



# BIGGIN HILL AIRPORT BUGLE

*News from our Airport at Biggin Hill - established 2005*



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## BOB NEEDHAM author



*Born To Fly!*

### INSTRUCTOR PROFILE

*I went first solo after 57 minutes of dual instruction on a three day course.*

I have had an obsession with aeroplanes and flying since my earliest memories and probably even before that. As a very young child I was there when the Battle of Britain was fought in plain view over the green fields of Kent and the grimy suburbs of South East London where I lived. The battle was fought on a stage consisting of a clear blue English summer sky and the audience, were the people of Kent and London. Later in the war the skies were thick with low flying military aeroplanes. I have clear memories of Spitfires, Hurricanes, Typhoons, and Wellingtons, Lancasters and even the odd German Heinkel 111 and Focke Wulf 190 flying overhead. I could recognise them all. I remember Lenny Chandler, the son of a neighbour who was a Lancaster rear gunner, home on leave, giving me a model aeroplane

for my sixth birthday. He was shot down and killed a few months later. It was a silver bi-plane and was my most favourite toy for many years. I think it was then that I knew I would be a pilot. All this led me to join the Air Training Corps when I was thirteen.

I still recall with nostalgia my early gliding days in England in the last century, 1956 to be exact, I must say that after a life time of professional flying my A and B gliding certificates, which I obtained with the A.T.C. at Royal Air Force Station Hawkinge in Kent, are still my most prized flying qualifications. I went first solo after 57 minutes of dual instruction on a three day course, with no previous air experience other than as a passenger in Royal Air Force aeroplanes. Nineteen launches at three minutes a launch in a **Kirby Cadet Mk 3**.



No soaring allowed! The top cadet on our course went solo in 45 minutes. Those were the days. Our Royal Air Force instructors were men of steel. On the course before mine a cadet crashed on his first solo. He deployed the spoilers on short final and then froze. The increased rate of descent slammed him onto a barber's shop roof. He survived but after that we



weren't allowed to touch the spoilers. It didn't matter as Hawkinge was an ex Battle of Britain all over grass forward airfield for Spitfires and Hurricanes. It was very large and long for gliding purposes but on my first solo I still remember giving a huge sigh of relief as I sailed well over the top of the barber shop roof. Later I obtained my C gliding certificate in Germany and my Silver C height qualification in Kenya but it is my A and B gliding certificates of which I am most proud. They were signed by Lord Brabazon of Tara GBE, MC, PC. He was a contemporary of the Wright brothers and was the first person to qualify as a pilot in the United Kingdom in March 1910 when he was awarded Royal Aero Club Aviator's Certificate number one.

Seven years before that in 1903, the Wright brothers had made their first heavier than air, sustained and controlled powered flight. That was 111 years ago, and I have been a pilot for 58 years. So I have been flying for well over half of the time that flight, as we

know it, has been in existence.

I had a great admiration and respect for my first power flying instructor. He had been a World War Two night fighter pilot in the R.A.F. When he finished his first operational tour as a fighter pilot they sent him on a rest tour as a flying instructor. His name was Alan Wilson and he was much happier upside down in a Tiger Moth than he was the right way up. He imparted to me a great love of aerobatics even before I did my first power solo at the old Croydon Aerodrome, South London in a 1939 vintage Tiger Moth. At about this time I was told by the Department of Civil Aviation medical authorities that, because of a slight eye sight problem, I would never get into airlines. I was devastated. However becoming an instructor like Alan, sending people off on first solos and teaching formation and aerobatics and spin recoveries, seemed a fun way to go so that's what I aimed for. It would certainly be a better job than a builder's labourer which was my employment at the time. I knew it would be a long road but I had that one essential quality to succeed that all student pilots need. A burning, and all consuming desire to become a pilot. I didn't have the education or much money to learn to fly because I had to leave school at age 15 and go to work to help my single mother put food on the table for my younger brother and sister. I was also told that I was wasting my time because of my eyesight problem but I had that burning desire and nothing and no one was going to stop me. My early gliding experience showed me that I could do it and do it I would. I thought about flying every minute of my working day. Running my once a month 40 minute flying lesson over and over in my head. Probably not the best thing to do on a building site but my head was in the clouds and I never even considered the salary

difference between airline pilots and instructors for one moment. Silly me.! Wage wise I was better off as a builders labourer and as an instructor I worked a damn sight harder than any airline pilot ever did. Nonetheless it certainly was a fun job and one that I could take pride in, especially as I came from one of the much poorer disadvantaged areas of London.

I mentioned fun earlier, but like most relatively high risk jobs it can have its more sobering moments. Like the time when I and a student had a complete engine failure in an Auster J5 whilst on a cross country training flight out of Biggin Hill in England. Shortening a story that would take two A4 pages to recount fully, the flight ended with the aeroplane upside down in a very boggy field in Essex with both of us trapped inside, soaked to the skin in high octane avgas and hanging upside down in the straps. No pun intended but I can tell you that we didn't hang around for very long.

On another occasion on take off at Biggin Hill in an Aeronca 7AC.



The student, who was on his first lesson, took it into his head suddenly to grab onto his stick and yank it hard and fully back just as we got airborne. As we had briefed that I would be doing the take off his action was totally unexpected. My stick was wrenched out of my hand and held fully back. Now the Aeronca is a tandem seat aeroplane and the instructor sits in the back so it was impossible for me to get his hand away from his stick in the front. In circumstances like these the instructor's manual advises that

you should call out in a masterful voice "I have control" but it came out more like a squeak as I said with non standard phraseology "get your \*effing\* hand of the stick you stupid bastard".

To his credit and no doubt recognising that his ideas on how to conduct a take off were basically flawed, he did in fact let go. The aeroplane was now at about 100 feet above the runway. No inherent problem with that but the issue was that it was pointing in the wrong direction; vertically nose up. The other point that exercised my mind was that the airspeed indicator was heading for zero very rapidly and I suspected that this would soon be followed by the altimeter. As we used to say in those days "There I was with nothing on the clock except the makers name - Smiths of Cricklewood and the altimeter was about to read fathoms"! So here was the dilemma. Keep the stick back and down we would go or push the stick forward and down we would go. Predictably the aeroplane now started to enter a spin to the right so I chose to conduct the incipient spin recovery. The recovery was starting to take effect and certainly prevented a full spin from developing when the ground intervened. We hit with a teeth rattling crunch. Being quite a perspicacious young man I knew we were in deep trouble when I saw the door fall off, the starboard undercarriage leg depart the aeroplane and the starboard wing tip and the propeller disintegrated in a shower of wooden splinters. Somewhat wisely, I believe, I decided to abandon the take off. Later the insurers, Lloyds of London, who are usually quite laconic in the reporting of accidents stated in the Financial Times, almost poetically, that "The aeroplane was seen to climb exceptionally steeply after take off to a height of 100 feet from where it then plunged vertically into the ground." "There were no

fatalities.” They seemed a little disappointed about the no fatalities bit. I was not!

### *I would love to buy a Hawker Hurricane*

Over the years I have often been asked what aeroplane I would buy if money were no object. Well it would have to be the Hawker Hurricane. When I was a child living in the South East of England the Battle of Britain raged in the skies over my head. On the British side the Battle was fought mainly by Hurricanes of the Royal Air Force (RAF) together with a few of the new Spitfires just coming into squadron service. I was too young to remember seeing them at the time but later in the war I certainly remember seeing “Hurries” over my home on many occasions. At the time this classic aeroplane was still a front line fighter, some of them operating nearby from the famous RAF fighter aerodrome of Biggin Hill in Kent. Little did I know then that I was destined to fly as an instructor from this hallowed place.

The more modern and faster Spitfire took the public imagination during the Battle of Britain but there is no doubt in my mind and most historians minds for that matter that the Hurricane, together with its pilots, was the prime machine that saved Great Britain, some would say the free world, in its darkest hour. I have flown from the place that they flew from. I have flown in the skies that they flew in. What an honour it would be actually to fly the aeroplane that saved Great Britain!

Another question that most instructors are asked is “What is the most interesting aeroplane that you have flown”. For me this is always a difficult one to answer because, at the last count, if I include GA, ultralight and sailplane types, I have flown in command on well over 350 totally different types. All of them have their particular and sometimes peculiar

characteristics. Here is just a small sampling.

My all time favourite – the De Havilland Tiger Moth - don't forget to strap into the Sutton Harness painfully tight before flight. If you don't, when you roll upside down your bum leaves the seat and the sensation is that you have just fallen out of the cockpit. Then as you continue the roll you are left swaying upside down in your harness and it feels like you are hanging outside of the aeroplane. Of course the engine stops as you roll inverted because the good old Gypsy Major engine doesn't run upside down. But you knew that was going to happen anyway so you are pretty well up to speed on diving air restarts as there is no starter motor fitted.

Great character building stuff, aeroplanes were made of wood and pilots were made of steel in those days. Not like now where it is the other way around.



The two thirds scale open cockpit Hawker Fury bi-plane fighter was a fun machine - don't round out too high or it will drop a wing on you as you three point. The CAC Winjeel with its castoring tail



wheel - don't forget to lock it for take off or you are in for an exhilarating take off as you swerve from side to side down the runway. The Grumman Ag Cat crop sprayer big old draggy 450 HP engined

open cockpit bi-plane – don't go one knot below 80 Kts on final or it won't round out.



Then there was the Pilatus Porter tail dragger with its 600 HP PT6A gas turbine engine - the only aeroplane that I have ever flown that could be taxied backwards. Phoebe Ann and I ferried one of these aeroplanes from Switzerland



to Nairobi, Kenya in the late sixties for me to take up a crop spraying job in it. This was just after the time of the Israeli/Arab six day war. We created quite a stir in Libya, Tripoli, Egypt and the Sudan because the aeroplane had the Swiss flag painted on the tail and airport authorities constantly mistook this flag for the symbol of the Red Cross. So what's the problem with that you ask? Well in Africa many gun runners paint the Red Cross symbol on their aeroplanes in an attempt to make people believe that they are engaged on humanitarian flights. So we were constantly being either locked up or escorted around at gunpoint until we could prove that we were indeed not gun runners. Actually this wasn't too hard to prove as Phoebe Ann was very obviously seven months pregnant with our first daughter, Tana.

Once the authorities at each airport realised that we were fair dinkum we then, much to their delight and accompanied by lots of hand

clapping, had to demonstrate our backward taxiing act since most of them had never seen such a thing before. Indeed I think that I spent more time taxiing backwards than forwards on that trip. To add to the fun of it all we rescued an American exotic dancer in Aswan, Egypt who was running away from her Saudi Arabian Muslim husband. She had to lie flat on her tummy in a very confined space on top of the ferry tanks in amongst a tangle of plastic fuel pipes. Both Phoebe Ann and I were extremely worried that she might use one of the fuel pipes to pull herself forward, break it and cause a fuel gusher in the cockpit. In the end she left us in Abu Simbal where we stopped off to see the temple of Ramises the second and we never saw or heard from her again. We often wonder what happened to her.

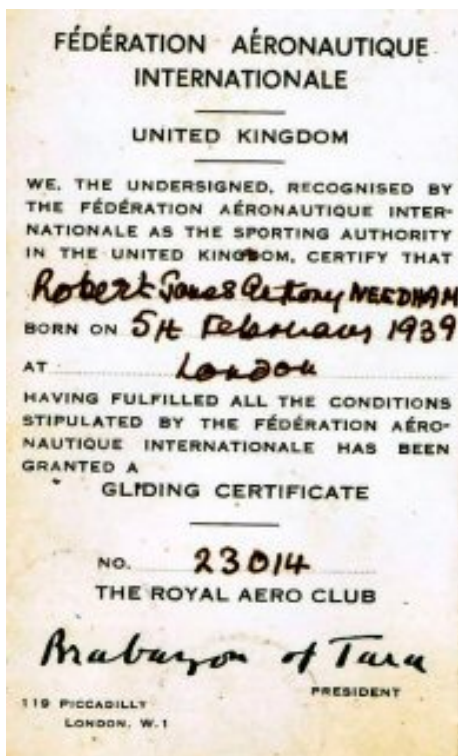
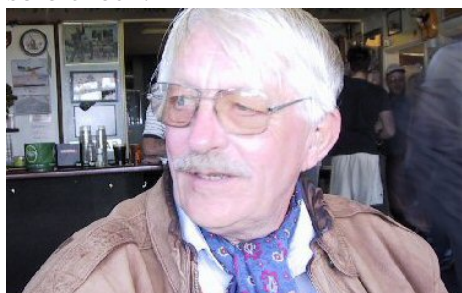


Bob in DH Tiger Moth G-ANRU in the old days of Croydon Airport before it finally closed.

### A FINAL PICTURE OF BOB



Bob sitting in the front cockpit of the Kirby Cadet Mk3 for his pre-solo check.



My treasured Gliding Certificates.

### FASCINATING TRUE STORY

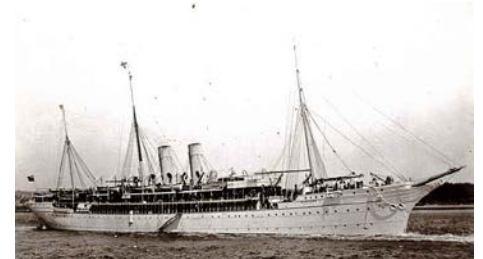


Violet Constance Jessop

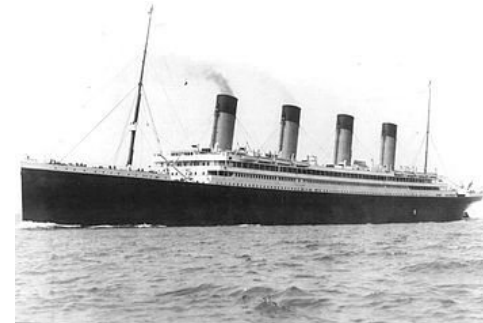
Violet was born to William and Katherine Jessop, Irish emigrants living near Bahia Bianca, Argentina.

His fiancée Katherine Kelly, followed him out from Dublin in 1886. Violet was the first of nine children, only six of whom survived. Violet herself contracted tuberculosis at an early age, but, despite doctor's predictions, she survived.

After her father died, Violet and her family moved to Great Britain, where she attended a convent school. After her mother became ill, she left school and took a position with the Royal Mail Liner aboard the **ORINOCO**.



Following this adventure at sea, at the age of 23 Violet boarded the **RML OLYMPIC** 14<sup>th</sup> June 1911.



To work as a stewardess.

The Olympic was a luxury ship that was the largest civilian liner at the time, being nearly 100ft longer than any other ship.

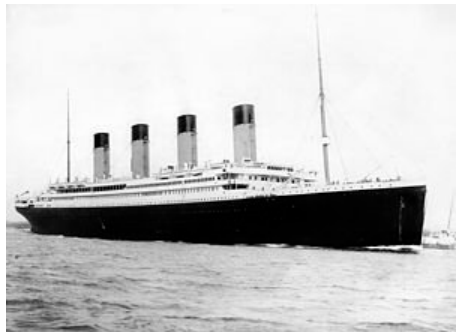
Olympic's first major mishap occurred on 20 September 1911, when she collided with the protected cruiser HMS Hawke off the Isle of Wight.

Although the incident resulted in the flooding of two of her compartments and a twisted propeller shaft, Olympic was able to limp back to Southampton.

At the subsequent enquiry the Royal Navy blamed Olympic for the incident, alleging that her large

displacement generated a suction that pulled the Hawke into her side. (*Benoulli's Theorem*)

Following this adventure at sea, Violet boarded the **RMS TITANIC**



as a stewardess on the 10 April 1912. Four days later 14 April 1912 the vessel struck an iceberg in the North Atlantic, starting to founder and, over the next two hours, broke in two and sank. Violet described in her memoirs that she was ordered up on deck, because she was to function as an example of how to behave for the non-English speakers who could not follow the instructions given to them. She watched as the crew loaded the lifeboats. She was later ordered into lifeboat 16, and as the boat was being lowered, one of the Titanic's officers gave her a baby to look after. The next morning, Violet and the rest of the survivors were rescued by the **RMS CARPARTHIA**

According to Violet, while on the Carparthia, a woman grabbed the baby she was holding and ran off with it without saying a word.

During the First World War, Violet served as a stewardess for the British Red Cross.

On the morning of 21 November 1916, she was on board **HMS Hospital Ship BRITANNIC** when the ship apparently struck a sea mine, with all the portholes open for ventilation, quickly sank in the Argean Sea of the Greek Island of Kea, with the loss of 30 lives. There is also a second theory for the cause of the sinking claiming that a German U-Boat shot the Britannic without warning, regardless of its status as a medical ship. While the Britannic was

sinking, Violet jumped out of lifeboat to avoid being sucked into the Britannics turning propellers. She was sucked under the water anyway, and struck the lifeboats keel before surfacing and being rescued. She later stated that cushioning due to her thick auburn hair, helped save her life. She had also made sure to grab her toothbrush before leaving her cabin on the Britannic, saying later that is one thing she missed immediately following the sinking of the Titanic.

### **VIOLET JESSOP 1886 - 1971**

After the war, Violet continued to work for the White Star Line, and the Red Star Line, then the Royal Mail Lines and later did two round the world cruises on the company's largest ship the **BELGENLAND** in her 30's.

Violet says of her experiences that she (Violet) was unsinkable.

### **2<sup>ND</sup> FESTIVAL OF FLIGHT at BIGGIN HILL 13<sup>TH</sup> JUNE**

Gates open at 09:30am - join us for another wonderful flying day out.



This promises to be another thrilling social day out some tickets are still available, hurry to buy so as not to be disappointed. ED