

A short History of Attleborough Fields Aerodrome.

John Grech

A FORGOTTEN AERODROME - ATTLEBOROUGH FIELDS, NUNEATON

The first recorded time the field at Attleborough had been used for flying, was on 12 and 13 July 1912. An air fete was organised to take place at Attleborough fields and featured the French aviator M Moineau probably flying his new Breguet 100 h.p. biplane that he used when coming second in the French Military Trials in November 1911. The original site to be used was a tree lined field at Weddington which after viewing by Moineau and possibly the display organiser and manager Capt. J. E. Atkin the week before it was decided to look for a more open venue resulting in the selection of a field at Attleborough Fields farm. The field was noted as being equally accessible, in the midst of fine open country and has a gentle slope of over 300 yards to the river Anker. The flying display by Moineau was also accompanied with musical entertainment by the Band of the 7th Bn Royal Warwickshire Regiment and the Marlborough entertainers, a troupe Pierrot entertainers. There was a great interest in the event with people showing interest from as far away as Hampstead and Wolverhampton. On the Saturday evening there was to be a grand fireworks display, teas and other refreshments were also available at a moderate price. The gates were to open at 2.30 p.m. the cost of a two day ticket was 1/6d.

Flights were also offered and the demand was so great that the organisers decided to reduce the air time and reduce the price from five to three guineas. The following week The Nuneaton Observer reported that a commission agent, Sidney Grice was in the dock of the Nuneaton Police Court charged with "obtaining by false pretences from Thomas Goodman the sum of 6d, with the intent to cheat and defraud. Goodman had been walking through a local park and been offered a cheap ticket to the event by Grice, when Goodman presented his ticket at the Fete he was not admitted and had to pay the full price of 1/- . The ticket that Goodman had brought was the wrong colour for that day's entry and others had been caught out by the same scam. Grice pleaded not guilty but the bench found him guilty and he was sentenced to two months hard labour.

Development of the new Alighting Ground

The official opening day of the newly created aerodrome at Attleborough Fields was on the 2 August 1913, or "Alighting ground" as its developer, Mr Edward Ferdinand Melly J.P. called it. The land on which this development was to take place was owned by Mr George Ward of Attleborough Fields farm which was located to the South East of the centre of Nuneaton town. Mr Ward owned quite a large number of farms in the area and was, like Melly a local Nuneaton Town Councillor and Alderman.

The developer of the aerodrome Mr Edward Melly had been influenced by his brother Henry Greg Melly, who had learnt to fly in France in the summer of 1910 and had been issued with French Aviators Brevet number 212. Henry

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Melly returned to England and had a flying field at Freshfields and later Waterloo, Liverpool where he kept a single and a two seat Blériot aeroplanes, giving exhibition flights and some flying instruction.

Henry had written to his brother suggesting that he might open an aerodrome at Nuneaton to assist aviators who were flying direct between London and Manchester. It must be remembered that navigation was in its infancy and the aviators of the day followed major landmarks such as railway lines and major roads to maintain the right course. Nuneaton was located on the main L & N.W. Railway line the main route from London to Manchester and the North East of England.

Edward Melly was a man of action and had been a benefactor to the Town in the past, only a few years before he had donated land to develop Nuneaton's first public park at Riversley Gardens and now he decided to develop the Alighting ground. Melly consulted with George Ward the owner of the land at Attleborough with a view too obtaining the use of 12 acres of land for flying. Once the agreement was made he contacted his brother Mr Henry Melly in Liverpool and he came up with a novel idea for the proposed hangar which was to be 50ft wide by 50ft long and 12 ft high which the roof was to be constructed with corrugated Iron pitched roof. The hangar was to have four doors designed to open outwards and lie horizontally with no intermediate support. The lowering and raising of the door was achieved with the use of rope and tackle blocks and it was said this could easily be done with two men. The hangar door would be 10 ft wider than the hangars at Hendon and available floor space was to be 2,500 sq ft as against Hendon's 1,600 sq ft.

Two local companies were engaged, Messrs Parsons, Sherwin & Co of New Bridge Street Nuneaton who most probably supplied the metal work and Messrs Swinnerton & Son Timber Merchants who would build the hangar and supply the materials required. Mr Swinnerton personally visited Hendon to see their largest hangar and consult with the manager. Because the hangar door opening was so large and the fact that the new Alighting ground was in open country, three sides of which were open and one side was tree lined it was decided to reduce the chance of the wind blowing the construction down by building the frame from large wooden columns and embedding them in 4ft of concrete, the roof was to be painted with black and white stripes to aid location of the site.

Immediately after the official opening of the Alighting ground in an attempt to bring the opening of the facility to the attention of the Military, Edward Melly wrote to Col John Bernard Seelyⁱ, M.P. who was Under Secretary at the War Office.

August 3rd 1913.

My Dear Sir,

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I do not know whether you and the War Office have been informed of the Alighting ground which, on the suggestion of my brother, Henry G Melly of Waterloo Nr Liverpool, has been instituted here, and which was declared open yesterday.

My object in providing this ground was purely to assist the military aviation, and in the hope that – as in France – a number of similar alighting places and hangars may be founded in other parts of the country.

I remain,
Yours truly,
ad/ E.F. Melly.

Col Seely then passed the letter down to HQ RFC and on the 17 November they wrote to the Officer Commanding five Squadron at South Farnborough Maj John F A Higginsⁱⁱ.

Will you please arrange for an Officer to inspect the Aerodrome belonging to Mr E F Melly at Nuneaton and report on its suitability as a landing ground for use in cross country flights between Farnborough and Montrose.

If the Nuneaton ground is not judged to be suitable, the officer shallfor aground in the neighbouring town of Coventry and Rugby, bearing in mind the advantage of.....the Ordnance Works.

Maj Higgins detailed Captain Daniel G Connorⁱⁱⁱ to inspect the landing ground who reported back to H.Q RFC (M.W.). Lt Col F H Sykes, Bt, Commanding the RFC (M.W.) in turn reported to the Director General Military Aeronautics on 14 January 1914. He reported that Capt Connor had inspected the Nuneaton landing ground at Nuneaton and that it appeared suitable for a stopping place on flights between Farnborough and Montrose, the Lt. Col also said he did not think it was necessary to inspect the grounds at Birmingham and Newark and that Birmingham had been inspected and reported on in a letter dated 13 June 1913.

Capt Conner described the Field thus.

Field $\frac{3}{4}$ mile S.E. of Nuneaton. Hedges 3'6" high.
Surface – Smooth grass. Slight slope down from S. to N.
Hangar – 50ft x 50ft. Doors 12ft. high. Earth Floor.
Country – Fairly good to E. and S. Houses of Nuneaton to W.

Address:- Warde^{iv}, Attleborough Fields, Nuneaton.

Warde should be warned to clear stock off ground; he offers to supply a searchlight if given a week's notice.

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In the two files at The National Archives^v there are two maps of Attleborough Fields Landing ground, one show its general position in relation to the railway junction and the town of Nuneaton, this drawing was also published in Flight on 2 August 1913. The other a hand drawn sketch shows the position of the ground in relation to the railway junction, dimensions of the landing field and position of the hangar and farmhouse^{vi}.

The Great Aerial Race

Meanwhile one of early flyings most famous names Bentfield Charles Hucks, or B.C. as he was know, challenged Mr Gustav Hamel to an air race; the challenge was covered in the local newspaper The Observer on 22 August 1913. Hucks and Hamel had recently competed in Birmingham at another aviation meet, and according to the report which originally appeared in the Birmingham Daily Post, Hucks manager overheard a over heated discussion about the relative merits of the two aviators. Some one suggested that the only way to settle the argument was for the two competitors to arrange to compete on equal terms in a flying contest. On 16 August Hucks then issued a challenge to Hamel "to a monoplane speed race across country, for £500 aside, over a course starting and finishing in Birmingham". The challenge was accepted and the proprietors of the Birmingham Daily Post were going to present a "handsome silver trophy". The proposed course was to be flown on 30 August between Birmingham, Redditch, Kidderminster, Northampton, Coventry and Nuneaton, Birmingham. In addition a half hours stop was to me made at each of the towns. This course was later amended by replacing Kidderminster and Northampton with Tamworth and Walsall, the Start and finish was still the Tall-Ho, Edgbaston ground at Birmingham, Redditch Beoley Road Showground, Coventry Greenfield's Old Arley Road, Nuneaton Attleborough Fields, Tamworth Drayton Manor, Walsall Springvale Farm, Birmingham Road. The chosen machines were to be identical in construction were two Blériot 80 h.p. monoplanes. Hamel set out for Birmingham on the 27 August from Hendon in his Morane-Saulnier making a short stop at Nuneaton on the way; his time to Birmingham including the stop was 90 minutes. Unfortunately Hamel's race machine was involved in an accident. At this time Hucks machine at the time was in Barnsley and unusually was to be transported to Birmingham by train to avoid any accidents en route. This resulted in a rethink about the race as the Morane was a faster aeroplane than Hucks Blériot. It was decided that the race should continue but that the officials would have to handicap Hamel's Morane two seater. Initially this was to be a time handicap, but Hucks who knew the lie of the land better than Hamel agreed to race on level terms providing Hamel carried a passenger. Hamel agreed to this and as a result the Birmingham Daily Post's offer of a silver trophy and the £500 was set aside.

On race day by the time the two contestants had reached Coventry Hucks was two minutes faster than Hamel. Hucks departed Coventry Green Fields at 3 55 44 pm and Hamel exactly two minutes later, the initial route to Nuneaton was

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along the track of the North Western railway line, at Exhall they cut across the cricket ground. The waiting crowd at the aerodrome was in the order of 2000 people with an estimated 20,000 in the surrounding countryside all eager for a view of the proceedings. The sounding of some factory hooters in Nuneaton alerted the crowd and all heads turn towards Coventry and shortly after Hucks arrived a minute ahead of Hamel. Once Hucks and Hamel had landed the crowd inside and outside the ground surged forward and surrounded the two airmen. Unfortunately Hamel's mechanic Gondre left the machine unattended for a minute or so to speak to Hucks and on his return he discovered that Hamel's cap and goggles were missing from the cockpit. Hamel made an appeal for the return of the items to no avail and as he did not have any spare goggles with him was forced to continue without them. The next leg to Tamworth Drayton Manor was due off at 4.45 and Hamel was forced to make the flight to Tamworth with no eye protection. Hucks departing first and a minute later Hamel, when Hamel reached Tamworth he was leading Hucks by 55 seconds. At Tamworth Hamel was able to find another pair of goggles and by the time they both reached the Walsall Springdale Farm landing field Hamel was only nine seconds in the lead. When the two men departed Walsall on the final leg to Birmingham Tally Ho at Edgbaston, Hamel was able to extend his lead and arrived just over 20 seconds before Hucks. Later Hucks would challenge Hamel to another race on the original terms, which is with the same machine matched against each other.

Following the theft of the goggles, Nuneaton police began to search for the missing items and PC Boneham arrested a Labourer, James Meehan who it was alleged attempted to dispose of the items behind a wall. A witness for the prosecution James Catcliffe informed the court that he saw Meehan take the goggles and cap off the machine and put them under his jacket. Police Constable Boneham said he arrested the prisoner and noticed the cap and goggles under his jacket. Meehan said he was very sorry and that several people near by him were talking about taking the articles, so he did it. He went on to say he did not know the goggles were in side the cap or he would have returned them and that he took the items out of curiosity. Superintendent Evans told the Court that it was a most contemptible theft. The airman was risking his life in the race, and it was mean of the prisoner to steal things so necessary to Mr Hamel's comfort. The chair of the Court Mr J F Johnson expressed himself strongly on the action of the prisoner but said that the Bench would deal leniently with him and fined him £1.00 or 14 days hard labour.

On March 4 1914^{vii} the Royal Aero Club held its Annual at Dinner at the Savoy Hotel in London. The principle guest was the First Lord of the Admiralty, Mr Winston Churchill. Churchill's speech was covered several topics including flying accidents, at one point he said
"The Government ought to do everything in its power, but the public ought to come in too, and there are various ways in which it is proper and convenient that the public should land assistance. For instance, the provision of landing

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facilities is a most important feature in the development of aviation in this country. I think that Lord Tullibardine^{viii} and the Aero Club might guide the public on the path for providing satisfactory facilities, if not all over the country, at any rate along certain marked aerial routes. It ought to be quite easy, and not very expensive, to make a two or three-acre field into one at intervals, and to arrange for a small compensation fund for the farmer or landowner, which would enable aviation to be conducted much more safely and easier than at present. This is a subject for Military and naval investigation, and it is a matter in which the public might be fairly asked to intervene and help."

It must be remembered that on 3 August 1913 Edward Melly had written to Col J. B. Seely M.P. Under Secretary of State for War with just such an offer to the Military.

Ward decided to write to Royal Aero Club dinner attendee Brigadier General Henderson C.B., D.S.O. in his capacity as Director General of Military Aeronautics on 10 March 1914.

Dear Sir^{ix},

After reading Mr Winston Churchill's speech at the Aero Club Dinner with regard to the Government having set landing stages throughout the Country, and also after your representative's visit in December last, if I could see that it would be worth my while, I could easily arrange to extend the field in which the Hangar on my Farm is situated by taking down a hedge and so adding another 200 yards making the length 500 yards for landing and ascending purposes. Further I would arrange for petrol store and mechanics and ordinary spares could also be obtained at a few moments' notice.

I trust that you will give this matter your early consideration as I feel sure that you would find the ground an excellent one, this opinion being borne out by Mr B C Hucks who gave demonstrations here last Thursday and Saturday. Awaiting the favour of your reply.

Yours faithfully,

George Herbert Ward.

A Searchlight could also be fixed, if required.

It is not known what if any the reply to Ward was, but further investigations have not found a reply. Ward alludes to B. C Hucks, Hucks had been flying at Attleborough Field on Thursday the 6 and Saturday the 19 March 1914 displaying to crowds of some 3000 people before bad weather forced him to abandon any further flying.

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Flying continued at Attleborough Fields with an unusual display by Mr Edwin Prosser of Birmingham on 11 July 1914 who gave a display in front of an estimated crowd of 3000 people and which unusually included some flying after dark, his aeroplane had been fitted with electric light bulbs so that the outline of the aeroplane could be observed in flight, a search light was also used to follow the movements of the machine and flares were position to guide him down to earth. The British Empire declared war on Germany on 4 August 1914 and this no doubt had an adverse effect on private flying consequently it is not known if the Military used the aerodrome through the war or not.

A FALSE DAWN

In a rather strange place to announce that he was to start a passenger service at Nuneaton from Whitsuntide 1919 well know motor cycle rider Mr Trevor T. Laker was pictured in the magazine "Motor Cycle" on the 5 June 1919 in front of an ex Royal Air Force BE2e. The Nuneaton Chronicle of the 13 June carried an advertisement on the front page advertising Passenger Flights to be given at Ward's Aerodrome on the following Saturday and Sunday. The paper later noted that a company know as Ariel Transport Co. The Company was offering flights in their 100 h.p. Be2e biplane, the Be2 had been "licensed as being fit for passenger and goods-carrying traffic" and could easily climb to a height of 15000 to 16000 ft. This was probably ex RAF Be2e C7175 which carried the civil registration G-EACY, the aeroplane was first registered on the Civil register on 29 May 1919. The Company hope to find a field for their hangar in the Coventry area, but at present it was temporarily housed in a hangar on Mr. Ward's farm at Attleborough. In early 1921 Nuneaton ceased to a licensed civil aerodrome and the name was deleted from the list of civil aerodromes.

The Aerial transport Co was the trading name for BY AIR Ltd^x a company registered in Coventry at 50 Earl Street with capital of £2000 £1 shares half of which were preference shares. The names of the people concerned were W.R. Johnson, T.T. Laker, J.W. Batchelor and E.W.Saward.

Trevor Tenterden Laker

Trevor Tenterden Laker who was born near Ipswich in 1890 the son of a Bank Cashier and had been working in Birmingham and Coventry from 1910 before starting his own business. Laker had served in WW1 with the A.S.C as a 2/Lt. In 1917 he transferred to the Royal Flying Corps as a Cadet pilot. His initial Officer Cadet training was undertaken at St Leonards over the winter of 1917-18, in February 1918 he was sent to Aboukir Egypt for flying training and then to 193 Training Squadron at Amriya, which later became a component of 20 Training Depot Squadron. For Instruction in higher aviation he was then sent to 16 T.D.S. at Amriya, and was granted his Royal Aero Club certificate, number 7274 on 30 September 1918. Laker returned to the United Kingdom on 15 October 1918 and was sent to 12 Group who sent him to Cranwell on 29 November but he

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was again posted away to near by Spittlegate with 39 TDS as a RE 8 pilot; Laker was posted to the unemployed list on 24 January 1919.

By AIR made the news again in 1920 when the Company was summoned before Bletchley Sessions on 1 April. The company was fined £10 for each for five offences under the Air Navigation Act. And Company pilot Loftus Claude Gerald Mollen Le Champion £5 on six charges i.e.

Flying a machine not carrying British markings. Flying a machine not certified as airworthy. Flying a machine not inspected on day of flight. Taking passengers up for hire or reward on a machine not licensed for this purpose. Flying with out being licensed. The machine had been on its way from London to Coventry and developed engine trouble and was forced to land at Bletchley; the engine had been "overhauled" and the pilot in order to pay his hotel expenses decided to give some flights. The pilot Le Champion from Crick, near Rugby had learnt to fly with the Royal Naval Air Service in 1916 and been awarded RAeC certificate 3367 on 18 August 1916. His appointment with the R.N.A.S had been terminated on 25 January 1917. He joined the Royal Flying Corps on 7 November 1917 and went through Cadet Officer Training but relinquished his commission in October 1918.

The last aeroplane operated by BY Air Airco DH6 G-EAQC was cancelled on the Civil aeroplane register on 6 November 1921 and BY Air was struck off the Register of Companies on 24 July 1923.

By Air had the following aeroplanes registered in its name with the Civil Aviation authorities.

G-EALW	AW FK8	F7484	t.o.c 03/09/19	Crashed
	16/08/20 Bedford			
G-EACY	RAF Be2e	C7175	t.o.c 29/05/19	Crashed 12/19
G-EAQB	Airco DH6	C7815	t.o.c 11.12.19	wfu 09/1920
G-EAQC	Airco DH6	C7436	t.o.c 00/12/19	Cancelled
	06/11/21 operated by By Air Ltd/Baginton B Martin /Notts			

ⁱ AIR1/803/204/1133

ⁱⁱ Major John Frederick Andrews Higgins RFA, born Farnham surrey 01/09/1875, Royal Aero Club certificate no 264 taken on 30/07/1912 at the Bristol School, Brooklands. C.O. 5 Sqn RFC.

ⁱⁱⁱ Capt Daniel Goodwin Connor born Dublin 02/12/1884, before joining the RFC had served with the R.A., RFA and RE. He learnt to fly at the Military School at Larkhill on Salisbury Plain in 1911 and was awarded his Royal Aero club licence on 07/04/11 number 54. He went on to serve with 3 and 5 Squadrons pre war and during the war he held a number of senior postions in the RFC as a Technical Officer. In 1920 as a Wing Commander he resigned and returned to the Army.

^{iv} Connors spelling.

^v AIR1/803/204/1133 and AIR1/764/204/4/219

^{vi} The file AIR1/803/204/4/1133 also contains similar sketches of possible landing grounds at Coventry Radford Reservoir and Coventry Whitmore Park.

^{vii} Flight March 7 1914 p248

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^{viii} The Chairman of the Royal Aero Club. The Marquess of Tullibardine, MVO, DSO, MP

^{ix} AIR1/764/204/4/219

^x Flight 7 August 1919 page 1070