

HEWLETT & BLONDEAU

BROOKLANDS – BATTERSEA – BEDFORDSHIRE

by Paul R. Hare

BEGINNING AS OWNERS OF A FLYING SCHOOL, the first in England, the partnership between Mrs Hilda Hewlett and the Frenchman Gustav Blondeau, Hewlett and Blondeau was unique among pre-war aeroplane constructors in being the only firm not to design any aeroplanes of their own, instead being content to manufacture other people's designs, under licence, to meet customer orders. Only with the war well under way did they respond to a request from the Admiralty and produce one single design.

Born in 1864, Hilda Beatrice Herbert was one of nine children, her father being the vicar of St Peter's Church, Vauxhall. She studied at the National Art Training School, South Kensington, a teacher training college, the course including both wood and metalwork as well as needlecraft, and later spent a year training as a nurse in Germany; however, she took up neither profession.

On 3 January 1888 she married Maurice Hewlett, then a lawyer with his family firm, her father conducting the wedding ceremony. They had two children, Pia and Francis. In 1896 Maurice replaced his father as Keeper of Lands, Revenues, Records and Enrolments, advising the Government on medieval Law, but relinquished the post in 1901 to concentrate on his increasingly successful career as a writer.

Hilda meanwhile progressed, through bicycling, to motoring and among her many other similar activities, in 1906 acted as Passenger/Riding Mechanic for Miss Hind, the only female entrant into the Land's End to John O'Groats reliability trial. Although primarily for motorcycles the two ladies competed in a Singer Tricar.

Hilda Hewlett boarding the Farman III she owned jointly with Blondeau and with which the flying school was founded.



In October 1909 she happened to be in Blackpool at the time of Britain's first official flying display, and was immediately taken with aviation, considering it even better than motoring. At that time there were no flying schools in England, or indeed anywhere else, the only way to learn to fly being to either build an aeroplane or buy one, in the latter case the manufacturer often providing some basic instruction in its operation. Mrs Hewlett therefore travelled to Mourmelon-le-Grand in France and started to study aeronautics at the Farman factory and there she met Blondeau, who was similarly occupied.

Gustav Jules Eugene Blondeau was born in 1871 at Tregnier, a small town to the north east of Paris and, prior to his being bitten by the flying bug had spent eight years working in the motor industry, including building his own car.

In May 1910, whilst still at Mourmelon-le-Grand, Hilda Hewlett and Gustav Blondeau became business partners, buying a Farman III biplane together. On 10 June 1910 Blondeau took his brevet on this machine, before taking instruction in the operation and care of Gnome engines at the Seguin Brothers' factory in order that he could carry out the maintenance and repair of the engine with which the aeroplane was fitted.

Meanwhile the Farman, named the 'Blue Bird', was shipped to England and assembled at Brooklands, with Blondeau then flying it in a number of competitions and exhibitions, including that at Lanark in August 1910, Mrs Hewlett accompanying him.

In those early days, exhibition flying was, in social circles, considered roughly on a par with being a circus performer and thus no fit occupation for the wife of a prominent novelist, therefore, just as the actor Robert Loraine initially competed under the pseudonym 'Mr Jones' so Hilda Hewlett's aerial activities were, at first, reported as having been achieved by 'Mrs Grace Bird'.

Then, in September 1910, the pair set up the country's first flying school, based in Brooklands shed No.32 and trading as Hewlett and Blondeau, although for a time *Aeroplane* magazine, with a sexism typical of the time, insisted on reporting it as being the 'Blondeau – Hewlett' school. They employed no mechanic, Blondeau putting his experience and recent training to good use and carrying out all necessary maintenance and repairs himself.

Gustav Blondeau seated in the Farman in which most of the school's pupils were taught. The second seat is behind his own, making a learner's access to the controls difficult.

