

## AMY JOHNSON, AVIATOR



*Picture courtesy of the Amy Johnson estate*

At around 11.45 on the morning of Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> January, 1941 Amy Johnson, aged 37, a pilot with the Air Transport Auxiliary (ATA), left Blackpool aerodrome flying an Airspeed Oxford. Ineligible to work as a pilot for the RAF, she had become one of a number of women who joined the ATA to ferry planes and VIPs between airbases and manufacturing sites. This morning she was headed to Kidlington in Oxfordshire, a flight which should have taken around 90

minutes. But the weather was against her – it was very cold, snowy and foggy.

We shall probably never know exactly how and why an experienced pilot like Amy ended up so far off course, but at around 3.30 in the afternoon a seaman serving on a convoy of ships in the Thames estuary near Herne Bay spotted an aeroplane – followed by a parachute – floating down through the snow. Some sailors reported seeing two bodies in the water. One was heard to cry out in a high pitched voice. Despite the freezing conditions, Lt Commander Walter Fletcher of the HMS Haslemere, dived into the water and attempted a rescue. It was unsuccessful, and was to cost him his life from exposure and shock. Neither Amy's body nor any second body was ever found.

What went wrong? Even today official reports of the incident remain classified and we shall probably never know. The suggestion – unproven – that there was a second body has excited speculation that she was flying a secret mission of some sort. In 1999 a man called Tom Mitchell from Crowborough in Surrey claimed – amidst much scepticism – that he had shot the plane down. It was taken to be an enemy plane, he said, because the pilot had twice failed to give the correct code which would have identified it as British. It was claimed that in the confusion a ship's engines had been thrown into reverse and Amy had got sucked into the propellers. The straightforward but unproven explanation is that she simply got lost in bad weather and ran out of fuel. Had it been any other pilot the incident might not have attracted such attention or been so controversial, but Amy was not just any pilot. By now her fame was such that at least ten songs had been written about her, and amongst a mountain of fan mail she once received a letter addressed only to 'Amy what flies in England.' To use a word which she herself would probably not have recognised, she was a superstar.

Born in St George's Road, Hull in 1903, Amy was the oldest of the four daughters of John and Amy Johnson, the granddaughter of William Hodge, a onetime Sheriff and Mayor of Hull. Her father was a member of Andrew Johnson, Knudtson and Co, a family firm of fish merchants. She left Boulevard Secondary School (later Kingston High School) at the age of 18 - minus two front teeth which she lost in an accident while playing cricket – and for the next six years was involved in a romantic relationship with a Swiss businessman called Hans Arregger. When the relationship ended Arregger kept all of the 286 letters she sent during that time, some of them from Sheffield where she successfully studied for a degree in economics. Returning to Hull she undertook secretarial work, but crucially had her first experience of flying – as a passenger in a small plane which took off from the Endyke Lane flying ground.

In 1927 she moved to London where she again worked as a secretary, but she was still drawn to the idea of flying and on one fateful Sunday in 1928 she took a bus to the Stag Lane aerodrome near Edgware where she found out that she could take flying lessons at a reasonable price. Her first instructor was distinctly unimpressed with his pupil, but even so Amy was hooked to the extent that she wrote home after only six lessons, saying 'I have an immense belief in the future of flying.' Fortunately there was a second instructor with whom she fared rather better, making her first solo flight after 16 hours flying time. Amy was now on her way, and persuaded her father to support her financially so that she could give up the secretarial job and become a full time mechanic at the aerodrome. Instructed by Chief Ground Engineer Jack Humphreys she took to the work so well that in December 1929 she became the first woman in Britain to be awarded an Air Ministry Ground Engineer's licence.

It was now that her extraordinary ambition asserted itself. With only very limited solo flying experience – the longest such flight she'd ever made was from London to Hull (Hedon) – she declared that not only did she propose to fly solo from London to Australia, but that she intended to beat the Australian pilot Bert Hinkler's record for the flight. She secured financial backing from her father and from Lord Wakefield of Wakefield Oils (later Castrol) and bought a second hand de Havilland Gipsy Moth which she christened *Jason* after her father's business trademark. She set off from Croydon on 5<sup>th</sup> May 1930 for Vienna, the first of 16 stops on the way to Darwin in Northern Australia. The route was carefully planned with fuel available at each stop, but the flight did not proceed altogether smoothly. Amongst other things she survived a dust storm, a monsoon, heavy landings, one of which broke an undercarriage strut, a broken propeller and a couple of forced landings, one of which was amongst a tribe she initially but incorrectly took to be hostile. She had to pump some 50 gallons of fuel by hand each day, the fumes making her sick. She suffered from extreme cold and exhaustion, but despite all this landed successfully in Darwin on 24<sup>th</sup> May. Even though she hadn't beaten Hinkler's record she became an instant celebrity. She spent six weeks touring Australia - as a passenger, drawing large crowds wherever she went. The plan had been to tour in Jason, but an exhausted Amy crashed on landing in Brisbane, causing substantial damage. It was on this tour that she met – and in 1932 married – the Scottish aviation pioneer Jim Mollison.

She returned to England in the August of 1930, to be greeted by huge crowds in London and Hull. Coincidentally, Dorothy Mackaill, the film star who also features in this series, was not only born, like Amy in 1903 – Dorothy was older by about four months – but also came home to a parade in front of cheering crowds in 1930. There were two awe inspiring celebrations in Hull that year in the space of a few weeks.

But Amy was far from finished. In 1931 she and Jack Humphreys – her former ground engineering instructor – teamed up to become the first co-pilots to fly from London to Moscow in one day, taking around 21 hours. In 1932 she flew from London to Cape Town and back, beating fiancé Jim Mollison's record for the return journey by fully ten and a half hours. In 1933 she and Mollison – now her husband – made a transatlantic crossing – a journey made hazardous by the amount of fuel they needed to carry and the wide stretch of ocean they had to cross out of sight of land. In fact they ran out of fuel and crashed short of their destination, but they had crossed the Atlantic and were given a ticker tape welcome in New York. Records continued to tumble, but turmoil grew in her private life. Jim Mollison was a heavy drinker and a playboy who was unfaithful to his wife. As a celebrity couple the press were interested, adding to the pressure and they divorced in 1938.

When her friend, the American aviator Amelia Earhart went missing over the Pacific, Amy's interest in long distance flying waned and she took up gliding which she found much more peaceful and relaxing. But in 1939 war broke out and Amy joined the women's section of the Air Transport Auxiliary where she was paid a weekly salary of £6. Thus it was that on Saturday 4<sup>th</sup> January 1941 she flew an Airspeed Oxford from Prestwick near Glasgow to Blackpool where she stayed overnight with her sister.

The following day she continued the journey, taking off from Blackpool for Kidlington. As we have seen, the weather was poor, she flew well off course and crashed into the River Thames near Herne Bay. It was to be her final journey.

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