



Civilian Flying Training in 1916

The Experience of Valentine George Austen

by Philip Jarrett



A Gnome-engined Beatty-Wright passes over a Beatty-engined example at Hendon, with a Gnome-powered Caudron in the background.

VALENTINE GEORGE AUSTEN was born at Bekesbourne, Kent, on 9 January 1899, the son of Mr and Mrs George Austen, later of Nichol Farm, Teynham, and grandson of the late Mr Thomas. Austen, of School Farm, Faversham. Years ago I purchased a large box containing his Aviator's Certificate, various books of notes and cuttings, photograph albums and memorabilia. When Austen learnt to fly at the Beatty School of Flying Ltd at Hendon in 1916 he kept a diary of his training and other events at the aerodrome, which he prefaced with an account of his first flight, also made at the Beatty School at Hendon, shortly before the First World War. The following is centred on a direct transcript of this handwritten diary, with added introductory and concluding texts and only minimal editing for the sake of consistency of style and editorial insertions [in square brackets] for clarification and to provide additional relevant information. Austen's account provides a fascinating insight into the procedures at a typical civilian flying training school of the mid-war period, and also into the problems and shortcomings of such training. A note of his brief subsequent Service career and time as a prisoner of war is appended.

The Status Quo

In 1915 the military became increasingly concerned with the inconsistent and varying standards of tuition at the numerous civilian flying schools that were training young men anxious to join Britain's flying services. In an editorial in the 7 June 1916 issue of *Aeronautics*, John H. Ledebor, the magazine's editor, wrote, in part:

... for our supply of pilots we depended on many and multifarious flying schools established throughout the country, some from patriotic motives, a few, it is

to be feared, in the pursuit of commercial gain. The result was inevitable. Each school, whatever the motives which actuated it, had its own peculiar methods of tuition, whether its primary object was to turn out thoroughly efficient pilots – a process which was commercially unprofitable – or to rake in fees from unsuspecting pupils at the quickest possible rate, with slight regard for their proficiency. The war changed all that by bringing into being a vast and gradually increasing number of naval and military training centres, whose methods of tuition, I regret to say, were as diverse and incompatible one with the other as those of the civilian flying schools.

Valentine George Austen in front of the Anzani engine of one of the Beatty School's Caudron biplanes, probably taken at the time he was awarded his Aviator's Certificate.



There is a spirit of reform and reorganisation abroad in the land. We all recognise nowadays that our material is excellent, if we but knew how to utilise it to the best advantage. The civilian schools, despite all naval and military competition, have survived hitherto. It is an open secret that the official has regarded them of late with no kindly eye and has thought of their suppression. And not wholly without reason. Nevertheless, in the interests of the country – for the purposes of war and post-war times – the civilian school must survive. They were the main reservoir from which our flying services were recruited; and so, when the bruit and clamour have subsided, will it be again.

The civilian schools have lately been in danger of extinction by official fiat or pressure. Not long ago, realising the dangers of this suppression, the Royal Aero Club [RAeC] took the matter in hand, and resolved to place the whole supervision, control, and methods of tuition at all civilian schools under its own aegis. The Club has now issued a set of regulations for the control of civilian flying schools...

Following a conference on 20 June 1916 the schools agreed to abide by