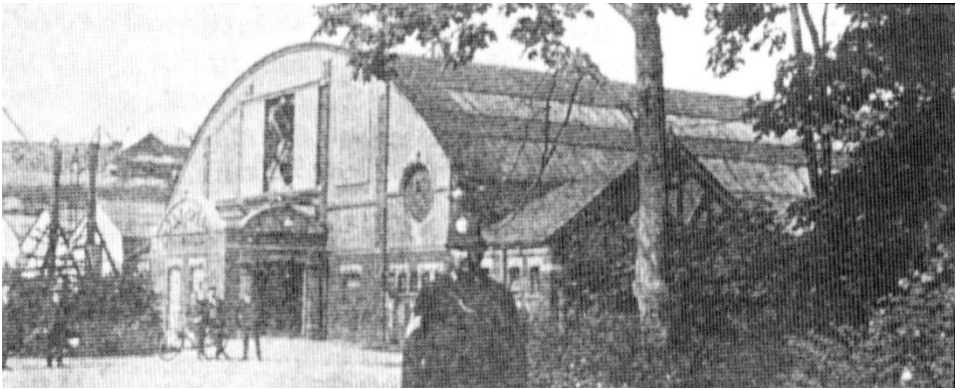


## **EARLY BIRDS OVER YORKSHIRE**

© By Hilary Dyson



**'Entrance to Olympia Works in 1915'**

Very soon, in 2003, we will be celebrating 100 years of powered flight and many memories of previous flyers and their bravery in taking off into space will be recalled.

The story of flying in Yorkshire might be said to have started back in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. A certain gentleman called George Cayley who lived near Scarborough took an interest in many things one of which was flying. Cayley (1773-1857) had a technical education in London and on his return to his Brompton home he set up a workshop in which he eventually produced a 5ft glider in 1804. He then spent some five years developing a prototype manual glider with 200 sq ft of wingspan. But it was to be many years later that he felt ready to test it out. The test flight didn't take place till 1848.

Even then he did not risk his own life he persuaded a young boy, his name was not recorded, who was launched into the air in a series of hops over a few yards. Cayley was to be 80 years old when he tried again with the help this time of his coachman. The coachman called John Appleby was not keen to change his occupation. But Cayley was elated however when a very short flight of about 500 yards was achieved. The coachman, no doubt worried that he might be asked for a repeat performance, gave in his notice, saying that he had been hired to drive a coach not to be catapulted into the air. Cayley was amongst the first of many would be flyers.

Sometime later in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century an ex Texan cowboy turned entertainer called Samuel Franklin Cody visited Leeds in 1901 where he demonstrated his hobby of large kite flying on Holbeck Moor. With the help of Government money he developed a rudimentary aeroplane and on 16<sup>th</sup> October 1908 completing a 27 second flight. But this biplane crashed later so no more money from the Government. Cody went on however to fly for four miles in his renovated plane even taking some very brave passengers with him.

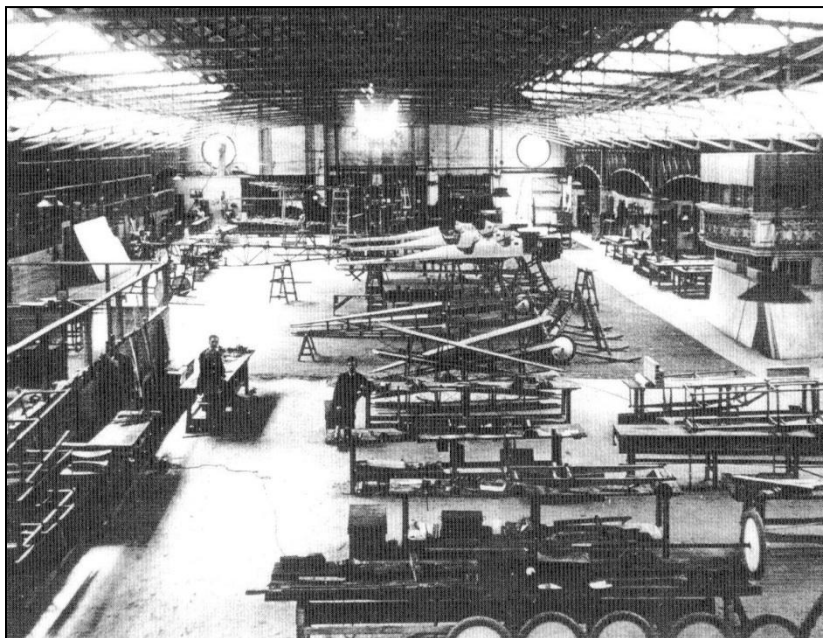
It was probably the outstanding efforts of the Wright brothers in 1903 who made a successful flight of about 10 ft above the ground for 59 seconds that inspired Robert Blackburn to pursue his interest in flying. I believe that he met the brothers when he was working in France. In 1909 Louis Bleriot flew across the English Channel from Calais to Dover. His monoplane was equipped with a 3 cylinder -25 h.p. engine. This magnificent achievement probably inspired the formation of the Yorkshire Light Aeroplane Club at the Hotel Metropole in Leeds in September 1909.

Soon some 200 aspiring flyers were trying to build their own planes. One of the first local men to be successful was Charlie Parker of Holbeck. He and his partner Rowland Winn had joined forces to create a plane using a 30 h.p. engine to complete their creation made of plywood, calico and piano wire. Their first attempt to fly took place at Harewood and the plane managed a short flight.

Many flights were attempted on the beaches of East Yorkshire, presumably because of the stretches of sands for a soft landing. Graham White thrilled crowds in Halifax when he performed in his Farman biplane over the zoo (at Exley) in June 1910. The zoo site was high on the hill overlooking Halifax and of course was subject to gusty winds. Good for kites but maybe not too good for aeroplanes. This particular day the weather was a little unsettled. However, a large crowd had turned out to see the flight and had all paid a shilling. So off went Graham in a 30 mile per hour wind.

The wind caught the plane, the White Eagle, and it appeared to vanish into the valley below. But as the sun went down like a flaming ball the plane reappeared silhouetted against it. The crowd were thrilled. The flight probably was about 1/2 miles. Everyone felt they had value for money, very important to a Yorkshire crowd.

The day after White demonstrated his machine, it again caused traffic jams in Halifax. White had purchased his monoplane from the Bleriot Co. and spent many weeks perfecting his flying skills. Aeroplanes and flying were the in thing at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and young men were showing lots of interest in building and taking a more active part in this new, thrilling sport, dangerous though it most certainly proved to be.



**The erecting shop of the Olympia Works in 1915, the main production in the central area being B.E.2c biplanes. The ornate structure at the right had been the bandstand in roller skating days and now served as the works manager's office. (Hawker Siddeley Aviation Ltd)**

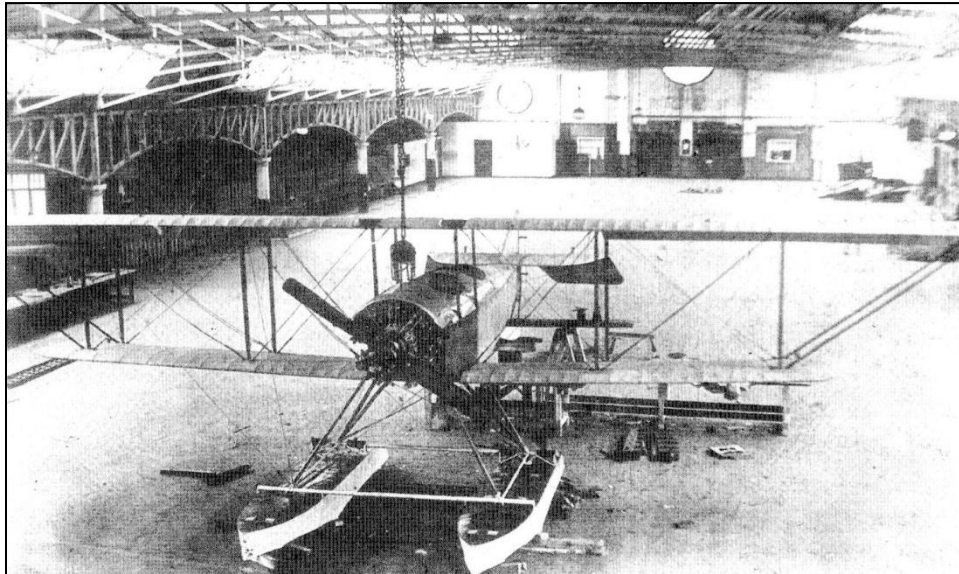
A young man born in Leeds in 1885, called Robert Blackburn- Bob was one of these adventurers. He was one of four boys born to the manager of Smithfields ironworks of Thos Green & Son, North Street. He studied Engineering at Leeds University and on qualifying he applied to his father for a job in the works. But he soon realised that this did not suit his young adventurous spirit and moved to France. There he got some useful experience in design work for structural steel work. In fact it was

in France that he caught the flying bug. He started to develop plans for a high wing monoplane and then he returned to Leeds. He tried to interest his father in his project but his father felt that he could not allow Bob to do any work in his factory. However, he did encourage him to continue working on his invention, he lent him some money and offered him practical help in the shape of a pattern maker/joiner called Jack Rhodes. The two got some premises and began working together but progress was slow. Bob's father George Blackburn could see that he needed more help and so he loaned him one of his gifted apprentices Harry Goodyear. From then on things began to improve. By April 1910 the three men had taken premises on Balm Road and were ready to try out their aeroplane on the beach at Marske. To our sophisticated eyes it must have looked very strange. The propeller was 8 feet 6 inches in diameter and driven by a 2 to 1 chain drive from a platform mounted engine. The pilot sat on a wicker chair from George Blackburn's garden. Probably where the pilot sat was the last thought. Bob the pilot was dressed in tweeds wearing a cloth cap back to front and goggles. This first attempt was not very successful and the plane was scrapped. But the inventors were not to be put off. Bob registered his company, the Blackburn Aircraft Company, using his Father's house in Spencer Place as his address.

The 1911 Circuit of Britain Air Show provided the right setting for the firm to present a plane for sale though it had not yet been tried. The price was 825 pounds complete. Soon this "Mercury" aircraft was showing off its flying ability from Filey to Scarborough and back 19 miles at an average speed of 50 mph at an altitude of 1,200 feet. This successful flight was accomplished by the company's first test pilot, Bentfield C. Hucks. Despite a mishap, when the propeller fell off, Bentfield obtained his Aviation Certificate..

The year 1911 was a year of ups and downs in aviation. Some would be flyers being killed and others going on to glory. A great boost to the future of aviation was given in the shape of prize money offered for a Circuit of Britain Air Race. The prize of 10,000 pounds was considerable then not to mention the fame and honour. The race was arranged by the Daily Mail newspaper. The challenge brought many eager flyers not only from Britain but also from Europe. The Blackburn Aircraft Co. had two entrants. These were the Mercury planes sponsored by Stuart Hirst of Leeds. Hirst was later to become chairman of Blackburns. The two pilots Hucks and Brigadier Conway Jenkins were in charge.

Twenty-seven planes left Brooklands racetrack on the 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1911. The man who took first place was Jean Conneau. Flying his Bleriot he took the lead straight away and went on to win the race. Some of the early pilots felt that it would be a good idea to follow the Great Northern Railway line giving the inhabitants of Doncaster a good view. Cody, ever the intrepid, came down in a field to refuel. Another came down in a field at the top of Harehills Lane Leeds, to enquire the way? A Frenchman came down on Wetherby Racecourse mistaking it for Harrogate Stray. Yet another flew very low over Spofforth shouting to passers by asking which way to Harrogate? He eventually came to grief coming down fortunately on a local cricket pitch. Was he bowled over? The actual planned temporary landing spot on Harrogate Stray had some 50,000 people eagerly waiting the flyers on this leg of the race. They had all paid between 6 pence and 5 shillings for a good view. The first Englishman to arrive was greeted with a chorus of "All my life, I'll be your valentine" This was very appropriate as his name was James Valentine. He then flew on to Newcastle. The winner however, Conneau, completed the 1,100 mile circuit in 22 hours 28 minutes flying time. The Blackburn team were not put off by their unsuccessful attempt and went on entertaining crowds on their summer tour of the West Country.



**The Blackburn type 'L' seaplane nears completion on the ex-skating rink floor which became the main shop of the New Olympia Works in 1914. (Hawker Siddeley Aviation Ltd)**

The best of the early planes developed by Blackburns at that time was the range of Mercury monoplanes with Isaacson engines. The Isaacson engines were developed in the Hunslet area of Leeds and were adopted by many aircraft firms including Handley Page and Roe. Albert Edward Charlton and Graham White had worked along side Rupert John Isaacson to produce a 50 h.p. engine. During 1912 Blackburns completed their seventh plane that was tested by Harold Blackburn, not related to Robert Blackburn. He gave demonstration flights at Lofthouse Park Wakefield. There were regular flights between Leeds and York carrying the latest edition of the Yorkshire Post in 1913. Blackburns may have gone in for manufacturing lightweight cycle cars. These were very cheap four wheeled vehicles. Trial runs were taken from Headingley to West Park, the car had one bad snag, there was no reverse. The best way to turn the car round was to pick up the front and walk it round! Something like the early Robin car I remember. However the outbreak of war put an end to this venture. Perhaps if further experiments in this venture had been followed up, there might eventually had been a car factory in Leeds area.

In May 1914 the Government decided that the production of the B.E. 2C biplanes Farnborough design should go ahead. This had been brought forward due to the fear of war. Blackburns share of the contract was twelve. This expansion meant there was a need for larger premises. A site was found that proved to be ideal, a large empty building situated on the main road out of Leeds going towards Wetherby. It was decided to form a new company and to take over the premises on Roundhay Road that had previously been a roller skating rink. This made an ideal erecting place and the superb maple floor was to see the company's first plane assembled there. This was known as the Olympia Works.

The Government thought that single wing planes were too dangerous and forced the aircraft companies to produce biplanes. With the commencement of war the need for more planes became urgent. Many planes such as the Swordfish, Buccaneer and Firebrand were manufactured. The first Swordfish was assembled at Sherburn in Elmete, a branch factory of Blackburns. One of the Swordfish was named The City of Leeds.

There are still four Swordfish in existence and there is a dedicated band of supporters who help to keep them safe for future enthusiasts. The Swordfish was a very successful design and was still in service in the second world war, involved in attacking and torpedoing the Bismark.

The company's first float-plane, type 'L' hydro-biplane, which after some rebuilding, the Government took over and fitted with a machine gun. It was also used for coastal reconnaissance from its base hanger at Scarborough. This plane was flown by Rowland Ding, but in 1915 it came down in thick fog.

Blackburn's new Olympia works flourished and new blood was brought in to cope with the urgent production required by the war effort. A works manager called George Chapman was appointed. He was an experienced vehicle body builder and woodworker. Together with Albert Charlton, who was promoted to assist him, they shared a small office overlooking the assembly floor. This had previously been the stage where the band played suitable music for the skaters. A large number of B.E. 2C biplanes were to be assembled on the old rink floor. When each one was finished it was taken to the nearby Leeds Flying Field only half a mile away on what today is still known as the Soldiers Field, to be tested.



**Commercial Kangaroo G-EAIT.** The addition of a glazed-in 7-seat cabin, plus accommodation for one intrepid passenger in the nose cockpit, gave a quick conversion from a war surplus bomber to an airliner, for the introduction of a short-lived passenger service in 1919 between Leeds (Roundhay), London (Hounslow) and Amsterdam by the Blackburn subsidiary company of North Sea Aerial Navigation Co Ltd. The Leeds/London fare was £30 return. (*Hawker Siddeley Aviation Ltd*)

During the war years Blackburns not only manufactured planes for the war effort but also tried to develop seaplanes. The Sopwith Baby Seaplanes were produced from 1915 at the Olympia works. By 1917 Blackburns had produced their twin engined plane called the Kangaroo or RT1 which had 250 h.p. Rolls Royce Falcon 11 engines. Ten of these joined the R.F.C.'s 246 squadron at Seaton Carew on the North East Coast. These planes were used during the last months of the war when they attacked and sunk at least one submarine and damaged several others. During the war years many firms were diversifying from their peacetime productions. Firms used to making first class furniture like Kendalls, later March Jones & Cribb, and Pratts of Bradford now manufactured the bodies of planes such as the Sopwith Camel. Kendalls helped to build twenty-five Sopwiths. Pratts were instrumental in the development of some of the first seaplanes, Felixstowe F2A using Rolls Royce engines. The first of these was tested at Brough on the Humber and they later joined the Royal Naval Air Service. Pratts had to take over bigger premises to complete five aircraft a week. No wonder the King and Queen visited the works to honour Christopher Pratt in 1918 for his contribution to the war effort.

At the end of the Great War, the aircraft industry suffered a difficult transition to peacetime needs. But in 1919 civil flying was resumed and of course Blackburns was not slow in joining in. They produced what they hoped would be a cheap plane for general use. This was called the "Sidecar". But it was very underpowered its 40 h.p. 2 cylinder ABC Gnat engine could not lift it off the ground. Robert Blackburn's contribution to the development of aeroplanes was recognised in 1918 when he was made a Fellow of the Royal Aeronautical Society. Blackburns formed a new company called the North Sea Aerial Navigation Company Limited that was at first for purely pleasure pursuits. Two Avro 504k biplanes were purchased and converted to carry two passengers each. They provided an air taxi service between Scarborough and Middlesborough, Stockton and Darlington, Harrogate and Brough.

Several accidents put an end to this service in 1920. However the Graham White Aviation Company flew from Hendon with a Blackburn Kangaroo to Roundhay carrying a consignment of mail and passengers in order to break a rail strike.

Blackburns tried to set up a regular Leeds to London service, but the fare of fifteen pounds and fifteen shillings one way was too expensive for most people at that time.



The North Sea Service Co. continued to carry freight, a maximum of 2V2 tons, not very profitably but Kangaroos continued in service until 1924. Robert Blackburn OBE who had done so much for the future development of flying died in September 1955 aged 70 yrs. at his home in Boston Spa. It was a pity that he did not live long enough to see their most acclaimed plane, the Blackburn Buccaneer, come to fruition. This plane was a low flying naval plane, and was used in the Gulf war for reconnaissance. After the Great War, Soldiers Field changed its use to sports fields, so Blackburns planes could no longer be tested there. So in 1929 most of the works were transferred to the Brough site that had been in use for some years by this time. Most of the Olympia works in Roundhay Road continued as an Industrial Estate till 1932. The large arched roof of the old skating rink could still be seen for some years afterwards. To day the site is occupied by Tesco supermarket.



**'The Site in 2002'**

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