magnificent men in their flying machines
One of the all-time greats of aviation, Wing-Commander Ken Wallis, needs your help in adding the final moments to one chapter in his remarkable story. It revolves around a plane built in a garden shed in St Barnabas Road, Cambridge.

He writes: “My father, Horace, and his younger brother, Percival, were the middle brothers of four, in their father's wholesale grocery and tea importing business. Early in the 1900s the Sunlight Soap Company offered a 'Rex' motorcycle for some enormous number of coupons that went with their soaps. Being in the trade, my father and uncle purchased a large number from a retailer, which is how they got their first motorcycle. The brothers soon acquired a blacksmith's forge where they made their own versions.

In 1908 they went to France, where they saw a Wright 'Flyer' aeroplane. The moment they returned they started to build a monoplane in a shed in their garden. Their father subsidised them as there was a £1,000 prize for the first 'All-British' plane to fly a mile. He paid £300 for the engine, only to find it had a German magneto, so could not have qualified as 'All-British'.

In May 1910 they exhibited their 'Wallbro' aeroplane at their home. It was launched at St Barnabas Road, paying sixpence for admission. The machine was staked down and the motor set running twice a day.

A month later it was put on display again, in Few's Barn near the river in Old Chesterton during the May Bank Holiday. It had been designed by the Wallis brothers together with C Knightley, P Booth and E Muller, all of Chesterton. In their spare time. Can you add any details about these men?

Its framework was of spruce and bamboo, it was covered by a special aeroplane fabric and was fitted with elm skids to take up the shock of landing. But it was to be initially tried as a glider mounted on a carriage with three wheels so it could be pushed downhill to give the glider a start. If the experiments were successful a petrol motor might be installed. It was not to try it in the air within a fortnight. By July a motor had been fitted and the plane was taken to a field near Abington. Percy Wallis made a successful run to test the pulling-power of the engine, covering half a mile at a speed of 12 over 20mph. Then he started back. At first the plane skimmed lightly along the ground, then it started to climb and sailed along at a height of three or four feet. It appeared to fly quite evenly and continued like this for several yards. Then the back was pulled up and the front sank. It slid forward on its skids but the tail continued to rise. Finding himself unable to right the machine, Percy stopped the engine and sprang off. He was unhurt but the monoplane turned a complete somersault, landing upside down like some giant insect on its back.

The propeller was smashed to atoms and the wing considerably damaged. It was thought either a gust of wind had lifted the tail or the balance was not right. Probably the driver's seat was too far forward and made it heavy in front. It would take a fortnight to repair, they thought.

By August 1, 1910, the repaired plane was on display again, at the Mammoth Show on Jesus Green. Organisers decided the crowds were so great that it would not be safe to attempt a flight. But what happened to the Wallbro Monoplane after that?

Aviation was dangerous and papers carried reports of disasters and accidents. It also seemed rising costs would threaten aviation meetings. Ken Wallis believes his grandfather realised there was to be no quick return from the monoplane project and ordered his sons back to the family business. The machine was apparently destroyed in its shed in a freak storm in December 1910.

In 1912, Horace Wallis married Emily Barker, a school-mistress in Cambridge. She got very annoyed when pupils left their desks to watch the 'Wallbro' being towed up to their window, wings folded, behind a Pratt's Motor Spirit van, itself pulled by a giant cart-horse!

Ken is their son. He learned to fly at Marshall's in a Gypsy Moth, gaining his licence in 1957. Later he developed a new type of autogiro in which he won numerous world records - one when flying from Wyton in 1964. He is still flying today from his home in Norfolk.

He reconstructed the 'Wallbro' using newspaper reports, to see if his father and uncle had got it right. They had: the plane took to the air in 1978. It is now at the Norfolk and Suffolk Aviation Museum, on the A14, where they will soon mark the centenary of the first plane to be built in Cambridge.

If you can add anything to the story, drop me a line to email lan Hancock, Ken's biographer at tanhancock@tinyworld.co.uk.