

such as Dover Regatta. We are constantly looking for further volunteers to help with the bookstall as well as the rubbish clearances that we do from time to time, so why not join in. LRCF can be contacted through the 'Contact Us' tab on our website **www.londonroad.info** or just by walking into The White Horse in St James's Street where, over a pint, the landlady will wax lyrical about a community group that really is trying

to make a difference in Dover. We all know the difficulties the global economy has left us facing, but at local level we simply cannot afford to sit back and bemoan our lot whilst doing nothing about it. With your help, LRCF will continue to make a difference for years to come. We enjoy support from Councillors, Dover District Council Officers, the White Cliffs Countryside Partnership and even Kent Police. Can we add you to our list of supporters?

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*One of a series of articles  
covering the lives of Doverians of international renown.*

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## **Harriet Quimby** *- the first woman to fly the Channel*

**by Lorraine Sencicle B.A. (econ) hon**

A few days before Louis Blériot entered the history books as the first person to cross the English Channel in a heavier-than-air flying machine, Hubert Latham (1883-1914) had taken off from France. He flew 8

miles before his engine failed. On the morning of Blériot's epic flight, 25 July 1909, as it was windy, Latham's advisors let him sleep. Nonetheless, there is a statue to Latham near Cap Blanc Nez, outside Calais.



Harriet Quimby

© Giacinta Bradley Koontz

Less than a year later, on 2 June 1910, Charles Rolls (1877-1910) made a return flight across the Channel. Leaving Dover at 6.30pm he was over Sangatte, France, at 7.15pm and was back in Dover at 8.00pm. Over 3,000 people witnessed the event, after which he was carried through Dover, shoulder high. A month later Charles Rolls lost his life in a flying accident at Bournemouth. A bust of him can be seen on the Seafront.

In 1912 the first woman, Harriet Quimby, (1875-1912), flew across the Channel. Many, including myself, feel that there should be a monument, a road name or even a plaque in Dover/Whitfield, to celebrate her achievement.

It was on Tuesday 16 April that Harriet took off from Whitfield aerodrome, in a Blériot monoplane with a 50hp Gnome engine, to make the epic flight. The feat took 59 minutes and she landed at Hardelot-Plage, about 25 miles (40 km) from Calais. Her account was published in Fly Magazine of 12 July 1912.

Harriet, a journalist, gained her pilot's licence in August 1911, the first woman to do so in the US. By Christmas, she had decided to be the first woman to fly across the Channel and through contacts managed to get a letter of introduction to Louis Blériot in Paris. On 1 March 1912, Harriet set sail for London on the Hamburg-American liner *Amerika*, where she put her plan to the editor of the Daily Mirror.

Her next stop was Paris, where she placed an order with Blériot for a seventy-horse-power machine. At the same time, she persuaded Blériot to loan her a fifty-horse-power monoplane for the Channel crossing. Blériot agreed and suggested that the aeroplane should be first tried out from his airfield at Hardelot-Plage.



Harriet Quimby in the Blériot plane

© Giacinta Bradley Koontz

On arrival at Hardelot, Harriet was keen to undertake trials but the weather decided otherwise. The wind increased throughout the first day and on the second, it blew a gale. The wind showed no sign of abating but as the Daily Mirror had given her a deadline to meet, she ordered the monoplane should be shipped to Dover.

As she was concerned about keeping the whole venture a secret, the monoplane was to be delivered to the aerodrome, which she described as having, *"a fine, smooth ground from which to make a good start. The famous Dover Castle stands on the cliffs, overlooking the Channel. It points the way clearly to Calais."*

In Dover, Harriet stayed at the Lord Warden Hotel, where she met reporters from the Mirror. The following day, Sunday, was perfect for flying, *"there was no wind. The sun was bright and warm. The air was so clear that by straining our eyes a little we could see the French coast dimly*

*outlined across the channel.*" However, Harriet's mother had asked her never to fly on Sundays.

Instead, she and aviator Gustav Hamel went to Whitfield to inspect the Blériot monoplane and for Gustav to show her how to use a compass. On arrival, a crowd of reporters and spectators greeted them, as rumour had spread that a woman was going to attempt to fly a solo Channel flight!

The following morning, Monday, Harriet, Hamel and the Mirror reporters all geared themselves up for the flight, but strong winds made it impossible. However, by 3.30am on the Tuesday, the wind had eased. Dressed in a flying suit of her trademark purple wool-back satin, she wore two pairs of silk combinations underneath. Over this apparel, she wore a long woollen coat, an 'American raincoat' all topped with a sealskin stole.

Before going to Whitfield, she stopped at the Blériot Monument on Northfall Meadow. Besides providing Harriet with the machine, Blériot had secured a long pontoon beneath the fuselage to enable it to float until someone rescued her, if she went down in the Channel. At the aerodrome, Hamel undertook a trial run. Satisfied with the monoplane, Harriet climbed aboard and took off at 5.30am. Within thirty seconds, Harriet had climbed fifteen hundred feet and flew over the Castle. There, Mirror reporters were waiting to take pictures of her.

As the early morning mist cleared,

she could see France on the horizon. However, part way across the Channel Harriet ran into a bank of cloud so was obliged to use her compass in earnest. When she thought she was nearing Hardelot, Harriet dropped down below the cloud. Unfortunately, she did not recognise where she was so landed on a beach.

Soon a crowd of fisher folk gathered, congratulating her. Then, according to Harriet, one of the women *"insisted upon serving me with a very welcome cup of hot tea, accompanied by bread and cheese. The tea was served in a cup fully six times as large as an ordinary teacup and was so old and quaint that I could not conceal my admiration of it."* The fisherwoman let Harriet keep the cup. Then the media arrived and Harriet was assured of her entry into the history books as the first woman to fly the Channel. Sadly, Harriet was not given the recognition she deserved for on 14 April the *Titanic* had tragically hit an iceberg off the coast of Newfoundland.

Less than six months later, near Boston, Massachusetts, while at the controls of her new 70hp Blériot, Harriet and her passenger fell to their deaths. Harriet was 37 years old.

Thanks to Giacinta Bradley Koontz (Aviation Historian/Author) and Martin Young (Aviation Historian) for their help and loan of the picture and photograph.

For more information on Harriet Quimby: [www.harrietquimby.org](http://www.harrietquimby.org)