

TO THE ALCOCK ATLANTIC FLIGHT



Vimpy veterans

THE last survivor of the team who went out to Newfoundland to put together the crated Vimpy is 77-year-old Bob Dicker of Weybridge.

It was less than three weeks after his wedding that Bob, who had started work at Weybridge in 1914, was told he was wanted for the trip to Newfoundland: his job was to set up the control systems operated by Bowden wires.

"I remember there were 13 of us on the boat going over, but we were not at all superstitious; we were always confident that Alcock and Brown would make it," Bob recalls.

By this time Bob had formed a very high regard for the patient thoroughness of Brown's navigation and for the skill of Alcock as a pilot.

Once they arrived at Quidi Vidi in Newfoundland there followed three weeks' hard slog putting the plane together in freezing temperatures. Much of this time Bob and his colleagues slept beside the plane in the crates in which the parts had arrived.

At the time of the take off Bob was the last man to speak to Alcock and Brown: "I shouted 'Good luck' over the roar of the engines. Alcock shouted back 'See you in London.'"

Bob can still remember the anxious moments as the Vimpy, its extra fuel tanks fully laden for the first time, rolled down

the field and hopped over the wall at the end.

"It was the first time I had ever seen an aircraft take off going down hill."

When eventually the Vimpy came back into sight flying over them in an easterly direction Bob remembers how impressive a sight it was: "It must have been doing 130 miles an hour and for those days it was a big aeroplane. It looked bloody marvellous."

After this there was nothing for the erecting team to do but to catch up on their rest and wait for news of how the pioneers had fared.

When the cablegram arrived to say that Alcock and Brown had touched down in Ireland, Bob says the locals were amazed at the lack of high excitement shown by the team.

"I think we were still too tired to celebrate. I remember I did have an ice cream. But we had expected them to do it anyway, so perhaps that was why we did not go wild at the news."

Back in England Bob only remained in the aircraft business for three months. He went back to his first love, motor cycles and became a very successful racer as well as setting up his own business selling bikes.

By IAIN CARSON

Behind that epic flight of Alcock and Brown fifty years ago next month were the efforts of the hand-picked team at Weybridge Works who worked round the clock for three months to prepare the Vimpy bomber for its history-making flight. We talked to some of them still living in the Weybridge area.

But in that same year he nevertheless came close to being on that fateful flight to Paris on which Alcock lost his life.

"He had invited me at short notice to fly over with him for a weekend in Paris but I was too involved trying to sell the local chemist a motor cycle combination. Later that afternoon, I had a call from Maxwell Muller to tell me that Alcock had crashed in fog and had died on the way to hospital."

Another surviving member of the team who worked on the conversion of the Vimpy is Bill Titcombe, now retired from Weybridge and running a small design studio in Byfleet. He was 15 in 1919, working in the blueprint room where he was involved on drawings for the alterations to the standard Vimpy.

"I can remember the welcome they got when they came back to Weybridge. Everyone gathered in the yard. We got an extra week's pay."

"Earlier the news that they had made it was phoned around the works by Miss Wisbey, the telephonist. She spoke to the heads of departments and the word went round the rest of us like wildfire."

IF you go to see the Alcock and Brown Vimpy at the Science Museum, look closely at the starboard fin on the tail-plane and you will find "W. Montague" written there. For 65-year-old Bill Montague was one of the squad who moved the reconstructed Vimpy from Weybridge to the Kensington museum. "Most of us signed our names!" he says.

"The windows had to be taken out of the building for us to get the Vimpy in," Bill recalls.

When the remains of the plane had been brought back to Weybridge from Ireland Bill can remember how they had to be completely stripped down and cleaned of mud before the Vimpy was ready to be put together again.

"I seem to remember that the back of the plane was broken by the crash in the bog at Clifden."

Strangely enough, says Bill, he has never been back to the Science Museum to see the Vimpy since he helped to erect it there.

Bill is another one who can remember the reception given at Weybridge to the returning heroes.

"There was a band from the nearby New Zealand soldiers hospital. You would have said that the reception was warm rather than rowdy. Some of the chaps did chair Alcock across the yard. I could see it all because I was sitting on top of the cycle racks."

Later Bill flew with Alcock as a flight observer on a trip to Eastleigh Airport which ended, however, in an emergency

landing in a field outside Basingstoke.

"It was a textbook emergency landing, just a bit bumpy."

Bill retired last year after 50 years at Weybridge where he became assistant supervisor in the fitting and erecting shops.

A REMARK that Jack Alcock made to some of the squad working on the Vimpy has always stuck in Bill Lambert's mind. Sixty-eight-year-old Bill who retired as assistant supervisor in hydraulics section in 1968, was at the time a shop lad working with George West on the nose portion of the Vimpy.

"Alcock said one day, 'what a great day it will be for all you lads when you hear we have come down in Ireland.'"

The remark would seem to indicate that even before the flight Alcock had it in mind that they might touch down in Ireland rather than carry on till they reached their scheduled destination at Brooklands.

Earlier the first indication that Bill Lambert had that there was something special planned for the Vimpy they were working on was when they noticed that Alcock seemed to be spending a lot of time in the shops.

"We knew about the Daily Mail prize for the first flight."

"Nothing official was said about the attempt being planned but then I noticed from the drawings that the nose portion was being made non-standard to allow for extra fuel tanks and guessed that this Vimpy was being prepared for an attempt at the Atlantic flight."

Bill was involved on the test flight of the Vimpy before it was stripped down for the sea journey to Newfoundland.

THE only woman to work on the Alcock and Brown Vimpy was Mrs Anne Boulwood, now a widow in her eighties living in Walton-on-Thames. Anne Boulwood must have been a remarkable figure in those days. A forewoman in the erecting and doping shop, she had 300 girls working under her sewing the fabric on to planes and repairing the damage caused to fabric.

With only a select few allowed to work on this extra special work, the pressure on them to get the Vimpy ready for its test flight was fantastic.

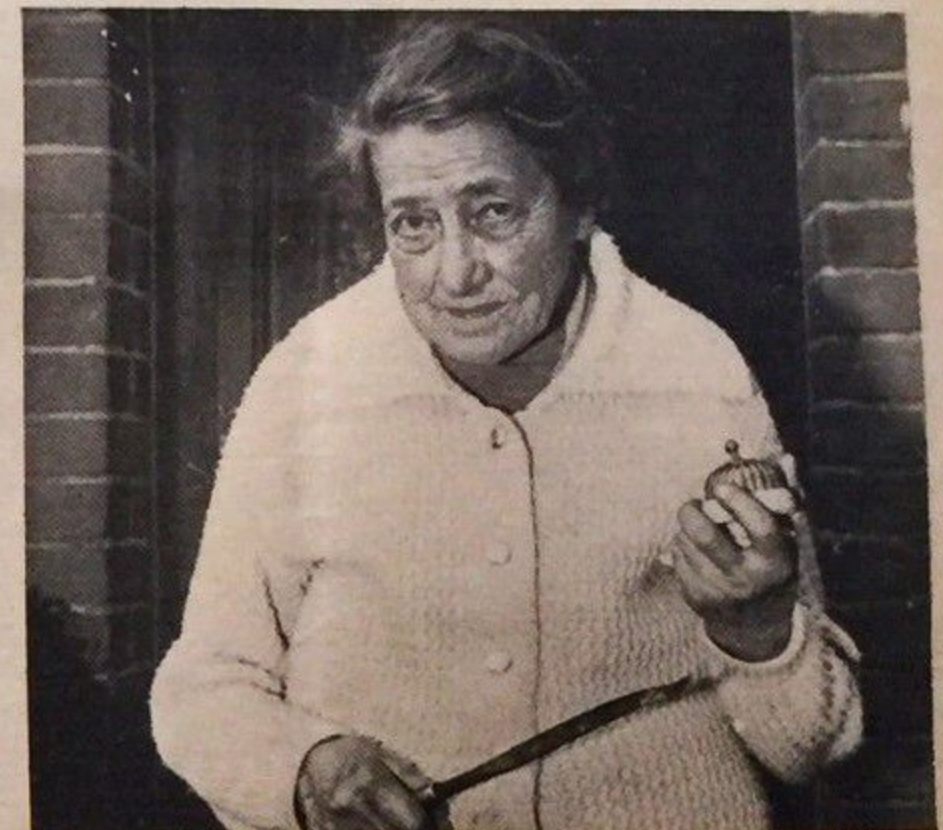
"I can remember working 18 hours a day for a whole week before the test flight."

"I can still see it as it looked then. It looked beautiful, all silver. There was shellac on the ribs, on the wings and on the tailplane elevator. All the dope was silver."

Anne remembers the first flight of the plane: "We had worked on it up to the last minute until it was ready for its baptism in the sky. I saw it take off for that first flight; it looked beautiful, like a bird," Anne recalls.



Bill Montague . . . "Most of us signed our names on the Vimpy in the Science Museum"



Anne Boulwood . . . "I saw it take off for its first flight; it looked beautiful, like a bird"

When the news came through that Alcock and Brown had completed the flight, Anne was working on the fabric of an SE5 fighter.

"Archie Knight, who was our guvnor came up to me and said, 'Mate, we've done it.' 'Thank God for that' I replied."

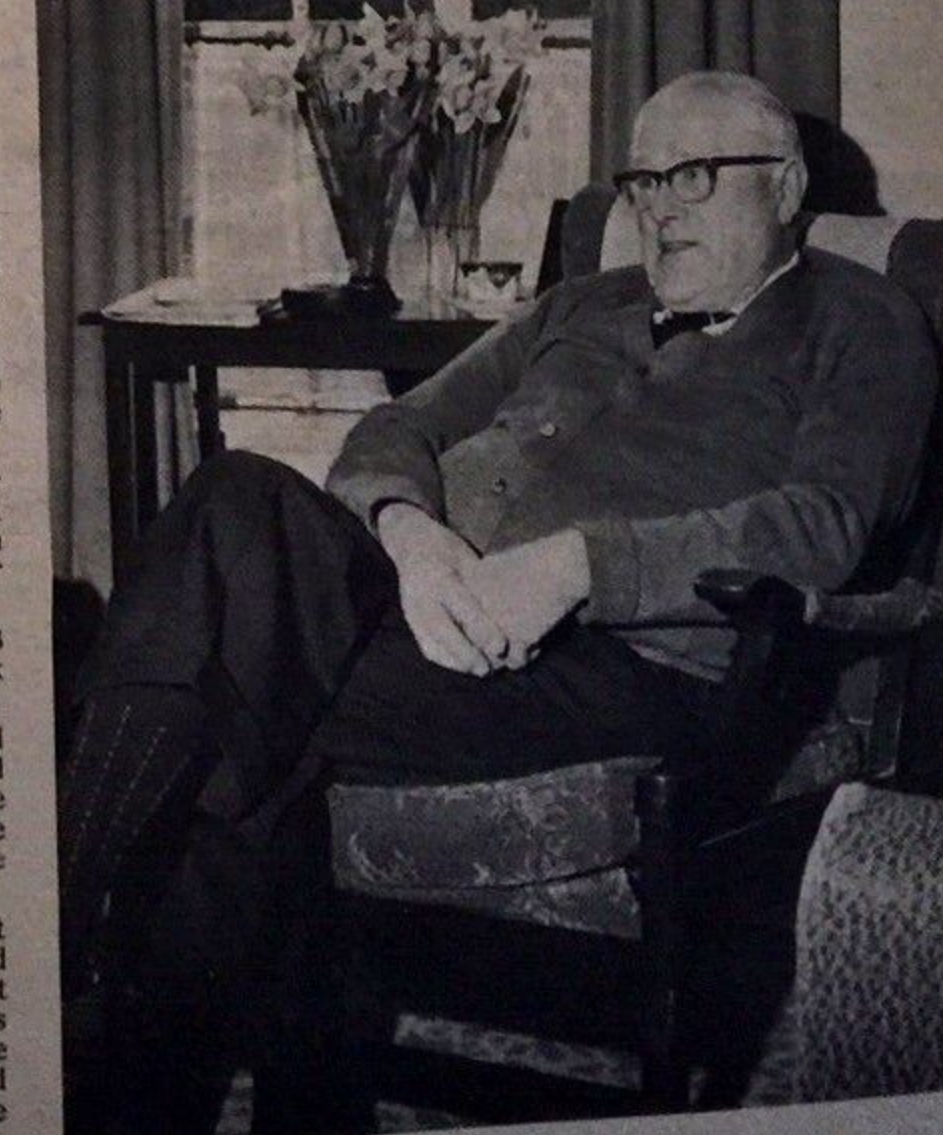
"I had always felt confident that they would succeed because I knew that they were the sort of men to do or die."

Anne retains two souvenirs from the Vimpy: one is an ordinary light switch which her husband, a carpenter at Weybridge Works for 30 years, had put on the fuselage on the eve of the departure for Newfoundland to give the flyers an instrument light. The other is a poker made out of the RAF wire used for the rigging.

Anne reckons that the Vimpy which reached the Science Museum is original only in the fuselage and larger parts because the souvenir hunters had stripped it.

Anne retired when she was 58 after 30 years at Weybridge when the days of fabric fuselages came to an end. But she still recalls vividly those early days when they were all fired with the enthusiasm of the pioneers. "After all," she says, "when you loved doing something in your life, you never forget about it."

Bill Lambert . . . "Alcock said one day, 'What a great day it will be for you lads when you hear we've come down in Ireland.'"



Bob Dicker pictured in Weybridge Works beside the fuselage of the replica Vimpy bomber being built by the enthusiasts

