

Airship Lands in Eastcote

by Sylvia Ladyman

Casually turning the pages of my *London Encyclopaedia*, the following sentence caught my eye 'the first journey by powered airship took place in 1902 from the Crystal Palace at Sydenham to Eastcote in Middlesex'. I was intrigued – who was in it? what was it like? where did it land? With the help of archivists, the internet, newspapers and a friend I managed to find answers to these questions.

It was Stanley Edward Spencer (1868 to 1906) who climbed out of the airship on Friday the 19 September 1902. He was born into a family interested in flying. His grandfather had flown in balloons since 1836 and his father Charles Green Spencer had pioneered gliding and founded a balloon factory in London. All five of his siblings were aeronauts.

Stanley married Rose Isabel Hawkins on the 9 September 1895 in Hornsey. A son William was born in 1897 but died five months later. However, in 1899 a daughter Gladys Rose was born, and three months later in July she went on a short airship flight with her father. See Fig. 1 below.

Stanley piloted a hydrogen balloon for the meteorologist Arthur Berson and achieved a record ascent of 27,000 feet. On the 15 November 1899 he ascended with John McKenzie Bacon and his daughter Gertrude to observe the Leonid meteor shower above the clouds. Ten hours later they landed near Neath in S. Wales.

He designed and flew two airships and planned a third, 150 feet long, with two 50 HP engines and ten people (passengers and crew). However, in 1906 while in Malta he caught typhoid and died on the 27 January.

His first airship was assembled at Crystal Palace in 1902. It had taken six months work, and consisted of a 75 feet (23 m.) long balloon filled with 20,000 cu. ft. of hydrogen. Below it was a gondola of bamboo poles containing a 3.5 HP petrol engine. There was just enough room for the pilot, ballast and a bag of tools. The pilot stood near the stern with the rudder, motor and gas control within easy reach. On this first cross London flight he also carried a bag of small rubber balls which he threw out to the crowds as he flew over them. He wanted to show how useful an airship would be for an army to throw out bombs over enemy territory.

In order to construct the airship he obtained £1500 from Mellin & Co. of Peckham, who manufactured infant foods, on condition that he advertised their product on his airship on 25 return flights. Hence the airship was called the Mellin Airship. The first test flight was on the 14 June 1902 over the Crystal Palace polo ground. See Fig. 2.

After the September flight across London he spoke to a reporter from the *Uxbridge Gazette* - He said:

"I had been waiting for a favourable day for some weeks and finally it came [19 September 1902]. There was thick fog in the morning north of the Thames and this indicated that there was but little wind about. I was at the Crystal Palace in the afternoon where the ship is housed, and I decided to make a trip that afternoon..... I gave orders to my men to have her ready.....Two and a half gallons of petrol spirit were put into the tanks for the motor and I calculated that would carry me 40 miles.....I wired my brother at Highbury, telling him to look out for me, that I was going to sail over London and would pass from south to north. The ascent was splendid, the ship rising like a gigantic butterfly turning round the north tower of the Palace. Then I headed north, passing Dulwich, Streatham, Brixton and on towards Chelsea. I sailed quite close to the great wheel at Earls Court and then steered for the Welsh Harp which is Hendon way. I looked about for a landing place and finally selected a field near Harrow where the ship came down as gracefully as thistledown. There soon came to see me a farmer, who I was glad to see because a little assistance at these times is always desirable."

The reporter asked him why he did not land near London. He said:

"In ballooning we always get more help than we want when we alight among a lot of people. Why, if I'd come down in the middle of a crowd there would not have been a shred of the balloon left. Carried off in pieces as souvenirs I expect.....I had arranged for transporting the ship to London. This was done in a cart.....The car [gondola] is a little worse for this journey by cart.....but all the damage is repairable for a few pence".

The airship arrived back at Crystal Palace the following Tuesday, where it was inflated and viewed by many people.

The *Harrow Gazette* dated the 29 September 1902 gives more details of the flight in our area, and even gives a clue as to the eventual landing place:

'.....in a field about a couple of miles from the Hill [Harrow]. It was about a quarter to six when Mr. Spencer's airship could be seen from the Hill, near the King's Head Hotel.....the news spread very rapidly. People congregated near the spot referred to and watched the progress of the wonderful invention. Mr Spencer has described the course he took from the starting point.....He meant to land at Eastcote he said, and when he had settled on a nice meadow near a farm known as Dabbs Hill he pointed the nose of the airship downwards with the balancing rope, and just as he neared the turf an upward tilt brought her stern skimming along the turf.'

A representative of the Gazette went to Dabbs Hill on Monday where he saw Mr T. Thorne a gardener of Dabbs Hill Farm, who in conjunction with the coachman, Mr W. Harris, assisted Mr Spencer to alight. Both these gentlemen were standing near the farmyard at about 6 o'clock.....and almost above their heads was Mr Spencer in his airship. He was at an altitude of about 1000 feet and going through a series of manoeuvres.....they were practically unable to see Mr Spencer himself with the exception of one arm by which he was motioning to them.....and promptly followed the airship. Mr Spencer then began to descend. He crossed over three fields and alighted in the fourth after skimming the hedge which divided the third and fourth. A man and a boy were on the spot and rendered some assistance until they arrived a few seconds later. The descent was made in a most satisfactory manner, when the airship touched the

ground it landed gently to one side. Mr Spencer was recognised by Mr Thorne who congratulated him on his safe journey.

The airship was shortly afterwards taken to the road. It was no easy task as can be imagined bearing in mind that the car [gondola] was 12 ft long and the balloon 75 ft. But as the latter was left inflated in order to bear the weight of the machine the task was eventually successfully performed. A member of the firm of W. Pratt and Sons, contractors of Roxeth, had ridden down on a bicycle and he was sent for a conveyance. On reaching the road Mr Spencer disabled the airship and it was then carefully folded up and afterwards taken to London. By this time nearly everybody in Harrow had heard of the voyage and as the machine was borne through the streets it was inspected by large numbers of interested people. Mr Spencer had tea with Mr Thorne at his cottage.....later in the evening he returned to London'.

But where exactly did he land? Looking at a map for points about two miles from Harrow Hill and in the parish of Eastcote and about four miles from Dabbs Hill Farm, I think it is likely he landed somewhere to the east of Field End School, just inside the Harrow / Eastcote boundary.

Stanley Spencer was the first man to cross London in a powered airship. He travelled 30 miles in three hours, and thus flew three times the distance Santos-Dumont had flown in France. Little did he and the people who saw his airship realise that 67 years later man would land on the moon.

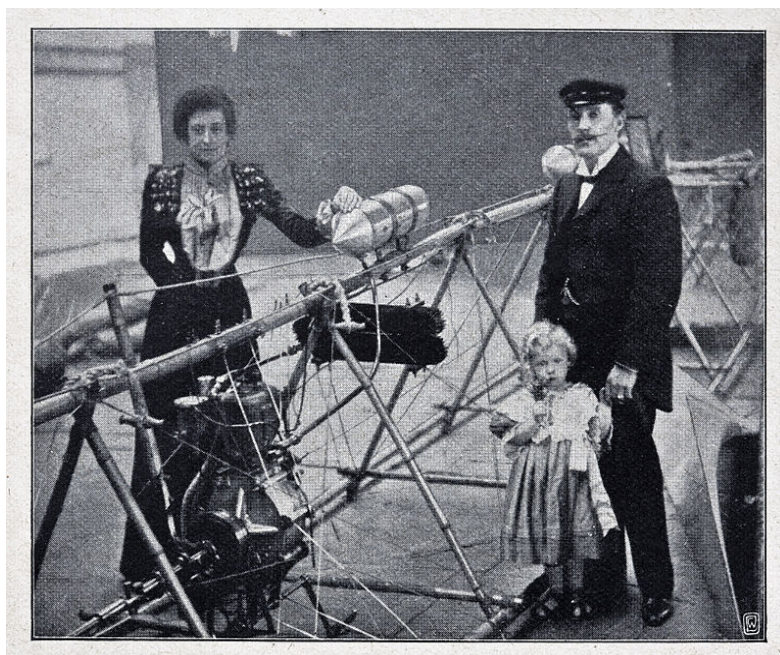


Fig. 1



Fig. 2 - The Spencer Airship

References

London Encyclopaedia, edit. Weinreb and Hibbert, Papermac 1983. ISBN0 333 458176 p889

Uxbridge Gazette, 27 September 1902

Harrow Gazette, 29 September 1902

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