

The Estate - Bevendean History Project



BRIGHTON'S MIDNIGHT PLANE THRILL

EIGHT-SEATER'S FORCED LANDING ON MOULSCOMBE GREEN Pilot Loses His Way: Alarm on the Sea Front

By Unknown Reporter, 17th May 1939

MOULSOOMBE witnessed the forced landing in dramatic circumstances just before 11.30 last night of an eight seater "Air Dispatch" aeroplane, which made a wonderful descent on the green in The Avenue, after having lost the use of its wireless apparatus and run short of petrol.

The plane, piloted by Mr. J. C. Chappell, in company with a wireless operator, Mr. J. Tidbury, had taken part in anti-aircraft exercises at Doncaster, having been engaged for the evening by the Air Ministry. It then made for Croydon. The wireless became disabled, and the pilot encountered thick mist and decided to make for the coast line.

He circled low over Brighton, and people on the Front became alarmed when they saw the machine skimming dangerously near the tops of hotels. Shortly afterwards, inhabitants of the housing estate at Moulsecoomb rushed out of doors to see the plane circling below the ridges of the Downs perilously near the roofs.

Mr. Leslie Catt realizing the pilot was in difficulties, flashed his motor-cycle lamp in an effort to guide the pilot on to the green which runs from the main Lewes-road into the hilts, and other motorists did likewise.

Mr. A. C. Rawlings, Chairman of the Moulsecoomb Social Club,

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drove his car on to the green and brought his headlights into play.

"The plane was flying not ten yards above the chimney pots," said Mr. Rawlings to an "Evening Argus" man "and I could see the exhaust against the blackness of the hills. Three times it circled, obviously well under control, and then it came down, missing me by a few feet.

"The plane tore through the telephone and wireless relay wires stretching across the avenue, and came to rest on the green between the houses.

"It was amazingly clever landing and would have been perfect had it not been for one wing tip being caught in the tree near the edge of the green."

Children screamed when they heard the roar of the engine, and one woman who ran to her front door fainted when she saw what she feared would be a crash.

Mrs, Richardson, who lives opposite where the plane landed, ran out to inquire whether anybody was injured. The pilot replied. "No, thanks," and asked to be directed to the public telephone kiosk, where he 'phoned his employers to notify them of the landing.

He and his companion had an amazing escape. They were unhurt, and the only damage to the plane was a buckling of the tip of the starboard wing.

Mr. Chappell told an "Evening Argus" reporter: "We left Doncaster after cooperating in an A.R.P. exercise. The weather was good, but on the way back to Croydon our wireless set failed to operate and we lost our way. I decided to fly on, thinking that if I reached the coastline I should be able to pick up a landmark and find my way back to Croydon.

I found Brighton, but as I had never been there before I did not know the district, and all the time I was running short of petrol. I circled round and round the town and narrowly missed some of the taller buildings, especially on the Front.

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"Flying inland, I searched for a field or a park where I could bring my plane down, and eventually sighted the stretch of green where I managed to get the machine down. I was compelled to make a forced landing owing to shortage of petrol. There was nothing wrong with my engine.

"People in Brighton no doubt were alarmed when I cut my engine out and started to glide, but I only did that so that I could save petrol.

From: The Evening Argus – 17 May 1939