

St Barnabas & R

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www

Magnificent men in their flying machines



KEEN PILOT: Ken with one of his autogyros, left and inset.



By MIKE PETTY



One of the all-time greats of aviation, Wing-Commander Ken Wallis, needs your help in adding the final details 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 soap. 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. Hundreds flocked to 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 Races. It had been designed by the Wallis brothers together with C Knightley, P Booth and E Muller, all of Chesterton, in their spare

AVIATOR'S LUCKY ESCAPE.

The new "Wallbro" all-British aeroplane, built by Messrs P. V. and H. S. Wallis, of 12, St. Barnabas-road, Cambridge, which they recently exhibited at that address, met with a very remarkable mishap on Monday evening in a field near Abington during the course of a trial run. The machine was taken over to the field last week, and Messrs Wallis have since been engaged in putting the finishing touches and making a few alterations to it, having removed thither the shed in which it was constructed at St. Barnabas-road.

They took the machine out for its first run at the end of last week, but confined themselves to testing the pulling powers of the engine and tractor, and did not attempt a flight. The engine, it seems, was not running quite right. On Monday Mr. P. V. Wallis overhauled the engine, and having got it going all right, took the machine out about seven o'clock.

In the preliminary trials the other day the machine proved herself a very rapid starter, getting under way almost immediately the engine was set going, and on Monday the engine worked beautifully, and Mr. Wallis had made one successful run, traversing the ground, which is about half a mile in length, at a speed of a little over 20 miles an hour. On arriving at the end of the ground he turned the machine, and started back on the return run.

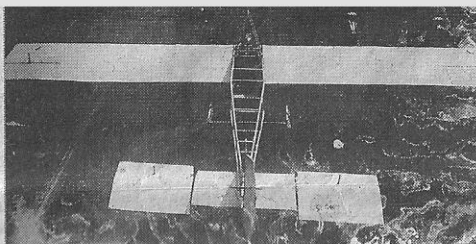
The angle of the planes had been set so as to cause the machine to skim lightly along the ground, running on the pneumatic-tired wheels, with which it is fitted, and the first part of the

BIG NEWS: The story of Percy Wallis's brush with death.

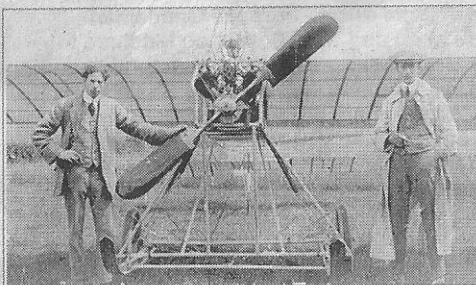
time. Can you add any details about these men?

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 cycle 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 hoped 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 a little over 20mph. Then he started back. At first the plane skimmed lightly along the ground but then rose up and sailed along at a height of three or four feet. It appeared to lift quite evenly and continued like this for several yards. Then the back was seen to lift 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



FLYING MACHINE: The 'Walbro', above and below, which was destroyed in a storm.



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 left 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.

Messrs. WALLIS BROS. Builders of the
"WALLBRO" (ALL BRITISH)

AEROPLANE

(THE FIRST ONE BUILT IN CAMBRIDGE)

Having had numerous requests from friends and the Public to see their New Monoplane, they have decided to place it

ON VIEW

To the Public on

WEDNESDAY & THURSDAY

May 16th and 17th, 1910, from 11 to 7.30 each day at

12, ST. BARNABAS' ROAD,
CAMBRIDGE (Three Minutes from Station)

The Machine will be Sealed Down and the Motor and Propeller SET RUNNING at 12 and 4 o'clock each day

All who have not seen a real full-sized Flying Machine should avail themselves of this opportunity

Admission - - **6d. each.**

TAKE A PEEK: A poster advertising the first plane to be built in Cambridge.

In 1912, Horace Wallis married Emily Barker, a school-mistress in Cambridge. She'd got very annoyed when pupils left their desks to watch the 'Wallbro' being towed past 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 1937. Later he developed a new type of autogyro in which he won numerous world records - one when flying from Wyton in 1984. 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 at Flixton, near Bungay, 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 or email Ian Hancock, Ken's biographer at ianhancock@tinyworld.co.uk

Visit Mike's website at www.cambridgeshirehistory.com/MikePetty for free advice and guidance on researching Cambrid