

Britain's First Aircraft Spotter?

Harry Harris

My father was an early aircraft spotter in two senses of the term. He was early because it was early in the morning when he saw his first aeroplane, and he was also early in the sense that he was one of the first of the breed.

In 1909, he saw Louis Blériot's monoplane land on the cliffs of Dover. That summer day, July 25, 1909, Blériot had set out from France in the early hours to become the first man to cross the English Channel in an aeroplane.

The Daily Mail had offered a prize of £1,000 to any aviator who could accomplish this feat. Others had tried but had failed. Anglo Frenchman Hubert Latham was Blériot's main rival for the prize.

My father, then a boy of ten, lived with his parents at The Plough Inn at Guston, some three miles east of Dover. To supplement their income from the pub, my grandparents kept pigs behind their dwelling, and my father, the second eldest of 13 children, had the task of fetching swill from the nearby Duke of York's Royal Military School, which is situated between Dover and Guston.

Guston itself was to figure in aviation history, as it was to become the site of an early airfield. It was from there that the aeroplanes of the British Expeditionary Force departed for France in 1914. An aircraft crashed there in 1917.

Blériot landed at 5.17½ hours that summer morning after his 36½ minute flight across the Channel. His wife was on board the French destroyer Escopette (Blunderbuss), escorting Blériot. It could not, of course,

keep up with him, as he flew at about 42½ mph at an altitude of approximately 250ft.

He had taken off from Sangatte, near Calais, having decided to make his attempt after taking into account the weather and wind speed. He had to walk with the aid of crutches, as he had burned his foot in an earlier incident. He had built ten aircraft of widely varying configurations, and his No. XI monoplane, designed by Raymond Saulnier, was his mount for his successful attempt on the Daily Mail prize. A signal was sent from Sangatte to the Lord Warden Hotel in Dover that Blériot was about to make his historic flight.

The battle between Latham, Blériot and other aviators to be first across the Channel had been the subject of wide publicity in the press and talk of the prize and the aspirants must have been a central topic to most Edwardians. The excitement and adventure of human flight in heavier-than-air machines captured the imagination of young and old alike.

On that historic Sunday, July 25, 1909, my father, also named Harry, must have risen early to go on his errand to fetch the pigswill. Daylight would already have dawned on that July morning,

My biggest regret is that I did not get my father to talk more about this event and record it as oral history. I can only surmise that, as he arrived at the Military School, the staff had been informed of the arrival of Blériot on the cliffs, less than a mile away. The general excitement can only be likened to that of an alien spaceship landing in one's own back garden today. The fact that it was early on a Sunday might have meant fewer people

attended the triumphant arrival than if it had happened later in the day, or in the middle of the week. However, early morning or evening was the best time to fly the lightly loaded pioneer aeroplanes, with their low-powered engines. The local police were soon on the scene, mainly to protect the flying machine from some predatory souvenir-hunters. The photographs of the recently arrived Louis Blériot, who just managed to nurse his machine over the clifftops on to Northfall Meadow to land near Dover Castle after his 22-mile flight, show a motley group of spectators. I have often tried to identify my father in the photographs, but there are several boys of his age, all with similar caps, and all could pass for him.

My father was probably asleep or preparing to start work when Blériot left Sangatte. A short while later Blériot and

his aeroplane were firmly embedded in my father's memory, to be recalled from time to time for those interested in it.

Before my father died, in 1974, we (Homo Sapiens, that is) had put men on the Moon and built Concorde. In one man's lifetime we progressed from the Wright brothers' first successful powered, sustained and controlled flights on December 17, 1903, and Blériot's 1909 cross-Channel flight, to supersonic airliners and Space Shuttles.

As far as I know, my father flew only once in his life. That was to Canada, after he had retired, to see my elder brother. I am sure his mind must have gone back to that Sunday in 1909 when, as a boy, he witnessed that significant episode in history. I doubt whether even Blériot himself could have imagined where it would take us.

Business UP

Port of Dover Annual Consultative Meeting

Terry Sutton

Profits were up at the Port of Dover in 2022, with an increase in business in all sectors except truck traffic (down seven per cent). As a result, Dover Harbour Board was able to donate more to local charities and, at the annual consultative meeting on May 24 2023, a further £109,000 was presented to a fund that finances scores of local charity organisations.

"This is the most we have given away in any 12 months and it's possible because of our improved profits," DHB's chief executive, Doug Bannister told the packed meeting at one of the port's two cruise terminals.

The meeting welcomed Jason Holt, DHB's

new chairman, who introduced his fellow Board directors.

A series of top port officials reported on 2022 successes with increases in ferry revenue (£60 million), cargo (£5.5 million) and cruise sector (5 million). Coach traffic increased and it was claimed that Dover was now taking virtually all cross-channel coach traffic as the Tunnel dropped out of the market.

The meeting was reminded it was 70 years since Dover led the way with cross channel car traffic with the opening of revolutionary drive-on drive-off ferry berths at the Eastern Docks. On display was DHB's new "brand image" with the logo of "Closing the Gap Every Day."