

Did We Make History?

Keith Hardwick

Henry G. Melly flight re-enacted

I hope you remember, and enjoyed, reading my article, "100 years ago...." in our previous 09/27 which majored on the aviation achievements of Mr Henry G Melly. It might be an idea to re-read it now to set the scene for this sequel.

Henry Melly was one of those fearless men in their very early flying machines. He had a passion about aircraft in the years soon after the Wright brothers made their first flight in 1903. After marrying in 1910, Henry of course took his new bride on honeymoon, but it was a rather different sort of honeymoon. It lasted at least nine weeks and during this time Henry spent a lot of time learning to fly at Louis Blériot's Flying School at Pau in France! He was awarded his licence – "Pilote-Aviateur" on the 9th October 1910. It was licence No. 212 of the, "L'Aero-Club de France, Paris". Quite a different honeymoon achievement. More about this licence later.

Henry, and one assumes his new bride, returned to Merseyside and soon purchased his first Blériot XI aeroplane which was duly shipped to Liverpool and was first flown from the fledgling Airfield at Freshfield in late 1910. By March 1911, Henry had established his own operational airfield at Waterloo Sands near Crosby, complete with two hangars and workshop. He had, prior to his marriage, qualified as an Engineer, a training that was to prove invaluable in his flying exploits.

From early summer 1911, Henry flew almost daily from Waterloo in one of his now three Blériots, one of which was a two-seater and was often accompanied by his wife Nellie or other pupils. He was the first full-time flying instructor in Lancashire and soon had an enthusiastic band of pupils. It was with one of his pupils, Mr Dukinfield-Jones, that he attempted and succeeded in making the first ever non-stop flight between Liverpool (Waterloo Sands) and Manchester (Trafford Park). You had the story of the amazing return flight on 7th July 1911 in the previous Newsletter. I had felt that we ought to mark this epic flight by re-flying the original route on the exact 100th Anniversary day, and as near as possible at the same time too.

I was not too surprised that the number of people wishing to make the anniversary flight was small, just five in fact. The cost was unavoidably high for a special charter flight in a small commercial aircraft which would have to position to/from LJLA for the flight. It looked like we would change to use a Liverpool-based 5-seater Ravenair Aztec aircraft. However, before confirming this I decided to double check that Martin Keen did not have the right sized aircraft available, because Martin has been so enthusiastic and generous in the past in support of other special flying events we have mounted. Martin confirmed that he did not have a 5-seater available, but, "Why not have five aircraft, one for each celebrant flier and let's do the flight over Melly's original route in formation?" Now that really was the most surprising offer I have ever had for a flight. It would be much more 'authentic' than one swift small airliner, more impactful and certainly more memorable for the celebrants, but hey, hang on, what would they



A photograph of Henry Melly's pilot's licence dated 1910

Malcolm Coates

feel about the possible major change of plan? It was with great relief that one after another as I explained the possibility, though not a little 'shell shocked', they were equally enthusiastic and excited at the prospect. Martin quickly confirmed that he could offer the flight for each celebrant at the same cost as the Aztec. Now that was one heck of a generous offer! "These special historic flying achievements must be remembered and celebrated," said Martin. "We owe it to the early fearless fliers without whose bravery and determination the aviation we all love today would never have developed."

So, what did we now have on our hands? Aircraft and celebrants secured I set out to find more about Henry G Melly and see whether there were any of Henry's descendants still around Merseyside and who might even join us on the flight. Chris Aspin – the author of the book on early fliers in Lancashire told me he had had contact with Henry's only daughter Eileen some 20 years ago. OK, on to local searches for Eileen Melly and up came a 'hit' at a Nursing Home in Crosby in 2010. Was she still there? Sadly no, she had died in October 2010 aged 93. Back now to the internet. My first stroke of fortune was to locate a German person who was also asking for information on the 'Melly family' (The family had come to 'fame' in Geneva in



'Melly 2' Tomahawk G-LFSN flown superbly by Ed Byrne with the Editor aboard

Graham Ward

Switzerland back in the 1700s when a Melly had made a fortune from watch design and manufacture). His comments indicated he had had recent contact with a family member and he kindly gave me the contact. The contact was a Malcolm Coates who was living on the Wirral and Malcolm's wife was a niece of Henry. To cut a long and very happy story short, I, and our Editor Graham, were invited to go and meet Malcolm and his wife, Malcolm having told me on the phone that they had a lot of family items which had been passed on to them by Eileen, including many concerned with Henry's flying activities. Eileen had never married and there were no children from Henry's only son Len who had died over 20 years ago. The biggest shock of all 'inflicted' on me came when Malcolm announced calmly, "I do know where two of Henry's Blériot propellers are". No, he confirmed, he certainly was not joking. He subsequently put us in touch with the owner of one propeller, who so kindly loaned it to us for our event!!!

I still get goose bumps when I think about that revelation, and about Graham and I really touching and collecting the wonderful propeller to bring it to Liverpool as the star of our celebration - it really may have been the actual propeller that Henry had used for his Liverpool—Manchester flight. With the owner's permission it was the star attraction at our July FoLA meeting and was appropriately drooled over by all present! We had hoped to carry it on the celebratory flight, but sadly at 8ft. 2ins long it just would not fit safely into either of our types of formation aircraft - Cherokee or Tomahawk. We actually took the next best (or even better!) link with Henry in the Cherokee - Malcolm's daughter Sue, a real member of the Melly family. Each of the five pilots carried a copy of Henry's original French licence with them throughout the flight and Certificates, based on the licence and signed by all pilots and celebrants, were also carried on the Cherokee and later presented to each participant as a unique memento of the day. Henry was truly with us throughout the flight.

I must now tell you a little about the actual celebratory flight, though you also have in this 09/27 a slightly more 'technical' account by Brian Jones of aspects of the flight. The five-aircraft formation was made up of one Cherokee, G-LFSG as lead aircraft flown by Chief Flying Instructor at Liverpool Flying School (LFS) Phil Ryan, followed by four Tomahawks piloted by Martin Keen, Mitch Walker, Ed Byrne and Bill Morland. Celebrant fliers were Susan Cain (Great niece of Henry Melly), and FoLA members Lil' and Ron Buckley, John Hughes, Brian Jones, Graham Ward and yours truly Keith Hardwick. (Sue, Lil' and myself were in the Cherokee, other members were 'solo' in the Tomahawks).

Thursday morning 7th July 2011 dawned dreadfully dull with heavy showers and a brisk wind. The signs were.....? Nevertheless we all assembled at the LFS for 09.00 and arrived to hear aircraft engines already revving. The pilots had decided they needed to go and try the conditions and see whether we could go ahead with Plan A. Interviews with BBC Radio Merseyside reporter Jimmy McCracken, which were broadcast later in the day, helped to usefully fill some of the waiting time. After an anxious 30 minutes they returned and said.....Yes we would give it a go. Phew! But it might be a bit sporty! We all climbed aboard around 10.15 and were settled into our aircraft by our respective pilots, thankfully now with the weather showing distinct signs of improvement especially 'up to the north', where we would be heading first. Ready to go, and I really have to admit I did not have any idea of what was to unfold. Yes, I have flown in small aircraft many times, but not formation flying (like the Red Arrows!) and with four displays to do before we returned and with an estimated airborne time of



The Gaggle of LFS aircraft go forth

John Hughes

around one hour 45 minutes...

We all had head-sets complete with microphones so we could hear all ATC conversations and talk to each other in each of the aircraft. This added greatly to the understanding of the flying and enjoyment of the whole experience. We also picked up clues about when we should hold-on particularly tightly as we began our 'hair-raising manoeuvres'. And who said close our eyes!?

Phil our leader made all the ATC calls for the whole formation, other pilots listening in of course and able to break into the transmissions if it was necessary. It is almost impossible for the lead pilot in a formation to see the positions of his other aircraft - no wing mirrors here!, so the agreed checks to confirm other aircraft OK and in correct positions was to be by simple numbering back to Phil when asked. He would call, "Formation check call" and the response, if everything was OK, was to be by allocated aircraft number, Phil calling One, then....Two...Three....four....five, back from each pilot/aircraft in quick succession. Engines were all started and Phil called ATC for permission to taxi to Runway 27 using the collective call sign "Melly Formation" - a lovely touch. Formation check... One....Two...Three, Four, Five...all OK and we were off for the 27 holding point and then into the unknown.

It was just a little turbulent as we got airborne, but the weather now looked good ahead as we climbed to 1,000 feet on course to Waterloo. Superb views of Liverpool City as we progressed up past Pier Head. Quick looks back left and right showed Numbers 3 and 4 aircraft working hard to keep the formation behind us. They occasionally bobbed and weaved off our wing tips coping



Mr Melly's Blériot propeller made a nice table decoration!

Graham Ward



The Formation 'perform' over Mossley Hill Church Simon Rayner

with our turbulence and the natural elements. The formation tightened as we prepared for our first display at Waterloo Sands over the grassed area by Harbord Road/Sandheys Avenue, exactly where Henry had his Airfield and would have taken off from for Trafford Park almost 100 years ago to the minute. Below we could see lots of fellow celebrators frantically waving to us. After I got in touch with 'the two Brendas' from local history groups, Brenda Riddick and Brenda Murray, they had excitedly organised local residents and many dozens of children from three local Primary Schools (Ursuline Primary, Blundell-sands: St Edmunds Waterloo and The Mount, St Mary's Prep School) to celebrate the occasion. To kindly grace the event further The Mayor of Sefton, Councillor Paul Cummins, had enthusiastically agreed to join the welcome crowd for as he considered, this 'important local event'. Reports from people on the ground afterwards were that they enjoyed the formation greatly, but, "What a pity we couldn't go lower" Well, we were at the minimum safe height of 500feet.

We said bye for now to the Waterloo brigade and hoped to see them again later when we made our final tribute pass over Henry's Airfield after returning from Manchester. Climbing back to around 1,200 feet we were on our way to Trafford Park along a similar route to the one Henry took and at around the same height he reported using. We went via Aintree Racecourse, South of St Helens, North of Warrington and on to overhead Barton Airfield. As we progressed towards Manchester and our next display area it was decidedly dark and 'misty' ahead. Phil remarked, "Looks as though that weather may take a bite at us". Interesting comment! Then, "Calling Melly Formation for check... One... Two... Three... Four... Five." Great, we were all present and correct and ready for the next display. Phil had flown over the day before to locate from the air the intended centre of our display. The position was midway along the main road through the now Trafford Park Industrial Complex at a section so aptly called, 'Centenary Way' We determined this to be as near as

could now be reasonably estimated to the spot where Henry had landed at the then Trafford Deer Park/ Estate/Golf Course. A bit of confusion here because some of the old records report Henry landed on the Golf Course, (and certainly he was taken to lunch in the Club House by the startled golfers before returning to Waterloo), where the Trafford Park Aerodrome was subsequently established later in 1911. Other reports say he was the first ever to land at and take off from at the new Trafford Park Aerodrome on 7th July 1911. A small detail. We certainly know where he landed and later took off from. Interestingly reports also say that his take off to return to Liverpool on 7th July 1911 was the first ever flight by a powered, heavier than air machine (aeroplane), out of Manchester city. Another sub-event to be celebrated.

It was dull and raining now as we approached the display spot. There it was, by the blue and orange roofed buildings which Phil had selected to identify our display position, and there too were lots of welcoming enthusiasts, **and** they had placed a white sheet on the ground (adjacent car park) just as H V Roe had used to guide Henry in July 1911. Another super touch! The welcome group here had been mustered by Nick Forder, Head of the Aviation Collection at the Manchester Museum of Science and Industry (MOSI) and Kevin Flanagan from The St Anthony's Heritage Centre at Trafford Park. Both of them had offered to help organise a welcome when I had explained our plans. They too realised the significance of the original flight in the aviation history of Manchester and the value in celebrating it. Before our arrival they had enjoyed a presentation at the Heritage Centre on Melly's achievement and the history of the Trafford Park Aerodrome. Though the Aerodrome had only operated for about 3 years, it was Manchester's very first official and equipped 'Airfield' and towards the end of its operational period the Roe brothers did a lot of test flying there as they developed their new aircraft. We had hoped that a son of one of the Roe brothers would have been in 'today's' welcome party, but, although originally intending to be there, he was not quite well enough to travel on the day. What another superb link that would have been. Still, in trying to make arrangements, I actually found myself talking to Barnes Wallace's daughter! Yes, the Barnes Wallace of bouncing bomb fame! Another wonderful and totally unexpected experience for me!

Despite the lower visibility over Trafford Park we still carried out our full intended formation routine at around 500 feet. In addition to the waves, it was fascinating to see the large Salford Quays development from the air. Afterwards Kevin Flanagan said they were amazed at how good our formation display looked! – Well done Guys! While we were in our display over Trafford Park BBC Radio Manchester did a live broadcast from the ground below us.

Henry described climbing to around 2,500 feet for his return flight to Waterloo to, 'escape the air currents', but we chose



Exhausted but very happy—Ron and Lil' back on terra firma Keith Hardwick

1,000 – 1,500 feet and it was quite smooth, though still a bit damp and murky although with better weather in sight back towards Liverpool. Visual checks showed some of our co-formators still enjoying a bit of bobbing and weaving.

Quite quickly we were approaching south Liverpool and LJLA ATC gave us the freedom of the zone to do our display over Mossley Hill Church. Phil called colleagues to check number on the display frequency with him as usual starting , One...two.....Three....Four.....Five.....**Six!!** OK, who was the joker? I still don't know who it was that called 'Six', but it showed just how relaxed and in good spirits our pilots were. We could see the Union flag flying from the Church Tower as had been promised by Rev. Alan Kennedy, a really nice touch to fly the flag from dawn to dusk specially for our celebration. In 1911, Henry Melly's family house, Riversley, was adjacent to the Church, though it was finally demolished in the 1950s to make way for the development of new Halls of Residence for Liverpool University. Henry had intentionally routed back to Waterloo Sands via the useful navigation landmark of Mossley Hill Church and to view his own family house from the air and hence our routing and salute to the Melly home. Rev. Kennedy also told the story of Melly and the flight in his address to his congregation on the Sunday before 7th July. The word certainly did spread.

After Mossley Hill it was back to the River Mersey and on up to Waterloo Sands. All crews and celebrants were really enjoying the formation routine now so we did another full display over Henry's Airfield, much to the delight of the children and others who had waited patiently for our return. After a final farewell line-astern pass we were cleared by ATC back to Jaguar for a right base and landing back on Runway 27. To be honest I was now feeling distinctly sad to be nearing the end of what had been quite an unbelievable experience, and my mind started to turn to what 'challenge' we might take on next.

We landed in line with 'us' in the lead holding-off till well down the runway to allow our mates to land behind us. We had been airborne for one hour and forty-two minutes during which time the crews had had to work extremely hard throughout. They were quite exhausted, but justifiably exhilarated and proud of their



Martin and Keith congratulate each other Maureen Hardwick

achievement. It had after all been a new experience for them too. We de-planed slowly, all ready for a blow of fresh air and a good stretch.

Back inside the Flying School we welcomed the sight of a nice buffet lunch set out for us by my dear wife and Mrs Kath Keen. We all grouped around Henry's wonderful propeller and photographs of his family, aircraft and airfield and drank a heartfelt toast to "Henry Melly, Aviateur extraordinaire." What had started out as 'a good idea' had turned out to be an experience beyond my wildest dreams. It was largely thanks to **everyone** who had warmed to the idea of a celebration flight, and contributed so much to it, that it had become a great pleasure and privilege to be involved in the event. Many, many, thanks from me to **all the people** mentioned in this report for their help and support. I will just pick out two people again for special mention – Martin Keen of course who's genius idea of, 'Five aircraft for five celebrants', started the transformation of the event to something extra special, and to Malcolm Coates of the present Melly family for so generously sharing with us so many personal details of the family which completed the transformation of our celebration into a once-in-a-lifetime experience. I really mean that.

Did we make history? I think we did, though I guess we will have to wait until 2111 to see if we figure in stories surrounding the 200th Anniversary of Henry G Melly's 1911 flight.

More information and lots of lovely pictures of the event are available on lots of sites on the internet, especially our FoLA web site at: www.foia.org.uk and on the North West Air News Bulletin Board.

Left—

Martin Keen who made the whole thing possible

John Hughes

