

Skywritings

The Kent Strut Newsletter June 2023



Editors Corner

I hope everyone is making the most of this beautiful weather and making up for the earlier part of the year.

This month's Skywritings is a short one but with a focus on the great charity work done by the strut and from the pictures what was an amazing event at Manston.

Ron has kindly produced another defunct airfield's in Kent. I really enjoy reading them as I know many of you do. If you have anything that could help with this work, I'm sure he'd love to hear from you.

Finally, I hope to catch up with as many of you as I can at the strut BBQ this coming week.

Our next meeting is:-

Friday 30th June – Solleys Farm, Ripple
Strut BBQ

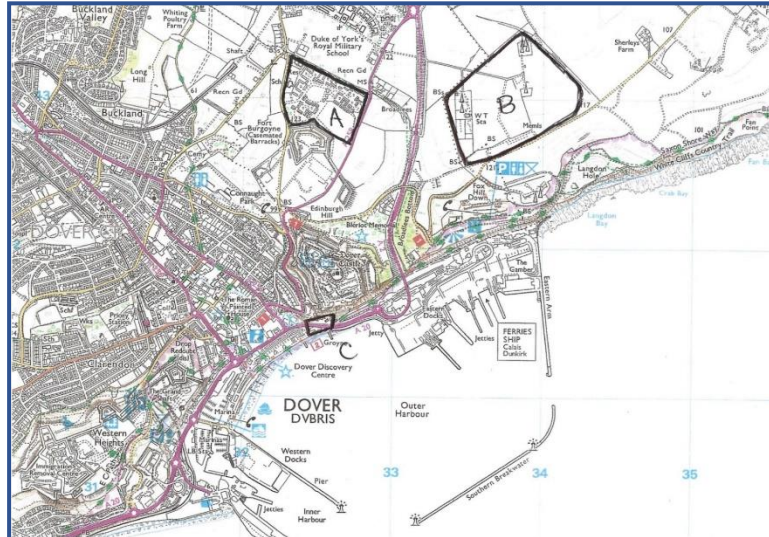
Finally, if you aren't in the Strut Whatsapp and would like to be, please email us and we can add you in so you're up to date with the latest news as it happens.



Defunct Kent Airfields

Dover (continued)

Article by Ron Armitage



B. DOVER Swingate Down/St Margaret's (aka Langdon)

Swingate Down was used by the military for the training of soldiers and experiments in what then was the new wireless system of communication.

In early 1910 Charles Rolls persuaded the War Office to rent him the site so that he could use it as an aerodrome. He had a hangar constructed and referred to the area as Swingate Aerodrome. It was from this site that his successful double crossing of the Channel was achieved on 2nd June of that year.



Charles Rolls postcard, commemorating his two way non-stop flight across the Channel Thursday 2nd June 1910.

Courtesy of Dover Library

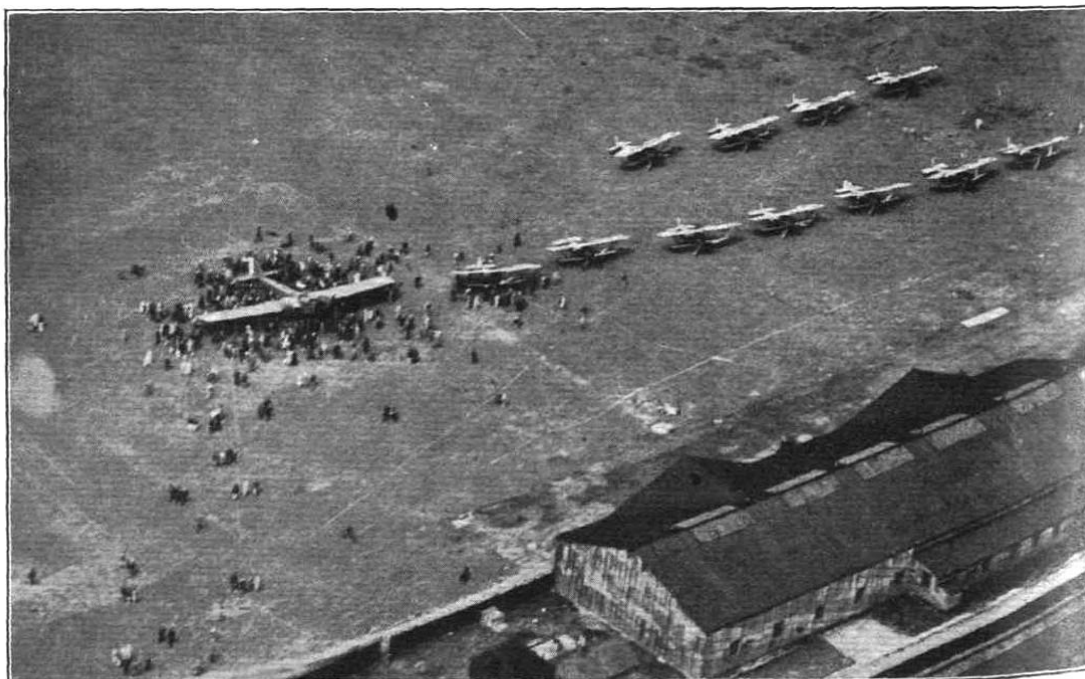
Subsequently the site was used by many aviators and for attempts at flying records and races. However, as World War 1 approached, the Royal Flying Corps prepared to turn the area into a military aerodrome. Long before the work was completed, four squadrons of aeroplanes left the country here bound for France, and on the site today is a commemorative plaque (reproduced here).



In 1915 the airfield was officially named Dover St Margaret's and because of its closeness to France, was used mainly as a transit station. It was, however, also used for training and as a night landing ground for the Home Defence squadrons. By October 1918 there was also a large unit, the School of Marine Operational Pilots, which specialised in anti-submarine and convoy patrol duties.

The 49 Squadron Association has on its most interesting website a copy of a letter written by Lieutenant William Sleeman, who passed through the airfield on his way to France, where he was killed just a few weeks later on 31st May 1917. He described the site as "an awful place right on top of Dover hills, clouds on the ground and a wind blowing like hell. The 'drome here is all ridges, rotten for taking off and landing." In my view, nothing has changed.

With the cessation of hostilities, the site fell into disuse and, by 1919, was used only for emergencies. It was closed in 1920. However, in 1926 a detachment of Bristol Fighters exercised there with the Tank Corps and, much later, in the 1960s, it was used by a number of replica aeroplanes in the filming of "Those Magnificent Men in their Flying Machines".



Following his famous first aerial crossing of the Channel by an aeroplane, Bleriot made another aerial visit to England. He is seen here after landing at Swingate.

Photograph courtesy of 'The Dover Historian'

How we brought aeroplanes back to Manston

Article by Nic Orchard

When an aerodrome closes, it is rare that it is not soon repurposed for housing or industry. The larger ones may survive in a reduced form, with some GA activity on a small part of one runway, but those retaining their full potential are rare indeed. Plymouth, certainly and Manston, where, since TG Aviation, there has been no aviation activity except helicopter operations. For some years, RiverOak have been battling to provide a freight hub and despite sustained and sometimes absurd opposition, the company has not been deterred. Opposition from some local authorities and support from others, together with Judicial

Reviews – plural - have made it a saga, not an episode. Manston Airport's enormous runway still has readable numbers and although many of the associated facilities and structures have gone, it is quite obviously viable.

At one hundred and seven years old at heart, Manston can claim a full history from WWI to 2014, its origins a quarter-mile square hose gallop identified as a suitable alternative to the landing ground at Westgate, where, when landing to the north, rather too many precious landplanes were joining their seaplane cousins on the shore below the cliff. By 1916, there were two squadrons based there; in WWII, the history is well documented, by 1960 it became a joint RAF/Civilian airport and by the mid-nineties, the MOD had sold it and the RAF had departed by the new millennium. Civilian expansion and contraction followed until, in 2013, the company owned by former CEO of Stagecoach, Ann Gloag, bought it for £1. Within six months, the closure of the airport was announced. Since then and the relocation of TG Aviation, there has been no fixed wing operation.

The Kent Strut has developed a relationship with one of the two museums on-site; the volunteers of the RAF Manston History Museum are knowledgeable, enthusiastic and most welcoming. Our monthly meetings alternate between Maidstone and Manston to cater to our widespread membership. It was after one such meeting earlier this year that we were invited to the Open Cockpit Day. May we fly in? asked everyone. Well, it turned out that we could, thanks to RiverOak. It couldn't be advertised too widely but we got fourteen in, it was deemed a success and there was sufficient excitement from all parties involved that further talks seemed inevitable.

Thus, the Charity Fly-In grew – and grew. The zeal emanating from the airport meant we could open it up to other Struts and then beyond. Space was not an issue.

The plan was for the fine folk at Polar Helicopters to handle the PPR and radio on the day and once the plans were drawn up and agreed, we simply watched the numbers booked in grow and grow. It was evident from early on that a straight-in approach would be best, with a Rally-style procedure to keep the radio chatter down to essentials. Between ourselves, we had confidence that the LAA attendees would have little problem with this, but that runway was attracting all sorts of traffic; would the big boys be as comfortable with minimalism? Would there be some who had no experience of the sort of fly-in where airmanship sorts everyone out, not the radio?

It was decided that the very modest landing fees would all go to Martha Trust, a local charity with which the Strut has been associated for a considerable time. The Museum was holding re-enactment days over the bank holiday weekend, so our Sunday gathering would both provide them with extra visitors and offer

an additional sight for their other visitors. Their NAAFI cafés (inside and out) would be open and for those wandering over to the Spitfire Museum, there'd be an alternative eaterie.

By the Friday before, word was out in the wider world. Aircraft enthusiasts were planning their days as we looked again at risk assessments. Meanwhile, the PPRs had exceeded a hundred. Polar Helicopters cancelled their students. John, our committee member whose role is organising the weather, arranged end to end sunshine and excellent visibility. He forgot to unwind the wind but has now been re-educated... Sunday 28th May started early.

Marshals (Strut volunteers) donned high vis vests and in good time, everything was ready. No, I can't write that with a straight face. For a brief time, there was frenzied activity as the volunteers from Martha Trust couldn't get past the security on the car park by the museums, because the most obvious car park belongs to the other museum and with so much going on generally, they weren't going to allow anyone but their own visitors use it. Once they were in, we had to leave them to it and be ready for the early arrivals. Manston is big. Getting from the taxiway to anywhere took time before getting across to the museum 200yds away. As the morning got going and the marshalls were filling the lower end with aeroplanes, then the dispersal bays and beyond, edging up towards the Echo taxiway, the desire to just trot back down to get something or other tended to decrease. It became a longer trot along the taxiway and back each time.



The wind was about 60° off runway 10. We did get some cancellations, understandably, but most of those slots were filled by late requests.

As mid-morning passed, the incoming aircraft kept coming. Airmanship was high and almost everyone followed the simple brief. Nathan did a superb job on the radio. Visitors were parked, tails were rolled onto the grass, pilots and passengers were directed to where a minibus would shuttle them across to the museums and cafes, the wrong side of a dangerous junction. Thanks are due to 2433 (Thanet) Squadron for use of the minibus and the volunteer from the museum for driving it all day. This fly-in really was a team effort.





When the last visitor flew out and we started to unwind, we started to appreciate what had happened. 103 aircraft had landed at Manston, 103 had taken off, Martha Trust had gained over £2,200 and everyone enjoyed good PR.

'Did you take any pictures?'

'No, I didn't have time. Did you?'

'No time either...'

'Well, there'll be thousands on-line of individual aircraft within a week. There was an extensive line of camera lenses along the verge that parallels the runway.'



The aircraft enthusiasts had found places that caused no problem and those that asked were escorted airside. One aspect we had not been able to arrange in advance was parking other than for aircraft. It had been arranged as a fly-in and only when the PPRs started to mount did it become apparent that we might also now get rather more than a very few non-flying visitors. Another item for the debrief. There was much to discuss but overall, it was regarded as a success – a triumph, even, by all involved.

We have been given access to many pictures* taken by RiverOak people and for a good piece of video, the one taken by Polar Helicopter is excellent. Check out their Facebook page.

The stars of the day had to be RiverOak and Polar Helicopters and our Steve Hoskins. Without him, it wouldn't have got beyond 'a nice idea'. Without the enthusiasm and generosity of RiverOak and Polar, none of the rest could have happened.

* All but one included here are theirs.

Dates for your Diary

Please check with event organisers in advance for any changes. Please let me know of any events you think others might be interested in.

Items in green are Kent Strut events

30th June	Kent Strut – Ripple BBQ Fly-in
9 th July	Suffolk Coastal Strut Fly-in
30 th July	Lundy Sunday Fly-In, Lundy Island
TBC July	Kent Strut – The Secret Nuclear Bunker Fly-in
18 th - 20 th August	LAA Grass Roots Fly-in Popham
28 th September	Kent Strut – Talk by Charlie Brown – Cobtree Manor Golf Club
26 th October	Kent Strut - Fireworks at Clipgate
30 th November	Kent Strut - One September Evening - The Greatest Dogfight of WW1
TBC December	Kent Strut – Christmas Dinner
25 th January 2024	Kent Strut - AGM

Ripple Fly-in

Stephen Solley has offered free of charge camping available for those wishing to try the new on-site bar.

Member Services

Drop the editor a line if you have a service or product, you'd like to promote including any items you may have for sale.



Solleys Kentish Ice Cream Amazing choice of flavours, tubs, cups, scooping kits.

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If you are looking for new aircraft radios, transponders, GPS or spares, don't hesitate to contact
Glen Everett 07801 639489 office@flyingadverts.co.uk

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