Early civil aviation at Swansea – *Alun John Richards*

The first 'aeronauts' in the Swansea area were those brave souls who, in Edwardian times, put their trust in God and hydrogen, the most dangerous element then known to man, and ascended a couple of hundred feet above Victoria Park in a tethered hydrogen balloon at Swansea's Annual Show.

However, the first known mention of the use of an aeroplane in the Swansea area, was in 1911 when a Mr Sutton is said to have landed one of M Bleriot's patent flying machines on Oxwich sands.

Following this, the paucity of persons in the area with sufficient reserves of both currency and courage to fly meant that Swansea remained an aviation backwater for a decade or more. In contrast with parts of England where 'Air Liners' were already almost commonplace whilst Gypsy Moths ('Carry a golf bag, don'tcha know?') scarcely raised a head, in Swansea, right up to the early 1930s, the sound of an aeroplane would cause people to rush to the window and passers-by to pause and gaze skywards. Schoolchildren would rush into the playground despite the teacher's vain assurances that it was 'just a motorcycle', which indeed it usually was. It has been suggested that local industrialists were too busy making money to bother with flying machines, but in fact in these difficult days they were too preoccupied trying not to lose it.

Immediately after World War I, Swansea enjoyed at least a vicarious connection with flying by the presence of Sir Arthur Whitten Brown as local representative for Messrs Metropolitan Vickers, but he had by then distanced himself from actual aviation. The first tangible manifestations of aerial enterprise were the 'Five bob (25p) flips' from Swansea sands.

The aircraft, which were based at the nascent Cardiff Airport at Pengam Moors, were Avro 504Ks and whilst not uncommon were such an important type as to merit serious mention.

This redoubtable type, which first flew in 1913, remained in production through some 20 variants for almost 20 years and in service in many countries into the 1940s. Most of the 10,000 built were the World War I K variant and immediately after the war many hundreds were offered for sale for little more than the scrap value of the engine. A number were bought by ex-military pilots who scrapped the 90 hp Clerget or Gnome-Rhone rotary engine (whose power could only be attenuated by blipping a magneto-earthing button) and installed a 160 hp Siddeley Lynx radial engine with normal throttle control. They enlarged the rear cockpit to accommodate three (slim!) passengers and took them round the country giving rides from beaches or meadows. Actually the 'Biggles' who flew from Swansea foreshore cannot have got rich on the exercise – they had to transit to and from Cardiff, they were constrained by the tide-table, and if the weather was bad they could not fly and if the weather was good there were too many people about to operate safely.

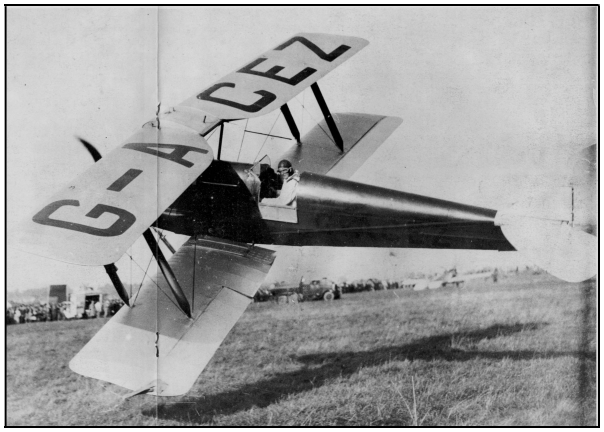
Until the arrival of the 'air circuses' in the early 1930s these represented the sum total of aerial activity in the Swansea area. Tales of grandfathers being given trips by famous flyers such as Sir Arthur Whitten-Brown are untrue. Air circuses, as pioneered by Sir Alan Cobham, involved flooding a particular town with several weeks of intense publicity involving exhortations to be 'air minded', subliminally inferring it was unpatriotic and un-British not to do so.

A motley collection of aircraft would be flown into a suitable field which was rented for the day. There displays would be given while the public were offered brief trips. Most machines were privately owned by pilots anxious to build up hours; a few might be owned by makers anxious to showcase their wares.

The 'market leader' was Sir Alan Cobham, but some charities copied the idea to raise funds and as far as I know, the first 'circus' to visit Swansea was the 'British Hospitals Display' at Whitsun 1933.

The venue was Park Le Breos a steeply sloping, tree-bounded field, far from ideal. Apart from the ubiquitous Avro 504, there were Moths of the Puss, Fox and Gypsy varieties and the new Tiger Moth flown by Idwal Jones, the noted Welsh airman who did his 'pick up a handkerchief with his wingtip' trick, allegedly the only one in the world to be skilled (or foolish) enough to attempt it. There was the brand new De Haviland Dragon – an airliner with no fewer than eight seats, plus a real oddity, an Autogiro, the forerunner of the helicopter. The star attraction was a fly past by the new secret list Hawker Super Fury, rumoured to be able to exceed 200 mph. There was quite a galaxy of pilots, C.W.A. Scott, the splendidly

named J. Rivers-Oldmeadow, the glamorous Pauline Gower and the Brooklands racing ace, the Hon. Mrs Victor Bruce.



Idwal Jones picks up a handkerchief

The whole shebang caused quite a stir. The Vanguard ran special buses and the 'air cruse' over Swansea by a formation of five machines brought traffic to a standstill. For weeks afterwards those who had 'been up' strutted the streets with a swagger.

In the two following years Cobham's circus 'came to town', featuring the delightful but commercially unsuccessful General Monospar, piloted by Owen Cathcart Jones who had found fame by flying from Britain to Australia and back in a week and a half, as well as the Airspeed ferry built for Cobham by N.S. Norway (aka Neville Shute) and the queerest of the queer – the Flying Flea.

It was 1938 before serious commercial aviation came to Swansea with the opening of its own 'airport' by Mr Whitney Straight's Western Airways. The term 'airport' was somewhat ambitious, since it consisted of a cleared and approximately levelled narrow strip of the Jersey Marine scrub, a wooden shed and a windsock.

Regular flights were offered to Cardiff and Bristol, the latter being a hub linking flights to all parts of Britain. Few businessmen were prepared to stand in a windswept, muddy, out of town field to be conveyed to another equally muddy ditto, by a severely weather-dependent aircraft that might or might not arrive. There was a certain cachet about 'took the plane of course' but summer birthday treats for the spoilt children of wealthy parents were probably the main source of revenue. Had it been possible to market it as a golfing destination, in partnership with Swansea Bay Golf Club, or even revive the Victorian plan to make Jersey Marine into a holiday resort, there might have been some success. The outbreak of war enabled Straight to make a graceful exit from this venture. Incidentally the war also enabled him to confound his critics' assessment of him as a rich American throwing his money about by achieving great distinction in the RAF and post-war becoming the driving force behind Britain's flag-carrying airlines.

De Haviland 86 as used by Whitney Straight

Jersey Marine 'airport' was recorded by the RAF as a 'discretionary landing ground' but was probably never used until the Spring of 1944 when it briefly accommodated US Army artillery-spotting Piper Cubs prior to D-Day. As for archaeology, all vestiges vanished under Eastern approach road!

World War II not only put a stop to civil aviation but it also caused RAF Fairwood Common to be built in 1939/40, but it must not be forgotten that prior to this in the late 1930s 'aviation' had taken place on Fairwood Common by the late John Hayman who was for many years a member of SWWIAS. His flights in his home-made glider were extremely brief, but so were Orville Wright's!

The flights took place where the ground falls slightly towards the north-east, a few hundred yards west of the north/south fork of the Gower Road beyond Upper Killay. Two elastic ropes were attached to the nose of the glider. Two teams of up to half a dozen stalwarts then pulled tug-of-war fashion. The glider's tail would be grasped by a pair of helpers with heels well dug in. When the build-up of tension in the ropes was too much for the anchor men to hold, they would let go and the glider would shoot forward with the

Glider similar to the Hayman machine

wings (hopefully over the two collapsed heaps of tug-of-war men), expertly guided by its self-taught pilot, John Hayman. The elastic rope could not impart enough kinetic energy to produce any discernible gain of height and with neither orographic nor thermal lift available, the exercise was technically a 'ground slide', but the fall of ground did enable a glide of a couple of hundred feet.

The glider consisted of a back-bone without fuselage; it has been described as being made of 'old tea chests'. In fact although some of the materials may not have been up to Air Ministry specification, the whole thing was built to professional standards from official drawings. The integrity of the design and construction was good enough for it to be later used by the Air Training Corps, supervised by Flight Lieutenant Norman Clarke RAFVR (T). Power-winch launched, it routinely reached height of several hundred feet.