

## Flying and Votes for Women

A National Women's Suffrage movement in the United Kingdom was started in 1872 to establish equal rights for women. The militant campaign for equal rights began in 1905 and was led by Emmeline Pankhurst and her two daughters Christabel and Sylvia. A key part of this movement was achieving the right to vote but equality was sought in many spheres including aviation.

The Women's Aerial League was formed in 1909 to further the development of aircraft technology and raise awareness of the aeroplane as a weapon for war. Although the Women's Aerial League was a strictly non political body, its members included noted suffragettes, Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst. The Women's Aerial League held annual Ladies' Days at Hendon Aerodrome, organised by Claude Grahame - White, a supporter of women in aviation and owner of the aerodrome. The majority of events featured male pilots with female passengers but some races were for women pilots. The Women's Aerial League provided prize money and trophies for the winners of all the races. The involvement of women in raising the profile of aviation can only have helped the cause of women's suffrage.

There were many pioneering female aviators from across the world that helped demonstrate that women were just as capable as men. Edith Maud Cook was a famous pilot and parachutist. She was the first British female pilot and the first British woman to fly solo. Edith learnt to fly in early 1910 in Pau, initially at the Blériot School, then at the Grahame White School. Claude Grahame White founded the London aerodrome at Hendon in the same year. Hendon was the site of many flying firsts and is associated with many pioneering flyers including, Mrs Winifred Buller, Lady Anne Savile and Miss Trehawke Davis.

Mrs Winifred Buller was the English ladies cross country flying champion and worked as a test pilot for the British Caudron Company based in Cricklewood, near Hendon Aerodrome circa 1912. Mrs. Buller was thought to be better than most of the French Army pilots she trained with because she never crashed an aircraft during her eighteen months' training whereas her male colleagues destroyed approximately twenty seven aircraft in six months.

Mrs. Buller also had a cool head in a crisis as she is known to have landed an aircraft in bad weather safely even though the engine had stopped. She also completed another perfect landing at Hendon in near darkness when the control wires on her aircraft had not been properly adjusted so she had to lean out of the cockpit and pull on them to control the aircraft. This kind of skill in a crisis made her a very valuable test pilot. Mrs. Buller is known to have served with the Women's Royal Air Force (WRAF) in 1919 and 1920.

Another famous flyer, Lady Anne Savile began flying at Hendon in 1914. Lady Anne primarily flew as a passenger with Captain Hamilton, a First World

War pilot, but she achieved several records in her own right. She is most famous as the first woman to attempt a transatlantic flight and to die in the attempt.

Miss Trehawke Davis never qualified as a pilot but thanks to a partnership with Gustav Hamel she became the first woman to cross the English Channel by aeroplane and the first woman to loop . the . loop in an aircraft.

Harriet Quimby was an American pilot, who became the first woman to fly across the English Channel in 1912; she was also a great friend of Gustav Hamel. Hamel offered to fly the highly publicised Channel crossing for Harriet, whilst dressed in her distinctive purple flying suit. Harriet refused and successfully completed the flight herself.

Aviation not only proved the equality of women as pilots, it was used by the Women's Suffrage movement to raise the profile of their cause. Muriel Matters, a noted Australian suffragette, hired an airship to fly from Hendon over the Houses of Parliament during the official opening of Parliament by King Edward VII on 16<sup>th</sup> February 1909. The airship was decorated with banners reading Votes for Women and Women's Freedom League. Muriel herself dropped approximately 56lbs of handbills promoting the cause. The airship was blown off course by high winds so never made it to Westminster; instead it flew over Wormwood Scrubs, Kensington and Tooting, finally landing in Coulsdon after approximately an hour and a half.

The campaign for equal suffrage decreased significantly during the First World War, militant suffrage stopped altogether as Emmeline and Sylvia Pankhurst were convinced that Germany posed a danger to all humanity. The First World War did however give women further opportunities to demonstrate their capabilities were equal to those of their male counterparts. Women were required to take on traditionally male roles because the majority of able bodied men had joined the military. Women took over many jobs in the aviation industry, huge numbers of women were employed by Claude Grahame White's aircraft factory in Hendon, building the aircraft used in the War.

Political movement towards women's suffrage began during the war, leading to women being granted the vote in 1918. The suffrage campaign continued until 1928 in the United Kingdom when women were finally allowed to vote on the same terms as men.