

# A History of Newtownards Airport

The first flight in a powered heavier than air machine or aeroplane, took place at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, USA on the 17<sup>th</sup> December 1903 and in 1909 Louis Bleriot was the first to cross the English channel .

In Ireland , the pioneer of aviation was a young Belfast engineer, Harry Ferguson. He built his own aircraft and made his first flight in this country on 31<sup>st</sup> December 1909 when he flew his aircraft at Hillsborough Park in Co Down.

Ferguson's exploits caught the public imagination and he was soon in demand to display his flying skills at fairs throughout Ulster. One such show was the annual show of the North Down Agricultural Society held at Newtownards on 15<sup>th</sup> June 1911.

## *The need for an airport*

The outbreak of the First World War in 1914, and the years of political upheaval which led to partition placed severe restrictions on flying, but by 1922 peace had broken out and a number of airline companies were establishing a pattern of regular air services between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK.

There was, however, a need for a proper airport to serve the Province. Attempts to develop an airfield at Malone were unsuccessful and the RAF station at Aldergrove was serviceable but unsuitable for civilian traffic. In any event it was earmarked for 502(Ulster) Auxiliary Reserve Squadron which was established in May 1925. The development of private flying was hindered by the absence of a suitable airfield. About this time the Belfast Harbour Com-

missioners had begun to reclaim land at Sydenham for an aerodrome but a lot of time was required for the land to settle and achieve stability.

**The North of Ireland Flying Club** had been formed in September 1928 and was anxious to find a permanent home for its members. A solution was offered in December 1933 when the 7<sup>th</sup> Marquis of Londonderry, himself an en-

thusiastic aviator and Secretary of State for Air from 1931 to 1932, announced that an aerodrome would be constructed on a fifty acre portion of his estate (formerly a racecourse) adjoining the Comber Road in Newtownards.



**The Airfield circa 1930**

Lord Londonderry wanted his airfield to be the civil airport for Belfast and to be the main centre for private flying in Northern Ireland. With this in mind he set up a flying school and appointed Flight Lieutenant RWE Bryant as Chief instructor and manager of the new facility. The **North of Ireland Flying Club** was also offered a home at the new aerodrome.

By Summer 1934, Messrs Airwork Ltd. the new airfield was ready for use and the first recorded landing took place on the last Sunday in June. The aircraft was a de Havilland Gipsy Moth and the pilot was a Scotsman, Fred McNeill. On 31 July a Hillman airliner landed at the airfield on board were Ladies Margaret, Helen and Mairi Stewart who had flown from London to stay in their home at Mountstewart. Also on board were monkeys which Lady Mairi had brought for here-Mountstewart Zoo.



**Lady Mairi preparing for a flight**

## Official Opening of the airport

The new Ards Airport was officially opened on 31 August 1934 by the Duke of Abercorn, the Governor of Northern Ireland. It had been constructed by

Messrs AIRWORK LTD employing local labour and Lord Londonderry met the cost.

In his speech, his lordship said that the occasion marked an important development in air communications between Britain and



**The official opening party with Lord Londonderry centre**

Northern Ireland and he believed that as air travel developed, Newtownards would be a base for flights to Britain, Europe and elsewhere in the world. Newtownards Silver Band played the "Londonderry Air" and the opening display, before a crowd of ten to fifteen thousand, included flights by an Avro

Commodore, a Hawker Fury of 502 Squadron and an Autogyro. Ards can therefore validly claim to be the Province's first civil airport. It was preferred by airline operators of the 30's and indeed from 1934-1938 served as the civil airport for Belfast under the management of Airwork Limited of Heston, with Flt/Lt RW Bryant as Chief pilot and Manager.



**Hawker Fury**



**Avro Tutor**

The Royal Air Force also gave a demonstration of its flying training exercise using four Avro/Cadet tutor aircraft including some belonging to the flying club. Lord Londonderry departed the field in the autogyro after the display. That evening, Mountstewart gardens were opened to the public and were illuminated by arc lamps.

## Development and Expansion

Facilities at Ards Airport consisted of three grass landing strips. One ran NW/SE and was 2100 feet in length whilst the N/S was 1880 feet in length. The shortest runway W/E was 1800 feet in length. There was also a 90 ft x70 ft

hangar, a club house including a ground radio station and catering facilities. Within a short time all the airlines serving Northern Ireland were based at Ards.

Amongst the services were flights to Glasgow, Blackpool, Liverpool and Croydon. Aircraft used for these services were De Havilland Dragons and Fox Moths. There were also large four engined DH



**De Havilland Rapide**

86 called Neptune, Mercury and Venus. These aircraft had a crew and carried 12-14 passengers and their luggage. Departures to Croydon were at 0900 and after a short refueling stop at Liverpool one arrived in London at



1015(much the same journey time as services today). Ards flourished. The Royal Mail was brought in through the airport and new services were opened to the north of England including Hull. By 1938 the volume of traffic was such that it was placed seventh in the list of Airports for the British Isles handling 2075 airliners and 3269 passenger arrivals and 2889 departing. The airport handled 21 tons of mail and it was second only to Croydon in terms of other freight services.

### ***German visitors***



**Von Ribbentrop's aircraft at Ards**

Probably the largest aircraft to visit the airport was a German three engine black and silver Lufthansa Junkers JU52 (named the Wilhelm Siegert) which landed on the field on the 26<sup>th</sup> May 1936.

It conveyed the German Ambassador to Britain, Joachim

Von Ribbentrop who together with Frau Ribbentrop was the guest of the Londonderrys at Mountstewart. Lady Londonderry and members of the family met the ambassador on arrival. The Junkers remained at the Air-port until the following Tuesday when Ribbentrop returned to London.



**Hawker Hart**

Elsewhere a flying boat landed on the lough and moored opposite Mountstewart for the weekend. It brought the Chief of the Air staff Air Chief Marshall Sir Edward Ellington who had been invited to a house party. That weekend Ards saw the arrival of 603(City of Edinburgh) and 607(City of Edinburgh) Auxiliary Air Force squadrons flying Hawker Harts who gave a thrilling display of formation flying and aerobatics. The pilots dined at Mountstewart before returning to their home stations.

### ***Private Flying***

Interest in flying was growing apace. The North of Ireland Flying Club expanded and had a thriving membership. The Marquis was an enthusiastic member and kept two aircraft at Newtownards an Avro Cadet and a Monospar. This latter aircraft was exclusively for business trips to Britain and was usually flown by his personal pilot Mr JC Neilan.



**Avro Cadet**

At this time there were a number of privately owned aircraft mainly of the Moth variety. Notable among the visitors to the field was Sir Richard Cobham who brought his flying circus over for the Silver Jubilee celebrations of King George V. In September 1935 the airfield was one of the checkpoints for competitors in the Kings Cup Air Race before flying on to Scotland. One of these competitors had to ditch in the sea off Donaghadee after an engine failure but was rescued by the local fishermen. The event returned to the field the following year and encouraged by its success the first Air Rally was organised for September that year. The event attracted fourteen entrants one of whom, an aviator from Scotland, lost his way and popped into Ardglass for directions to Newtownards. The rally proved to be a great success

with competitors completing a number of tasks ,including time trials, cross country flying and navigational exercises. One year on in June 1936 a “Flying for All” event was organised by the club and the citizens of the town were treated to aerobatic displays, flights by gliders and autogyros.



**The Airfield circa 1940**

March 1938 saw the completion of the aerodrome at Sydenham

and it opened for airline operations on 16<sup>th</sup> March resulting in the transfer of airline operations to it because of its proximity to Belfast. The Club nonetheless decided to remain at Newtownards where it continued to prosper. This in part was due to the support made available under the UK Civil Guard Scheme under which volunteers were trained as reserve pilots as the clouds of war were now clearly visible on the horizon.

## ***Outbreak of War***

With the outbreak of WW2 private flying came to a temporary halt as the airfield was requisitioned as a suitable base for training and Army Co-Operation flying. Development plans were drawn up by the Air Ministry and the site increased to 234 acres but in view of its intended role, only limited construction of hard runways and hard buildings was undertaken. Most of the new airfield buildings were grouped around the original ones and were supplemented by tented accommodation. Four new hangars were erected at different points around the perimeter, two of which stood at the current entrance to the UFC. Other buildings including living quarters and a sick bay were constructed

across the Comber Road in the area of what is now West Winds housing estate. Construction work was carried out by the Royal Engineers and was largely completed by 1940. The first resident

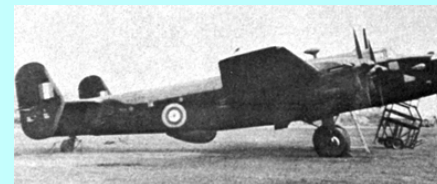
RAF unit was 231 squadron operating Lysander aircraft largely engaged on Army Co-Operation duties which consisted of patrols over Army convoys, and general support for tactical exercises. During the night of 14/15 April 1941 the Luftwaffe made another social visit to Belfast/Ards only this time they bombed the centre of



**Lysander**

the Belfast City/shipbuilding areas and for good measure dropping land mines on the airfield killing thirteen young soldiers who were too young for active service overseas but given responsibility for defending the airfield. As the war progressed, the role of the airfield changed and it came under the control of No 82 Group, Fighter Command, which had been formed as an umbrella organisation for all RAF fighter units in Northern Ireland. It became a centre for drogue towing units to facilitate air gunnery practice and by the middle of 1942 it had 22 aircraft and just over 600 personnel.

On the 25<sup>th</sup> December an American B17 en route from Newfoundland to Nutts Corner made an emergency landing on the field but 50 minutes later



**Handley Page  
Halifax**

departed the crew having got their bearings for their original destination. Other unintended visitors were a Handley Page Halifax returning from a raid on France in February 1944 and another B17 which landed on 7<sup>th</sup> February 1945.

By the beginning of 1944 the demands of the war changed and the airfield became a relief landing ground for 24EFTS(Empire Flying Training School) operating at Sydenham. A new squad-



ron was formed, No290 whose role was to provide all anti-aircraft training and practise flying for the whole of NI. This posting was short lived as the airfield's grass surfaces were so badly deteriorated by the intensity of use that the squadron were posted to Long Kesh and Ards put into care and maintenance. Apart from the establishment of No 203 Elementary Gliding School in early 1945, aircraft made little use of the field until its reversion to the Londonderry Estate shortly after the end of WW2.

## Post War Period



**Miles Messenger**

Lord Londonderry was unhappy about the condition of the airfield when it was returned to him and lost little time in repairing it and returning it to civilian flying. In January 1947, he set up Londonderry Air Charters (later renamed Ulster Aviation limited) using six aircraft to operate flights to Britain. It operated flights from Newtownards for only a short time before moving operations

to the Isle of Man.

In 1946, the Miles Aircraft company moved its aircraft building operations from Banbridge to Newtownards. It took over the factory beside the airfield at Comber Road and began building Messenger aircraft. The airport was used to test new aeroplanes before being flown to company headquarters in England. Post war austerity brought aircraft produc-



**Bristol Air Freighter**



**Silver City Airways Freighter**

tion to a close in December 1947. For a short time there was little flying and the runways were used as a race track for cars and motorcycles but in 1951 Shorts took over the field and sponsored the Flying Club which resumed flying operations in 1953. The Gliding school also recommenced operations on the field. Civil airline operations returned to Ards on 7<sup>th</sup> April 1955 with the new Silver City Airways operating a passenger and car ferry to and from Scotland. The service was operated by Bristol Freighter aircraft. These aircraft had a payload of three cars and 15 passengers. Four flights daily operated between Ards and Castle Kennedy outside Stranraer. Flight time was 17 minutes and fares ranged from £37 to £17.50 for a single journey and passengers £2.50. The Company continued to operate until 1958 when car ferries were from then on to take the major portion of cross channel traffic.

Shorts were finding it increasingly expensive to run the airport and the precarious financial situation was only saved by McCandless Aviation who set up engineering works in the hangars. They also ran the Flying Club and employed Shorts personnel to maintain the aircraft.



**The Airfield circa 1970**



**Shorts Skvvan**

The engineering business closed but the future of flying was then secured when the **Ulster Flying club** was formed in 1961 and ever since then it has had responsibility for the airfield. Like its predecessor the club was anxious to promote aviation in Northern Ireland and in the late 1960's the club organised the first Ulster Air Show. Since then and apart from training thousands of students to fly there have been several such Air Shows, attracting large numbers of spectators to the field. Visitors have the opportunity to see many of the latest aircraft in service with the RAF as well as many Warbirds which were in service during WW2. On the private flying front the UFC took part in and sponsored many Air Rallies attracting fliers from many parts of Europe. One of these attracted over 80 visiting aircraft. There have been many changes to infrastructure and aircraft over the years since the UFC assumed responsibility for the airfield notable among which was the opening of a new clubhouse in 1975 by the late and legendary Group Captain Sir Douglas Bader CBE., DSO., DFC. "The legless wonder" who commanded 242" Canadian" squadron during the Battle of Britain and was the subject of the film "Reach for the Sky". Thence followed a period of expansion in the numbers of people learning to fly. However disaster struck in 1981 when the tide bank was breached and severe salt water corrosion was caused to premises and aircraft. Per Ardua ad Astra the club pressed forward with replacement aircraft and equipment and the level of interest in aviation increased.

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**New UFC Clubhouse opening 1975**

## ***The Present Day***



**The airfield today**

The Ulster Flying club has continued to develop as a major centre for private flying and to that end existing runways were re-surfaced and the grass strip tarmaced in 1998. Following the destruction of the clubhouse by fire in 2004, a new clubhouse was completed and opened by HRH the Duke of York in 2005. New rather than leased aircraft have been purchased and the number of hours flown and aircraft movements on the field continues to climb at a steady rate. Since that time there have been several group flyouts to Scotland and further afield and two Air Displays. With the development of aviation many new types of aircraft, microlights, gliders and helicop-

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**Cessna 172**

ters can be seen on the field



**Vans RV-7**

The spirit of adventure which has so long been a feature of the Ulster character is alive and well and it is no exaggeration to say that the airfield remains the centre of aviation in Northern Ireland. 2004 saw its 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of continued use as an

airfield and in 2011 we will be celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the **Ulster Flying Club**.

**Ron Armstrong.**