

Flying over Feltham

Some First World War airmen who flew from Hounslow Heath airfield

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Although these airmen flew from Hounslow Heath, as the airfield sits on the borders of Feltham, a little licence is allowed, as they would have been flying all over the borough.



The origins of the airfield were with the Zeppelin menace at the start of the Great War – the Hounslow cavalry barracks had a training ground on the remains of the old heath, between the Staines Road and the railway line to Windsor. This was an ideal open area for basing a couple of aircraft at the end of 1914, to undertake night flights against Zeppelin raiders. This proved to be very difficult – they were slow to climb and just finding the raiders was difficult, But its suitability to be an airfield was proved and from spring 1915, hangars, workshops and other buildings were erected. Initially the airfield was used for new squadrons forming up and training before heading to France.



The aircraft photo shows a BE2c actually at Hounslow – the same type as used against the Zeppelins from the airfield.

CECIL LEWIS

April 1915



Our first airman is Cecil Lewis, who was to become the author of the classic *Sagittarius Rising*, which tells his story with the Royal Flying Corps. He would later become a founder of the BBC and live to 98. His connection with Hounslow is that he made his first flight here. He had just turned 17 (but said he was almost 18...), was a keen aircraft modeller and with a friend at Oundle School tried to sign up. One issue was his height..6 feet 3...so he was sent to Hounslow to see if he could fit in an aircraft ! He could and told his mother that evening 'It was ripping Mother. When I got down there, they let me get into a machine...you have to climb up under the wires, stand on the tyre, heave yourself up onto the plane. The captain, awfully decent he was, said he'd give me a flip...the engine went off with a roar and we bumped along over the ground - and then we took off! The Thames and all the houses and people looked like little dots...it's a marvellous feeling'.

CAPTAIN BINDON BLOOD
September 25th 1915



Secondly, we see Bindon Blood, who had the misfortune to be the first of over 30 airmen to lose their lives at the airfield. He already had a long military career, in the Boer War, Indian army and then fighting at Mons and the Marne in the first 1914 campaigns. Aged 33, he had been flying for six months. On this day, a friend flew a new scout (fighter) over from Farnborough, and Blood took off to do circuits. Unfortunately, in one turn he got into a spin and the aircraft caught fire when hitting the ground. He died of burns the next day and is buried in County Clare, where his family hailed from.

MAJOR LANOE HAWKER VC
October 2nd 1915



Lanoe Hawker is a VC holder who is less well known now. 24 years old at this point, with the war a year old, he had been a prewar airman and had served with No 6 Squadron in France. When the war became static with trench lines, the use of reconnaissance aircraft to map the trench development became more important. This led to the opposition trying to shoot down these aircraft, initially with pistols and rifles, later with machine guns. The scout, or fighter was born. Hawker was one of the first to fit a Lewis machine gun to the side of his cockpit, and in one day shot down three enemy aircraft, earning a VC. He was a natural leader and came to Hounslow to form No 24 Squadron. He noted in his diary that he started with six aircraft, only one of which was fit to fly. He proved to be successful in leading his squadron, until he became the 11th victim of the 'Red Baron' Manfred von Richthofen, in November 1916.

CAPTAIN CHARLES D'ARCY REEVE
July 18th 1916



As the air war became more intense through 1916, Hounslow's role was in training new pilots to form new squadrons and replace those lost in combat, the mortality rate heading to an average life expectancy of only three weeks. Charles D'Arcy Reeve was just 21, only three years older than his pupil, who he took up on a flight on a summer's evening, where the long days allowed training flights to continue well into the evening. Unfortunately, on this day he sideslipped from only 200 feet and both young men were killed. The airfield commander said that the accident should not have happened, he was too low to do a sharp turn and it was probably overconfidence on the part of the pilot. This is a typical story, young men with limited flying experience losing their lives. Training accidents were to cause as many deaths as combat during the war.

MAJOR JAMES McCUDDEN VC
July 19th 1918



The final story is that of a well-known name at the time, an ace, James McCudden. He was only 23 yet had shot down 57 aircraft and been awarded the VC. The ferocity of the air war in 1917-18 led to many high scores. McCudden was due to fly back to France and visited his sister in the War Office...and gave her an envelope with his medals. Did he have foresight? He collected a new SE5A at Hounslow and headed across the Channel to Boffles airfield. Unable to locate it, he stopped at another airfield to ask the way..and on taking off, the engine misfired and he crashed into trees. He was buried in a cemetery nearby. So we started with a first flight, and end with a last departure from Britan.



I finish with a painting by my dear friend Colin Ashford, who died a couple of years ago aged 101; he loved painting First World War aircraft and was a stickler for getting the right colours and markings, here we see a success for the RFC in 1915.