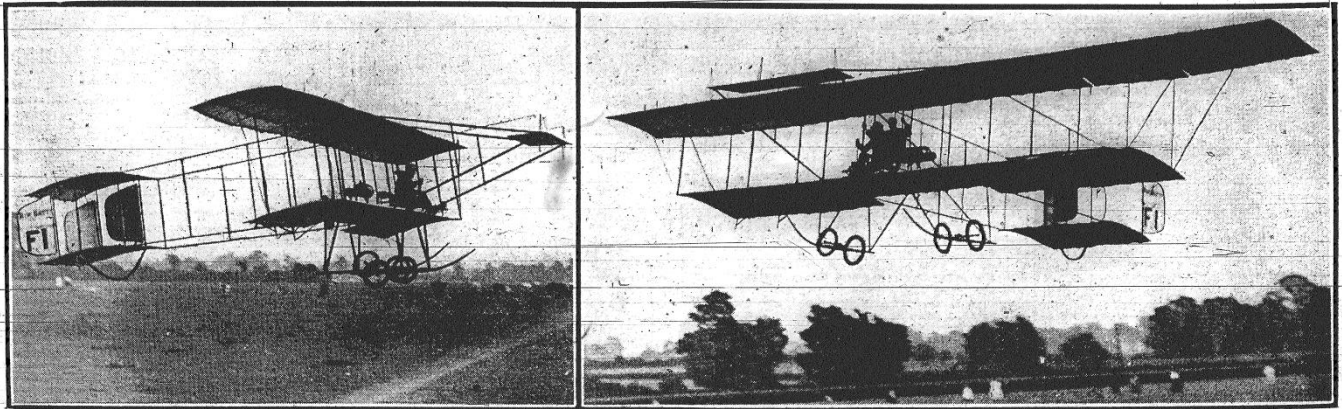


Port Meadow Aerodrome, Wolvercote, Oxford

Port Meadow's connection with aviation goes right back to the very beginnings of aeroplane flight in this country. In December 1910, only two years after Samuel Cody undertook what was recognised as the first flight of a piloted "heavier than air" machine in Great Britain, the Oxford Freeman's Committee agreed to accept £10 per annum from James Betts & Co (engineers) for flying rights over the Meadow. The payment was compensation for any damage to grazing through "the landing or starting of aeroplanes thereon".

Some wooden hangars/sheds were built in early 1911 on the northern part of the Meadow near Wolvercote, and the grandly titled Imperial Aero Club was established there as a flying school for Oxford residents and students. Local resident and Betts employee, Frank Goodden, even parachuted from a balloon onto the Meadow in front of a large crowd to generate some publicity. It is unclear whether the Aero Club actually opened for business, but unfortunately, the hangars and all 15 aircraft were completely destroyed in a gale in November 1911 and Betts went bankrupt. Goodden, however, set himself up from the remnants, built and flew his own aeroplane, the Dragonfly (known locally as the "Grasshopper"), in 1912. He went on to be an exceptional WW1 test pilot killed piloting the new SE5 fighter in an accident in 1917.

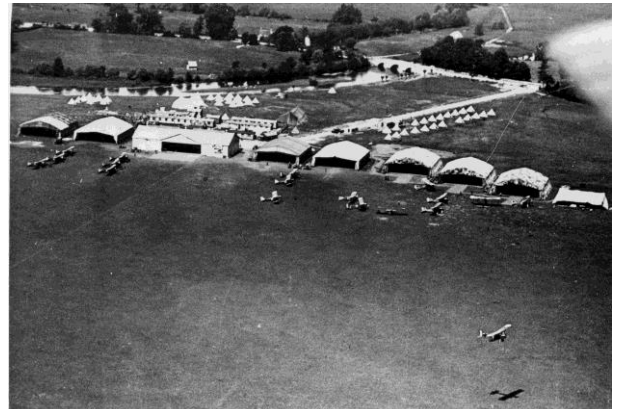
AEROPLANES AT OXFORD.



During Wednesday and Thursday last four aeroplanes were to be seen at Port Meadow, having arrived from Salisbury, piloted by four officers of the Air Battalion. Capt. Burke, whom we have previously seen flying here, arrived at Oxford at 5 a.m. on Wednesday, carrying a passenger; Lieut. Reynolds and Capt. Massey arrived about 7.30 p.m. on the same day, and Lieut. Barrington-Kennett at 9.30 on Thursday morning. All experienced successful flights, and all used the Bristol biplane type of aeroplane. During Wednesday evening Capt. Burke gave exhibition flights with passengers, showing complete control over his craft. Flights were also made on Thursday previous to departure, three of them to Cambridge, the other returning to Salisbury. The above pictures show Capt. Burke rising from the ground for his first exhibition flight, and at the start of his flight with a passenger.—(O.J.L. photos).

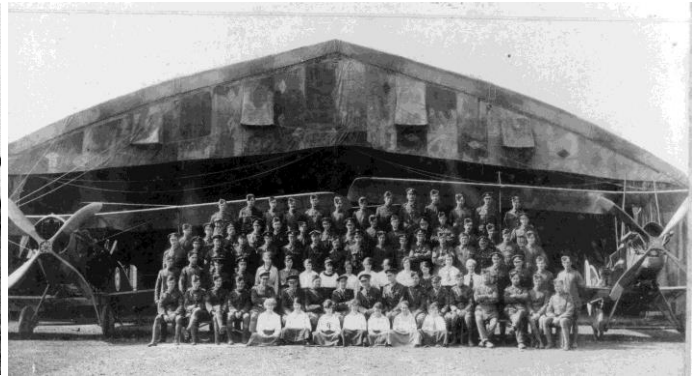
The first recorded visit by an aeroplane was in May 1911 when the celebrity Hubert Latham arrived from Brooklands in his Antoinette monoplane. The period 1911 to 1914 saw increasing but still sporadic use of the Meadow initially by the Air Battalion of the Army and from 1912, the newly formed Royal Flying Corps. The RFC typically used the landing ground as a stopping off point on the way to and from military manoeuvres elsewhere. Usually these visits were popular with residents, generated crowds and were well reported in the local papers, as above in June 1911. The tragic plane crash in September 1912 that killed two visiting RFC pilots in Wolvercote, near the Meadow, is commemorated on a plaque next to Wolvercote's Toll Bridge, unveiled in June 1913.

The site became a formal RFC aerodrome in 1916, with a primary role of flying training, as part of a drive to meet the huge demand for new pilots and observers as the role of aircraft in the war expanded. A new access road onto the Meadow was completed – called Aerodrome Road – along with a semi-permanent hangar/workshop and three portable canvas hangars, as shown in the April 1917 photo below left.



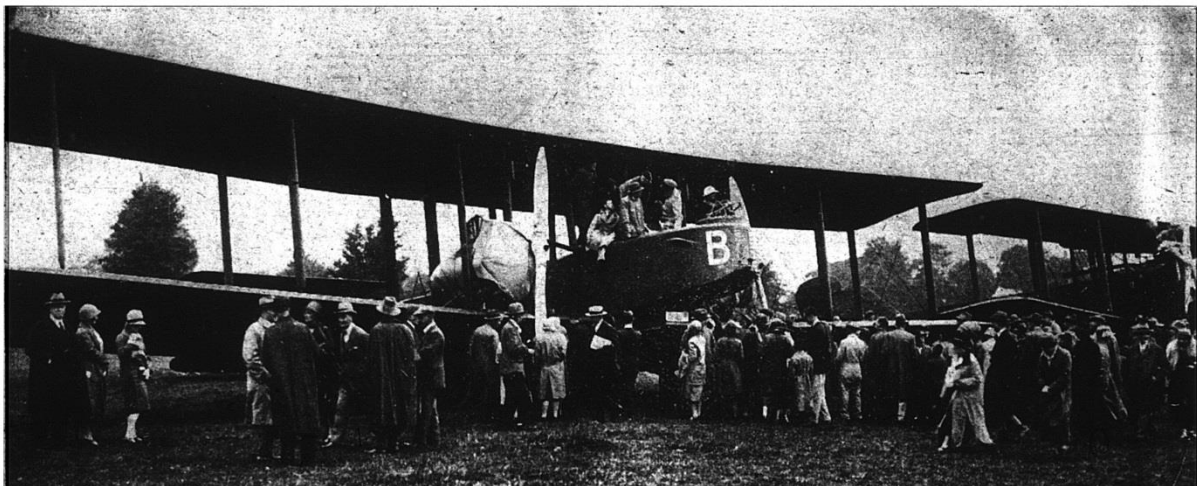
Several more hangars were added later and the airfield expanded as shown in May 1918 above right.

Despite the RFC's activities this part of the Meadow remained common grazing land, and the first job every morning was to clear the landing ground of animals to allow flying to begin! A number of squadrons were based at the aerodrome between 1916 and 1919, such as 35 Training Squadron shown below right. They and visiting aircrew used a number of well known World War 1 aeroplane types, including Royal Aircraft Factory BE2s, Avro 504s, Sopwith Camels and SE5a's, Bristol Scouts and, predominantly, F2b Bristol Fighters as shown below left.



Flying in those days was hazardous. Between March 1917 and November 1918, Eleven aeroplanes fatally crashed on or near the Meadow, with the loss of fifteen lives, with two others killed in a crash near Ascot. Eight of those aircrew are buried in Wolvercote Cemetery. One of them, Capt George Thomson DSO MC, was a 20 year old "Ace" with 21 aerial victories, who had just stopped at the aerodrome to refuel while on a cross country flight in May 1918. His aeroplane caught fire and crashed shortly after takeoff.

The aerodrome was closed in late 1919, although was still used for training visits up to that point. The hangars and other fittings were then auctioned off in February 1920. Over the next decade or so there was sporadic use of the Meadow for paid "joy" flights, an impressive RAF display in 1926 including two twin engine bombers (photo below), an air transport aeroplane and even "bombing" of the Target with flour. Captain Charles Barnard's impressive touring Flying Circus visited in 1931, drawing large crowds.



Adhoc private use also occurred, including a visit by a Gypsy Moth ending in a spectacular crash in 1929 (below left). One notable postscript on the use of the Meadow was the visit by HRH Prince of Wales to Oxford in July 1933. He arrived at the Meadow for the day in his new DH Dragon cabin aeroplane (below right), to be met by the Duke of Marlborough, Sir William Morris (founder of the Cowley motor works) and other dignitaries.

