

PIXTON'S AVIATOR'S CERTIFICATE: A discord of dates

by Philip Jarrett

To start with, it has to be understood that the date that usually appeared on pre-First World War aviators' certificates issued by the Royal Aero Club of the United Kingdom (RAeC) was not the date on which the aviator actually made the necessary qualifying flights in the presence of official observers, appointed by the RAeC, but the date of the meeting at which the RAeC Committee granted the certificate. Thus the actual date on which the flights were made usually predated the date on the certificate. However, there were occasions when a certificate was granted on the same day as the qualifying flights were made. This occurred when the flights happened to be made on the same day as a Committee meeting was held.

There were also occasions on which aviators' certificates were awarded on merit. One such example was 'Colonel S.F. Cody' (real name S.F. Cowdery), who was awarded certificate No.9 on merit, on Colonel Capper's recommendation, on 7 June 1910, at a time when he actually did not have an airworthy aeroplane.

In late 1910/early 1911, however, a curious anomaly appears. It is typified in the case of C. Howard Pixton's aviator's certificate.

In *The Aero* for 25 January 1911, on page 67 under *Work at Brooklands* (the entry begins on Sunday 15 January), at the foot of column 2 the penultimate paragraph reads:

On the Thursday [i.e. 19 January] Pixton set the ball rolling with a twelve minutes' flight on the Avroplane, while later in

the day he made the qualifying flights for his brevet on the same machine, flying at an average height of about 200ft.

There is no reason whatsoever to doubt the veracity or reliability of this report.

The report *From the British Flying Grounds in Flight* for 28 January 1911 contains, on page 74, col 1, under *Brooklands Aerodrome*, the words *During the morning of the same day [i.e. Friday 20 January 1911] Mr Pixton, who has just obtained his pilot's certificate was out on the Roe triplane . .*

This supports the report in *The Aero*.

In the official notices to members of the RAeC, published in *Flight* for 28 January 1911 (page 70), it is reported that, at a meeting of the Committee on Tuesday 24 January, the following aviator's certificates were granted:

48. H.J.D. Astley
49. Robert Macfie
50. C. Howard Pixton
51. Herbert John Thomas
52. E.V. Sassoon ("E. Smith")

However, the date on Pixton's certificate (and also in the entry for him in the RAeC index cards and photograph album of certificated aviators, held in the RAeC archives in the RAF Museum) is 31 December 1910.

This is very odd. Because of the Christmas holidays there was no RAeC Committee meeting between those of 20 December 1910 and 3 January 1911, but if Pixton had indeed made his qualifying flights on 31 December 1910 there were

RAeC CERTIFICATE No & AVIATOR	AIRCRAFT TYPE	LOCATION & DATE OF TESTS	WHEN GRANTED
39. B.G. Bouwens	Bleriot monoplane	Hendon, 28 December 1910	3 January 1911*
40. Lt G.B. Hynes	Bleriot monoplane	Hendon, 28 December 1910	3 January 1911*
41. St Croix Johnstone	Bleriot monoplane	Hendon, 28 December 1910	3 January 1911*
42. Major H.R. Cook	Bleriot monoplane	Beaulieu, 22-28 December 1910	3 January 1911*
43. Lt B.H. Barrington-Kennett	Bleriot monoplane	Hendon, 28/30 December 1910	3 January 1911*
44. P.G.L. Jezzi	Jezzi monoplane	Eastchurch, 30 December 1910	3 January 1911*
45. Lr R.A. Cammell	Bristol biplane	Salisbury Plain, 30/31 December 1910	3 January 1911*
46. O.C. Morison	Bleriot monoplane	Brooklands, none†	17 January 1911
47. James Valentine	Macfie biplane	Brooklands, 14 January 1911	17 January 1911
48. H.J.D. Astley	Sommer biplane	Brooklands, 7/10 January 1911	24 January 1911
49. Robert Macfie	Macfie biplane	Brooklands, 16 January 1911	24 January 1911
50. C. Howard Pixton	Roe triplane	Brooklands, 19 January 1911	24 January 1911
51. H.J. Thomas	Bristol biplane	Salisbury Plain, 18 January 1911	24 January 1911
52. E.V. Sassoon	Sommer biplane	Brooklands, 21 January 1911	24 January 1911
53. G. de Havilland	de Havilland biplane	Farnborough, January 1911‡	7 February 1911
54. Lt D.G. Conner	Bristol biplane	Salisbury Plain, 28 January 1911	7 February 1911
55. J.V. Martin	Henry Farman	Hendon, 2 February 1911	7 February 1911

* Another inconsistency has emerged here. These seven dates accord with the RAeC official notices to members published on page 11 of the 7 January 1911 issue of *Flight*, where it is recorded that aviator's certificates Nos.39 to 45 were granted at a Committee meeting on Tuesday 3 January 1911. However, in a list of 'Aviators of the Royal Aero Club of the UK' published on page 108 of the 11 February 1911 issue of *Flight*, and also in the listings of aviators' certificates published in subsequent editions of the *Royal Aero Club Year Book*, the date of granting is given as 31 December 1910. This date was also perpetuated in the listings included as Appendix E in R. Dallas Brett's *History of British Aviation 1908-1914* (John Hamilton, London, 1934). As noted above, there was no Committee meeting on 31 December 1910, which was a Saturday. At the time, Committee meetings were held on Tuesdays, and in the report on the 20 December Committee meeting in *Flight* for 24 December 1910, page 1054, it was announced that 'Owing to the Christmas holidays, the next meeting of the Committee will take place on Tuesday, January 3rd, 1911'.

† Morison did not have to take the official tests. *The Aero* reported in its 25 January 1911 issue (page 68, column 1) that: 'Morison, having done two of his test flights in France last year, has now been presented with his *brévet* in consideration of his magnificent flying lately, the ordinary test flight being an obvious absurdity for him to waste castor oil over.'

‡ The date on which Geoffrey de Havilland made his qualifying flights at Farnborough remains to be determined. It was before 2 February, as on that day de Havilland's aeroplane collided with some obstructions on the ground at Farnborough and its undercarriage was carried away. De Havilland 'escaped with a shaking'.