

PORT MEADOW

by PETER WRIGHT

A Peaceful Spot by the Thames

THERE CAN BE FEW FLYING SITES in the United Kingdom with such an ancient history as that of Port Meadow, near Oxford. The Meadow appeared in the Domesday Book as *Portmaneit*. It is not part of the city, but to the north-west, near the village of Lower Wolvercote. This age-old site of some 440 acres lies alongside the River Thames (or Isis as it is also locally known). The aerodrome was bounded by the river, the city suburbs, the then GWR railway lines with the Oxford Canal and the village of Wolvercote. The whole site is now designated as a Scheduled Ancient Monument and Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). The aerodrome itself only covered about one-third of the Meadow area.

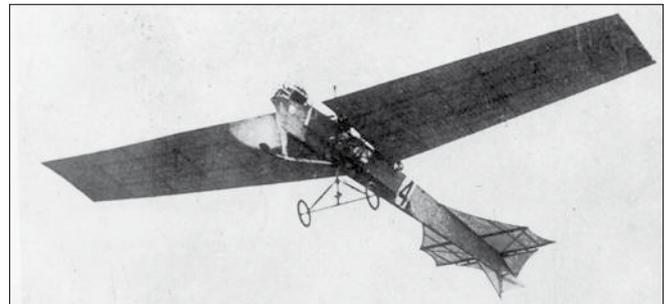
Because of these recent designations, no archaeological excavation is allowed, owing to an Iron-Age settlement and Bronze-Age ring ditches having been identified. The author has detailed knowledge of where surplus aeroplane engines were buried at the end of WWI but, sadly, they will never be recovered owing to these legal constraints. However, the site of the burial is nowhere near any of these pre-historic remains!

Further guardians of the Meadow are the Freemen of Oxford and the Commoners of Wolvercote, both having grazing rights to this land. Wolvercote Common lies adjacent to the aerodrome site, to the east, separated by the long Shiplake Ditch/Drain. In WWI, horses and cattle would have to be driven from the aerodrome early each morning, onto the Common, and parts of the aerodrome site were subject to some flooding and the usual autumn and winter mists associated with the Thames.

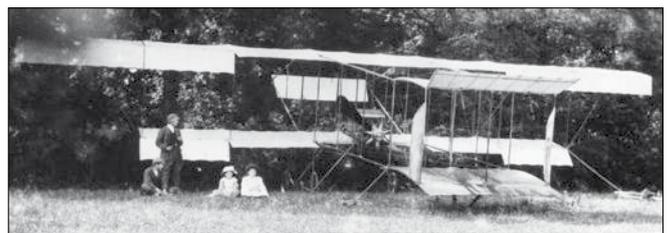
Now, we must establish a date-order, for progression of events and personalities on the Meadow.

1911

On Easter Monday, 17 April, an enterprising Londoner, James Bett, promoted an aviation meeting at Port Meadow, to publicise his grandly-named Imperial Aero Club, which the locals called 'Flight City'. As he had visualised, this event attracted a large crowd, and Frank Goodden, his engineer/pilot, parachuted from the tethered balloon *Entantress* onto the Common. Readers may wish to refer to the C&C Journal Volume 18/4 (1987), for my article *An Exceptional Man*, on Frank Widenham Goodden. This now famous flyer had considerable associations with Port Meadow, at the time living in Elmthorpe Road in Lower Wolvercote. He was employed by Bett as his Instructor/Engineer with the proposed Aero Club.



The very first aircraft to land on the Meadow, on 19 May was, an Antoinette VII monoplane, flown by Hubert Latham. He then gave exhibition flights to the large crowd this event attracted. The scribe in the local *Oxford Journal Illustrated*, interestingly described the machine in nautical terms, pictured as 'bows foremost' for the propeller and 'stern' for the rudder. Latham then returned to Brooklands.



Farman Military Biplane 'F1', resting at Latton Down near Wantage, on its flight from Larkhill to Port Meadow, 14 June 1911. :via author

The military had an interest in the site; it had earlier been used for training exercises with the local militia. On 14 June, two flying officers of the Air Battalion, Corps of Royal Engineers, Captain C.J. Burke, as pilot, with Captain S.D. Massy, the observer, landed on the Meadow, having flown in three stages from Larkhill on Salisbury Plain. They had departed Larkhill at 04.15 to catch the early-morning calm air. The machine was the very first to carry a military serial; it was marked as 'Air Battⁿ F1' and was the Farman III Military Biplane.

Further military use of Port Meadow came in August, when five of the Air Battalion machines paid a visit. Flying from Larkhill, the Farman III 'F1' and four Bristol Boxkites took part. The Farman was flown by Capt Burke, Capt Massy piloted a Boxkite, Lt H.R.P Reynolds arrived in Boxkite 'F7',