



TASMANIAN AVIATION HISTORICAL SOCIETY Incorporated

ENTHUSIASTIC RESPONSE TO AVIATION IN LAUNCESTON

Enthusiastic Response to Aviation in Launceston

Author: Paul A.C. Richards AM, September, 2021

The Great Depression was a severe worldwide economic depression that took place mostly during the 1930s. The timing of the Great Depression varied across the world, however, in most countries, it started in 1929 and lasted until the late 1930s. It was the longest, deepest, and most widespread depression of the 20th century.

Spawned from this downturn was the enthusiasm of aviation which grew out of Launceston with returned WW1 pilots and others who embraced the advent of the flying machine.

Aviation in Australia has always been a very strong point with Tasmania. The early pioneers from Hobart and Launceston in particular led the way from humble beginnings and their participation in Squadron's of WW1 in Europe and the UK to the establishment of the Tasmanian section of the Australian Aero Club.

In 1927, a group of Launceston citizens led by former WW1 pilot's Captains V.C. Holyman and C.W.B. Martin met to investigate the formation of a branch of the Australian Aero Club in Launceston. The Australian Aero Club (Tasmanian Section) was incorporated on the 26th of September 1927 and Mr J.E. Thynne appointed as their first president.¹





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The Club made great progress and at their AGM at the Launceston Stock Exchange in December 1928.

Mr W. S. Johnstone presided over a large attendance. An apology for non-attendance was received from the club's president, Mr. J. E. Thynne and the annual report and balance sheet read:

Since the annual meeting held on March 16 last the club has made very important progress and has been in constant touch with the Department of Civil Aviation which gave us considerable help and encouragement. During the financial year just closed the membership was greatly increased. There are now 140 members comprising 116 flying members and 24 associate members. This large membership has given the club a good start financially and the funds were largely augmented by the club's share of the proceeds of the tour made by Squadron Leader Hinkler in May last. The committee was instrumental in bringing Squadron-Leader Hinkler to Tasmania and his tour, which did much to assist us in our early days by arousing interest in aviation, was organised and managed throughout Tasmania by members of the club. As there have been few expenses during the past year it has been possible to show a cash surplus of £1193 4s d. This sum will enable the club to make much more favourable commencement flying operations than would otherwise have been possible since the expenditure will naturally be heavy as soon as active flying operations begin. The club was officially notified recently that the aerodrome site is being acquired by the Federal Government, and definite advice in this connection as expected shortly. The committee has received and approved of the draft agreement between the Crown and the club relative to the aerodrome equipment and subsidies. The committee considers that early in the present financial year the club will commence flying activities. When such activities begin, members are requested to do all they can to encourage flying and to induce as many suitable persons as possible to become members and to undertake the course in flying. The primary object of the club is to train pilots and it is hoped that the club will not lag behind the clubs on the mainland in training pilots and encouraging aviation.

In that same year the Federal Government asked the Aero Club to review a suitable site for an aerodrome close to Launceston. The site selected was part of Hogarth's farm at Western Junction so named because this was the railway junction to the South (Hobart) and West to the North West towns of Devonport and Burnie.



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The Examiner reported:²

AERODROME FOR LAUNCESTON:

In the Senate yesterday Senator B. Sampson was informed by the Minister for Defence (Sir William Glasgow) that an area near Launceston had been selected as being suitable for an aerodrome, after essential surface preparation and drainage. Further investigation of alternative possible areas had been necessitated, however, by: (a) The considerable expenditure that would probably be involved in suitably preparing the selected site for use in all weathers; and (b) the fact that owners of the selected site had raised strong objections to its acquisition by the Government. At the earliest possible moment an aerodrome would be made available for the Tasmanian section of the Australian Aero Club, but no definite date could be stated yet.

However as early as 1919 the question of establishing an aerodrome at, or very close to Launceston was formally discussed at a meeting of the Marine Board on 19 Dec. It had been suggested that some of the land on the banks of the Tamar at Trevallyn might be reclaimed. Other sites were also discussed which included land at Mowbray Heights in association with the Tasmanian Turf Club having part of the racecourse be secured. It was agreed that an aerodrome was very important to Launceston and that discussions to continue with the Launceston City Council and Federal Government in securing suitable land.³

There is no doubt that the arrival of Squadron Leader Hinkler was a triumph and a major boost to the newly established Tasmanian Section of the Australian Aero Club in Launceston in 1928 when he successfully flew from Melbourne to Launceston landing on the Elphin Show ground.

The Mercury reported:⁴

In perfect weather, and in the presence of a crowd of about 10,000 persons, Squadron-Leader Hinkler kept up his reputation for punctuality, and arrived almost on time at the Elphin show ground, Launceston, at 3.16 on Saturday afternoon.

The flight from Melbourne occupied 4hrs. 16min., and was devoid of any incident. Owing to the fact that a direct course was set for Launceston, the plane was not sighted until over Low Head at 2.45 p.m.

Squadron-Leader Hinkler was accompanied by Mrs. Hinkler, and a splendid reception was accorded them by the large crowd when the plane made a perfect landing on the show ground.

Those who had expressed any doubt as to the suitability of the show ground, were surprised to notice that practically only half the available length of the oval was necessary to effect the landing. Mr. and Mrs. Hinkler were welcomed by the Governor (Sir James O'Grady), the Mayor of Launceston (Alderman H. C. Barber), and the president of the Tasmanian section of the Australian Aero Club Mr. J. E. Thyne, and were entertained to afternoon tea by



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members of the club. In the evening the visitors were entertained at a smoke social by the Launceston branch of the R.S.S.I.L.A.

The ground at Elphin had been prepared by members of the Tasmanian section of the Australian Aero Club. They had laid white calico strips in the space between the water jump, in the centre of the oval, and the fences on the railway side. A fire was prepared also, near the water jump, to act as a guide to the airman. Facing the grandstand, a barbed wire enclosure had been erected to house the plane during its stay in Launceston.

Swooping towards the ground, he circled low down, and then returned to the northern end, having taken his bearings from the marking laid down for him. Turning sharply, he dropped gently to the oval on the city side of the water jump. Just before it hit the ground the plane swerved sharply in the air, and a gasp went up as people thought it was about to alight on the tip of its starboard wing. There was no cause for alarm, however, as it was only a trick of imparting a breaking effect to the plane, and it was so effective that the machine came to rest with fully half of the length of the oval untouched. Swinging sharply to the right, Mr. Hinkler taxied to the barbed wire enclosure, and brought his plane to a stop at 3.16. The enthusiasm of the crowd knew no bounds, salvos of cheers greeted the brilliant landing, and the police had a hard task to keep the cheering crowds from damaging the plane.

Hinkler was afforded several receptions in Launceston and Hobart during his visit to Tasmania and on several occasions alluded to the viability and enthusiasm towards aviation in Tasmania but in particular Launceston.⁵

Mr. Hinkler, upon rising to respond, was accorded an ovation. He said that it was a great pleasure to make his first public appearance in Tasmania among the "diggers." They had fixed a wonderful day to cross the Strait. It was all very easy, and there had been no trouble. He thought Tasmania had a great future in aviation. They had a progressive Aero Club. Wherever he went the feeling of comradeship was the same, both on the ground and in the air. Now that they realised there was so much in common between flyers and "diggers," they should get together for the good of their country, and themselves. They had a wonderful opportunity to develop Australia by aviation. Good, easy, and speedy means of communication were offered, and the "diggers" should be the first to push it along. Australia's coastline was very lengthy, and in peace flying they would train men who would be invaluable should they be needed in defence. The Aero Clubs were carrying out work of national importance in this way.

It is of interest to note that following Hinkler's official welcome to Launceston and dispersal of the crowd at the show grounds that the President and members of the Aero Club returned to Elphin, and the plane was removed from the barbed wire enclosure and housed in the Industrial Hall. During the removal operations Hinkler gave implicit instructions in the careful handling of his famous plane to the helpers as the wings of the small Avro-Avian were to be



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folded back, so it could be wheeled into the improvised hangar. The Industrial Hall was then securely locked, and the key handed to the airman.

The visit by Hinkler coincided with the early establishment of Tasmanian aviation as they now had an Aero Club but no aerodrome or aircraft! One of the first projects was to lobby the Federal Government to establish an aerodrome near Launceston. The airport site was chosen and purchased by the Defence Department in 1928.

By May 1929 advice had been received by the Tasmanian section of The Australian Aero Club that ministerial consent had been given to the acquisition of a property near Western Junction, about twelve miles from Launceston, for the purposes of an aerodrome. It is expected that active flying conditions will prevail about the end of August, for three de Havilland Moth planes are in Melbourne awaiting delivery to the Club.⁶

The site selected proved to be a good one as the old Western Junction Aerodrome still forms the southern end of the Launceston Airport. The year 1930 proved to be busy with construction of a hangar, a club house, the beginning of flying training, appointment of an engineer and assembly of the first Gypsy Moth VH-ULM.

The Australian Aero Club (Tasmanian Section) played a major role in the selection of the site of Western Junction Aerodrome, now Launceston Airport. The first two buildings on the aerodrome were the aero club hangar and club house, and the first aircraft to fly from the aerodrome were the two club Gypsy Moths VH-ULM and VH-ULN.

The Tasmanian Aero Club have now occupied a site at the Launceston Airport for over ninety years. January 16th 1931 was a significant date of the Western Junction Aerodrome with the arrival of the first commercial airliner from Melbourne. On February 28th 1931, 15,000 people turned out to see Tasmania's first Air Pageant and official opening of the aerodrome. It is reported that the traffic builds up created Tasmania's first ever traffic jam! The crowd were treated to a display which included RAAF Westland Wapiti, Bristol Bulldog, club and visiting Gypsy Moths, and Smithy's Avro X.

The Club House was opened by Air Commodore Richard Williams, later to become Air Vice Marshall Sir Richard Williams.

By 1931, in the midst of the great depression there was unbounded enthusiasm for aviation in Tasmania. Rare as it may seem the enthusiasm translated into financial support for landing grounds and flying facilities. Of interest Flying-officer Harold Owen, of the Shell company, who had returned to Melbourne by the Loongana from a month's air tour of Tasmanian country centres said at Wynyard where he gave an address on the need for landing ground facilities. A public meeting to consider the question was called within 24 hours of the address; and £50 was raised by subscription in the single evening towards the preparation of a new ground.

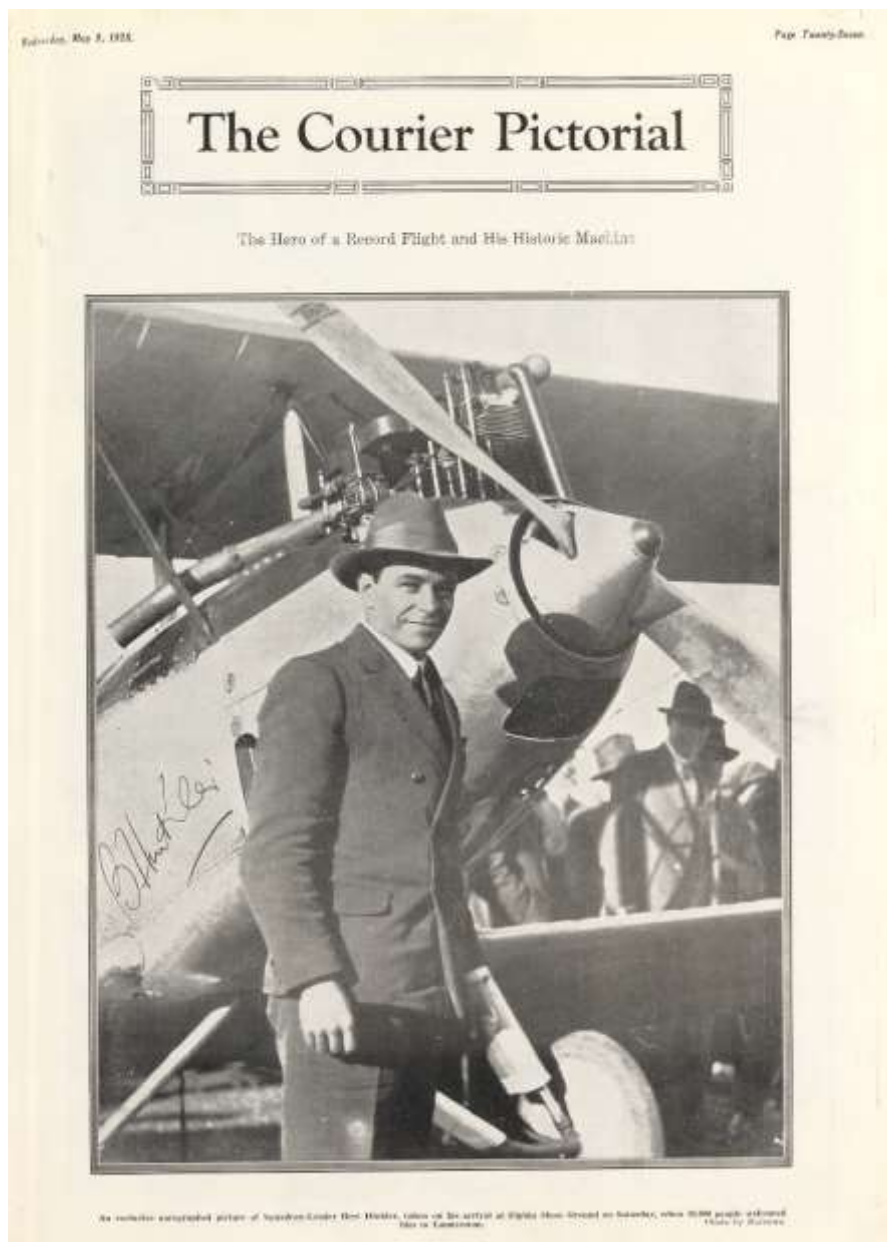


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At Hobart an active flying school was in operation under the well-known Victorian instructor, Captain J. Francis. Fifteen pupils were on the instruction list, and as many as eight had already secured their "B" (commercial) ticket. Considering that flying instruction at Hobart only began at the end 1930, and that the club was operating on a single machine, this number was considered a record. Likewise Wynyard and Burnie had between them 12 pupils awaiting facilities for instruction, and several other centres had expressed the hope that the club instructor will hold an instructional class during, the spring." Flying-officer Owen flew the company's Gipsy Moth machine, the "Golden Shell," throughout his tour of Tasmania.⁷

Bert Hinkler Photographs – Courtesy of "The Weekly Courier"





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Weekly Courier

Wednesday, May 3, 1921

Australia's Air Wizard Flies to Launceston Across the Strait.



Squadron Leader Hinkler and Mrs. Hinkler arriving at Eltham Show Ground on Saturday, after flying from Melbourne in a perfectly straight course. Mrs. Hinkler is here seen waving a greeting to the ground.



Squadron Leader Hinkler and Mrs. Hinkler, with the Governor (Sir James O'Grady), the Mayor and Mayoress (Alderman and Mrs. Barber), and the President of the Australian Aero Club, Tasmanian Section (Mr. J. E. Thorne).



Hinkler and his wife chatting with members of the Aero Club after their official welcome. Mrs. Hinkler was presented with a bouquet of flowers by Mrs. J. E. Thorne. Photo by Hinkler.



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Wednesday, May 5, 1926.

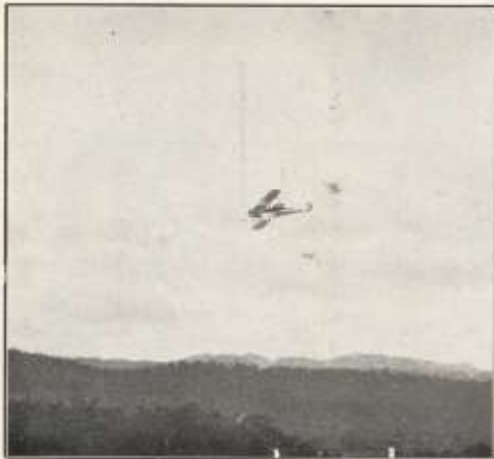
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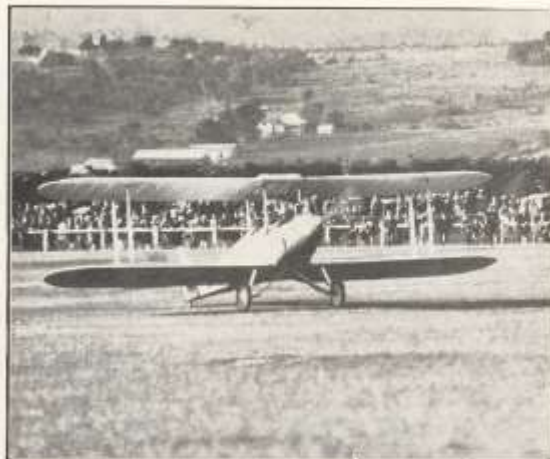
Launceston's Great Ovation for the Intrepid Airman



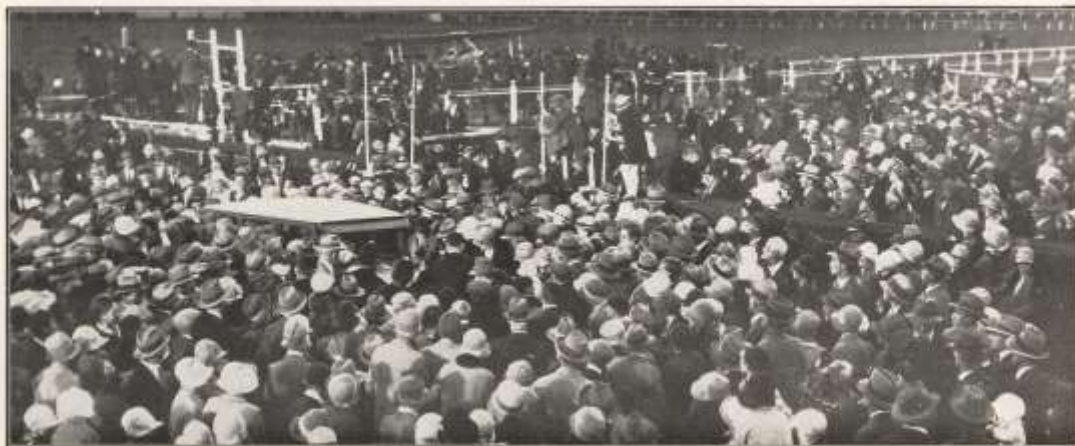
Squadron-Leader Hinkler and his wife passing through the huge crowd of people who were at Elphinstone to welcome them in true Tasmanian fashion. They are accompanied by officials of the Aero Club.



A view of the new world famous little Ayre Circus as the pilot prepared to land at Elphinstone on Saturday.



Hinkler landing on the Elphinstone Ground. It will be seen from the propeller that the plane is still moving.



It was with difficulty that Hinkler's car was able to move through the dense crowd which was eager to see him and pay him tribute. Photos by Thomson.



Civic Reception to Distinguished Aeronauts in Launceston



Squadron-Leader Bert Hinkley with the Mayor and Mayress, Captain Lancaster and Mrs. Keith Miller at the civic reception in Launceston on Monday.



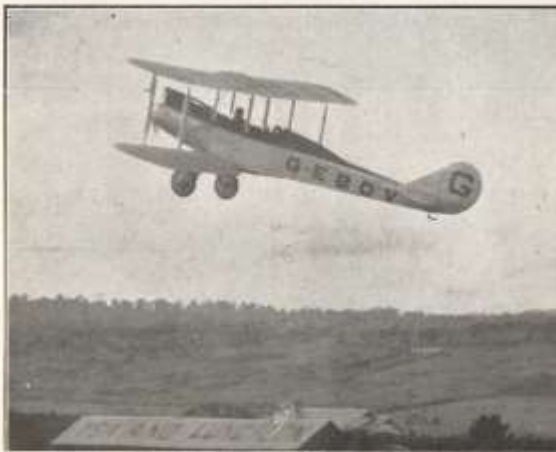
His Worship the Mayor officially welcoming Squadron-Leader Hinkley in the Town Hall.



Hinkley chatting with the Secretary of the Australian Aero Club (Tasmanian Section), Mr. Eric Tafari, just before his departure on Monday. Mrs. Hinkley is already in the machine.



Hinkley arriving at the Town Hall on Monday for the civic reception. A large crowd gathered outside the Town Hall to greet the famous aviator on his arrival.



Hinkley soaring above the Show Ground at Elphin on Monday when he left for Hobart.

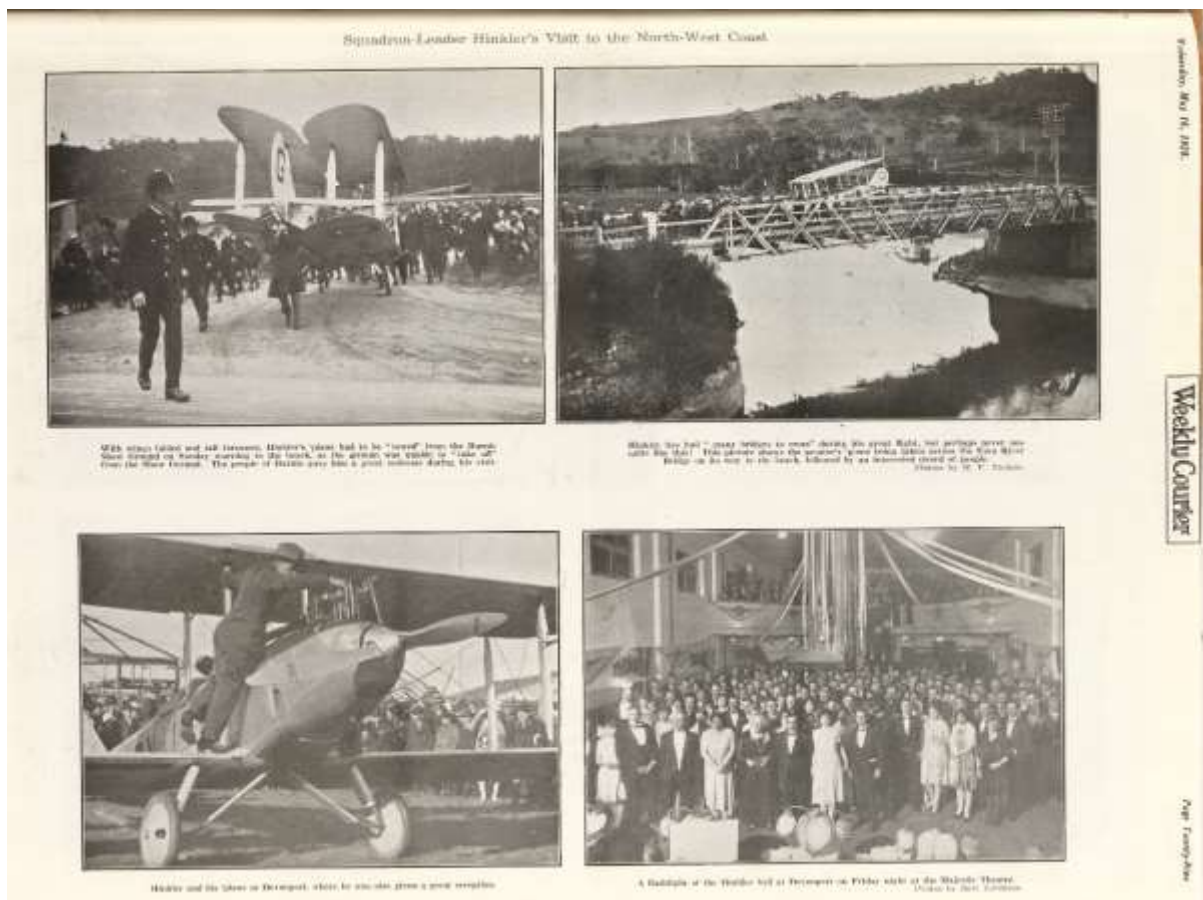


People at the Show Ground watching the famous aviator "log off" in Hobart. Photo by Barron.



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¹ <https://www.tasaeroclub.com.au/about>

² Examiner (Launceston, Tas. : 1900 - 1954), Thursday 14 February 1929, p. 8

³ Daily Telegraph (Launceston, Tas. : 1883 - 1928) Sat 20 Dec 1919 p. 6

⁴ Mercury (Hobart, Tas. : 1860 - 1954), Monday 7 May 1928, p. 9

⁵ *Ibid*

⁶ Age (Melbourne, Vic. : 1854 - 1954), Tuesday 21 May 1929, p. 8

⁷ South Eastern Times (Millicent, SA : 1906 - 1954), Tuesday 21 July 1931, p. 4