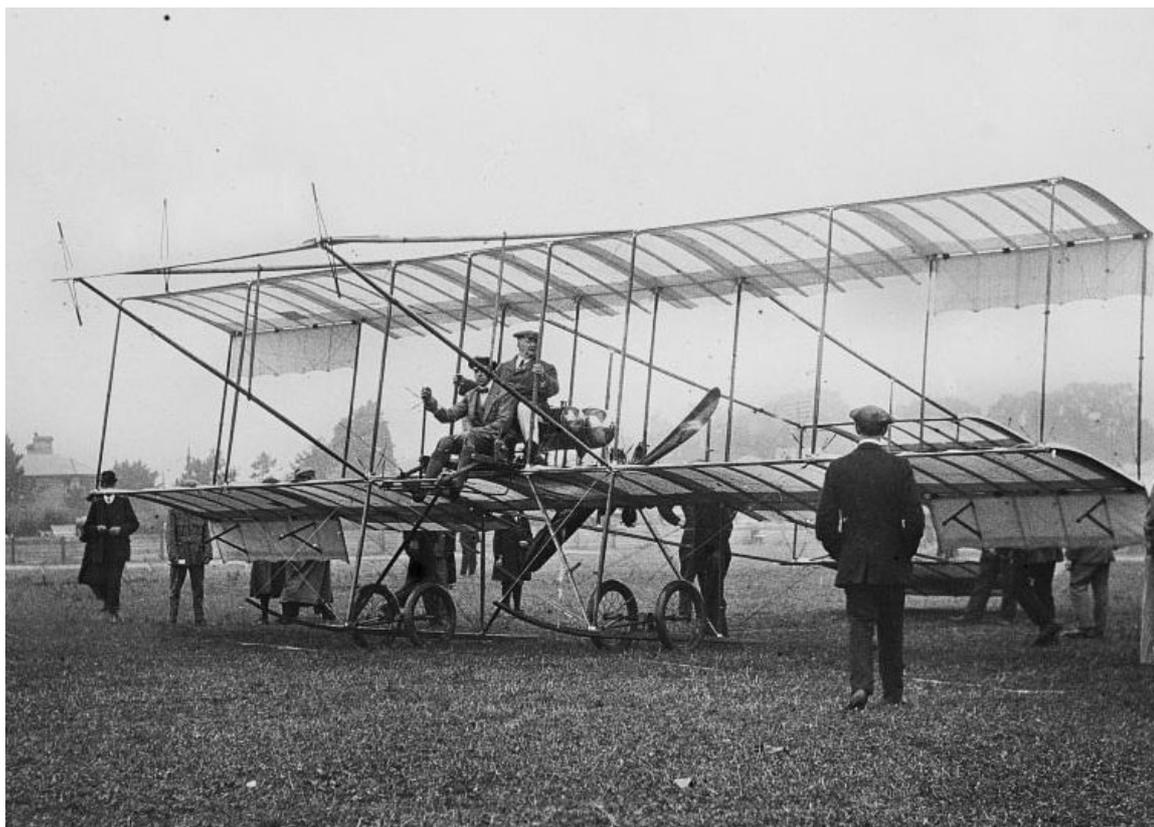




Claude Grahame-White (1879-1959)

In 1919, pioneering aviator Claude Grahame-White co-founded Aerofilms Ltd; his two fellow founders were Herbert William Matthews and Francis Lewis Wills (Board of Trade, BT31/33802/154995).



Claude Grahame-White in a Farman biplane at the Bournemouth Aviation Meeting held at Southbourne, July 1910.

EGP_22662_053 © English Heritage Archive

Claude Grahame-White was born at Bursledon Towers on the River Hamble in Hampshire on the 21st August 1879. He was the youngest of three children born to John and Ada White. His father is described in the 1881 Census as making an 'income from houses', and the family were clearly well-off, employing four servants (1881 England Census). The 1891 Census describes John White as a 'cement merchant'. The family were living in London at the time of the 1891 Census at 63 Linden Gardens in Kensington, the home of Claude's widowed

maternal grandmother, Ellen Chinnock (1891 England Census). Claude was educated at Crondall House School in Farnham, and Bedford Grammar School which he and his brother Montague attended as day boys. Claude did well at school, developed an aptitude for engineering and a keen interest in mechanical locomotion.

At the age of 16 Claude convinced his parents to let him train as an engineer and was apprenticed to a Bedford firm. He built his own bicycle, became very enthusiastic about the motor car, and in 1897 became one of the founder members of Frederick Simms's Automobile Club of Great Britain and Ireland (Driver, 1997:132). In 1898 at the age of 19 Claude went to work for his uncle Francis Willey, a Yorkshire wool magnate, at the Shipley Wool Combing Company. He had several successes with the company, including implementing the replacement of shire horses with lorries for everyday transport. He recognised the potential value of the motor vehicle as a means of public transport and quit his uncle's business to form his own company: the Yorkshire Motor Vehicle Company. Unfortunately the business failed due to a lack of skilled drivers.

He next spent time in London and Monte Carlo before meeting the wealthy land-owner George Wilder and his wife, owners of Stansted Park in Sussex. They paid Claude to buy new cars on their behalf and teach them how to drive. Claude became agent for their estate, a position he held for three years. He then spent nine months travelling in South Africa before returning to London where he set up his own motor car dealership at No.1 Albemarle Street. At the age of 27 he was a successful businessman, but he was not satisfied with his life (Wallace, 1960).

Aviation was in its infancy in the early years of the 20th century. Claude had his own balloon but he disliked being at the mercy of the elements, and soon his attention turned to heavier-than-air flight. He was a member of both the Aéro-Club de France and the Aero Club of Great Britain, and in 1908 he travelled to France to see Wilbur Wright fly. He returned to France in 1909 and attended the first ever festival of flying at Reims. He ordered an aircraft for himself and spent eight weeks at Blériot's factory helping to build a new Type XII. He learned to fly at Pau and on the 4th January 1910 he was awarded Brevet No. 30, becoming the first Briton to hold an internationally recognised pilot's certificate (Wallace, 1960). He went on to establish a flying school at Pau, transferring it to England in 1910 (*Flight*, 1959:64).

In 1910 Claude flew against Louis Paulhan in the *Daily Mail* air race from London to Manchester. Although Paulhan won the race and claimed the £10,000 prize, Claude's efforts which included the first ever night flight, made him a national hero. Flying had become Claude's passion, and he expanded his Albemarle Street business to include all things related to aviation (Wallace, 1960). He became actively involved in exhibition flying which included a month spent flying for the Festival of Empire at the Crystal Palace; it was perhaps here that Claude first met fellow Aerofilms Ltd founder Herbert Matthews?

Claude was convinced that the aeroplane had a key role to play in the future of the military, and was disappointed to learn that aviation was not included in the Fleet Review of July 1910. To prove a point he took his Farman biplane to the coast and flew low over the fleet, performing lots of aerial manoeuvres (Wallace, 1960). At a meeting in Blackpool, Claude demonstrated the potential use of the aeroplane for military reconnaissance and dispatch carrying, at one point taking up a photographer who captured images of 'enemy positions' (Wallace, 1960:93).

Claude could see the potential value of aerial photography even at this early stage.

Later in 1910 Claude travelled to America where his achievements included winning the Gordon Bennett cup. He made a perfect landing on Executive Avenue before meeting President Taft. During three months spent in the USA he earned \$250,000 in prize money and exhibition fees (Wallace, 1960:96). He was a brilliant aviator with good looks and a persuasive personality.

In 1911 he founded the Grahame-White Aviation Company (initially called Grahame-White, Blériot & Maxim Ltd), with Herbert Matthews (co-founder of Aerofilms Ltd) named as one of the directors (*Flight*, 1911a:298). Claude leased 207 acres of land at Hendon and created an oval airfield two miles in circumference with associated hangars, workshops and an office block (Wallace, 1960:131). He was invited to address both Houses of Parliament about the future of aviation, and on the 12th May 1911 he demonstrated the potential military uses of the aeroplane at Hendon (*Flight*, 1911b:433). Hendon quickly became a major centre of aviation.

War was brewing in Europe and in April 1912 the War Office announced the creation of a Royal Flying Corps. Claude immediately volunteered but was turned down on account of his civilian status. In May 1912 the Royal Flying Corps came into being, and at a Royal Review of the Home Fleet in Weymouth Bay naval pilots performed a display of their flying skills. Claude and a fellow pilot from Hendon then took to the air, performing manoeuvres which included taking a photograph of the upper decks of the dreadnought *Neptune* from a height of about 500 feet – that same photograph appeared on the front page of the next days' *Daily Mirror* (Wallace, 1960:161). Again Claude was pushing the

importance of the aeroplane and the potential value of photography from the air.

After his disappointment with the Royal Flying Corps, Claude focused his attentions on Hendon, developing the site with a new clubhouse and hotel, and with a programme of weekly air shows. The Grahame-White Aviation Company was busy building aeroplanes, and the Grahame-White School of Aviation trained more pilots than any other school in the country during its first year of operation (Wallace, 1960:167). In June 1912 Claude left his bachelor life behind when he married the New York socialite Miss Dorothy Taylor (*Flight*, 1912:608). After his marriage he continued to work tirelessly, embarking upon his 'Wake Up England' tour aimed at raising the profile of the aeroplane and convincing the public of its value. Claude and his pilots visited 121 towns, gave over 500 exhibition flights and took up approximately 1,200 passengers (Wallace, 1960:173-4).

Claude and Dorothy spent the winter of 1912-13 in St Moritz where their expenses were paid in return for Claude carrying out exhibition flights. It was here that Claude was given a letter of introduction to the international financier Sir Edgar Speyer. Claude met Speyer who agreed to put up £2,000,000 of capital to get civil aviation going on a significant scale *if* Claude could convince the government to invest 5% (i.e. £100,000). Sadly Admiral Jellicoe, Chairman of the Committee on Imperial Defence, refused the offer: the establishment considered airships to be the future of aviation (Wallace, 1960:182).

Once again Claude focused his attention and energies on Hendon, developing the site as 'London's Modern Rendezvous', and in September 1913 the millionth spectator passed through the turnstiles (Wallace, 1960:183). In January 1914 Claude became the first British pilot to log 10,000 air miles (Wallace, 1960:192).

At the outbreak of war in 1914 Claude was commissioned as a Flight-Commander in the Royal Naval Air Service, and Hendon Aerodrome and the hangars, workshops and aircraft of the Grahame-White Aviation Company were requisitioned under the Defence of the Realm Act, becoming a station of the RNAS (Wallace, 1960:197). On the night of the 5th/6th September 1914 Claude and Richard Gates made the first night patrol over London in response to the threat of bombing from German airships (Renwick, 2012:39), and in February 1915 he took part in a mass air raid on the German-held ports of the Belgian coast. In appalling flying conditions he was forced to ditch into the sea five miles off the Belgian coast and was eventually picked up by a French minesweeper. On returning to England he heard conflicting reports that he had drowned in the Channel or been shot as a spy in the Tower of London (Wallace, 1960:204).

Claude resigned his commission in June 1915 and focused his efforts on aircraft production, expanding his factory and employing more staff. He encountered many problems along the way: checks were made by Naval personnel rather than aircraft specialists leading to the rejection of perfectly sound components; unsuitable materials were supplied; he had to borrow money from his uncle to finance the expansion of his factory; and in December 1916 he and Dorothy were divorced. Just before Christmas 1916 he married Ethel Levy, a friend of Dorothy's whom Claude had known for some time (Wallace, 1960:209). The cumulative effect of years of relentless hard work and successive frustrations contributed to a nervous breakdown in December 1917, and a period of six weeks spent in hospital (Wallace, 1960:212).

The summer of 1918 saw several government contracts changed and/or cancelled, and following the Armistice of November 1918 all outstanding

contracts were suspended or cancelled pending a decision on the future of the Royal Air Force (Wallace, 1960:216). This was extremely costly and frustrating for Claude who had claims of over £400,000 lodged with the Treasury. Out of necessity, Claude returned to automobile engineering to keep the factory going. One of his hangars became an auction house for war-surplus vehicles, and he turned his wood-working department to furniture production. In this way he was able to keep his factory fully operational and all of his staff in employment (Wallace, 1960:217-9).

Despite his financial difficulties and the challenging post-war situation, Claude had the drive and somehow the capital to found a new company, Aerofilms Ltd, which was registered on the 9th May 1919. His contribution to the venture was to provide £3,000 and premises at Hendon.

The London Flying Club at Hendon opened its doors on the 1st July 1919, but it was a flying club without an airfield as that was still in the hands of the government (Wallace, 1960:222). During a visit to the USA Claude heard that without notice the Treasury had appointed a Receiver to his company, taken possession of his factory and discharged his employees. A lengthy legal battle ensued; after four and a half years Claude had had enough and planned to publish his view of the affair on the front page of the *Daily Mail* (Wallace, 1960:224). The government caved in, Claude got his money and decided to leave aviation behind him.

His post-Hendon life involved extensive travel, often aboard his private yacht *Ethleen*, and time spent living abroad. In 1925 he became agent for Baby Gar speed boats, an American company (Renwick, 2012:106), he wrote several books on aviation with Harry Harper, and branched out into property and real-estate investment, for example making £100,000 on the sale of the site of Victoria

Coach Station in London (Wallace, 1960:228). His marriage to Ethel came to an end, and in November 1939 he married another American, Miss Phoebe Lee of New York. They spent the war together at Cowes on the Isle of Wight and later at Rossmore Court, a Grahame-White development next to Regent's Park in London. Claude's only role during the Second World War was as a fire-watcher during the air raids (Wallace, 1960:231).

Claude died in Nice on the 19th August 1959 just two days before his 80th birthday.

He Woke Up England

"Claude Grahame-White has gone. To most of the industry's young men he was a name. To their elders he was an heroic figure, somewhere betwixt the Wright Brothers and Buffalo Bill. For it was this gutsy airman show-man who stirred their schoolboy blood with a joystick. "Wake Up England" was his cry. Fun, fame and fortune were his goals; homage by his peers his destiny. The pre-1914 Hendon days of "G-W" and his band have long been mellow memories. But wherever people gather in this island to enjoy the spectacle of flying and take comfort from the benefits it brings our nation and our race...the shade of Grahame-White will look benignly on."

(Flight ,1959:63).

Sources

1881 England Census [database online], Available at
<<http://www.ancestry.co.uk/>> [accessed 29 August 2012]; citing Class: RG11; Piece: 1216; Folio: 18; Page: 30.

1891 England Census [database online], Available at
<<http://www.ancestry.co.uk/>> [accessed 29 August 2012]; citing Class: RG12; Piece: 21; Folio: 66; Pages: 17-18.

Board of Trade, BT31/33802/154995. Board of Trade: Companies Registration Office: Files of Dissolved Companies; No. of Company: 154995; Aerofilms Limited. 1919. The National Archives, Kew, London.

Driver, H. (1997). *The Birth of Military Aviation: Britain, 1903-1915*. London: Royal Historical Society.

Flight. (1911a). Grahame-White, Blériot, and Maxim, Ltd. 1 April 1911, 298 [online], Available at <<http://www.flightglobal.com/pdfarchive/view/1911/1911%20-%200296.html>> [accessed 29 August 2012].

Flight. (1911b). The Hendon Demonstration. 20 May 1911, 433 [online], Available at ><http://www.flightglobal.com/pdfarchive/view/1911/1911%20-%200431.html>> [accessed 29 August 2012].

Flight. (1912). Marriage of Mr. Claude Grahame-White. 06 July 1912, 608 [online], Available at <<http://www.flightglobal.com/pdfarchive/view/1959/1959%20-%201909.html>> [accessed 29 August 2012].

Flight. (1959). He Woke Up England. 28 August 1959, 63 [online], Available at <<http://www.flightglobal.com/pdfarchive/view/1959/1959%20-%201908.html>> [accessed 29 August 2012].

Flight. (1959). Claude Grahame-White. 28 August 1959, 64 [online], Available at <<http://www.flightglobal.com/pdfarchive/view/1959/1959%20-%201909.html>> [accessed 29 August 2012].

Renwick, A. (2012). *RAF Hendon: The Birthplace of Aerial Power*. Manchester: Crécy Publishing Ltd.

Wallace, G. (1960). *Claude Grahame-White: a biography*. London: Putnam.

© Laura Maddison, English Heritage, 2014.