

A Farnborough Test Pilot William John Stutt

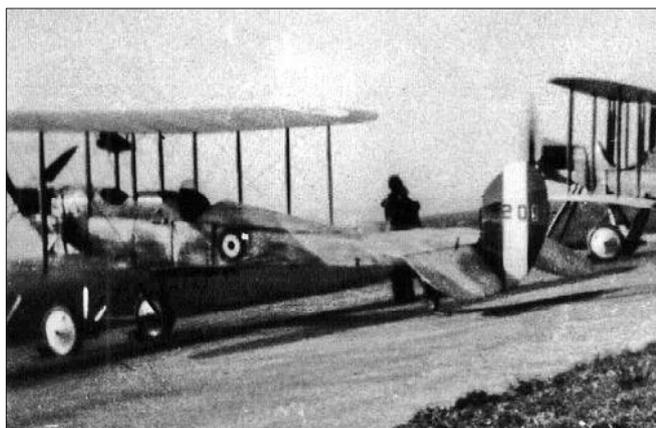
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THE RATHER BRIEF OFFICIAL HISTORY of the Royal Aircraft Factory¹ includes photographs of a number of 'factory pilots' including, with some licence, S.F. Cody, together with Geoffrey de Havilland, Frank Goodden, Norman Spratt and Roderic Hill; all of whom are justly famous and need no introduction here. Also included is a photograph of a man, whose name, although less well known, appears more often in the Farnborough flight log for 1915 than that of any other test pilot, namely William John Stutt.

'Billy' Stutt, as he was usually known, was born in Hawthorn, Melbourne, Australia in 1890 and, after leaving school began training as an engineer but, like many Australians, then and now, he came to England soon after coming of age. When he first became interested in flying is uncertain but by the end of 1913 he had enrolled as a pupil in the Bristol School at Larkhill, on Salisbury Plain. His first flights appear to have been with fellow Australian, Harry Busteed,² although he also flew with Mr Juilerot and, later, with William Voigt. Stutt obviously took to flying straight away and made his first solo on Wednesday 8 January 1914, making large two circuits and flying *very well*.³ His instruction appears to have been very thorough, especially for those days, and included at least one cross country flight,⁴ before he took his Royal Aero Club certificate, No.742, on 25 February, flying a Bristol School biplane.

At the beginning of April he was still at Larkhill, but now as an instructor,⁵ but before the end of May had moved to the Bristol School at Brooklands,⁶ where he continued to teach pupils to fly, even after the outbreak of war, until all flying training was taken over by the military, thereby terminating his employment. His only job offer appears to have been from

BE1 201 as it looked when Stutt flew it at Farnborough on 9 January 1915.



William Stutt's RAeC Certificate photograph.

the Royal Aircraft Factory,⁷ a role which he envisaged would involve little but flight testing production BE2s, but which he rather reluctantly accepted, joining the Farnborough staff in January 1915.

His first flight, made at 11.30 on 9 January 1915⁸ was, as he had expected, in a BE, a 30 minute solo in 201, the former BE1, although, after several re-builds, little, if any, of the original aeroplane now remained in what now appeared to be a BE2b. Stutt made three more 30 minute flights in 201 on 12 January, the last with a Mr Clarke in the passenger seat, carrying out what were tersely described as *experimental tests*, and thereafter he flew 201 on an almost daily basis, conducting bomb dropping tests, with a Mr Harper occupying the front seat on 15, 16, 17 and 19 January.

By the 28 January he had switched his attention to a BE8, 2131, the first of a small batch built by the Coventry Ordnance Works, conducting climbing tests accompanied first by a Mr Smeaton, and later by a Mr Heath, Speed tests with Mr Swayze, and engine tests with Mr Somersby each of these flights being timed at 30 minutes. The following day he repeated the pattern of tests, albeit with a different selection of passengers, in BE8 399, which had first been sent out to France on 29 September 1914 and now been returned. At 15.45 on 30 January the log notes that 399 had a broken wheel, but Stutt flew it again at 16.15 so the problem was either not serious, or was very quickly rectified.

After finishing with 399 on 1 February Stutt did not fly again, for whatever reason, for ten days, taking up the RE1, 607, on 12 February for the start of a series of wireless tests, the apparatus operated by Mr Birch, and occasionally by Mr Wittington. Stutt also made a number of passenger flights, in 607, during the next few days and also flew a Mr Baker on a number of photographic missions. 2 March saw Stutt in BE2c 1749, taking up the Rev Bernard Vaughan and then a Mr Balfour each for a 15 minute joy ride.

The next few weeks saw Stutt flying an assortment of BE types, mostly carrying out what were described as *general tests*, exactly as he had imagined that he would before accepting the post, but it was far from all routine and on 17 March he took up RE5 677, which had been returned to the Royal Aircraft Factory for repair, on a 30 minute speed test, recording 75mph. Stutt repeated the test the following day, achieving 78.8mph before the machine was handed back to the RFC and joining 7 Squadron in France early in April.

April brought a new series of wireless tests, again with Mr Birch operating the apparatus, but this time in BE2 2133 and then in 1749. On 24 April, Stutt was at the controls of an RE5 again, this time the last example completed, carrying out