

W.R. 'BILL' PARKHOUSE

AIR MECHANIC AND AVIATION PIONEER

by Peter Cowlan

This article is based upon a typescript produced by William Parkhouse shortly after his retirement in 1956. It relies also on various documents compiled by members of the Parkhouse family and tells the story of a man who was without doubt, a pioneer in the field of post First World War aviation in South West Britain.

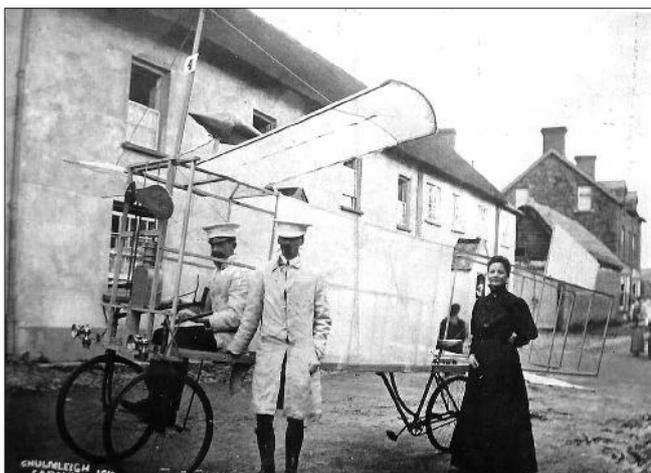
THE VILLAGE OF CHULMLEIGH lies surrounded by farmland in the heart of the county of Devonshire, and it was here, on 15 August 1891, that William Richard Parkhouse was born, the second son of William and Julia. William Parkhouse senior came from a family of what his son later described as 'agriculturalists'. At the time of the 1901 Census he was listed as a provisions dealer and farmer, and his wife Julia kept a small shop in the village specialising in stationery products. William makes clear his views on his father's work in agriculture when he states in his manuscript ... *for that kind of rather restricted life I had no particular inclination.* He does though also make it quite clear that he grew to know them as very fine character parents.

Around the age of eleven, his parents made it possible for William to attend the local Wallingbrook School. This was a private school for boys, relatively small, catering for around 150 pupils and specialising in a very sound commercial and general education. Discipline was strict, both in school and on the playing fields, but it would seem that William thrived on this regime. Throughout the latter days of his schooling he had apparently shown a noticeable interest in all things mechanical; this was something he was sure he must have inherited from his very practical father. William showed such a keen interest in machines of all kinds that his father was finally persuaded to allow him to be apprenticed to the Bath Engineering Co Ltd, a small firm of motor and general engineers. William takes up the story.

In those days - 1908/9 - work started at 6am in the summer months, and 7am in winter. The training there was of an eminently practical character but I attended Bath Technical College on those evenings when the Foreman would let me off. We apprentices - five or six of us - were expected to work on after tea if required and that was more often the case. Our labour was cheap - but the experience very valuable. Then [in the early days of motoring] owners sent their cars in for an annual overhaul and there was no 'repair by replacement'. We made our own patterns, machined pistons, rings, made and hardened gudgeon pins, shackle pins, and even cut new gears and hardened them in crucibles! Only castings were bought out.

On 1 November 1909, William joined the Territorial Force, signing on with the 6th Battalion Devonshire Regiment to

The Parkhouse brothers' carnival entry, 1910.



serve for a period of four years. But rather than soldiering it would seem that by the following year William was becoming increasingly interested in the new-fangled world of aviation. 1909 had of course seen the first powered flight across the English Channel by Louis Blériot; the Parkhouse boys, William and his elder brother John, deciding that this achievement should be duly celebrated in their village. With Chulmleigh carnival in mind they set about the not insignificant task of constructing a near full scale representation of a monoplane. This 'replica' - propelled by pedal power - was duly completed, no doubt helped by William's burgeoning mechanical skills, in time for the event. If there was a competition for the best entrant I would be very surprised indeed if the Parkhouse boys' creation - carrying the number 4 in the parade - went unrewarded. The family wardrobes were raided prior to the day of the carnival resulting in 'flying coats' and suitable head-gear being worn by the two brothers. The whole ensemble was finished off with them both sporting very impressive Edwardian 'moustaches'.

The distances involved precluded any chance of William living at home during the course of his apprenticeship; he was therefore found lodgings with the Beeks family, resident in Bath. Frederick Beeks was a provision store manager, the probability being that he was a friend or acquaintance of William's father. On completion of his apprenticeship, William joined the firm of H.B. Cook Ltd of Regent Street, London, distributors for Darracq cars where, possibly as a requirement of the job, he learnt to drive motor vehicles. It was almost certainly William's move to London that resulted in his early release from his Territorial commitments with the Devonshire Regiment in July 1911.

He stayed with Cooks until the outbreak of WWI, by which time he was being pressed to return to the Bath Engineering Co Ltd. to take up the post of Assistant Manager, which he

Henri Salmét and his Blériot on the 1912 Daily Mail Tour. :via M. Davis

