

## ROBERT BLACKBURN *Honorary Fellow*

26th March 1885 - 10th September 1955

ON 21st DECEMBER 1953, Robert Blackburn replied to the toast, at a dinner given in the Guildhall, Kingston-upon-Hull, of "The Pioneers of Aviation." He spoke as a pioneer himself, and, as a Yorkshireman, proudly claimed that it was a Yorkshireman, Sir George Cayley, who first laid down the basic principles of flight.

When Robert Blackburn died in September there died a great Yorkshireman, with all the solid qualities of one, kindness, generosity, warmth of heart and that simple *understanding* sincerity which is rare. He was friendly to all whom he met and retained, throughout his life, the friends he made in his younger days.

I knew Robert Blackburn nearly forty years and many, too, of those who worked closely with him over the years, years of great hopes, of great disappointments, when an assured belief, as Robert Blackburn had, in the course one was taking was an immense asset in aviation. Behind his easy friendliness, however, Robert Blackburn had the Yorkshire obstinacy which did not let him be easily swayed. He inspired the loyalty and affection and team spirit of a Yorkshire cricket captain. Many of those present at the memorial service in the flight shed at Brough must have been deeply stirred by the moving tribute paid to him by the many who had served him.

When, in 1954, his fellow manufacturers in the aeronautical industry presented him with a silver salver bearing their signatures, it was inscribed "A token of esteem and affection." Only a few months earlier sixty-one of the senior members of the firm, none with less than 25 years service, had also signed a silver salver to present to him "as a token of their affection."

Robert Blackburn indeed inspired affection and it is by that quality he will long be remembered.

He joined the Society in 1911 as a Founder Member and was made an Honorary Fellow in 1950. He served on the Council from 1932 to 1935 and 1937 to 1943. I well remember that last year of his on the Council, for it was in July 1943 that the Society was offered a unique collection of aeronautical medals, some 300 in all, dating over the period 1714 to 1941.

This astonishing collection included three medals commemorating the Montgolfier balloon ascents of 1783; the first ascent of Lunardi in London, in 1784; the first ascent of James Sadler, the earliest English aeronaut; medals commemorating the balloons used in the siege of Paris, 1870-71; the dirigibles of Giffard, Zeppelin, Parseval, the R101 and others, and Picard's stratosphere balloon of 1931.



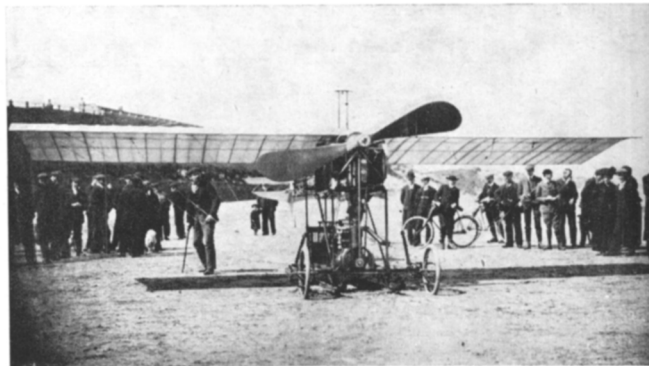
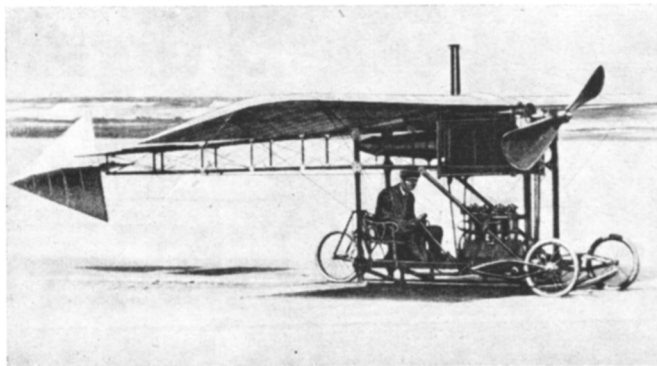
Celebrating heavier-than-air flights, the medals include Bleriot's flight across the Channel, 1909; Paulhan's flight, London to Manchester, of 1910; Pegoud's looping the loop flights; Lindburgh's New York to Paris flight of 1927; Hinkler's, London to Australia in 16 days, in 1928; Balbo's flight from Italy to America and back in 1933, leading a flight of 24 seaplanes; Amelia Earhart's flights, and many more high lights of aeronautical history.

Here was an opportunity for the Society to acquire an historical collection which I believed should be seized quickly, for I knew that they might go to America, and the opportunity would not recur. But the price was close on £500!

The Council appointed a small committee to consider how the money could be found. When the Council meeting was over, Robert Blackburn followed me into my room.

"You are unhappy," he said. "I think we should have decided to buy in any case. See what you can get them for and I will give you a cheque for the amount."

The following is taken from a note recorded in the next Council Minutes:



Robert Blackburn's first monoplane—on the sands at Saltburn, 1909. In the photograph on the left, Mr. Blackburn is in the pilot's seat.

“The Secretary reported that the set of aeronautical medals mentioned in Paragraph 9 of the last Minutes had been acquired for the Society at a cost of £470 by an anonymous donor, who did not wish any announcement of his name to be made.”

I have before me, as I write, a personal letter from Robert Blackburn, written a week before that Council meeting, one which he avoided attending. “On the subject of the donor,” he writes, “do please let this drop. I was only anxious when the subject was raised, that the Society should not miss them.”

That was like him. He was always an altruistic giver, and no announcement of this great gift to the Society has hitherto been made.

Robert Blackburn, two years ago, recalled that he was working in a civil engineering consultant's firm in Rouen (after taking an Honours degree in engineering at Leeds University), when he first saw Wilbur Wright flying in France. What he saw fired his imagination.

“I realised that the aviation ‘bug’ was well and truly in my blood . . . I approached my employer before he had time to approach me, sacked myself and returned to Paris.”

There, in a single top-floor room of a *pension*, he designed his first machine, as a monoplane. With the aid of two mechanics the monoplane was built in a garage in Leeds, fitted with a 35 h.p. Green engine and taken to the sands at Saltburn in April 1909. The engine and radiator, petrol tank and himself, as pilot, were all well beneath the wings, for he believed in a low centre of gravity for increasing stability.

There were no flying instructors. The only way to learn to fly was to get into the aeroplane and then up in the air with the hope one didn't get wings as the aeroplane lost them. Robert Blackburn got up in the air all right, made an exhilarating turn and side-slipped, with a pendulum effect, into the sands.

He began designing a new machine immediately, with a different centre of gravity. It proved very successful. It was on this machine that that great pilot B. C. Hucks learnt to fly, and, joining Robert Black-

burn, gave an astonishing series of flying demonstrations in 1911.

One of Blackburn's pilots was Hubert Oxley who, with a passenger, was killed pulling out of a dive. Robert Blackburn must have been one of the earliest aeroplane designers to draw attention to the danger of pulling out of a nose dive. In January 1912 he wrote, in a letter to *Aeronautics*, “You will quite understand that when making one of these steep descents and suddenly flattening the machine out, the strain must be enormous . . . there is a limit to which such descents should be made, since the velocity at the end of the dive will be so enormous that no machine could possibly stand it.”

In 1912 Robert Blackburn designed his single-seater military monoplane, with an 80 h.p. Le Rhone engine. Many members of the Society will have seen it flying at the Society's Garden Parties in 1950-53. These early Blackburn aircraft were fine examples of engineering practice.

This is not the place to enter into the later history of the Blackburn and General Aircraft Company. I quote, however, from the end of his speech when replying to the toast of the Pioneers of Aviation.

“I cannot close,” he said, “without saying how much the progress of the Blackburn Company has been bound up with the loyalty, co-operation and team spirit of the staff. To have 274 members of our Company who have given over 21 years of faithful service is a measure of that spirit.”

He himself gave over forty years to that Company, and there were present with him, when he spoke, some, who, to quote his own words, “of my little skilled labour force who would willingly work day and night to complete an urgent job. They were a splendid lot, full of spirit and enthusiasm, and in spite of no wages being forthcoming some Fridays, they stuck to the ship.”

They and many others who knew Robert Blackburn, have lost a friend.

“In every friend we lose a part of ourselves, and the best part.”

J.L.P.