

Dover's Forgotten Aviation History

Part I

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Following on from a talk given by Brian to the Society last November here is the full story of Dover's Forgotten Aviation History.

Few Doverians have an inkling of the importance of Dover in aviation before the First World War, or of the critical role played by Dover's air-stations during the conflict. The bungalows and houses between Archer's Court Road and Sandwich Road, Whitfield, stand on the once internationally important Whitfield flying ground which was a magnet for many early aviators to whom a Channel crossing was an irresistible challenge. The now bare heights of Swingate Down saw the entire operational strength of the army wing of the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) fly off to France in 1914 from an airstrip that was to become home to over 500 airmen and 14 aircraft hangars. At Guston, Capel, Marine Parade and Hawkshill Down more air stations were developed for the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS) to protect the town, its harbour and shipping and to provide operational, training and engineering support for the work of the Dover Patrol in maintaining a safe Channel crossing throughout the war. The air stations of Dover played their part too in defending the country from Zeppelins and the Gotha bombers. Between 1910 and 1918 the roar of aero engines was a swelling accompaniment to daily life in Dover.

The Whitfield flying ground was home to the Dover Aero Club and, by 1910, was being



*Royal Flying Corps Memorial
Swingate*

described in the press as, "...the first air station in England". In fact, the aerodrome was contemporary with the Royal Aero Club's ground at Eastchurch, where that club shared training and other facilities with Short Brothers whose factory was, in effect, the world's first aircraft production line.

Dover's position on the Channel coast, however, guaranteed its prominence in the fast growing aviation world and the Dover club attracted powerful patronage. By 1911 'Flight' magazine described it as one of, "...the most powerful aeronautical clubs in the country..." The president of the club was the Marquis Camden, whilst the vice-presidents included Lord Kitchener and Vice-Admiral Sir John Jellicoe. A reflection of the significance of Dover to aviation generally could be seen in the fact that in 1912, Claude Graham-White, Gustav Hamel and Jules Nardini, three of the most internationally famous aviators of the day, consented to become vice presidents of the Dover Model Aero Club, whose headquarters was in Godwyne Road.

An event which underwrote the importance of the Whitfield Flying Ground was the 1911 Circuit of Europe Challenge which carried a prize of 450,000 Francs (about £8,000) offered by the French newspaper Le Journal. The event was held between 18th June and 7th July 1911 and the Whitfield flying ground was selected as the departure and arrival point for the cross Channel stages. The Dover Express reported that the event

signalled, "...the constitution of a permanent Dover air station..." at Whitfield. This optimism was to prove misplaced but the event was memorable for a number of reasons. The Dover Engineering Works was appointed official repairer to the flyers and several hundred people made their way to Whitfield where they incurred the wrath of Mr Kendall of Archer's Court whose fences were damaged by the crowd. The event also showed how the science of communications was developing. A wireless equipped French destroyer was despatched to Dover Harbour and a telephone line was laid from there to Whitfield. News of the departure of the flyers from France was then relayed by radio and telephone to the waiting officials and spectators.

The race was won by the French flyer Lt. Jean Louis Conneau. The only British pilot to finish was James Valentine who, in September 1911, gave an exhibition of flying at Whitfield that attracted 600 spectators. Valentine died in the RFC in 1917.

More ominously, the Dover Express reported that of the 11 aircraft that set out from France, only 7 were spotted by the support boats stationed in the Channel. This led the Express to endorse the national newspapers' demands for the Government to spend more on air defence. As will be seen, Dover would continue to play a part in highlighting the country's vulnerability from the air.

In December 1911, in line with the Dover Express' prediction, the Dover Aero Club set about forming a limited liability company: Air Stations (Dover) Ltd. The share capital raised was to be used for the building of hangars, thereby ensuring that, "...aviation will then be permanently established at Dover and passenger flights and tuition in flying will be able to be obtained..." By 1912



British Army Aeroplane Number 1. Designed and flown by Samuel Cody – October 1908. No attribution.

funds had been raised to build a new club house which was opened on 19th June by the Lord Lieutenant accompanied by a large crowd of, "...well known persons...". The club appeared to be going from strength to strength and in December 1912, under the auspices of the Dover Aero Club, the famous 'Colonel' Samuel Cody was booked to talk at Dover Town Hall about, "The Progress of Flight during the past twenty-five years".

Cody's engagement with the club showed both his and the club's importance in the story of aviation. Samuel Franklin Cody was an American who came to Britain in 1890 and was naturalised in 1909. He was a considerable self-publicist and enjoyed the public's confusing him with Buffalo Bill Cody whom he resembled. He was however a man of great skill and ingenuity. He invented the Cody War Kite observation balloon and became the Army's chief instructor and designer at its balloon factory at Farnborough. He flew the first powered airship from Farnborough to London in 1906. More importantly, he designed British Army Aeroplane No.1 and in October 1908 flew it for 27 seconds over a distance of 1400 feet thereby achieving the first officially recorded flight of a heavier than air machine in Britain. His aeroplane was, to our eyes, an extraordinary box-kite like machine with twin propellers and six wheels, but it made Cody's reputation. Cody suffered the fate of



Harriet Quimby – the first Channel crossing by a woman, April 1912 by permission James Field, artist.

so many early aviators and was killed in a flying accident in 1913.

1912 proved auspicious for Whitfield for other reasons. At 5.30 a.m. on 16th April the American flyer Harriet Quimby took off from Whitfield in her new Blériot XI monoplane and 1 hour 9 minutes later landed in Pas de Calais to a great reception as the first woman to fly herself across the Channel; the first woman passenger had been taken across on 6th April by Gustav Hamel. Unfortunately, the news of Harriet Quimby's feat, accomplished with a hot water bottle strapped to her waist and a wristwatch and hand compass as her only instruments, was overshadowed by the news of the sinking of the Titanic. That, coupled with her death in a flying accident in July 1912, led to her achievements being largely forgotten. A plaque commemorating her flight was placed at the Ramada Hotel in 2012.

May 1912 also saw the arrival at Whitfield of Jules Nardini who was described as "resident aviator". Nardini was already famous, having participated in many air competitions and exhibitions at Hendon, where he was particularly noted for giving flights to young ladies! He was Italian and had been living in France but was expelled for 'dubious' political activities, which seem to have revolved around his having alerted the

Italian Government to the fact that the French were selling aeroplanes to the Turks. He arrived in exile at Whitfield after an unscheduled stop in Deal, on Lord Northbourne's estate, due to a defective compass. On the day following his arrival, he gave an exhibition of flying over Dover Harbour. Nardini was killed on his 13th Channel crossing.

The Whitfield Flying Ground's salad days were between 1910 and 1913. At the close of 1912, with tensions rising in Europe, a Zeppelin was spotted flying over North Kent. As a result, in 1913 restrictions on civilian flying across the Channel were imposed. Incoming flights were restricted to narrow corridors between Walmer and Ramsgate or Rye and Eastbourne and pilots had to give 18 hours' notice of intended arrival and present themselves for examination within 5 miles of the coast at designated landing grounds. This had a dramatic effect on air activity in Dover. Whitfield had been used for some time as a stopping off point for trainee pilots from the RNAS, Eastchurch; that occasionally continued but the level of civilian activity greatly declined and the ground saw little use until after the War.

An additional reason for the decline in Whitfield's fortunes was the development of Swingate as a viable landing ground. Louis Blériot had effected a cliff-top landing at Northfall Meadow on 25th July 1909, having made the first powered crossing of the Channel. Blériot's contribution to aviation history lay not only in his flying achievement but primarily in aircraft manufacture. The Blériot XI monoplane that he flew to Dover was further developed and used at one time or another by most of the pioneer flyers. It went on to become the pattern from which the most numerous British military plane, the 'BE' series (BE stood for Blériot Experimental), was developed. 900 Blériot XI monoplanes had

been produced by 1913 and over 3,000 BEs were produced for the RFC and RNAS before 1918. Blériot had promised his wife before setting out that he would give up flying after the attempt. He did so and lived until 1936.

Blériot had aimed at winning the Ruinart (Champagne House) prize of 12,500 gold Francs for the first Channel crossing but had missed the deadline for submission of his application and had therefore to content himself with winning £1,000 from the Daily Mail. Jacques de Lesseps had an English wife and was the 10th son of Count Ferdinand de Lesseps of Suez and Panama Canals fame. He won the Ruinart prize on 21st May 1910 when he landed his Blériot on Swingate Down, close to Reach Court Farm, where he damaged a fence and handed over £4 by way of compensation. De Lesseps received an extra £100 from the Daily Mail for being the second man to complete a crossing. He was killed in a flying accident in 1927.

Many people know that Dover also attracted the attention of Charles Rolls, who was the 2nd man in Britain to gain a pilot's licence. He favoured developing Swingate Down as an airfield and persuaded the War Office to rent him the site. Rolls had what was called an "aeroplane garage" erected. The Dover Express and East Kent News referred to Rolls building, "...a corrugated shed on the Government Ground between the Deal road and the old St. Margaret's road." It occupied over 1,000 square feet and was built by William Harbrow of St Mary Cray, which company would much later erect the first radar towers on the site as the 2nd World war loomed. At 6.28 pm on 2nd June 1910, less than a year after Blériot's historic crossing, Rolls set off from Swingate Downs to complete a double crossing of the channel. He flew a Wright Bros. biplane built under licence by Short Bros. at Eastchurch, the cost of which was £200. He landed again at 8 p.m. Rolls' feat

was astonishing – it was only 3 years since an aeroplane had managed to change direction in the air for the first time (achieved by Henri Farman in 1907) and only 18 months since the first observed powered flight in England by Samuel Cody. Charles Rolls was killed in a flying accident in July 1910.

Following Blériot's crossing, the Baron de Forest increased to £4,000 the prize he had offered that year for the first Englishman to fly an English made aeroplane across the Channel. Swingate Down was used by the majority of the flyers seeking the prize and in the event it was awarded in December 1910 to Tommy Sopwith for flying the furthest distance into Europe. He invested his winnings in his flying school.

Sopwith's interest in flying stemmed partly from his contact with another famous aviator who achieved a Channel "first". On 18th August 1910 the American aviator John Moisant arrived at the East Kent Colliery brickfield at Telegraph Farm Tilmanstone as a result of a forced landing in his Blériot XI two seater. He had flown from Paris and was accompanied by his engineer, thereby achieving the first Channel crossing with a passenger. Due to bad weather, crashes and mechanical mishaps he took three weeks to complete his intended journey from Paris to London. He caused a sensation locally and it



Short seaplane Dover Harbour 1918. No attribution

was reported that he was presented with a cat as a gift from Tilmanstone. In fact it seems certain that the cat in question was one he had acquired in Paris where he had learned to fly with Blériot; its name was Mlle. Fifi. On landing at Tilmanstone, Moisant told observers that he had only flown five times before and that he was heading for London, although he did not know the way. More aviation mishaps subsequently occurred but the cat went with him to Sittingbourne, Upchurch, Rainham and Kemsing, where it was cared for by a certain Miss Burr, and then on to Otford and Beckenham where he completed his journey, although he had aimed for Hendon. John Moisant was killed in December 1910 whilst landing a Blériot XI.

Gustav Hamel was considered by Louis Blériot to be the best pilot he had seen. In 1911 Hamel flew a Blériot XI the 19 miles between Hendon and Windsor to deliver the first official airmail carried in Great Britain. In April 1912 he assisted Harriet Quimby by testing her newly delivered Blériot monoplane before her flight from Whitfield to France, although, somewhat ungallantly, he had suggested that a woman would be unable to meet the demands of such a flight. He made many cross Channel flights from Dover and, in April 1913, made the first return flight carrying a passenger, the Evening Standard journalist Frank Dupree. Later that month he flew with Dupree as passenger from Whitfield to Cologne, the first time that a flight had been made from England to Germany. The flight, sponsored by the Evening Standard, was intended to draw further attention to Britain's need for military aircraft. Hamel is known to have flown into Swingate after the imposition of restrictions in 1913 and is believed to have been testing armed Blériot for the RFC. Aged 24, he disappeared over the English Channel in May 1914.

As Dover's significance in civilian flying

faded in the face of international tension, its importance as a military base naturally grew. Dover became a special military zone and travel and other restrictions were imposed. The need for both offensive and defensive capability in the air was clearly recognised as war loomed. Dover was, of course, a target for the Germans for the same reasons that it was important to the Allies. The town's experience as "Hell Fire Corner" in the Second World War has tended to obscure the memory of its experience in the First World War. There were 113 air raid alarms and 185 bombs fell from Zeppelins, sea planes and from Gotha bombers during the German air campaign of 1917/18. 23 shells landed on the town, fired from German destroyers. Though less damage was caused than in the Second World War, the effect on Dovorians was nevertheless traumatic; 23 civilians were killed and 71 injured. The first bomb to fall on land in England fell on 24th December 1914 in Leyburne Road on property belonging to Mr Terson, knocking his neighbour's gardener out of a tree. The last bombs to fall on England from an aircraft are believed to have fallen on Swingate in March 1918.

Following the Zeppelin panic of October 1912 £45,000 was allocated for the development of a military flying station on Swingate Down (incorrectly reported by the Dover Express as £14,000). In 1913, the (Army Wing) RFC started the development of Dover (St. Margaret's), as Swingate was officially called. Canvas hangars were erected in 1913 for two Maurice Farmans of 5 squadron; the pilots slept at the nearby military prison! In August 1914 the RFC began to arrive in strength and by then there were 14 hangars in place. The force comprised 4 squadrons, nos. 2, 3, 4 and 5, which represented the entire operational complement of the RFC: 60 machines with their pilots and observers. They were all destined for France as part of the British Expeditionary Force.