



# Eastchurch: The Early Years

## A HISTORY OF THE EASTCHURCH AIR STATION, SHEPPEY

1909 – 1920

This history of the first British aerodrome, which was used by the Royal Aero Club in the early days of aeroplanes, was written by R.H.W. Empson and first published about 1927. The references to ranks etc refer to that time. The comments in square brackets, unless stated otherwise, are by Sir Francis McClean AFC, past president of the Royal Aero Club

Reprinted with kind permission of the Royal Aero Club  
via Eric Harlin

*The heading photograph shows Eastchurch during 1910, with Short's two sheds in the background and those of the RAeC nearest the camera. Frank McClean's bungalow lay in between.*

*All photographs courtesy of the Royal Aero Club except where otherwise stated.*

It was perhaps not surprising that the Isle of Sheppey was one of the first places in England to become connected with aviation. In January 1909, Mr Albert Eustace Short, who with Mr Hugh Oswald Short had been appointed Aeronautical Engineers to the Aero Club of the United Kingdom in the ballooning days, visited the brothers Wilbur and Orville Wright at their flying ground at Pau, in France. Having received instructions to construct Wright machines in this country, he returned, hunted for a flying ground, and settled upon Leysdown.

The ballooning members of the Aero Club (not yet Royal) endorsed this choice, as they knew from experience that Sheppey was a flat country, comparatively free of trees and other obstacles. Most balloon ascents were made from the neighbourhood of London and most winds were westerly; the north and south shores of the Thames estuary were therefore well known to this community of amateur aeronauts.

The brothers Wright having also reported favourably as to its suitability, in February, the Club decided to acquire 400 acres of marsh ground between Leysdown and Shellness Point for their aeroplane experiments. They also took over a small

hotel in Leysdown village (now occupied by Mr Andrews) and a house called *Mussel Manor*, near the present Royal Air Force quarters at Leysdown, to accommodate its members.

During the following month Mr Eustace Short was joined at Leysdown by his brother, Mr Horace Leonard Short, and they at once erected workshops, two sheds for aeroplanes, and bungalows for their workmen. In addition, several private sheds were quickly put up to house members' private machines, the leading pioneers being Mr Frank McClean (now Lt Col Sir Francis McClean, AFC), Mr Ernest Pitman, Mr J.T.C. Moore-Brabazon (now Lt Col Moore-Brabazon, MC MP), the Hon Maurice Egerton (now Lord Egerton of Tatton), Mr Percy Grace, Mr Cecil Grace (later drowned in the Channel), and the Hon Charles Rolls (later killed at Bournemouth).

From the outset Mr Moore-Brabazon became one of the most enthusiastic of the little band, and on 27 February 1909, on a Voisin 'pusher' brought from France, called the *Bird of Passage*, he flew 5 kilometres [*the official date of the first British flight is 2 May 1909: Ed*] The following day, too, he flew several short distances and would have continued with others