

## **De Havilland air crash over Wheathampstead**

We have often heard the story of how Geoffrey de Havilland and John Cunningham crashed their aircraft over Wheathampstead. Indeed it merited a display board outside The Swan public house during its recent rebuild. Details of the event are slowly drifting into the mists of history. What then is the true story? The first correction to the popular story is that the pilot was not Geoffrey de Havilland but his 29 year-old son, Geoffrey Junior.

De Havilland had developed the new Moth Minor (D.H.94) aircraft. It came just at the right time as the Civil Air Guard training scheme wanted young and old alike to learn to fly. Talk of war in 1939 had brought the realisation that we needed pilots. The D.H.94 was the ideal training aircraft.

The notorious incident took place while testing the new prototype Moth Minor G-AFRD which took off from Hatfield on Tuesday 11th April 1939. Geoffrey Jnr. was in the front seat with John Cunningham in the rear. They climbed to 8,000 feet. Spin tests were required to see how the aircraft handled. You never know when you would get in a spin but, if you did, you needed to know the aircraft would recover. Geoffrey Jnr. threw the craft deliberately into a left-hand spin. They completed eight turns and recovered the aircraft safely. They climbed again to 8,000 feet and threw the aircraft into a right-hand spin. The engine coughed and stopped – it's every pilot's nightmare when the engine goes quiet. The nose reared up and the Moth Minor went into a flat spin, fluttering down like the seed of a maple tree. A difficult situation to get out of and often fatal.

Geoffrey Jnr. spoke through the Gosport tube to tell John that he was getting no response from the controls and suggested they jump. Cunningham climbed onto one wing first and jumped while Geoffrey, close behind, did the same. They jumped successfully and both 'chutes opened.

Now pilotless, the Moth Minor pulled out of the spin; the airspeed turned the propeller and started the engine. The aircraft continued its spiral descent, circling one of the pilots and adding a new terror to the descending airman.

The aircraft crashed into a tree and iron fence with engine roaring and burst into flames. The pilots, landing half a mile apart and no worse for their ordeal, gathered up their parachutes and went to find a telephone. Farmer Mr. G. Norbury saw the crash on the nearby Gustard Wood Common from his house at Home Farm.

Before long the two pilots were joined by an investigation team from Hatfield and all adjourned to the Crooked Chimney on their way back to Hatfield for a welcome drink and dinner.

Frederick Kelvey, working at a local farm, told the Herts Advertiser "I saw the pilots bail out, then the machine continued to circle round as if it was still being piloted. The machine seemed to be circling round one of the pilots as he descended with his parachute and it was a miracle that it did not hit him. I thought it was an airman's stunt."

Modifications were hurriedly made to the aircraft. The tail-plane was raised, anti-spin strakes were fitted to the side of the fuselage and increase was made to the rudder area. Other smaller modifications were made so the aircraft could spin safely in either direction and become the ideal trainer it was intended to be.

Terry Pankhurst  
January 2016