

## Flights of Fancy

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“ We will be landing at Wakefield Airport in five minutes. Please remain in your seats until the engines have been switched off, and the exit doors have been opened. Thank you for flying with us and have a nice day”.

If only!

To go anywhere by aeroplane, we in this area, have to go to Sheffield, Leeds/Bradford, Manchester, Doncaster or more often to an airport in the south, yet it could have been so different if Wakefield had taken those early opportunities to be a leader in the “flight” field.

The first mention of flight in Wakefield, occurred, if Henry Clarkson was correct, in either 1810 or 1811, when according to an advertisement, a man would “fly” from the battlements of the Parish Church ( now the Cathedral) to land on the bowling green in Southgate. His flight involved him keeping his balance on a wooden board, that had a deep groove, into which the rope fitted. Sliding down the rope the man waved his arms giving the appearance of flying, much to the enjoyment of the numerous spectators.

This gentleman was luckier than the acrobat at Pocklington who tried this “flight “ in 1733 for, according to an inscription on the outside of the eastern end of the chancel, the man was dashed against the wall of the church and killed when his rope slackened.

Once the Montgolfier brothers had shown that balloon flight was possible more brave aeronauts either thrilled the public with an ascent to be marvelled at or shocked when the balloonist plummeted to earth following some accident or mistake.

We go to the Hull Advertiser of 12th. October 1827, for information of the first known “flight “of a balloon in our area. This concerned a Mr. Brown who had already established a name for himself, after flying at Barnsley in 1825 and Beverley in 1826. On the above date, it was his younger brother, Brown Junior. who was lifted up from opposite the then named Woodman Inn ( Royal Hotel) situated in Wood Street amid great excitement from the many spectators. There was disappointment that they were not watching the more experienced Brown Senior but he was ill and it was two hours after the expected take off at 3 p.m., that the balloon eventually left.

Climbing quickly the balloon seemed to be under control for the first five minutes as it drifted westward towards Flanshaw where it should return to earth. There was much consternation when spinning wildly the balloon was seen to drop through the clouds apparently plunging to earth. Mr. Brown was pulled from the basket by two lads of the district and then conveyed to a surgeon with little injury save for a headache and a fractured foot. The cause of the accident was put down to Mr. Brown opening the gas release valve by mistake.

Mrs. Graham was, when she set up her balloon in the yard of the Bull and Mouth Hotel, attempting her 47th. ascent. The gas for her balloon was 20,000 cubic feet of coal gas purchased from the then 14 year old Wakefield Gas Light Company. Her balloon rose leaving the spectators wondering no doubt if that they, on the 9th. of November 1837, had witnessed a happening that their parents would not have believed possible. The flight lasted only 11 minutes and with a westerly wind gently blowing she landed one mile past Glasshoughton.

Our next flight of fancy took place in 1890 when a daring lady balloonist Miss Cissie Kent announced that she would ascend by balloon and descend by parachute. Her flight was to take place on Saturday May 31st from the City Grounds in Calder Vale Road. The site was not well chosen, for the area is low lying with the sheer cliff behind the present Kirkgate Station to the north of her. If the wind was from the south or west the balloon would have been pushed against the cliff. She had not anticipated these local conditions which could have been overcome by increasing the amount of gas the balloon should have carried for the rapid lift that would be required. to climb quickly.

The lift was postponed until the following Wednesday June 5th. The flight that day was arranged to take place from St. Austin's field in the market at 7.30 p.m.

With a perfect lift the balloon and Cissie gradually rose to drift over Eastmoor, Stanley and Altofts where she began to descend after floating over the River Calder in the Stanley Ferry area. Her touch-down must not have been where she or the police would have wished for she landed near the Normanton Local Board's Offices in Normanton High Street.

Lieut Lampriere was booked to appear at the Park on Whit. Monday and Tuesday in 1897. Not a great deal to get excited about save that the Lieutenant. was the famous French lady parachutist. There is no mention of what means she used to get into the air but she was to parachute out of the clouds. I wonder if any young lady used this lady's exploits to further her own "adventures" when a lady's exploits would be opposed by a strict Victorian father. There were also balloon ascents and the usual parachute descents made during July 1910 but whether this was a "barnstorming" person or a local dare-devil is unknown. One must remember that although the parachute was available in 1910 the Royal Flying Corps would not issue any pilot with the means of escaping his damaged aircraft until after the first conflict. During that war there must have been many people in the Wakefield area, who had witnessed a person floating down to the ground asking why were English pilots and aircrew denied the parachute.

There is a mention of an aeroplane on October 18th. 1916 falling to earth in Johnny Firth Lane, now called Thornes Moor Rd. The date would indicate that the craft was of the Royal Flying Corps and possibly from the nearby temporary air-base at Pontefract.

There has been a report of an aeroplane during W.W.I landing at Heath with the pilot asking for directions. Possibly he was wanting instructions to get to the landing strip at Pontefract.

Following the rapid improvements in aircraft design and manufacture made during W.W.I, aircraft were gradually becoming safer and more plentiful. There were many young men who had experienced the thrill of flying in combat and were now looking for a means to enjoy a hobby that was different from all land and sea based pursuits. It was no surprise that after 1918 young pilots would be touring the country either exhibiting their own flying skills or giving paid-for flips. The flat areas referred to as Pugneys Field, off Portobello Road, saw such an occasion. In 1925 from April 9th. to May 25th. patrons paying 7/6 - (38p) could have a flight in an aircraft of the Northern Aviation Co. The cost was quite high, possibly one third of a young man's wage, but for those who indulged, they would have been hero worshipped as they told of the thrill when flying around the castle and over Denby Dale Road.

Wakefield had at least one such young budding pilot in Mr. Francis Armitage of Hall and Armitage the furniture dealers. He had his aircraft during the late 1920's and was reputed

to have landed his craft on Heath Common.

Wakefield City Council received a letter from Great Northern Aerial Syndicate in December 1919 looking for suitable sites for an airfield. Pugneys was going to be developed as a council housing estate, and no other alternative was offered so that was the end of a possible Wakefield Aerodrome.

Everybody in the 1930's would have heard of Sir Alan Cobham, for he was a leading pilot in a organisation called National Displays Ltd., a company which gave exhibitions of flying and gave the paying punters "flips". He was the first person to buy an Avro, from the Aircraft Disposal Board, paying £450 for it in 1919, which he converted to take three seats. When he came to Wakefield in September 1934 he had just started his tour of England with his flying circus. Before he finished this tour in late 1936, he would have been involved in 1,250 exhibitions of flying and given many people the thrill of a flight. Cobham used the field at Hill Top above Newmiller Dam, charging 5/- a trip. The area at that time were cultivated fields and part of the Chevet Hall Estate.

It may be that amongst the crowds queuing for their trip or craning their necks to watch aircraft rolling and turning, were the Wakefield young men who when the call was sounded, were eager to join the Royal Air Force and fly like Cobham.

Alas that seems to be the end of Wakefield's attempt to break into the field of aeronautics. Except that is for the arrival of the flying chairs etc. which would appear at Heath Common Fair every Easter!

For some, W.W.2 would give a chance to take to the air, but for the majority of us it was either at the pictures, or later going on holiday to some far overseas destination.

A photograph exists of a light aircraft on Lowe Hill during the spring of 1939. There are many onlookers so one must assume that the plane was not military but rather from a club or privately owned

There is a report of an aircraft K 7031 of 271 Squadron crash landing and becoming wrecked on 16th. of December 1940, possibly in the Pugneys area. The information is very scarce as such accidents would be secret and kept from the public.

There is also a one person report of seeing a German plane in the school field at Newton Hill and teachers helping in the removal of its crew. Seeing that German aircraft should have been out of the West Riding by at least 3 a.m. it seems strange that this crew sat in their craft till eight thirty to be rescued. What no Home Guard?

During one of the War Saving Schemes, possibly "Wings Week" an aeroplane was brought to the empty plot of land to the north of the Bull Ring where the bomb had been displayed

We now go back in time for a major air development which occurred at Lofthouse Amusement Park. It opened in 1908, and for amongst the many entertainments provided by the Yorkshire ( West Riding ) Electric Tramway Co. Ltd. at their ground, was the site for an aerodrome. This is clearly marked on the proposed layout of attractions and actually did come to fruition, not like some of their other ideas!

As an attraction it must have been amongst the best the park ever had to offer, for not only could the public see aircraft being built, but there were times when a craft would be given either an engine test or a flight test. The pilots would have been those dashing young men in overalls, always ready to be photographed draped over a machine, either before a flight or after a successful landing. With greasy overalls, helmet and goggles these flyers, would to young boys and maidens, seem as though they were aces.

From the Wakefield Express of 1910 August 1st. there is a photograph of a plane and a mention of a flight by Mr, G. A. Barnes of Abbey Wood, London, flying at Lofthouse. He flew his Humber monoplane three times in front of 20, 000 spectators.

1st. flight 40 feet high and travelled 440 yards.

2<sup>nd</sup> flight 60 feet high and travelled 440 yards.

3rd flight 100 feet high and travelled 440 yards.

The slightly increasing heights would indicate tentative test flights more than a thrill for the onlookers.

On August 20<sup>th</sup>. there is a photograph of a plane that had landed at Lofthouse from Liverpool.

These planes were extremely primitive with only small horse power engines

During the later months of 1912 Harold Blackburn took up Mr. Cyril E. Foggin's 50 h.p. Gnome rotary engine craft built by Robert Blackburn from the aerodrome at Lofthouse. It publicly flew again on Friday 21<sup>st</sup> of March 1913 when Harold started giving displays during the next 10 days to the paying public. During early April he made a cross-country flight to Stamford where he dropped, 1 500 leaflets from a height of 1,200 feet Harold did further flights with this craft until the end of May. ..

. An added attraction would be the air races to be organised around the park. All flying was subject to the weather conditions. With aircraft made of tubes, bamboo, wire, doped canvass and small capacity engines, crashes had to happen. Not many were recorded but it is known that one crash-landed in a rhubarb field at Lee Moor and another failing to gain any height went through the hedge at the eastern side of the park.

Mr Harold Blackburn of Brighouse now becomes the main attraction for in May 24th. 1913 he rose 3,000 feet in his 50 h. p. plane.

The following week he flew to Leeds with a passenger and a week later in his new 60 h.p. monoplane he flew to Harrogate without either a map or compass and was caught in a thunderstorm. All these flights took place from the aerodrome at Lofthouse.

Another flier at Lofthouse Park was Mr. Hartlet and the famous B. C. Hucks who, was believed to be the first man to fly upside down while doing a loop-the-loop. This feat was seen at Lofthouse Park, prior to it being performed anywhere else. Hucks had already made his name by winning many aeronautical competitions organised by national papers. The Park advertise in the local paper during June of 1913 that there would be flying every Wednesday and Saturday

It was recorded in the Wakefield Express in 1913 that on the Monday and Tuesday of the Bank-holidays at 5.30 p.m. Harold Blackburn would thrill the huge crowds with the flying of his 50 h. p. monoplane at 60 m.p.h. some 50-60 feet high.

This Blackburn does not seem to be related to the Blackburns who created the Blackburn Aeroplane Company at Hunslet.

A Harold Blackburn in 1908 is in the West Riding Trade Directory as being a cycle dealer on Huddersfield Road at Brighouse. Is it a coincidence that the Wright Brothers were also cycle dealers and manufacturers? There is also a Harold Blackburn at, 13 Bradford Road Brighouse in 1922. This time he is a cycle and motor engineer. One can see that these occupations would be very useful in the development of aircraft.

On enquiring at Brighouse Museum in 2005 they had at that time no knowledge of a Harold Blackburn

References.

.Mrs. Graham--- Wakefield Herald and West Riding Advertiser November 1837

Cissie Kent-----Wakefield Express May 1890

Lofthouse Park---"Going back a bit" R. P. Rhodes.

Wakefield Express June 21 1912.

Pugney's Field ( advert) Wakefield Express April 1925

Alan Cobham's( advert) Wakefield Express 1935.

Blackburn Aircraft since 1909 by A.J. Jackson pub. Putnam

Elvington Air Museum had some information regarding Blackburn at Lofthouse Park and the planes that were flying there They have more information concerning the Blackburn airplane Company

Wakefield Historical Society