

## FLYING AT THANINGTON

By  
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Edited by Roger Cheeseworth 2006

Probably the least likely airfield in Kent during the inter-war years has to be Cockerling Farm at Thanington Without, lying to the south of the minor road from Canterbury to Chartham. Yet, from 1929 to 1932, it was the venue for a number of air shows which were the delight of many local people.

The farm was owned by Mr Ashenden, the Canterbury auctioneer and estate agent who ran the farm as a hobby. In 1929 he was approached by the Alan Cobham Aviation Company with a request to use his front field, beside the road and the house, as the Canterbury venue of his aerial tour of the country. From May to October Sir Alan Cobham flew to cities and towns throughout Britain in his De Havilland Giant Moth G-AAEV, 'Youth of Britain', in a campaign to convince local authorities of the need for municipal airports.



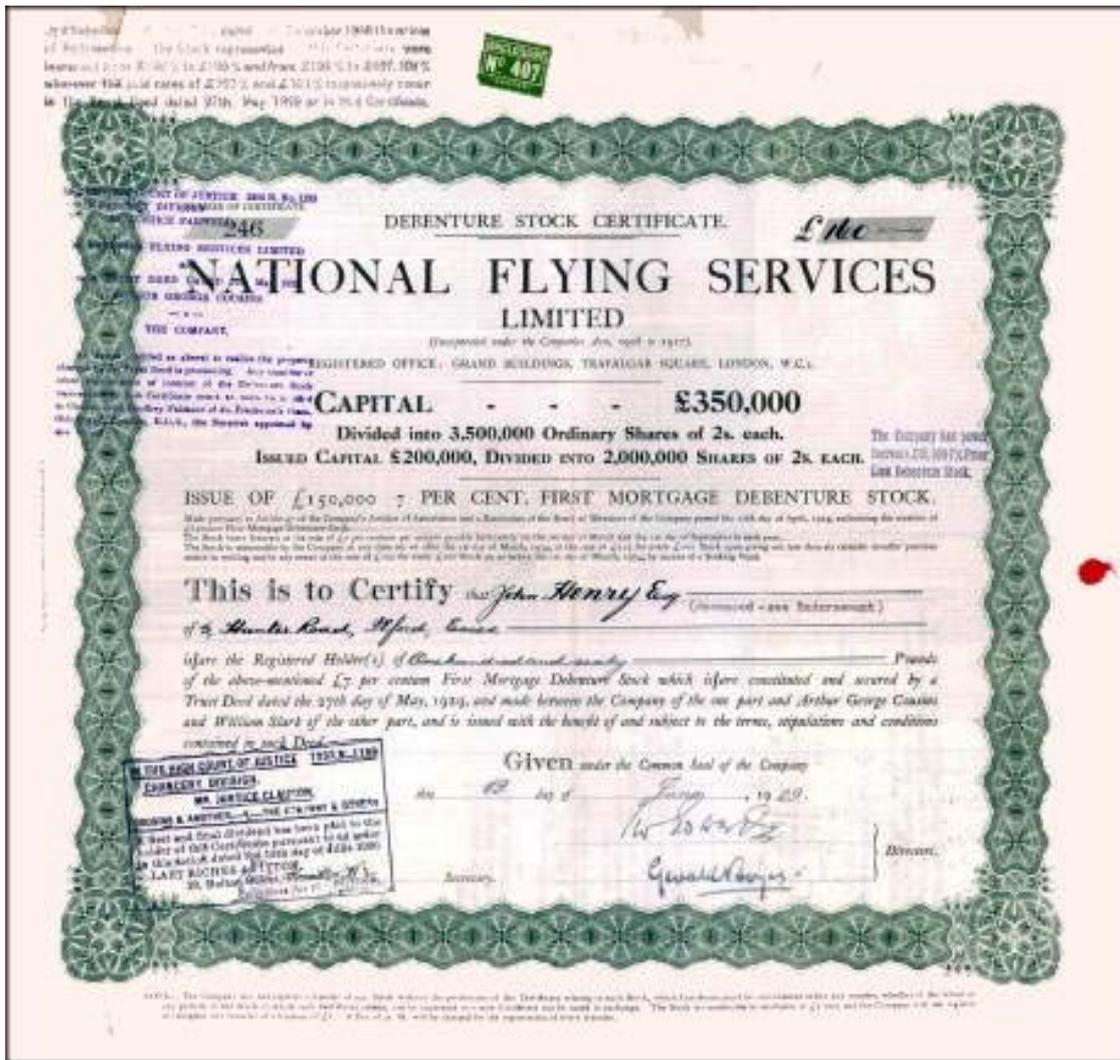
I was a tour of heroic proportions in which 3,500 mayors and councillors and 10,000 school children were given free flights, sponsored by Lord Wakefield of Hythe, and 250,000 other joy flights were made.



*Editor's Note - Lord Wakefield of Hythe. A former Lord Mayor of London and Proprietor of Castrol Oil. A man with a large fortune and a zealous commitment to public service and upholding the prestige of the City.*

The Cockerling Farm visit took place on 16th August, flights were five shillings a time and many school children flew in the ten seater aircraft. Betty Green of Canterbury was one who did not, "I was too chicken," she recalled, "but my brother did and later learned to fly at Hawkinge."

The following year, 1930, it was the turn of National Flying Services. Their orange and black Giant Moth, G-AAAN, was at Cockerling Farm for a whole week; from Sunday April 27<sup>th</sup> until Sunday May 4<sup>th</sup> inclusive. This aircraft, once red and silver and called 'Geraldine' had previously seen service with the Daily Mail as a flying darkroom for rapid news gathering. National Flying Services acquired it in February and proudly advertised it in the Canterbury Press and Kentish Gazette as their 'saloon air taxi' in which passengers were offered 'perfect comfort' and an 'unrestricted view'. Again flights were from five shillings and admission to the field was free except for the Saturday when there were 'flying displays by famous exhibition pilots' and for which spectacular attraction adults were charged 6d,



Copy of debenture stock certificate in National Flying Service

In 1931 another 'flying circus' displayed at Cockerling under the leadership of Captain C.D. Barnard. Joyflights were offered in the red Spartan Three Seater, G-ABTU shown below as different aeroplane



Spartan Three Seater

At this time Spartans were the mainstay of the nation's pleasure flight trade and it was in this machine that one of Mr Ashenden's daughters made her first flight over Canterbury, complete with flying helmet and goggles in the open cockpit. Her sister was to fly the following year in the all yellow Tiger moth, G-ABRC, when Sir Alan Cobham returned with his National Aviation Day Display Campaign, headed by his new three engined Airspeed Ferry, G-ASDI, 'Youth for Britain II'.

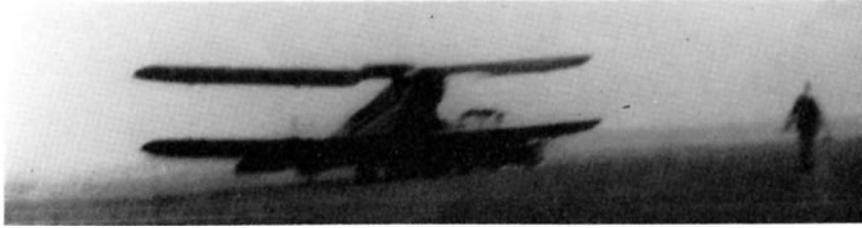
Conceived by Sir Alan Cobham with the object of "making it possible for the majority of people in the British Isles to see every type of flying close at hand and, if they wish, to participate in a flight", the National Aviation Days were the best known and best organised of the flying circuses so popular in the thirties. They were part of Cobham's vision for an air minded Britain; "I maintain that it is impossible to expect any substantial growth in general flying activities until every town and village throughout the country has a landing ground of some description for the reception of aircraft. I am convinced that this is the root of the successful development of British flying." With this aim the circus visited over 170 towns throughout the British Isles. He visited Bekesbourne Aerodrome near Canterbury but Cockering Farm was much closer to the city and much closer to the idea of "a landing ground of some description". City people would be more prepared to make the short walk to the farm than the longer trip to Bekesbourne. The circus's display was impressive and included crazy flying, parachuting, air-racing, aerobatics, 'aerial marksmanship' (shooting down balloons with a revolver), and even 'syncopated flying in time with dance music broadcast from the...radio coach'. 'Jimmy' Lowe-Wylde of Kent Gliding Club was with the circus in 1932 demonstrating both motor car and aerial tows in his blue and grey BAC glider.



*Sir Alan Cobham*



*Preparing for a 5/- joy flight in 'Youth of Britain' at Cockering Farm in 1929*



*The De Havilland Giant Moth 'Youth of Britain' at Cockerling Farm in 1929*

To have such first class flying so close to Canterbury must have been greatly appreciated by the residents who will have looked forward with anticipation to the annual displays at Cockerling Farm. They were exciting times; one of Mr Ashenden's daughters, now Mrs W. Ward of Dover, then only a small girl, remembers the events; vividly she recalled the pilots and remembers that "we always used to make great friends with them to get a flight!" That was, after all, the aim of the flying circuses, to bring aviation to the people. Sadly, the Cockerling Farm displays were not to continue for, in 1933, Mr Ashenden planted out the front field with fruit trees, but by then he and his farm had earned themselves a small place in the history of flying in Kent.

#### Acknowledgements

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