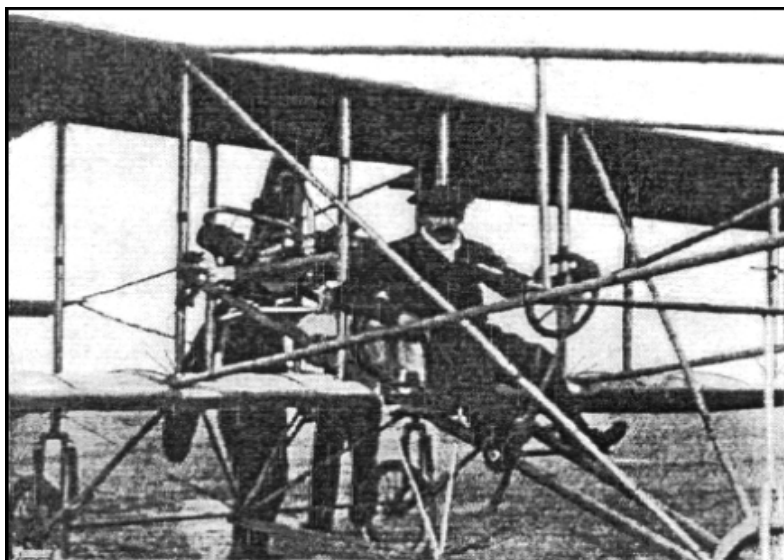


# Freshfield Flying Centenary

special supplement to *Formby Civic News*,  
*The newsletter of the Formby Civic Society.*

*The aviators who one century ago made  
history on Freshfield beach.....*

MAY 2010



*Compton Paterson in his biplane.*

## **Cecil Compton Paterson.**

On Saturday 14 May 1910, *The Liverpool Daily Post* reported that Paterson had made history by becoming the first man to take off from Freshfield sands

*At half past three o'clock, just as the sun had risen, the aeroplane arrived on the shore. Within an hour from the time of unshipping it, its parts had been assembled and it was ready for the fray. For some twenty minutes or so, Mr. Paterson drove the machine backwards and forwards along the hard, dry sandy beach in order to test the capacity and temper of the engine. Then, to the sur-*

*prise of the little knot of people present, he quietly and gracefully rose from the earth, and soaring in to the air, sailed away for about 100 yards.*

*With the same ease that he had risen, he came down lightly to the ground amid the congratulations of his friends upon what, under the circumstances, must be regarded as a marvelously successful debut. For two or three hours he continued his experimental trials, making upwards of a dozen aerial excursions at varying heights and distances. The longest flight was about half a mile at an altitude of about 30 feet. It spoke well for the manner in which Mr. Paterson had built his aeroplane that its bal-*

*ance in the air was so unfalteringly true and perfect. As it rose, its movements were guiltless of the slightest wobble or eccentricity*

Paterson was a director of the Liverpool Motor House Company. Had spent eight months and £625 building an aeroplane based on the design of the Curtiss *Golden Flyer*.

Paterson's aeroplane weighed about 273 kg (600 lbs) and was powered by a 25-30 horsepower Anzani engine. A six gallon fuel tank allowed flights of up to 90 miles. Top speed was 41 mph. Paterson then approached Southport town Council for help to set up an aerodrome and flying school. As the Council would not offer enough money, Paterson decided to erect a hangar at Freshfield (later Shed 2, of what was to become a row of five).

*The Formby Civic Society is grateful to Chris Aspin, John Mulliner, Nick Forder and the Manchester Museum of Science and Industry for help in recalling these historical events.*

# Freshfield Aviators

## Cecil Compton Paterson

Paterson's ability as a pilot increased steadily. By November 1910 he had flown about 160 miles in total. Most of these flights were local, though on 3 December *Flight* reported that Paterson had flown across the Mersey to Hoylake with a passenger, and returned via New Brighton. Carried with him on most of these flights were two teddy bears, presented by lady admirers. On 10 December 1910, Paterson was awarded his Pilot's Club Certificate, (Aero Club Certificate 38.) It had taken so long for his prowess to be recognised because of the lack of accredited observers at Freshfield.

Paterson was becoming aware of the limitations of his Freshfield base and attempted longer distance flights. On 16 March, he attempted to fly to Manchester with a passenger, but was forced down by the weather. Later that month, he hosted a party of students from the Liverpool Institute, two of whom had won a ballot for a flight to Southport. In May 1911, he moved to Hendon to work for Claude Grahame White as a flying instructor, but not before he fulfilled the dream of Percy Amos, of Flixton, Manchester, who had written to *Flight* offering a guinea (£1.05) for a flight as a passenger, *See page 6 for Percy Amos's full account*

## Claude Grahame White

On 3 August 1910 Grahame - White had visited Freshfield in his Farman biplane. He had become famous for his attempts to fly from London to Manchester earlier in the year to win a £10,000 Daily Mail prize. Grahame-White's visit was an endorsement of the increasing importance of Freshfield as an aerodrome. He visited again in 1911, trying out one of Paterson's biplanes on Monday 13 February and using it to give his fiancée, Pauline Chase, a flight. Miss Chase was then appearing in 'Peter Pan' at the Southport Opera House. Paterson accompanied them in a Farman, and then took Graham White for a flight to Southport on the Sunday



Miss Chase, an early passenger.

## Gerald Higginbotham

Higginbotham was born in Macclesfield in 1877. He was interested in motor cars and became the first man to own one in Macclesfield. Bleriot's 1909 flight across the Channel stimulated an interest in aviation and Higginbotham set about building a steel tube framed Bleriot copy. This project was abandoned after a crash at Chelford in June. Instead, a Bleriot XI was purchased from Leo Swain, Bleriot's Northern agent, and towed to his home at Ivy Lane. Finding fields off Congleton Lane too small, Higginbotham decided to build a hangar (Shed 4) at the established aerodrome at Freshfield. He made flight trials along the beach, until he became a competent pilot, and then flew further.

There flights were not without mishap, and in September the Bleriot was tipped over on landing.

Higginbotham recalled later,

*The accident was caused after the machine had been running along the ground after landing from a flight of 3 miles, and had covered quite 100 yards when a piece of drift-wood caught the front wheel, buckling it, and causing the machine to cant over; but I was able to get out quite easily, and was not inconvenienced in the least.*

*The breakages consisted of the propeller, one wing slightly damaged, and one wheel-rim buckled, so the accident was not so serious as reported. Flight.*

Impressed by Paterson's biplane, Higginbotham ordered his own. This was fitted with a French 50 horse-power Gnome rotary engine. The biplane was completed by the Liverpool Motor House Company in January 1911. Paterson flew this aeroplane regularly, along with other types based at Freshfield. Higginbotham took his Royal Aero Club Certificate tests on 1 July, and was awarded Ticket 96.

On 12 August, Higginbotham was flying around Ainsdale and Formby, with his mechanic, when he hit an air pocket and his biplane touched the sea. The propeller broke, and a loose flying wire sliced off part of the pilot's ear. Higginbotham and his mechanic were forced to swim to shore and the biplane was recovered for repairs.



In September, Higginbotham was appointed as a Royal Aero Club observer for Certificate tests at Freshfield and Waterloo. These duties were to be carried out along with Captain Eifford Bignell and Mr. L. Williamson, both appointed at the same time. Higginbotham's next achievement was on 20 October, when he decided to copy the Coronation Air Mail and carry letters and cards from Freshfield to Southport. A load of letters and parcels were collected from friends and endorsed with a special stamp, ready for a take off at about 4:00 pm. Higginbotham and his mechanic landed on the Southport foreshore, and took the mail to the post office for sending on. Higginbotham then flew the 8 miles back to Freshfield in about seven minutes.

Higginbotham recovered his Paterson biplane from the sea in November and restored it to airworthiness, but deteriorating weather limited flying for that season. Higginbotham and Bignell travelled down to Laffan's Plain to act as official observers for Cody's successful attempt at winning the British Empire Michelin Cup No 1 for distance flying.

Higginbotham continued flying from Freshfield in 1913 and, although he had still to travel from Macclesfield, was the aviator to remain at Freshfield the longest.

#### **A Whitwell Pochin**

In 1911 Pochin began designing aeroplanes and took over John Gaunt's hangar at Southport in August. In October, both Pochin and his mechanic were given flights by Higginbotham in his Paterson biplane, and this may be why the first three flights of the Pochin monoplane were from Freshfield on 28 October. The following month, Pochin began taking lessons from Higginbotham. The monoplane was not a success and in 1912, Pochin is believed to have co-owned a biplane with Arthur Rimmer.

#### **Robert Arthur King**

King was born on 9 August 1883 at Blundellsands and lived at Neston. He was a regular passenger in Pater-



*R. A. King's Farman Biplane.*

son's biplane, including on the attempted flight to Manchester. King ordered his own Farman biplane, which arrived at Freshfield on 26 November 1910 and was first flown by Paterson, with King as a passenger, two days later. It was housed in Shed 5. On 29 November, King became the first aeroplane passenger to be ferried across the Mersey when he flew to Hoylake and back with Paterson. King was soon flying his own aircraft. On 7 June, he flew to Colwyn Bay and back, and returned later to take part in a flying meeting. On 16 May 1912 King circled the Tower at Blackpool, before landing with his passenger, F.O. Topham, on the sands opposite the Imperial Hotel. The following day, an attempt to fly around the Liver Building was prevented by a thunderstorm that forced

King and Topham to land at Egremont. It was 1913 before King received Aero Club certificate 482, this being awarded on 16 May following tests at Freshfield. By that time, he was a Sub Lieutenant in the Royal Navy Reserve and was stationed at the Central Flying School at Upavon.

#### **Henry Gregory Melly**

Melly was a 42 year old electrical engineer from Aigburth. Having learned to fly at the Bleriot school at Pau, he brought his Bleriot XI to Freshfield in August 1910. Eventually Melly owned three Bleriot, one of which was built at Freshfield in Shed 3. He moved to Waterloo in early 1911 and set up the Liverpool Aviation School. However, Melly and his pupils continued to visit Freshfield regularly



*Melly's Bleriot at Freshfield., 1910.*

# Freshfield Aviators, continued.

## Robert C Fenwick

Occupying Shed 1 at Freshfield from November 1909 was Planes Ltd. This company had been formed by WP Thompson, a Liverpool patent agent and later chairman of the Liverpool Aeronautical Society. Thompson wanted to build a stable aeroplane which he thought would be easy to learn how to fly. He came up with the idea of 'pendulum stability', brought about by concentrating as much weight as possible beneath the lower wing of his design. He took his concept to Fred Handley Page, then in the process of setting up an aircraft company at Barking and developing successful designs. Handley Page saw Thompson's design as a way of promoting his company and named the aircraft the Handley Page Type B. Fenwick worked as Thompson's assistant, replacing steel tubing, held together with plumbers' screw fittings, with lighter wood.

The aircraft's undercarriage was damaged during testing and then the hangar housing it collapsed in a gale. Handley Page began to call the aircraft 'The Scrapheap' and agreed that Fenwick could rebuild the aircraft at Barking only if Thompson formed Planes Ltd to emphasise that it was not a Handley Page design!

Thompson was based in Liverpool and so transported the aircraft to Freshfield by rail for testing. Fenwick continued modification work and eventually the Planes Ltd biplane had ailerons on the upper wing to replace wing warping and

the 60 horsepower Green 4-cylinder in line engine turned a single pusher propeller, rather than two chain drive propellers. Planes Ltd. Secretary, Charles Leslie, wrote to *Flight* in November 1910,

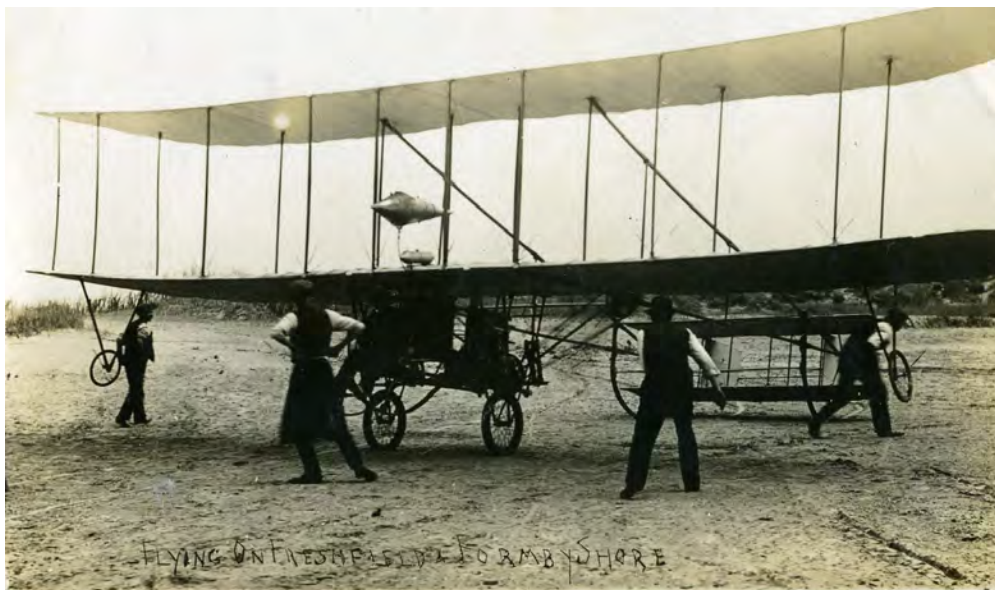
*I have seen numerous letters in*



*The Bleriot monoplane was a crowd-puller!*

*your paper on pendulum stability... and I think you may be interested in hearing that we have ourselves tested this pendulum theory to the uttermost... a machine... is being daily flown, often for long distances, has been tried for weeks in every conceivable manner, such as for height, for going out in a strong*

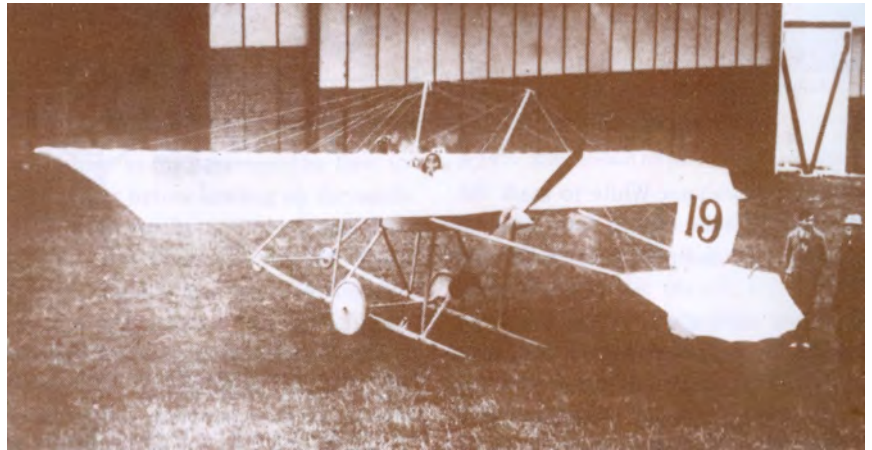
*wind, for turning in a short radius, and for going long distances, and has proved remarkably successful, and has been entered for the De Forest prize to France (London to Paris Flight). On one occasion, it started with a monoplane and a biplane at Freshfield to go a certain distance, turn round a given point, and come back again. For about half a mile of the distance our aviator informs us that he hardly once put his hand to the steering and elevating lever, and all the bystanders agreed that its flight was wonderfully steady as compared both with the monoplane and the other biplane which accompanied it. It alone of the three machines was able to go round the goal point owing to the strong current, the other two having had to come to earth, and our aviator, Mr Fenwick, informs us that, in his opinion, it is a much easier and safer machine to manage than one with the weight nearer the centre of gravity.*



*Planes Ltd. Biplane at Freshfield.*

Fenwick taught himself to fly on the biplane, and was awarded Royal Aero Club Ticket 39 on 29 November 1910. That same day, the biplane was damaged by the downwash from King's Farman biplane flying close overhead, but was soon repaired. Fenwick, now a qualified pilot, returned to Barking, Essex, to become Handley Page's first employed test pilot.

Later, in May 1912, Fenwick came back to Freshfield after working with Sydney Swaby on the design of a monoplane. This was licensed from Planes Ltd to the Mersey Aeroplane Company. The most novel feature was the mounting of the 45 horsepower Isaacson engine in the nose driving a pusher propeller by a shaft passing through the nacelle. In December 1911 the War Office announced a competition for military aircraft and the Mersey was entered.



**The Mersey Monoplane. This plane had military trials.**

The Mersey was flown from Freshfield extensively, with Fenwick recording over 600 miles in the air. A number of passengers were carried aloft also, including Thompson, Swaby and a small number of lady spectators.

The Mersey was taken to Larkhill, Wiltshire, for the Military Trials in

1912. On 13 August, at just after 6:00 pm, Fenwick took towards Stonehenge. Soon afterwards, the Mersey was seen to be in difficulties and crashed. Fenwick, who was not wearing a seatbelt, was killed. It was believed that turbulence had flexed the lightweight structure and prevented the elevators from working.

## FRESHFIELD AERODROME summary

- *On Saturday 14 May 1910, Cecil Compton Paterson, made history by becoming the first man to take off from Freshfield sands. "To the surprise of the little knot of people present, he quietly and gracefully rose from the earth, and soaring in to the air, sailed away for about 100 yards. With the same ease that he had risen, he came down lightly to the ground amid the congratulations of his friends upon what, under the circumstances, must be regarded as a marvellously successful debut." Liverpool Daily Post*
- *Paterson was a director of the Liverpool Motor House Company who built his own aeroplane and set up the first successful aerodrome in the North West of England. This consisted of five aircraft sheds. He was joined in 1910 by Robert King, from Neston, Henry Melly, from Aigburth, and Gerald Higginbotham from Macclesfield.*
- *On 29 November 1910, Paterson and King took off in a Farman biplane to make the first crossing of the Mersey River by air.*
- *Melly set up the Liverpool Flying School at Waterloo and on 7 July 1911, made the first flight from Liverpool to Manchester.*
- *On 20 October 1911, Higginbotham flew to Southport in a Paterson biplane to make the first aerial delivery of mail in the North West of England.*
- *Robert Fenwick tested the innovative Planes Ltd biplane and Merseyside Military monoplane at Freshfield between 1909 and 1912.*
- *The outbreak of the Great War (1914-1919) stopped flying from Formby until RAF Woodvale opened in 1941.*

# Flying with C. Compton Paterson at Freshfield in 1911 - by Percy A. Amos



*C. Compton Paterson, the first to fly at Freshfield.*

Through the courtesy of C. Compton Paterson Esq., the Liverpool aviator I got a long-for flight and it exceeded my expectations in many ways.

I arrived at the Freshfield aerodrome just after 2 pm on Saturday 8<sup>th</sup> May [1911], and met the racing Farman just returning from a spin. The wind was rising and blowing strongly, but Mr. Paterson decided to take me out, and I was in the seat, the engine throbbled, and away we went along the broad smooth sands towards Southport, and took the air with out knowing it. Now began the experience of which I had no conception. The sands below and sand-hills on our right, the sea away directly on our left, all sank below and we stood still seemingly, although the exhilarating rush of air said 50 mph. For some miles we kept this course at about 300 feet and, and then we turn to the left and swept out over the sea, heeling over as

gracefully as a yacht. Here I took a photo of the ribbed and coursed sands and the incoming tide. A long undulating course back beyond our starting point towards Liverpool found us at a height of 400 feet. We swept round again and passed directly over the line of the five large hangars.

Here I took photo number two. A blur at the junction of the road and beach was a small crowd of spectators. We circle out to sea and dropped to about 200 feet over the hangars again to get photo number three at closer range. Then at 300 feet and -- silence and a steep dive with the beach rushing up to us, as

both hands and yet feel quite secure, and that travelling at this great speed over an exposed coastline, the well-defined image of the frame and elevator and even the wires, makes the photos a striking testimony to the wonderful balance of the machine and absolute control and skill of the aviator. I admired the ease and confidence with which Mr. Paterson fought the gusts and wind waves, and kept the aeroplane running smoothly. To my surprise he was able to call out a running commentary upon his moves for my benefit. The flight convinced me of the vast strides which aviation has made in little more than a year,



*Planes Ltd biplane being hauled to the beach from the hangars.*

with the Gnome stopped we *volplaned* to earth, landing as we started, imperceptibly.

Although there is nothing striking about these photos at first sight, when it is borne in mind that it was a misty, windy day, that I had never been aloft before, and yet was able to work the camera with

and even if I cannot get aloft again the experience has added greatly to my already keen interest in aviation.

*Editors Note; This slightly edited account is reproduced from Flight, May 6th 1911, p 408, Correspondence [1160].*



*Photographs of 'Freshfield Aerodrome' taken by Percy A. Amos from Paterson's plane in spring 1911, Reproduced from Flight Magazine. These are probably the earliest ever aerial photos of Formby Point. The position of the five wooden hangars behind the plane in the top photo are shown in the right hand aerial photo.*