

Some Personal Recollections of Britain's First Two Experimental Air Mails



By HARRY HARPER

First Air Reporter—Doyen of Writers on Aviation—Author, among more than Twenty Flying books, of "The Evolution of the Aeroplane", "Riders of the Sky", "Romance of the Aerial Mail", and "Flights into the Future".

ON a summer's afternoon, forty years ago, I was sitting in a hangar on the Squire's Gate flying-ground at Blackpool.

In front of me was a little portable typewriter—one of the first of its kind. I was busy tapping out a letter on it to my wife in London.

Outside, on the aerodrome, stood a small Bleriot monoplane.

I finished that letter, and after I had slipped it into an envelope I went across to the aerodrome, being greeted by Mr. G. Holt Thomas, famous air transport pioneer, and by Mr. Claude Grahame-White, equally famous pioneer flyer.

The letter of mine, with other letters and postcards, went into a bag which was stowed away in the cockpit of the Bleriot. After which Grahame-White took his place at the controls and the little machine taxied out for a take-off. There was a gusty wind blowing—nothing to worry any pilot of today, but distinctly troublesome to anyone flying one of the low-powered, slow-flying contraptions of forty years ago.

But Grahame-White was soon in the air, and managed to fly with that mail-bag for about seven miles across country, alighting at a point not far from Southport. Here the bag passed into the hands of Post Office officials, and its contents went on to their destinations through the ordinary surface mails.

That experiment, although unofficial, had the historical significance of being the first in this country in the carriage of mails by aeroplane. Each letter and card airborne in the flight—which took place during the August meeting at Blackpool in 1910—bore an inscription in red to the effect that it had actually been flown.

What this Blackpool experiment did, although unofficial, was to focus public attention on the possibilities of the aeroplane as a swift carrier of urgent mail matter. And it also paved the way for the now-famous test organised in the following year, 1911, and which was flown over a 20-mile route between Hendon and Windsor. Held in connection with celebrations attending the coronation of King George V, a great deal has already been written about these Hendon-Windsor trials, during which more than 100,000 letters and cards were airborne. Details of the experiment are, of course, well known to all interested in collecting air-mail matter. But, so far as I am concerned, I had the privilege of being on the spot personally at the time, and of following and describing—as Britain's first air reporter—each and every aspect of the flights.

The organiser was a very early air friend of mine, the late Sir Walter Windham. It was he who managed to interest the then Postmaster-General, Mr. Herbert Samuel, to such an extent that official Post Office sanction was given to the trials—the first time this was accorded to any such experiment.

One of my personal recollections of this milestone in flying history was touring round some of the big London stores and seeing in each of them a bright red air-mail pillar-box—the first of their kind to appear in the metropolis. In these the public posted specially-issued letters and postcards each carrying a pictorial design in colours showing an aeroplane over Windsor Castle and bearing the wording "First United Kingdom Aerial Post". And all those letters and cards were already franked for inland postage with 1d. stamps for the letters and ½d. stamps for the cards.

Collections from the air-mail boxes were made by Post Office vans, and the letters and cards were taken out to Hendon

aerodrome for air transport to Windsor Great Park by monoplanes and biplanes provided by the Grahame-White Company. Four pioneer pilots, all of whom I knew well, were entrusted with the carriage of the mails. They were Clement Greswell, Gustav Hamel, E. F. Driver and C. Hubert. Greswell and Hamel flew the monoplanes—Bleriot machines with 50 h.p. Gnome motors—while Driver and Hubert flew Farman-type biplanes.

The highlight of the whole test came on the opening day, September 9th, when Hamel was chosen to inaugurate the flights by carrying to Windsor a bag which contained a special letter of greeting to His Majesty the King.

We had all gone out to Hendon in the morning, being due to lunch on the aerodrome before the despatch of the first machine in the afternoon. But already there was a factor to be reckoned with over which neither we nor anybody else had any control. This was the weather. And what the meteorologists were already telling us was causing anxiety.

What was happening was that a quick-moving, deepening depression had appeared suddenly off our south-west coast and was now moving on London. This meant that the wind, blowing already in awkward gusts by the time we reached the aerodrome, might within the next few hours increase in force until it was at gale strength. And what was worrying everybody, more than anything else, was this. The experiment had already been given such a lot of advance publicity that public interest had been thoroughly aroused. And this meant that if the inaugural flight had to be abandoned, owing to the weather, there was a very considerable risk that a lot of people would be going about saying that though the aeroplane might offer a new and super-speed form of transport, it looked as though it might not be sufficiently reliable in adverse weather to be entrusted with His Majesty's Mails. Such an impression, if it took root in the public mind, might be very detrimental to plans already shaping for the establishment of regular air-mail services.

(To be continued)



Mr. Grahame-White (Pilot)—with cap—loads the mail which he carried in his plane from Blackpool, being the first letters carried by airplane in Britain. The helper with pipe is Mr. G. Holt Thomas (Organiser).

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PART II
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So we were a somewhat worried group as we assembled for that aerodrome lunch, because we could see, looking out across the big flying-ground, how rapidly the weather was now deteriorating. But there was one of our party who remained quite cheerful. This was young Gustav Hamel, destined within the next hour or so to win world-fame by becoming Britain's first official aerial postman. Gustav was, without doubt, one of the finest monoplane pilots of his day. He could do things with that Bleriot of his that I had seen no pilot do previously. And not content with flying in favourable conditions, he had already begun to test his powers by making flights in quite high and gusty winds. Thus, though conditions on that all-important day struck most of us as too risky for any pilot to attempt an ascent, Gustav smiled quietly and told us not to worry. That letter to the King was going through by air to schedule, he said, no matter what the weather might be like at the time fixed for the start.

But, as zero hour approached, even his fellow-pilots joined with aerodrome officials in begging him not to think of flying. By now the wind was blowing at gale strength, with occasional super-gusts which whistled round the sheds with vicious force. Gustav, however, remained quietly confident, shaking his head at any idea of cancelling the flight. Mechanics wheeled out his Bleriot. The bag containing the Royal letter was stowed away in the fuselage behind him. The Gnome engine was run-up. Gustav waved an arm. The mechanics let go. Out he taxied. And just as he did so a tremendous gust caught his little monoplane, wafting it up like a leaf on the wind.

There waiting officials, in view of the worsening of the weather, had by now given up any hope of seeing any aeroplane coming from the direction of Hendon. Judge of their astonishment, therefore, when from out of the storm clouds appeared the tiny speck of Hamel's plane. As he drew nearer, coming down over the tree-tops, wind gusts threw his little monoplane about like a row-boat in a heavy swell. But by a superb piece of pilotage he managed to make a safe landing and handed over to Post Office officials that precious bag containing the Royal letter.

The tradition Hamel established, away back on that September afternoon in 1911, is a tradition which still inspires our present-day postmen of the air. It is with one slogan in their minds: "The mails must get through" that they fight their way through the fiercest gales. Far north into the Arctic, far south into tropic lands, our world-girdling mail-planes now wing their way, and those in their control cabins do not forget that day, away back in the infancy of flight, when Hamel braved a gale in his little low-powered plane in order to pave the way for one of the most romantic of all developments in aerial history.



HAMEL AT THE CONTROLS: A PHOTOGRAPH TAKEN A MINUTE BEFORE THE INCIDENT RELATED BELOW

It seemed to go straight up into the air without any run forward at all, hovering motionless for a moment or so although its engine was running at full throttle. But now another great wind rush came sweeping up. The monoplane dived a wing and, for a moment, we thought it was going to side-slip and crash. But Hamel was still master of the situation. Diving to pick up speed, he brought that drooping wing up just in the nick of time. And then he proceeded to fight grimly with that gale as he slowly gained altitude. Presently, now at a safe height, he swung round and headed for Windsor.



A COVER CARRIED ON THE HISTORIC FLIGHT

King George VI Study Circle

THE TABLES

SIR,—I know everyone is not an avid collector of K.G.VI items, but has anyone ever made this suggestion to you? Have you ever thought of compiling into one handy volume all the table you have given on the printings of the K.G.VI items? I have my back copies open to those pages when I put them away so that when a date of a certain shade release or perf. release is required I need only look for the open copies. All the printing tables in one compact booklet would be very handy. Then it could be kept right with the catalogue one uses as a company book.

FREDERICK J. BECKER.

South Milwaukee, Wis., U.S.A. January 20th.

(The suggestion has been made, and it is hoped that we can act on it in the future. The main snag at the moment is the paper, but there are certain technical difficulties such as where one is to draw the line? (Should one put in a table of a current issue stopping at an arbitrary date or wait until the issue is obsolete?) The views of collectors of K.G.VI stamps would be appreciated.—Ed.)