

THE ROYAL AIRCRAFT FACTORY AND THE PRESS

by Paul Hare

BETWEEN 1908 AND 1918 THE ROYAL AIRCRAFT FACTORY and its forebears were mentioned in Britain's press several thousand times, not only in the national papers, such as the *Times*, *Daily Mail*, and *Daily Mirror*, but in a myriad of local papers from across the whole country, whilst the aviation magazines, *Flight*, and *The Aeroplane*, once established, carried news about it in almost every issue.

The Factory's activities with balloons and airships were frequently reported in the press with apparent freedom. However, during 1908, as development of a powered aeroplane progressed, the situation changed. In developing a military aeroplane Colonel J.E. Capper, Superintendent of what was then officially called the Balloon Factory, considered that he was creating an advance in weaponry and, although unable to do so in secret, sought to achieve as little publicity as possible. In consequence, he arranged for trials of the inherently stable aeroplane developed by Lt Dunne to be carried out at Blair Atholl in the Highlands of Scotland, as far from prying eyes as possible, although even this precaution did not prevent some occasional mention in newspapers.

A hiccup in the previously harmonious relationship between the Factory and the press occurred in May 1908, when Capper had given permission for a visit by delegates of the *Federation Aeronautique Internationale*, the body which co-ordinated sporting aviation, including ballooning contests, and ratified records. As it was a private occasion, a reporter for the local *Aldershot News*, who turned up at the Factory gates, was refused entry. However, a representative of the *Daily Telegraph* was admitted because, as a member of the Royal Aero Club he qualified as a delegate of the FAI. This led the Editor of the former paper to question how military secrecy could be maintained by admitting foreigners to the Factory whilst keeping local people out, but, generally, reporting of the Factory's activities continued as before.

The trials of British Army Aeroplane No.1, largely designed by S.F. Cody, who was then the Army's Chief Instructor in Kiting, were held on Farnborough Common, which was then

a public open space. On 17 September, shortly before the aeroplane made its first appearance outside its shed, Capper's assistant, Capt Carden, wrote to the Central News Agency, the Press Association, and the National newspapers stating that no attempt was yet being made to fly and requesting, in the interest of public safety, that the trials were not reported.

Some responses were made to the effect that each paper would comply with the request only as long as their rivals did, but not all papers took any notice and on 22 September reports on activities at Farnborough appeared in the *Daily Chronicle*, which included a description of the machine, and the *Daily Mail*, which did note that no attempt was yet being made to fly, whilst the *Manchester Courier* included a brief report of what it described as the *secret trials of a mechanically propelled aeroplane*. The following day the *Yorkshire Post* published a very critical account of the trials, describing them as a failure and Capper wrote again to the editors of *The Aldershot News* and *Sheldrake's Military Gazette*, whose reporters often sold information gathered by local reporters on to other papers, asking that the trials be given no further publicity. Despite Capper's request newspaper reports continued to appear and on 25 September 1908 *Sheldrake's Military Gazette* countered the *Yorkshire* paper's criticism with an article in support of the Factory's activities, whilst the *Times* included an accurate report of the trials carried out so far. On that same day Harry Delacombe, the *Times*' correspondent, visited the Factory and was granted an interview with Capt Carden, who asked him to report that no attempt was yet being made to fly. However, on 29 September Cody managed a 'hop' of 78 yards which was duly reported in the *Times* of the following day. Reports continued to appear in local newspapers too with, for example, the *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette* of 9 October noting that: *during the past week trials have been made with a mechanically propelled aeroplane*, the quaint wording suggesting that the paper shared the same source as the *Manchester Courier*.

On 15 October the flood waters broke when the heavily illustrated *Daily Mirror* which, on 24 September had been

The pirated photograph which appeared in the Daily Mirror on 15 October 1908 after the press had been specifically requested not to report on the trials of British Army Aeroplane No1. As a result, reporting restrictions were lifted, coincidentally just in time for the Cody's first flight the following day.

