

Notes from Local Interest Group 22nd February 2018

Present: Maureen Lloyd, Avryl Lloyd, Sylvia Illingsworth, Margaret & John Price, Jenny Francis, John & Evelyn Bally, Helen Barnett, Sue Farmer, Edwina Griffiths, Carole Gibbs, Richard Martin, John & Sue Ievers, Judith Coles, Gareth Jenkins, Tim Francis, Geoff Moore, Grace Davies, Roy Lloyd

Apologies: Wendy & Dainis Ozols, Peter & Pauline Spode

Maureen welcomed everyone and introduced our speaker for the evening, Phillip Jones from Llandrindod Wells, who was going to speak about Aviation in Radnorshire; he was ably assisted with the visual presentation by his wife, Amanda.

Phil explained that he had recently published a book called "Early Birds and Boys in Blue: A century of Radnorshire Aviation", about all aspects of flight in the county of Radnorshire, so most of the talk would be on that. He also works for the Radnorshire Museum and would spend a few minutes talking about the museum.

The project began in 1985 when Phil and his late father-in-law, John Lucas, began striding across the hills of Radnorshire looking for wrecked aircraft. The next logical step was to find other like-minded people to share information with and he came across the Machynlleth Aircraft Discovery Group which helped him to get into the field of aviation archaeology. It was at about this time that he began to focus on the men rather than the crashes, because a crash site was often the last resting place of a young man and Phil wanted to know more about who the young man was. He began by focusing on a few local sites with a view to revealing the stories of one or two of the wartime pilots.

We were given an outline of aviation in Radnorshire with reference to the many men who had connections with the county, some poignant, some humorous, but all contributing to a rich biographical account of a century of flight. We were shown pictures of the men, the families, the aeroplanes, advertisements and other related objects which provided the backdrop to some fascinating details of men and machines.

The story of flight in Radnorshire started in 1912. Denys Corbett Wilson, a newly qualified pilot with barely 30 flying hours, set off to be the first man to cross the Irish Sea by air. He did make it, but there were a few hiccups on the way, one of which was his forced landing at Colva. There were air displays in the county in 1912, 1913 and 1914 in places like Llandrindod Wells and Knighton. Some of the most famous aviators of their day, such as Gustav Hamel, came to perform stunts and aerobatics; in fact, Gustav achieved superstar status. Vivian Hewitt, his fellow showman, was a little "steadier". He crashed at an air show at Llandrindod Wells, but he was not hurt and soon appeared across the river from the crowd smoking a cigarette. In 1914 the summer season was cut short as World War I broke out.

Not at any point during the history of the British Air Force has anyone been compelled to fly. From the beginning, as the Royal Flying Corps through to the formation of the Royal Air Force and up to the present day, all air crew were and are still volunteers.

As far as is known, William Thomas Lloyd Allcock from Knighton was the first Radnorshire man to qualify as a pilot. He had emigrated to Canada, but when the War began he returned home and, in May 1915, he became a qualified pilot and joined the Royal Flying Corps; he was 19 years old. He kept a diary which provides interesting reading about the early days of flying. Later he became a flying instructor and one of his pupils, Charles Kingsford Smith, became the first to cross the Pacific and to circumnavigate the globe in the air. Allcock disappeared on a mission in France on 5th June 1917.

When WW1 was in full swing, a poster encouraged men to join up by promising that they would not be sent to serve in the trenches or at sea if they volunteered for the Air Force. Phil gave so many examples of men who had joined the Air Force in WW1. Three of the Millichamp sons from Presteigne chose to serve in the Royal Naval Air Service. Cyril Evan Robinson from Llanellwedd spent only eleven days in France before he was killed. The Insall brothers were all living in France, where their father had a dental practice, when WW1 broke out. The family headed back to England and Gilbert joined up and was shot down and taken prisoner; he won the Victoria Cross. Jack trained as a pilot and after his service he retired to Penybont. Cecil, the youngest brother, joined the Red

Cross at the age of 17. Percy Bufton from Llandrindod Wells had an interesting and relatively safe war! He was a keen naturalist and at the end of the War flew exotic pets across the Channel; he even had his plane adapted to transport tropical fish. He went on to serve in World War II.

After the War many of the pilots turned their skills to entertainment. By the 1930s, flying was becoming far more common. The cost of a flight from Llandrindod to London was £10 7s when average wages were £200 per year and you could buy a house in London for £400 or a pint of beer for 2d. For those who could not afford a flight, air displays were the next best thing. There were no crashes in Llandrindod during the War but with increased activity it was perhaps no surprise that a Northamptonshire man overshot the Ddole runway and crashed into a neighbouring property. Alan Cobham was another famous aviator who came to Llandrindod. He was responsible for the airliner 'Youth of Britain' which had been commissioned to allow 10,000 school children an introduction to aviation with a free flight. Glen Pearson Kidston, a larger than life character whose parents lived at Gwernyfed estate, began his military career in the Royal Navy with several skirmishes in World War I. He decided to learn to fly and would fly to Llandrindod to pick up parts from Tom Norton's Automobile Palace before returning to Gwernyfed. He teamed up with Owen Cathcart Jones who was the proverbial "lovable rogue". They collaborated on record attempts, but during one of these Kidston was killed in a crash in South Africa. In WWII, Cathcart served with the Canadian Air Force, enjoying a few "sideline" visits to Hollywood, etc.

On Sunday 21st November 1940, one of the most unusual aircraft landings in Radnorshire was that of a modified Tiger Moth; it came to an unscheduled stop in the Claerwen valley. Nobody was hurt because no-one was in the aircraft. This ungainly aircraft, called the Queen Bee, was an experimental, pilotless aircraft from which all modern-day drones have been developed.

31 aircraft have crashed in Radnorshire over the years. In some places there are still little bits of plane left at the crash sites, such as near New Radnor where there are molten bits of alloy left in the grass. These are the remains of a Wellington bomber which crashed on 10th December 1940 when out on a training flight to Aberaeron. The crew members were unharmed and taken to a local pub to wait to be picked up. After a crash, anything which could be salvaged would be and the rest burned. This was to prevent other aircraft reporting an aircraft down. Thirty of the crashes involved British aircraft. However, on 25th April 1942, a German aircraft got lost when on a mission to distract British fighters away from a bombing raid on Bath. The pilot and gunner were killed in the crash while two other crew members bailed out and survived. At the time, there was only one policeman in Glascwm and he had to deal with the fire as well as the missing airmen. However, five members of the Home Guard were soon on the scene. The last crash in Radnorshire was in 1987 when a Jaguar crashed on Pantau Farm near Aberedw; the pilot, Fl/Lt Ian Hill, was the last military pilot to be killed in Radnorshire.

It was not only aircraft that were falling on Radnorshire, bombs were dropped on the county on 27 different occasions, although there is no evidence that Radnorshire was the original target, rather they were the result of lost or damaged aircraft dropping their "unwanted" bombs.

The Bufton family from Llandrindod Wells made a big contribution to RAF history. Sidney joined in 1927 and by WWII he had flown every type of aircraft. He rose to the rank of Wing Commander. His younger brother, Harry (Hal), became a bomber pilot. These brothers were instrumental in setting up one of the most famous forces in RAF history, the Pathfinder Force, renowned for its contribution in WWII.

In answer to a question, Phil highlighted a local crash, near Penbedw Rocks in October 1942, involving a Miles Master stationed at Cardiff, in which the Polish pilot was killed. The other local crash was in 1941 when a New Zealand Air Force pilot, James Grevatt, having got lost and running out of fuel, was forced to land on Pentre Farm, Rhosgoch. As John Meredith recalled, there was great excitement. "We all rushed out of school to see the crashed plane, which was a write off."

Llandrindod Museum is housed in the Carnegie Library building, which is situated in the Town Hall gardens. There is an extensive collection of geological specimens from Radnorshire within the museum. There are also several classes and activities held in the upstairs gallery. The museum holds many artefacts and items of interest from Radnorshire and it also hosts a display of the Rev Francis Kilvert, as well as Victorian toys and displays on the spas of the town, along with so much more. A forthcoming event in the autumn is "Radnorshire in the Great War"; as

the centenary of the end of the War approaches, the intention is to commemorate as many of the men from the county as possible. The exhibition will run from November 2018 until January 2019.

ML thanked Phil Jones for his fascinating talk, he had made the history of aviation in Radnorshire really interesting and she was looking forward to reading his book.

The meeting ended with refreshments, kindly made as usual by Avryl & Edwina.

The next two meetings will be held at Painscastle Village Hall:-

March 29th – The de Winton Family by Ken Jones.

April 26th – Hergest Camp, Kington by Mari Fforde.