

2nd Talk

The Forgotten Aviator

A talk by Dr Barbara Walsh reported by Terry Sutton

Dr Barbara Walsh made the journey from County Kildare in Ireland to provide our members with an outstanding talk at our October meeting about the major role Dover played in the early days of aviation. Mrs Walsh, the author of several books, concentrated mainly on the exploits of Hubert Latham: The Forgotten Aviator.

She had visited Dover before when she gave a talk about her hero Latham at an event organised by Dover District Council but this time she widened her lecture to mention various ways the Dover Strait has been crossed by air.

The first was by Jean Blanchard and Dr John Jeffreys in 1785 who crossed the water from Dover Castle to France, landing in the Forest of Guines, in three hours. She told how, to escape coming down in the sea, they had to discard virtually everything including parts of their clothing, to gain height. However, they retained an official letter they had been given which made this the first airmail flight, she commented.

Other early flights she mentioned were by Count Jacques de Lessups who made the second aircraft flight of the Channel in 1910, the Honourable Charles Rolls who in July 1910 made the first "there and back" flight between Dover and Calais, Cecil Grace who, the same year, set off to fly the Strait and was never seen again, and the first woman to fly the Channel, Miss Harriet Quimbley who crossed from Dover to Boulogne in April 1912. She, said Mrs Walsh, never received the worldwide

publicity she expected because of the news of the sinking of the Titanic.

Another interesting crossing was by Cowboy William Frederick "Buffalo Bill" Cody in 1903 who used a 15 foot kite to haul his 12 foot boat from France to land near the Lord Warden Hotel, Dover in 13 hours.

But, of course, Dr Walsh's main interest was in the wealthy Anglo-Frenchman Hubert Latham whose Channel flight attempts, she believes, were sabotaged for various commercial and political reasons, especially after it was discovered he had family links with Germany. As he prepared, in advance of Louis Bleriot, to make his attempt on the Strait, there was a "strong catalogue of setbacks" which have never been explained. When he crashed in the sea it was discovered he had virtually an empty fuel tank. Another strange fact was there was a loose piece of wire in his engine. His machine was also vandalised overnight needing a replacement. "There were moves by the dirty tricks department," claims Dr Walsh.

She went on to tell how this wealthy explorer, sportsman and "high-flying gentleman", while on a mission for the French government, was allegedly killed by a wild animal in the Congo while he was out shooting. She expressed her doubts about the way he died believing some people with Latham at the time did not want him to report back to the French government on the way the natives were being treated.