, she divorced Inigo and then married FG.



His first plane had been built on the floor of the family laundry - and one of its uses was to bring copies of the Daily Mail from France, where they had been printed during the General Strike. Despite being blind in one eye, 'Blossom' was an excellent draughts-woman, and designer of planes. The couple joined Phillips and Powis, and had a house built to the east of the airfield. The planes they designed were either named after birds, or had names with an initial 'M' (for Miles - Phillips and Powis later being taken over by Miles Aircraft Ltd). During WW2, over 2000 Spitfires were repaired by the firm at Woodley, where Blossom established the Miles Aero Technical School in 1943. One of the main roads across the area is called Miles Way.



One of the smaller roads nearby is Blanchard Close, Jean-Pierre Blanchard was one of the first - in 1784 - to fly in a balloon, where he flew from Paris across the Seine and back again. He came to England, where he flew from Chelsea to Romsey, before going on to demonstrate ballooning in the USA, where his flight was witnessed by President Washington, and future presidents Adams, Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe. Jean-Pierre married in 1804, his wife, Sophie, being described as a 'fearless lady'. As Jean-Pierre was facing bankruptcy, he suggested that it would attract the crowds if she piloted the balloon alone. A year later Jean-Pierre died, but she continued flying, riding in a small basket below the hydrogen balloon, traditionally dressed in white. Her final flight was in 1819, when, also carrying fireworks, the balloon caught fire, and she fell to the ground "a broken corpse".

Another of the main roads across the airfield is The Bader Way, named after Douglas Bader.



He trained at Cranfield, and joined the RAF in 1928. He was considered fearless but clever in the air – and had to be reprimanded for some of his flying stunts. Whilst performing one of these, in December 1931, he crashed at Woodley airfield, and as a result had to have his legs amputated by J Leonard Joyce, the eminent Royal Berkshire Hospital surgeon. Bader recorded the occasion in his diary “Crashed slow-rolling near ground. Bad show”. He was invalided out of the RAF, but persuaded them that, with his artificial legs, he was still capable of flying. In 1941, he was forced to bail out of his plane, but his artificial right leg was trapped in the plane. He was taken prisoner of war, and arrangements were made to have a replacement leg delivered to him. Even so, he made attempts to escape, so was transferred to the “escape-proof” Colditz Castle. – his story being the basis of the film “Reach for the Sky”. Post-war he became a champion for the disabled.

Henri Farman is recalled by Farman Close. His father was the French correspondent for the Times newspaper, and he lived in France. He trained as a painter, but ‘got the speed bug’ – as a cyclist or motorist, competing in the Gordon Bennett races (forerunner of the Grand Prix) for Renault. In 1907 he got his first plane, and set several long-distance records and was the first to operate passenger flights. In partnership with his brothers, he set up a plane manufacturing business, and planes he designed were used for reconnaissance during WW1. Using a plane originally intended as a bomber, in 1919 he started a service from Croydon to Paris. Locally, W E Johns, author of the ‘Biggles’ books, learnt to fly in a Farman plane whilst at Reading University.

Mollison Close, Joy said, might be named after either Mr or Mrs Mollison. Jim had gained a licence aged 18, and was the youngest commissioned officer in the RAF, and had a reputation as a playboy. In 1932 he set a record of 4 days 117 hours for the flight from England to South Africa. Soon after he met an aviatrix - and they became known as the 'flying sweethearts'. She was Amy Johnson, and both were very competitive - each breaking the other's flying records. The marriage only lasted 6 years, however, Amy resuming her maiden name. Jim remarried, but lost his pilot's licence due to drinking. Amy continued to fly, working for the Air Transport Auxiliary during WW2, until, in 1941, way off course, she crashed into the River Thames near Herne Bay.

Joy told of the aviation personalities recalled by several other Woodley roads - Harris Close (Arthur 'Bomber' Harris), Dowding Close (Hugh Dowding - head of Fighter Command in WW2), Mitchell Way (R J Mitchell, designer of the Spitfire) Rose Close (Tommy Rose was a test pilot for Phillips and Powis) and Lindberg Way (after Charles Lindbergh, the American flying pioneer (who visited the Miles' at Woodley), whilst Concorde Way recalls the passing at 10.52 each morning of the supersonic airliner overhead, turning at the Woodley beacon, from 1976 - 2003. Early work on supersonic flight had been undertaken at Miles Aircraft, (although that project was cancelled by the Government long before Concorde was developed).

Miles Aircraft continued to build aircraft at Woodley until 1948, when it faced bankruptcy. In part this was due to a ban on the use of fuel for private flying, to FG Miles' paternalistic attitude, and to their continuing to build wooden planes. FG and 'Blossom' moved back to Shoreham, and in 1980 the site was sold to Bryant Homes - the road names ensuring that the site's aviation heritage is not forgotten.

The Society's planned programme is at www.wargravehistory.org.uk/ - where the latest information can be found.