



## **Ding, a forgotten hero?** **A tribute to a flying hero and his contribution to Leeds' aviation story.**

William Rowland Ding in his Handley Page

William Rowland Ding, tragically crashed to his death in woodland in Oakwood in 1917.

Ding was the hero of Leeds resident Eric Sudell (who was born 1909). Mr Sudell has vivid memories of his early years watching renowned airman, Ding, who frequently flew from Soldier's Field as part of his job as a test pilot for Blackburn's - an aeroplane company based on Roundhay Road.

Ding clocked up 35,000 of miles of flying in the months before World War 1 after a late start as an aviator. As well as test flying he was also the star attraction at events like the Northallerton Carnival. His death occurred in front of around 1000 spectators on 12 May 1917 in Leeds.



The crash site as it is today

The pioneering spirit of those early days meant that aviators were heroes to many and especially to Eric Sudell, then an eight-year-old boy living in a house on Lunan Place, Harehills:

"Every day after school I used to go home and have my tea, then off to the Soldiers' Field. 'Take me up with you Mr. Ding', we used to say. He was the hero of all the kids; 'Oh, take me up Mr. Ding', 'I will when you're a bit older' he'd reply."

Eric remembers the day of the crash very well:

"We were playing on Hill Top Mount, 'Oh look, there's Ding' and my friend Alex Watson stood on the wall to get a better view. We saw him loop the loop and when he was at the top the wing came off, and down he went. 'Oh', Alex said, 'he's falling.' A neighbour who worked at Blackburn's was coming along the road and had a look. He said 'He must have fallen, I can't see him.' I ran to tell my father: 'Ding's fallen dad.' I remember it as if it was only yesterday."

A memorial was placed at the site but didn't last very long:

"They put a four-bladed propeller in the shape of a cross. It disappeared and it was found hanging on the wall of a pub in Vicar Lane. They put a bronze plaque of his head at the gate of Blackburn's, and I used to go and look at it. I got bits of the engine and kept them in a box.."

in 2007 William Rowland Ding got a suitable memorial as Eric marked the anniversary by laying flowers and a photograph at the site in remembrance of his childhood hero.

For those who wish to know more about Ding and other flyers from the region, his story is recounted in "Yorkshire's Early Flying Days" by Ronald Nelson Redman, published by Dalesman Books.

\* Update May 2008 \*

The four-bladed propeller set up as a memorial to William Ding still exists and is in Armley Mills, the Leeds Industrial Museum on permanent display.

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