

Rowland Ding, Dare-devil Pilot of Soldiers' Field

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William Rowland Ding was born in 1885 at the Rectory in Alsager, Cheshire, where his father was the vicar. He was sent off to be educated at the St Edmond's Clergy School in Canterbury. But Rowland's interests lay in mechanical things, and when his father died while he was still at school, his mother allowed him to complete his education at the Finsbury Technical College under Professor Sylvanus Thompson. Also at school was Frederick Handley Page and the two became friends.

By 1907 he was married and living in London where he was the manager of a power station.

In 1911 the Blackburn Aeroplane Company organized a display tour of the West Country to promote its new Mercury monoplane. Rowland was on holiday and by chance visited a country show where the display was taking place. He watched spellbound as Bentfield C. Hucks looped-the-loop and flew upside down. It was a case of love at first sight, and Ding resolved there and then to learn to fly. As soon as Hucks had landed Rowland asked him if he would give him a job. By chance they needed a secretary for the duration of the tour, so Ding spent the rest of his holiday working for them. The mechanic during the tour was Haratio Henry Goodyear, who was much better known as Harry. He was the very first Blackburn apprentice, and rose to a senior position with the Company.

So Rowland gave up his secure job and entered the uncertain new world of aviation. He worked in partnership with WH Sayer before joining Claude Grahame-White, while still finding time to study engineering and aeronautics, and give lectures. In early 1914 he became one of the first pupils at a new flying school at Hendon set up by an American called GW Beatty. He was a natural pilot and on the 17th April he passed his test and was awarded Flying Certificate No. 774.

Frederick Handley Page had gone into the aircraft construction business, but he was unable to fly, so he asked Rowland to fly his new Type G biplane for him. Just three weeks after getting his license, Rowland became the first pilot to take royalty aloft. This was when he

flew Princess Ludwig of Lowenstein-Wertheim (the former Lady Anne Saville) across the English Channel to Calais.

While his wife and two children remained in London, Rowland moved to Yorkshire where he made his living giving displays and joy rides at country shows, and from the Stray at Harrogate. When the war started in August 1914 all this had to come to a stop but Rowland was not grounded for very long as he became a partner in the Northern Aircraft Co. Ltd. at Bowness on Lake Windermere. Using a Blackburn type 1 monoplane fitted with floats he taught Royal Navy Officers to fly. The school was doing well when it was commandeered by the Admiralty.

The aeroplane had soon proved its worth in the war and big orders had been placed. These new aircraft needed experienced pilots to test and deliver them so now Ding became a freelance tester and delivery pilot. He enjoyed flying the wide variety of aircraft, but he did not like the train rides between jobs, and lodging in dingy hotels. The obvious solution to him was to have a two seater aircraft with another pilot to accompany him. He would then fly to his place of work, and with his own aircraft following, he would deliver the aircraft, and fly to his next job, and so on. The building of private aircraft had come to a stop for the duration but Rowland submitted his idea to the Ministry, emphasizing that his greater productivity would help the war effort. Surprisingly he was given permission to go ahead with his plan, but if they had known the things he was to get up to with his aeroplane, they would most certainly not have given permission.

Of all the aircraft Ding had flown he thought there was nothing to beat the Blackburn Type 1, so he asked Blackburn to build him one. They said they were unable to do so, but they made something very similar for him. Powered by a 100HP Anzani engine and using many BE2 parts as possible the result was the White Falcon monoplane. It proved to have an excellent performance, and was Rowland's pride and joy.

By late 1916 he was concentrating his efforts on the Blackburn factories at Leeds and Brough, and Phoenix Dynamo at Bradford. He set up home at the Queen's Hotel which was handy for the station, and trams to Blackburn's Olympia Works on Roundhay Road. I recommend you have a look at Oak Leaves, Part Three, for information on, and pictures of, the Olympia Works in Hilary Dyson's



Rowland Ding at the Controls of His Handley Page Type G..



Ding in His Blackburn White Falcon on Soldiers' Field.

excellent article 'EarlyBirds Over Yorkshire'. Most aircraft were dispatched in packing cases for assembly elsewhere, but some types such as the BE2 were pulled by horses to Soldiers' Field, where Rowland would then test fly them. He also kept his White Falcon there in a small wooden hangar.

Rowland was obsessed with aerobatics, and when he had some spare time and the weather was fine, he would be up in the White Falcon practicing. In no time people began to flock to Roundhay Park for the free air display he provided. At that time the word aerobatics had not come into use, and to the people of Leeds, Rowlands antics were called 'Dinging'. He soon became a well-loved hero.

Rowland was happy to take friends, Blackburn employees and even paying passengers, up for joy rides in the White Falcon. On 15 April 1917 he was coming in to land after such a flight when he saw that such a huge crowd, which always gathered when he was flying, had blocked his landing area. He opened the throttle to go around again, but the usually trusty Anzani engine failed to respond. To his horror everywhere he looked there were people, and it seemed he would have no option but to mow down some of his adoring fans! Then he saw that Prince's Avenue was clear. It was lined with trees, and had a busy tram route with all of its poles and wires. But with nowhere else to go, with great skill he flopped his White Falcon down onto the tram wires, which held long enough to take the momentum out of the aircraft. Ding and his passenger escaped with cuts and bruises, but his beloved White Falcon was almost a write-off with both wings detached, cracked fuselage and damage to the undercarriage and propeller.

The accident could not have come at a worst time for Rowland. He had been asked to put on a display at a presentation ceremony on Soldiers' Field which was to take place in just five days time. After all those hours of practice his chance to perform his 'Dinging' at an official event seemed to be dashed. But his friends at Blackburn's rallied round, and thanks to BE2 parts in the White Falcon it was as good as new for his big day. As a reward Rowland took those employees responsible to the theatre.

The presentation aircraft was a BE2c which carried the inscription 'Heaven's Light Our Guide', and was paid for by funds from India. It was handed over by Lord Islington to General Henderson, and then with a band playing, Captain Howard took off 'to fly directly to the front'.

It was then Ding's turn, thrilling the crowd with a skilful display. But this was to be his swan song.

Most of Blackburn's work was for the Admiralty and there was a Royal Navy Acceptance Officer based at Olympia Works, whose job it was to pass aircraft fit for service. When the aircraft was a two seater, such as the BE2c, this involved him going up for the test flight. Ding became friends with the officer and confided in him that he had been involved in five serious accidents, and the night before each one he had a premonition in a dream!

The BE2c was designed for steady bombing and reconnaissance duties and was not intended to perform violent manoeuvres. A steady stream came out of Olympia Works for Ding to test. He found them very frustrating to fly, and from time to time, it got the better of him and he would loop the aircraft. Harry Goodyear, who by now was the erecting shop foreman, warned Rowland on a number of occasions of the danger of overstressing the aircraft.

At 6.0pm on Saturday 12 May 1917 a crowd of several thousand of Ding's fans were waiting on Soldiers' Field. They cheered and clapped as he walked out to a waiting BE2c. The Royal Navy officer was not with him - had Rowland had another dream and warned him? Waiting at the aircraft was Harry Goodyear and the last words exchanged between the two men was a stern warning from Goodyear of "No fancy flying now".

At first Ding flew normally, but then he moved to a position of about a quarter of a mile south of Soldiers' Field. Because of the dangers, he never looped a BE2 over the heads of the crowd, and Harry Goodyear knew what was coming next. Ding performed a number of steep turns, and then a loop. He was part way through another loop when one of the wings either detached or buckled, and after spinning twice, the aircraft dived into a fence which separated a field from a footpath known as Loner's Lane which ran from Oakwood Lane to North Lane. Ding was killed instantly and a lady walking along the path had a very narrow escape.

Nearby, Major Seeker-Walker of the Royal Army Medical Corps was at home on leave sitting in his garden and he thought that the aircraft was about to crash onto his house. He ran to the wreck which was blazing furiously, to find that Ding's body was on fire and impaled

on a fence post. Despite this, the gallant major was able to rescue the body from the flames. The BE2 was totally destroyed. The conclusion of the inquest held at Roundhay Park Mansion was accidental death caused by the machine collapsing and falling from overstrain.

The people of Leeds were devastated by the loss of their hero, and there was a large crowd at his funeral at Lawnswood Cemetery. Two memorials were put up to him. One by the Council on behalf of the people of Leeds in the form of a BE2c propeller, was erected on the crash site, which is close to where the Air Training Corps building now stands on Oakwood Lane. This had to be removed in 1935 because of damage caused by souvenir hunters. It was put into storage for many years before being put on display at the Leeds Industrial Museum at Armley Mills. The last news I have of it is that about two years ago it was taken away for painting and not returned!

The other memorial was a brass plaque, paid for by the Blackburn employees, which was attached to the gate at the entrance to Olympia Works. In 1946 when Blackburn's moved out, it was sent by Rowland's daughter, Mrs Aphra Burley, by rail to his old school at Canterbury. But it never arrived, no doubt stolen and melted down. It is sad that today very few people have heard of this great man who at the time of his death had flown more different types of aircraft and very possibly more miles and hours than any other man.

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