



**HAPPY  
TO FLY**

**An Autobiography**

**ANN  
WELCH**

*Happy to Fly*, written by a pilot with a lifelong enthusiasm and love for flying, is a lively book, full of stories from all over the world which do not turn up in ordinary aviation histories. In 1981 Ann Welch was awarded the Gold Air Medal of the Fédération Aéronautique Internationale in recognition of her distinguished career in aviation and for her devotion to the training and encouragement of young pilots. *Happy to Fly* is her personal story of fifty years of aviation and reveals a truly pioneering spirit, impatient with bureaucracy and petty restrictions and full of interest for new developments and ideas.

As a child Ann Welch longed to fly, kept a diary which listed every aeroplane that flew over the house, and at sixteen bought a motorbike for five pounds to visit Croydon Aerodrome. She gained her pilot's licence at seventeen in 1934, flew at Brooklands, and in 1937 started gliding. In that year she also began instructing in gliding and the following year started the Surrey Gliding Club.

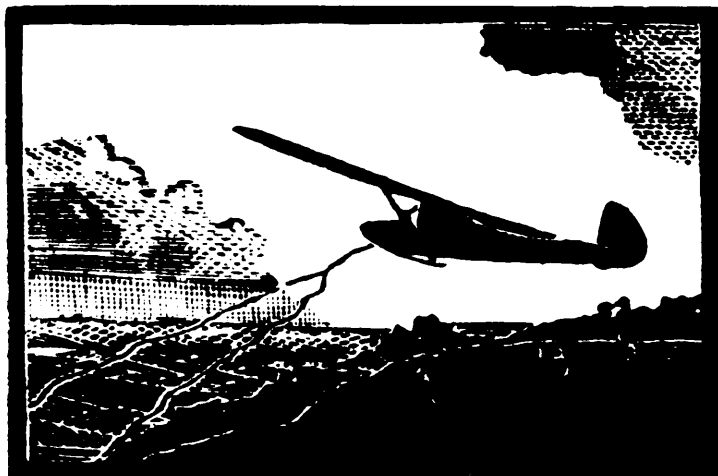
In *Happy to Fly* the author vividly describes her experiences during the Second World War, when, as a member of Air Transport Auxiliary, she flew new aeroplanes — Spitfires and Hurricanes, Blenheims and Wellingtons — from the factories to operational units.

After the war Ann Welch concentrated on gliding, particularly the training of pilots and instructors, and for twenty years was in charge of the British Gliding Association Examining Panel. During these years she was also bringing up three children as well as being Manager of the British Gliding Team in World Championships and, later, Chairman of the International Jury.

Currently she is involved with both hang gliding and microlight flying because she believes that people should be able to afford to fly when they are young.

# *HAPPY TO FLY*

*An Autobiography*



*To Wally*

**Ann Welch**

*Ann Welch*

*Lasham July 1998*

**JOHN MURRAY**

# *To all my Family*

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## Introduction

Suddenly I was sixty. Then almost at once, it seemed, I was sixty-five. What was happening to those years which had once seemed to stretch far into the future, filled with so many marvellous things to do and still to be done? Now, here I was, helping to teach people little older than my granddaughter to become hang gliding and microlight instructors; though after only a few not very successful flights I had realised that, for me, the delights of hang gliding had sadly come twenty years too late. I must be mad; I should be pottering in the garden or going to boring coffee mornings, not running round without a moment to spare.

Once, a long time ago, I knew that all I ever wanted was to fly, to just float around in the cool sky, playing with the clouds, looking at the land and sea below, toylike and beautiful. Or, when I had to be on the ground, to create things: to paint pictures, to write about flying, or make things in wood which smelt so good. But here I was, involved in paperwork and those faceless international organisations which years back I had thought so unimportant – I had all the ideas I needed of my own. What was it that had determined the way I would, or should, go? What decisions had I unwittingly taken that caused the linking of events which had inexor-



ably led from those lovely dreams of flying to the administrative pressures of today – but also to the fascinations of an aviation far beyond my early imagination. My dreams were just of being in the air like a bird, and did not include travelling comfortably to the Pacific in a day, or ‘flying’ the 747 simulator in Seattle; this felt so real that I believed landing from a cockpit 30 ft up would be difficult, but it was not. Certainly I never had any intention to become what I am or to do many of the things that I have done; the possibilities were not even known to me. So how did it happen?

In 1903 an organisation had been born called the Fédération Aéronautique Internationale (FAI) for ‘the encouragement and control of all sporting flying’, but I did not really know anything about it until I had been flying almost thirty years. It was in 1965 that I went to one of its meetings in Paris to discuss rules for the World Gliding Championships in England, of which I was to be the Director. Afterwards I was invited to Paris again to consider future rules and found myself becoming increasingly involved with the FAI Gliding Committee, CVSM (now CIVV – Commission Internationale de Vol à Voile), and after that as British FAI delegate, a Vice-President, and Editor of the annual *FAI Bulletin*. I liked the FAI because it was a great and civilised gathering of enthusiasts, people from all over the world working together for the sort of flying we loved; and because it also gave me those undreamt of opportunities to see so many countries – Chile, Iran, New Zealand, and Japan – and to be with my flying friends.

My involvement with the FAI came because of organising a World Championships, but being put in charge of that had resulted from my having been manager of the British gliding team over the previous fifteen years; so I was supposed to know something about the problems. Those years had taken me on remarkable expeditions, some hilarious, a few solemn, but all different; and had brought the realisation that the fun of flying was not only being in the air, but being together with people whose sense of humour was the same as mine – well, often it was.

But becoming team manager in the first place, in 1948,

was due to the happy chance of being in the right place at the right time; simply because I was on the British Gliding Association Council representing the Surrey Gliding Club. And I had come on to that, not because I liked administration but because I had found that I really enjoyed teaching flying. It gave my creative energies plenty of scope in trying to improve techniques and methods; which were much needed if my own experience as an instructor at that time was anything to go by! And I had become an instructor for no better reason than spending every spare moment out on Dunstable's windy and beautiful hilltop in 1937, and was one day seen with my hands in my pockets – actually feeling if there was enough money there for another flight. With no other instructor present someone told me to help the newcomers – those unfortunates who had started about two months after I had – to fly from the top to the bottom of the hill without reducing the primary glider to matchwood. It was a challenge. I liked trying to find the right words to say so that the beginner understood what he was supposed to do, and it was satisfying if each time he did it better. To do better myself I listened more carefully to the chief instructor, Tim Hervey, to learn how he did it.

Before that I had wanted only to fly, like some disembodied spirit far from reality, though the dream to me was very real. And I had been able to fly only because so many people had helped me change my dreams into hours in the air. All sorts of people, some unknowingly, had given me something, from words of encouragement to flights in the back seats of their aeroplanes.

So this book is not only about the pleasures of flying, but the places to which it has taken me and the often ludicrous situations in which I have found myself, and the friends without which life would be no fun at all. It is, I suppose, a thoroughly one-sided history of gliding championships and what I believe were perhaps the best years ever for what is now euphemistically called recreational flying; carefree years full of new and exciting adventures – not all of which worked out – and of being a part of those years. My flying has never been dramatic or ambitious; no fighter pilot stuff or long pioneering flights to Australia. It has just been fun,

sometimes a little frightening, but I would not have missed any of it. But I am still not sure what it was, back in the beginning, that started me off on such a single-minded journey; or what it is, when there is great freedom of choice, that produces an overwhelming desire to do only one thing. I think it is only rarely that an isolated happening determines a whole future, it is probably more of a trigger mechanism. For me it was an unexpected five-minute flight that somehow collected together all the loose ends of interests and ideas which had until that moment no particular direction.

It was during the last summer holiday, of many that my family spent on the wild and empty north coast of the Cornwall of my forebears, when Alan Cobham's Circus came to a small grass field near Wadebridge. I was taken to see it – I am not sure how we went, as few people had cars – and was immediately captivated by the row of brightly coloured aeroplanes with their unidentifiable smell; and by touching one for the first time. All around there were banners draped on the hedges and more people than I had ever seen together in Cornwall. One after the other aeroplanes rumbled into the air, flew round, and bounced back on to the rough ground; and when without warning I was given the chance of a flight I became totally unaware of anything else around me. It was in a rather ugly, squat biplane with three engines, called an Airspeed Ferry; but I did not mind what it looked like. Jumping in as soon as I could I found a seat with an unobstructed view – not easy with all those struts and engines – and waited in breathless anticipation. It was not a long wait; Cobham's pilots knew how to keep moving. We bumped and rattled over the grass. Then it was all smooth as the small fields and stony Cornish hedges fell away at an angle changing, as we turned, into endless miles of glistening sunlit sand with a rugged headland meeting a deep blue sea. It was a new world in which I did not even recognise the same Camel River Estuary and Pentire head that I knew and loved. Then farmland was underneath and the engine noises died away. I knew we had landed only because with my face pressed against the glass my chin bumped on the window frame. The door was

opened and we clambered out, me last, slowly, reluctant to leave. I was a small, skinny and tousle-headed thirteen-year-old, the year was 1930, and I wanted to fly.





AIRLINER

1928

## 1 · Growing up

Born in London among the infrequent Zeppelin raids of the First World War, my first few years taught me little of use to flying, though I suppose my first lesson in stability was when, aged four, I joined my small brother, John, in the open bottom drawer of a huge wardrobe which promptly fell on its face – fortunately the drawer jammed open; and I may have learnt something about structures when the front door slammed in the wind locking out everyone except me. Through the letter box I was anxiously instructed to get the key from the high shelf out of our reach; I am not sure how structurally sound was my pyramid of chairs and waste-paper baskets, but I made it to the key.

Shortly after that we moved to the country – it was country then – staying in a hotel while our house at Bickley in Kent was built, and for the first time I could see that the sky was big, and full of beautiful moving clouds which I could watch all day; dark rain would pass leaving a tracery of white feathers against a delicate blue, and in the evening thousands of little cloudlets grew golden then fiery red. Grown-ups said it was a mackerel sky, but I did not know what a mackerel was; it was the light and the air which I loved, and the wind on my face. Even more fascinating were the aeroplanes that droned across this sky, sometimes very low over

my head. I did not know that they were the first airliners, pioneering their way from Brussels, Amsterdam and Paris to Croydon. Looking at a map many years later I found that the Paris aeroplanes should have been much further south, but in rain and storm must have been following the low ground, creeping along the railway line to arrive at Croydon from the north-east. Certainly in such weather they flew low, sometimes turning around trees before disappearing into the wispy murk. They did not come at night, though occasionally cabin lights moved slowly through the dusk. In summer they flew high and serene, clear against the sky. I was fascinated by these aeroplanes, but they were remote from me and I never thought of flying them.

In 1924 we moved into our new house, I going to school all week and my parents happily gardening all weekend. I was interested in neither, longing only for our summer holidays in Cornwall; for those clean washed days when grey curtains of rain gave way to a sky of brilliant blue, over an even deeper blue sea with the whitest of roaring surf. On such days I would lie alone in the sand dunes, warm in the sun, and just look at the sky and the sea through the waving grass. Sometimes I would try to paint it in watercolours but could never achieve the brilliance of reality. Of course I also swam in the waves, explored rock pools, and ate strawberry jam sandwiches gritty with sand; and one day, aged five, I was given the helm of the Padstow to Rock ferry when it was an engineless sailing boat, and felt the wind through the tiller in my hand.

And so the years of my childhood went by. Except in school, time never dragged. I painted pictures, embroidered table mats, made a duplicating machine which would produce about twenty smudgy purple copies out of a foul smelling jelly; and a projector from a biscuit tin and a magnifying glass which showed postcards – you had to put the pictures in upside down – and jigsaw puzzles with a fretsaw. I did not see a lot of my brother; in Cornwall he was happy all day at Trenain farm where we stayed and at home he disappeared to boarding school. My own school work was unimpressive as I spent my time looking out of the window. Then I had that flight in Cornwall, and soon after I saw a

scale model aircraft kit in a shop window. It was about the first – rough chunks of wood in a box and called a Hawker Fury; which I knew about as they sometimes flew over our house from Biggin Hill. It cost one shilling. I saved and bought it, opening it in the seclusion of my bedroom with a strange excitement I could not understand; and made it immediately.

It was when I was about fifteen that I met Henry Williamson, the author, in south Devon, at Torcross where my aunt lived; and I had never met anyone like him before. His mind was full of ideas new to me and he could invent stories so that time passed unnoticed. He visited us at home often but his unpredictability – disappearing in the middle of a meal or arriving through a window – caused consternation to my father, who was never sure whether to appreciate a genius or complain about bad manners. But Henry showed me peregrine falcons and gannets superbly flying from high north Devon cliffs, and did not laugh at me when I talked about aeroplanes or showed him my growing collection of models. I had soon run out of the few kits available and was building my aeroplanes from cigar boxes, cutting out the wings with my fretsaw, using florist's wire for the struts, and casting lead wheels in a tiny sand box. I drew the plans in a school arithmetic book to a scale of 6 ft to 1 in ( $1/72$  as I discovered later when my sums had a little more practice), and I became quite good at drawing them just from photographs in magazines. In this way I built a model of every British light aeroplane made at the time – and there were a lot.

In 1932 the first issue of *Popular Flying* appeared on the railway station bookstall which I passed each day walking to school. I bought it and read everything in it, and realised that it was not just aeroplanes I liked. I desperately wanted to fly them. But I could not, I was still only fifteen, so I followed book instructions, practising for hours in my room with a poker in my right hand, a pencil for a throttle in my left and my feet on two boxes, doing take-offs, turns and landings; but I avoided stalling, which the book made to sound alarming and was not in the least clear what one should do about it.

In 1933 I kept a diary for a whole year, something I never succeeded in doing before or since. It was a Royal Aeronautical Society diary and contained eighty-two pages of information, ranging from how to pass the A licence (PPL) tests to the strength of helical valve springs – and I wrote in it details of every aeroplane I saw that year and the weather it flew in. In a slightly blunt pencil it records that on 5 January the first British monoplane airliner, the Atalanta, started from Croydon to Cape Town, and on the 7th Bert Hinkler set out for Australia in an Avro Avian; but by the 9th he was missing somewhere in the Alps, with his friend Captain Hope searching for him. Hinkler, small in stature, totally dedicated, attempting to reach Australia in such an apparently flimsy craft caught the imagination, and the papers were full of his departure and his disappearance; reflected in my diary almost daily; and not superseded by the vanishing just over a week later of Lady Bailey in a Moth on her way to the Cape. Four days later she was found, flew home on 23 January, and promptly set course again – followed by the entry for 30 January: ‘Lady Bailey missing *again*’. She was rediscovered the next day; but it was not until the end of April that the remains of Hinkler’s Avian CF-APK was found in the Apennines. But all this produced no public outcry: searches, if any, were usually privately conducted, pilots paid their own medical bills, or their relatives buried them. The urge for exploration still had deep roots, and if anyone wanted to go further, faster, or higher it was good luck to them and a pity if they did not make it. But even before Lady Bailey had had time to set off again the RAF arrived in my diary with the Fairey Napier long-range monoplane, attempting to fly non-stop to the Cape; and James Mollison left for South America in a little Puss Moth. By the time the RAF had landed at Walvis Bay with their record, another pilot, Victor Smith, on some other attempt had crashed and returned home to try again. James Mollison made it across the South Atlantic by 9 February. This spring fever ended with the disappearance of Captain Lancaster on 5 April and the finding of Mrs Bonney coming the other way from Australia. What seems remarkable now is just how many little aeroplanes were flying around in



1933. On a fine spring day, 8 April, I entered 'a good many Moths from N – SSW, flying and stunting', and from then on it was Moths almost every day with the first Puss Moth of the summer overhead on the 11th. At the time I imagined myself piloting any aeroplanes low enough for me to read their numbers, but now I wonder who the pilots were, and if they are still alive whether they can remember those flights. Who might it have been who flew Desoutter G-AANE to the west over Kent shortly before dusk on Sunday, 19 April, or the Cierva C19 autogyro G-ABUH on 15 June; or Moth G-ABXG on that hot and sunny day of 1933 with its light SW wind? Perhaps it was one of the new 976 pilots who got their A licences in that year.

As summer wore on the variety of aeroplanes increased as a Percival Gull, a silver and red Desoutter, a Monospar, Avro 504K, Spartan three-seater G-ABWU, Moths G-ABUY, G-ABWY, and the smart red, black and silver G-ABAO, flew over. Then came Avian G-AAYU, Puss Moth G-AAJU, the new monoplane Miles Hawk G-ACHZ, and Blackburn Bluebird G-ABOT floating overhead. The same Spartan returned three days later, pilot unknown. But occasionally there was the excitement of discovering who was tucked down in the cockpit. On 17 August it was dull and cloudy when a silver Moth came over, registered VH-UPD, and next day's paper told me it was Jimmy Woods nearly at the end of his long haul from Australia. But as autumn shortened the days and freshened the wind the little aeroplanes came less often. On a cold and blustery 19 October an Avro 504K sped downwind to the east, followed by a late Puss G-ABHB, the poor visibility not hiding its bright silver and blue paint, then Mollison's Puss G-ACAB and Gull G-ABUR low under the overcast finally left the sky to the winter battles of airliners striving to prove their safety.

Even in 1933 the continental traffic into Croydon was still low and slow. Some days everything went well with the aeroplanes on schedule, but on another Argosy G-AACJ tottered towards Croydon with its left prop idling and low enough for me to read CITY OF MANCHESTER painted on its side. With only a few hundred feet above the ground 9

miles was a long way to go. On 28 March G-AACI, CITY OF LIVERPOOL, was not so lucky when it crashed in Belgium killing the pilot L. Leleu. But on fine days there was no excuse except for the fun of flying for the majestic Heracles G-AAXD to float past, unhurried, just over our roof. Sometimes KLM flew low over the Kentish fields; one, PH-AIE, appeared in my diary no less than twenty-five times that year – it became quite a friend. Then the corrugated Junkers G-31 of the Lufthansa started coming, always on time, and later the incredible G-38 with windows in the wings. It flew very slowly, looking absolutely enormous and somehow sinister.

Most of the RAF aeroplanes I saw that year were the Bristol Bulldogs and Hawker Demons of 23 and 32 Squadrons from Biggin Hill, and when I discovered that the aerodrome was within cycling distance I wrote to the commanding officer to ask if I could come and look at them. I not only received back a kind invitation but a Flight Lieutenant Monty Whittle had volunteered – or been detailed – to escort me around and answer my questions. He did this with great patience, let me sit in the cockpits of these fabulous aeroplanes, took me to the mess for lunch, and then saw me back to my corporal-guarded bicycle. It was a visit which turned out to be the first of many as Monty asked me to dances at Biggin and often came to our house.

Now I found that I could also get to Croydon on my bicycle, which I had fitted with a larger back wheel, price 2s 6d, so as to be able to go faster without my feet having to rotate so rapidly. My visits took place at any time that I had 5s, the price of a flight; usually in a Puss Moth. Charlie Allen, the Air Taxis Pilot, was always kind enough not to hurry back on to the ground, and to let me lean over his shoulder and hold the stick. Then, one day, when no one was looking I went up into the control room in the tower. As I stood hesitantly in the doorway an important looking man – it must have been Jimmy Jeffs – asked me in and told me all about the aeroplanes he was expecting, and with him I watched Hannibal float by almost alongside the window.

Somewhat concerned about their daughter's strange and seemingly hazardous ideas my parents went in for

diversionary tactics. One of these was to dispatch me to France for the summer holidays, to stay with the Graillot family in their ancient house surrounded by its own vineyards and apricot fields some 50 miles south of Chalons-sur-Saone. I had never been abroad before but soon came to love the hot, still days so different from the breezy English summer. Often we would walk through dry and scented fields noisy with grasshoppers to a quiet part of the river near Tournus to swim, and afterwards sit on its sandy shore eating hard black chocolate with crusty bread while the sun dried us. That was in the day; at night I dreamt of flying.

At the end of that year I left school, aged sixteen. The headmistress reckoned I would not get School Certificate unless I stopped gazing out of the window, and my father was tight on money keeping my brother at public school. But I think the final straw was when, without telling anyone, I bought a motorcycle for £5 so as to get more easily to Croydon and Biggin Hill. I rode it home uninsured and unlicensed – no one had told me about these things – and proceeded to go to school on it. Out of concern, because he was a very law-abiding man, my father dealt with the legal side of my new venture but was defeated by the displeasure of the headmistress. So I departed to the sound of her words at the end-of-term ceremony: ‘Ann has been with us ten years.’

Still not reconciled to my ideas of flying my parents discussed the problem with Henry Williamson who suggested that I stay with Charles Tunncliffe and his wife to learn about how to paint – more suitable for a girl. I had always liked painting and Charles Tunncliffe’s love for birds was after all a love of flying, so I did not feel hard done by, and they looked after me well. But it did not take long to discover that the Lancashire Aero Club at Woodford was only a bus ride away. The following Saturday I set off, arrived at the club gateway near a neat row of lovely aeroplanes, and wondered what to do next. I heard a voice asking ‘Are you looking for someone?’ and realised he was talking to me. I must have mumbled something about aeroplanes and he must have been kind because he showed me around the row of Avro Cadets and took me into the clubhouse, introducing

me to members. One said he was just going up for a flight and would I like to come. My expression must have assured him for he soon found a helmet and goggles and a leather coat for me and installed me in the front cockpit. Incredibly, unbelievably, I was in the air again. Every weekend until I returned home I went to Woodford and each time I was taken flying by Colin Wilson, Peter Eckersley, George Youell, or Mollie Barnard. I have never forgotten them.

As I neared seventeen and the legal age at which I could fly solo I became increasingly worried by the clear and simple fact that I did not have any money to do so; and it was not at all easy then for a girl to get a job. So I continued to study the enticing flying club advertisements offering a complete A licence for £35 and equating it with others offering dual for £2 an hour and solo at £1 10s. There was also the problem of getting to and from whatever flying club it would be. To my great relief the transport problem unexpectedly became, I hoped, soluble. My parents, like most others at the time, did not run a car; but for some reason they suddenly decided to get one, ordering a new BSA with automatic transmission as my mother had never driven and my father not since the First World War. When the car arrived at the Bromley showrooms I, close on the heels of my seventeenth birthday, was sent off alone by bus to fetch it. Apart from my little motorcycling experience I had driven a car only three times – twice illegally in Henry Williamson's Silver Eagle Alvis with its crash gearbox along empty Devon lanes, and once in an MG Magnette for about half a mile down a private drive. I had never driven in a town. Luckily no drama occurred and I got the BSA home safely, on the strength of which I was told that I could now teach my mother! Between us we managed this successfully, probably because we both possessed a good sense of the ludicrous, so it was fun. Then for my birthday my father gave me £30 towards my A licence. Where to spend it was settled quite simply by the family camping for the summer holiday in Henry's barn in north Devon, on the hill above Barnstaple aerodrome (now part of Chivenor). I would learn at the flying club there.

Barnstaple was a small grass field bounded on two sides

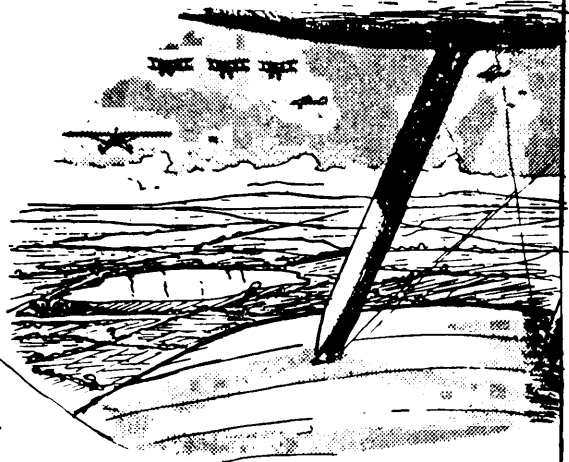
by the estuary. It had a little hangar and clubhouse, a small number of Moths in blue and silver paint and two instructors: J.W. Nash and R.J. Boyd. I flew only on one Moth, G-AAIM, and almost entirely with Nash. I do not think I was a very good pupil because being in the air was still like a blissful hazy dream, but I do not think either that the club was in any hurry to expedite my training as there were few other pupils and they needed the money. So they invented expeditions such as flying to Lundy Island and landing in a little field with sheep – called Lundy aerodrome; probably not realising that I was running out of money faster than they were. Each day I would freewheel down the hill on my motorbike to save petrol, but returning home was a different matter as the petrol tank was circular with the fuel outlet forward of centre. Unless the tank was well filled when going uphill the petrol sank downhill of the orifice and the engine died. This happened quite often.

Eventually, on 5 September 1934 I went solo. Nash got out and did up the front cockpit straps while my happy dreamy state took on a disconcerting blankness. I think he must have told me what to do but I do not think I heard him. As he backed off from the Moth and gave me a wave I opened the throttle mechanically to turn and taxi close to the downwind hedge, the other side of which was the water. Then I opened up fully, the Moth bounding into the air as though it, at least, was pleased with itself. All too soon I was gliding down again over the shiny mud and grey water of the estuary, over the same hedge, and was back on the ground and taxiing in. I was so happy that I was speechless – and Nash was probably glad to get his Moth back intact.

But this was the end of the summer holiday and although I had flown solo there had not been time, mainly as a result of days of wind and rain, to get my licence. So back home I joined Brooklands, which the BSA put within reach, and squeezed a little more subsidy from my father. I soon found that flying at this mecca of racing tradition was somewhat different from easy-going Devon. The club members all seemed to know each other by their Christian names, with life one long party. They were kind to me but my single-minded approach to flying, and my youth, did not easily

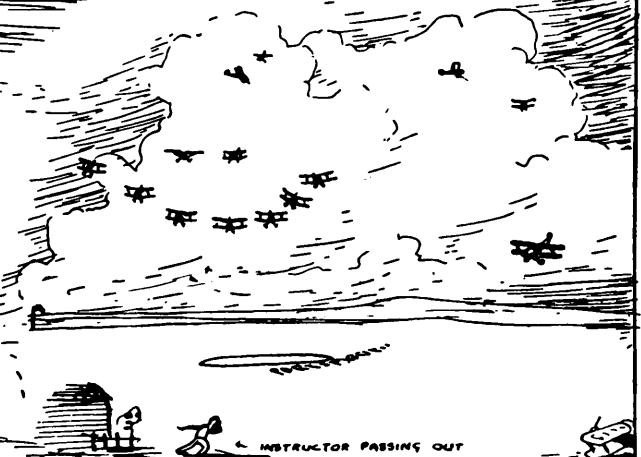
# PORTSMOUTH DAWN PATROL MAY 30 1937

LEAVING BROOKLANDS ON A CUP OF TEA  
WE FLEW BY DEVIOUS (VERY) ROUTES  
TO PETERSFIELD POND WHERE MOST  
OF THE ATTACKERS HAD SECRETLY  
CONSPIRED TO MEET



AND AT 340 (BY KENS VEREY  
LIGHT) WE FORMATED FOR  
PORTSMOUTH 12 AIRCRAFT,  
IN ARROW HEAD FORMATION,  
WITH 2 PUSSES AND A LEOPARD  
ABOVE AND BEHIND

AS WE APPROACHED PORTSMOUTH  
THE THREE UP BEHIND DIVED  
AWAY AND ATTACKED THE  
DEFENDING AEROPLANES,  
WORRYING THEM AWAY FROM  
THE MAIN FORMATION. (ON THE  
CONDITION THAT WE SUBSCRIBED  
TO THEIR BACON AND EGGS)  
AND ONLY THE TWO OUTSIDE  
MACHINES WERE SPOTTED  
(UNFORTUNATELY JIMME . ME)



REMARKS FOR POSTERITY  
"AND DO YOU KNOW I  
COULDN'T SEE A SINGLE  
AEROPLANE, NOT ONE,  
'UNTIL I FOUND I WAS  
FLYING UNDER THE HOOD

THEN WE ALL LANDED FROM DIFFERENT DIRECTIONS AT THE SAME TIME AND OVER  
AN EXCELLENTLY SERVED AND BETTER APPRECIATED BREAKFAST, COMPARED NOTES  
WITH THE OTHER WORM CATCHERS.

adapt itself to the sophisticated socialising of this famous place. But the flying was marvellous, and I was looked after to begin with by 'Mack' and Duncan Davis on Moths G-ABBW and WN, qualifying for my Royal Aero Club Aviator's Certificate (No. 12413) on 8 October 1934; which then included gliding without engine from 2,000 ft and hoping to make it into the landing area. My Ministry 'A' licence (No. 7226) was issued on the strength of the Royal Aero Club Certificate.

During the whole of 1935 I could afford only about seven hours' flying but it was two or three circuits regularly twice a month. I managed to sell some advertising artwork to *Flight* magazine and Fairey Aviation which helped, but it was a lean year. 1936 was better as, with some thirty hours' total flying, I was accepted as experienced enough to fly new aeroplanes brought to Brooklands by salesmen, and also to go on 'breakfast patrols' on club aircraft. Two of us would share the cost, one flying to whatever aerodrome was being 'attacked' and the other back home. I also managed to do a little flying on Aeronca C-3s at Hanworth; so that year I logged a new Tiger Moth G-ADEL, a BA Swallow, G-ADOB, BAC Drones, EAN and EJH with 6 hp Douglas engines, a Moth major, Taylor Cub A-AEIK and Avian G-ABVG. Then C.G. Grey bought some of my cartoons for *Aeroplane* magazine, I took my first passenger and looped him, earned a bit more money as assistant in a car showroom selling 30/98 Vauxhalls, and started to learn slow rolls with Max Findlay. On the first one, as we became inverted, Max came quite slowly out of the front cockpit until his head rested on the underneath of the fuel tank. A gurgling sound came through the gosport tubes which I could not understand, nor did I know what to do; so I did nothing. The roll continued and, years later it seemed, the gyrating horizon returned to somewhere underneath and Max sank back into the cockpit; followed by a few minutes' silence while he did up his harness.

There is no doubt that flying in the 1930s possessed a certain individuality. On one dawn patrol into Portsmouth from Brooklands we 'attacked' *en masse* having arranged to formate over the town of Petersfield at eight o'clock on a

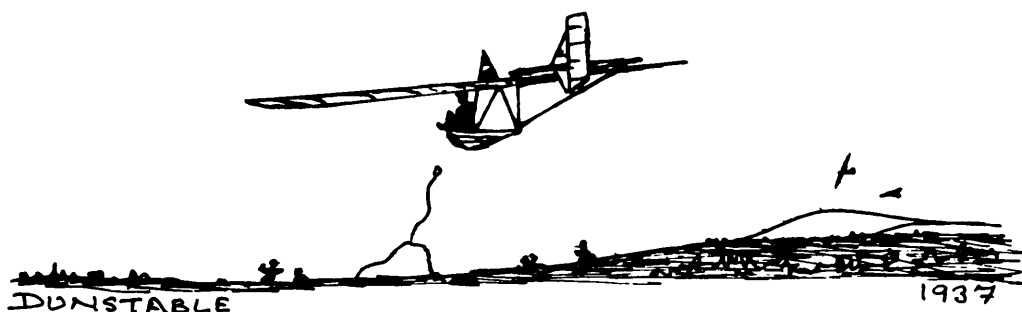
Sunday morning, with no thought of the noise made by a dozen aeroplanes at 800 ft. Going into land at Portsmouth Jimmy Gunn, who had this first half of the flight, undershot and hit the main Portsmouth road before bouncing over the fence to arrive neatly just inside it. A few weeks later I went with Ivor List in a Puss Moth to his old school at Haileybury where we landed on the playing field, which turned out to be a little smaller than he had remembered when he had been a pupil there. Taking off we failed to clear the tops of the oak trees and needed to land in a far corner of Brooklands to remove the twigs and leaves before showing our faces in the clubhouse.

One day I was in the front seat of a Moth when the pilot lost control in low cloud. With nothing to do except look out I immediately yelled as the trees on the top of Box Hill shot out of the murk. We screamed over them as we came more or less level. It was the nearest I had been to a 'close call' and it heightened the pleasure of our lunch in the warm sun.

Brooklands was a very relaxed place. There was no ban on drinking and flying; it was reckoned that as every pilot would probably sooner or later find himself flying after a party he might as well learn to do it properly. So the bar opened every lunchtime with Pimms as the favoured tippie. It was up to you whether you drank or not – and my first real lesson in taking decisions for myself.







## 2 · The good west wind

By the middle of 1937 my log-book held 50 hours of flying, including some as a passenger with anyone who would let me hold the stick for even a few minutes. Then a body calling itself, I think, the Anglo-German Fellowship, circularised information about a gliding course at Dunstable. It was cheap, though most aeroplane pilots regarded gliding as mere aerial tobogganing and not real flying at all. But any chance to get into the air needed to be taken, so I went. This time my kind mother, who supported all my strange activities, helped me with money, balanced against the food I would not be eating at home for two weeks.

I found my way to Dunstable by bus, walking the last few miles out to the Downs, looking with fascination at the slow silent gliders floating over the bare hillside, their wings transparent against the bright summer sky. This did not look like derisory tobogganing to me. I soon discovered that gliding was not only flying but something you became a part of. There were no mechanics to put the aircraft away at night; with other members you had to cunningly fit into the small hangar more gliders than seemed possible. The instructors were ordinary club members, not paid professionals; and when gliders were broken we all carried the bits to the workshop and helped mend them. Every day I

was out on the hill in the soft summer wind flying or launching other pilots, running hard, stretching out the rubber bungee catapult, ducking as the whistling glider shot overhead. Somehow it all had a great creative feel; it was a new world and I felt I belonged, helping to build it.

There were twenty-five on the course – sixteen young Germans and nine British. I was the only girl. We started by flying Daglings, very basic gliders with no cockpit and no springing to absorb bad landings – a real encouragement to learn! The first flights lasted only a few seconds, barely time to breathe after the sharp acceleration of the launch before the ground rushed up and you hit it – a normal landing was one which did not actually break the glider. We flew in turn, launching each other with the instructor, Tim Hervey, shouting the commands which soon became part of our existence: ‘Walk – Run – Let go.’ This last meant that the person lying on his tummy in the grass hanging on to the glider’s tail let go, not those pulling the bungee! Off went the Dagling on its ten-second flight, with us in pursuit to get it back up the hillside so that our turns would come round again sooner.

After a few days we were allowed to take off from higher up the slope, and then if we had not broken anything, right from the top; and although getting the glider back up the hill now required more energy it did not happen so often. There was also a rudimentary winch operated from the hilltop which did the actual pulling of the glider so that it was only necessary to walk up the face of the Downs holding the wing tip. That was the theory; in practice lack of communication ensured that the winch started before you, out of sight at the bottom, had properly hooked on your glider, or it pulled so fast that mountain goat leaps became essential to keep up with it, or it left you stopped and forgotten in mid-ascent – usually because everyone at the top had gone off to fetch a glider which had landed on the golf course; or – final indignity – the winch did not stop when you arrived and you were left with the exciting task of getting it unhooked before it rounded the wheel at the top and left you hanging on to a run-away aircraft. Much depended on whether someone on the hill wanted your glider; it was all

much better if they did. Flying an open Dagling from the top of Dunstable was exhilarating and to begin with a little frightening. After the wild acceleration of the launch you had somehow to slow down to the right speed; but not too much and stall – without an airspeed indicator. But you tried not to go too fast either, as this got you to the ground more quickly and lost precious seconds of airborne time.

As the days passed, warm and sunny, we were advanced to less basic gliders. One RAF pilot, Widdle Shaw, quickly moved to the Falke, a stocky floater with no upward view, while I was promoted to the 'Boot'. This was just a light cockpit fairing clipped on to a Dagling, to improve the performance enough to allow it to soar over the hill in the lift from a fresh west wind. Proficiency as a glider pilot was based on certificates: A for a flight of 30 seconds, B for two 45-second flights plus one of a minute, and C for 5 minutes' soaring. My first flight in the 'Boot' for my C produced no 5 minutes as I flew too far out from the ridge, not wishing to cartwheel into it as I had seen others do, and so sank quickly down to the landing field. Getting back up to the top again took a while but the westerly breeze was still blowing, and with fierce instructions from Tim Hervey to *hug* the hill I was shot into the air and turned quickly along the ridge. This time it worked, the grass and the little bushes rushed past just underneath and I just achieved the magic 5 minutes. I got my A on 16 August 1937, my B on the 17th and my C on the 18th.

It was not just our own progress which was exciting. Gliding was just beginning to flourish in Britain as the delights of cross-country soaring on the thermals under cumulus clouds were discovered. Almost every weekend exploratory flights were made from Dunstable and sometimes records broken. It was pioneering flying and even as a beginner I was part of it, helping to launch the explorers – Philip Wills, Kit Nicholson, Hugh Bergel, Sebert Humphries – and sometimes going off in an open touring car to retrieve one of them from some strange field. I loved every minute of it; the unexpected, the new, the belonging.

After the course I returned to Dunstable every weekend. My parents had sold our house at Bickley and lived, at that



*Photo by Christian Gad*

**Ann Welch** began flying aeroplanes in 1934 and gliders in 1937. She was Manager of the British Team at World Gliding Championships from 1948 to 1968, and in 1961 gained the National Women's Goal Record. Awarded the MBE and OBE for services to gliding, the FAI Bronze Medal for her international work, the Lilienthal Medal in 1974 and the FAI Gold Air Medal in 1981, she is also a writer and sailor, President of the British Hang Gliding Association and of the FAI Microlight Committee.

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