

Ninety years ago next month John Leeming, with co-pilot Hinkler landed this AVRO (actual picture) on the top of Helvellyn in the Lake District.



'Avro Gosport two seater land plane (No R3/R/70000) fitted with Avro five cylinder radial engine of 100 HP-flight from Woodford Aerodrome to Helvellyn'

Facebook friends interested in flying know that long flights in open bi-planes in icy winter weather are to be avoided.

The flight was to further interest in private flying and to generate enthusiasm for municipal airports.

Leeming was an influential and courageous man.

Here is his abridged story of the flight:-

"What you want to do" said Sir Sefton, addressing John Leeming "is to land on a mountain". Some time in 1926, Sir Sefton Brancker, (died 1930 in the R101 Airship at Beauvais), the energetic and far seeing Director General of the Civil Aviation Authority, hosted an evening out in London with a group of guests including John Leeming, Chairman of the Lancashire Aero Club (LAC) and later co-founder of Northern Air Lines. Dinner at the Army and Navy Club, a theatre, then back to Chez Victor's off Bond Street. Over coffee and brandy Brancker told Leeming he ought to land on a mountain for propaganda purposes to add new members (and benefactors) for the growing Air Ministry backed "light aeroplane clubs" set up to encourage "air mindedness". Brancker had obviously read The Aeroplane for March 11 1925 where C G Grey, the illustrious editor, had published a photograph of the summit of Snowdon and averred "When an aeroplane can alight by the hotel and start thence we may consider that we have achieved safety in aviation". In the early '20s most flying was stagnant and Brancker wanted the public to seize his vision of the coming importance of aviation. Leeming, thirty one years old, had gained Brancker's trust from a strong and active commitment to the still embryonic aviation. Just the man, founder of the first member's flying club in the world, to take on such a challenge. (As an aside it is an interesting comment on the times that Leeming soloed in the LAC de Havilland Moth bi-plane G-EBLV, at Woodford, Cheshire, after three hours thirty five minutes and performed two stall turns after which his instructor Scholes had to be 'assisted to the hangar' no doubt in shock). Snowdon in Wales was found impracticable for the purpose but Leeming was assured that Helvellyn, in the Lake District was "just like a Billiard Table at the top". On inspection Leeming found the possible landing area was also about the same size! Whilst Leeming was contemplating the Helvellyn flight Brancker, pushing for a Municipal Airport in Manchester, surprised him with a telegram on the Tuesday advising that on the Thursday Sir Alan Cobham, recently knighted for his Empire flights, would attend Manchester Civic Week (October 1926) in a Moth, and needed a landing ground finding and preparing within the City boundary, to be received by the Lord Mayor. With all the resources of the Manchester Corporation and Police he made the arrangements at Old Hall Farm Withington within twenty four hours and on the day, with Cobham grounded at Nuneaton with engine trouble, flew the Club Avro bi-plane in from

Woodford with a double Moth escort piloted by the two LAC instructors Cantrill and Scholes. The crowds lined up along the route into the City of Manchester greeted him in the Mayoral car as Cobham, who arrived later for a Civic tea of leftovers. Avro at Newton Heath, Manchester, had agreed, with some arm twisting from Brancker, to lend an Avro Gosport (G-EBPH) with Oleo undercarriage and an Alpha radial engine. Avro's Bert Hinkler, eventually occupying the second seat for the second and third attempts. Leeming and a friend walked up Helvellyn's icy slopes and on first impressions thought it couldn't be accomplished but Leeming was already committed with Brancker, Avros and the accompanying peer pressure and was compelled to believe that with rocks rolled away and the right wind it might just be managed. Compared to today the 'red tape' involved in this flight was small but insurance cover and a C of A for an experimental aircraft were essentials.

The permit was issued on December the 8th 1926 First attempt. On December the 15th Leeming heard from the Air Ministry Meteorological Station at Sealand, Chester that conditions might be favourable and with his reliable observers at Preston, Grasmere and Wythburn reporting a strong Northerly wind, good visibility with passing showers, the advice was 'Proceed, Good opportunity if the machine can be landed in a thirty mile an hour wind'. The Avro's engine refused to start and it was nearly noon before Leeming set off for Cumberland, In the bitter cold of an open cockpit, with Hinkler behind in a second Avro carrying a Manchester Guardian photographer. From Woodford due North west to Wigan to pick up the Crewe/ Carlisle railway line and then North towards the Lake District. With frost on the ground, patches of mist turned to wide stretches of fog, and by Preston the sun had disappeared and the sky changed to a dull browny grey. After Preston the visibility worsened and Leeming was down to 300' For five minutes the pair flew blind, out of sight of the ground, in a storm of hail stones. Hinkler eventually closed up so that each could see the other and Leeming could indicate the field at Lancaster where it was arranged they would refuel. Over Morecambe Bay there was a temporary improvement but the field at Lancaster with Petrol supplies was located with difficulty through mist and rain. With the threat of snow, the bitter cold and the risks involved the two bi-planes set off North again in the rain. Over the Lake District hills the 300' air pockets chastened them. "The rain kept on, and, to add to the difficulties, hail began to beat down heavily. Unable to see anything of the ground, we were compelled at times to climb upwards through the storm". Finally Leeming followed Hinkler in a violent stall turn as a mountain side showed through the mist and common sense finally made this courageous pair turn for home. Newspapers treated the failure in a kindly way but dread and worry set in for Leeming who was now fully entangled in whatever the outcome. Second attempt. On December the 21st there were good weather reports. At Woodford Hinkler's engine was defective and at noon after a bitter argument Leeming and Hinkler took off together in the Avro Gosport for Helvellyn leaving the Manchester Guardian reporter behind. After refuelling at Lancaster a strong gusty wind and ice on the wings did not deter them from getting within a mile of Helvellyn but the 3000' wind would have overturned the Avro if it had reached the summit and landed. Back to Lancaster for fuel before the flight back to Woodford. With Hinkler flying on the flight home, climbing out of the field at Lancaster, the engine hesitated with sediment in the carburetor and he performed the impossible-nose down for flying speed, then a maximum rate 180 degree turn and with the left wing brushing the grass skimmed cross wind across the field landing a few yards from the hedge.

The Avro was pegged down for the night and Leeming saw in his mind every boastful headline, every bragging remark, the ridicule, amused glances, sarcastic remarks quiet derision from a solitary journalist, offhand farm people, Hinkler asked what keeps this town going? Lancaster Lunatic Asylum was Leeming's desperate reply. They were oil stained, cold, disheveled, weary, unwashed, without money, both unprepared for a night away from Woodford but managed to persuade a suspicious hotel manager to give them accommodation and hot food. With a hot bath, a night's rest and meals payed for by £3 borrowed from the local garage proprietors the next morning, Leeming's spirits were sufficiently raised to pay their hotel bill and tell the manager that they would not patronize the hotel in future! Third attempt. After a lift back to the plane and a strip of plugs and filters the

two looked at the weather and decided to make another attempt, taking off into patches of blue, with high woolly clouds. The wind was strong and steady. with good visibility. They overflew Kendal at 3000' but at Newby Bridge the engine ran unevenly again, cleared, then at Bowness the revs dropped. Lake Windermere has narrow, wooded water's edge strips and is surrounded by hills. Hinkler spotted a small open patch of green, dived down with throttle closed, and then from 1000' with violent S turns landed in the grounds of Calgarth Park a children's sanatorium. More cleaning of the petrol filter and after take off, at a thousand feet Hinkler handed over to Leeming heading for Helvellyn into deteriorating weather again. Over Grasmere more air turbulence and 500' air pockets were met but as they progressed to Helvellyn turbulence started to ease and Leeming circled the summit in less turbulent conditions. The landing was uphill, close to the summit, where the rocks had been cleared, with a strong steady wind that had brought the Avro's ground speed down to about fifteen miles per hour. Hinkler had to hold the plane on the throttle to prevent it running back. With no reception party expecting them they were fortunate to find Professor ER Dodds of Birmingham University sheltering who signed the back of one of his bills that G-EBPH had landed with Leeming and Hinkler on the summit of Helvellyn on Dec 22 1926. Back in the cockpit of the Avro, which was about 90' from the edge of the precipice, Leeming opened the throttle and thought of England. In their own words:- "I don't like it," said Hinkler "I like it a lot less," I replied ."Just pray that the engine gives its full revs." "We said goodbye to the Professor, climbed in, settled our belts and goggles, and then, at a nod from Hinkler I pressed the throttle wide open. The engine roared; slowly, ever so slowly, we began to move, then more quickly, faster, faster. Five yards from the edge the wheels were still on the ground. Just for an instant the nose seemed to drop as we shot away into space. The next moment we were away, flying, dipping down".

Abridged from John Leeming's book *Airdays* published in 1936.