



Vale and Downland Museum – Local History Series

The Berkshire Aviation Company

by Reg Wilkinson

The Berkshire Aviation Company specialised in giving people short trips in aeroplanes for a few shillings per head - an activity known as “joyriding”. The firm was probably the most successful of the joyriding concerns which operated between the wars. In its early years it was based at East Hanney which was in North Berkshire at that time, hence the name of the firm.

Fred Holmes and his brother, John, were born at East Hanney in a house called “The Mulberries”. When Fred left school he joined A.V. Roe as an apprentice and qualified as a mechanic in time to join the Royal Naval Air Service at the outbreak of the 1914-18 war. John was commissioned in the Royal Flying Corps two years later and, like Alan Cobham, transferred from the Army to the RFC in 1917.

John was captured after being shot down behind enemy lines and ended up as a prisoner-of-war in Silesia. After a number of unsuccessful escape attempts he was repatriated to England in January 1919. Three months later he and his brother teamed up with Alan Cobham to form the Berkshire Aviation Company.

The firm owned one aeroplane, an Avro 504K, which was purchased for £600 from a war surplus depot in Surrey. On 27th May 1919, the first joyriding tour started near Newbury and continued through the southern counties until the aircraft was damaged beyond repair in a forced landing at Northampton. Compensation from the insurance company arrived just in time to enable the firm to buy a second machine and thus stay in business.

Additional aircraft were purchased as joyriding increased in popularity and more pilots were engaged so that tours could be extended and their number increased. By the spring of 1922, after three years in business, Berkshire Aviation had carried nearly 34,000 passengers and had outlived most of its competition.

Flying was still in its infancy despite experience gained during the war, and joyriding helped to introduce people to a novel and exciting means of transportation. At first passengers were charged as much as a guinea, but later trips were reduced to ten shillings and five shillings per head.

The flying was done from grass fields which were rented from farmers by the day. As well as joyriding the pilots gave demonstrations of their flying skills which included stunts such as hedge-hopping, wing-walking and looping-the-loop. Because of their daring, the pilots were regarded as celebrities and they had many requests for autographed postcards of themselves and their machines.

A few of the flyers became world famous. They included Alan Cobham, who left after one year with Berkshire Aviation to join the De Havilland Aircraft Co., and was to pioneer air routes all over the globe. He wrote a number of books about his journeys and was knighted for his services to aviation. Another was O.P. Jones, who joined Berkshire

Aviation in 1920 and was well-known in later years as a captain in Imperial Airways and BOAC.

In winter the aviation company's machines were overhauled in a barn at East Hanney. Spare parts were obtained from the surplus store at RAF Milton and engines were usually lifted out of the aircraft by means of a block and tackle slung from the branch of a convenient tree.

Business continued to improve as the joyriding tours were extended to take in the whole country. Fred and John were away from home for long periods, but they visited "The Mulberries" whenever they could and on numerous occasions flew over the house to drop a bundle of dirty laundry on the lawn!

John gave up flying in 1923 and took a job with British Petroleum. Soon afterwards the company took on the title of Berkshire Aviation Tours and in 1926 moved to Witney. Three years later the company amalgamated with Northern Air Lines to form Northern Air Transport Ltd. This firm worked from Barton in Lancashire with more than 20 Avro 5014Ks, all of which were painted red and silver. In later years many of these aeroplanes toured with Sir Alan Cobham's famous Flying Circus.

Northern Air Transport went over to more conventional forms of commercial flying when interest in joyriding began to decline. At the start of World War II Fred Holmes became the manager of a factory which made aircraft parts and John Holmes became a Squadron Leader, working in the operations room of Fighter Command.

Fred died in 1967, and his brother died at the age of 81 in August 1980. Until a few months before his death John still talked with enthusiasm about his early days in flying. He was kind enough to supply much of the information contained in this article.

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