



FIRST WOMEN PILOTS

First Women Pilots

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

The first woman to ever own an aeroplane was Assheton Hardbord, the most intrepid woman balloonist in England. The plane was built for her in Paris, and she took possession of it in early 1909. She was a member of the British Aero Club from its early beginnings, achieving many first in ballooning crossing the English Channel to France twice in one week in 35 minutes. She was the daughter of surgeon general in the British Army and daughter in law to Lord Suffield one of King Edwards intimate acquaintances. Her husband was a member of the London Stock Exchange. She inherited a small fortune from her first husband a Melbourne Merchant in Australia and so had plenty of money to indulge herself in aviation.¹

Anne Lewis

Anne Lewis was the first female pilot to obtain her commercial licence in WA and first to fly for the Australian Aerial Medical Service, later to become the RFDS.



*Pilot Anne Lewis, second from the right, with fellow aero club pilots in the 1950s.
(Supplied: Anne Lewis)²*

Ms Lewis was a trailblazer in aviation, serving as the first female pilot in the Royal Flying Doctor Service (RFDS) and the first woman to hold a commercial pilot licence in Western Australia.



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Anne Lewis bought a Tiger Moth in 1947 (Supplied: Anne Lewis)²

Ms Lewis joined the Women's Royal Australian Air Force (WRAAF) in 1944 at the age of 18 and spent two years as an aircraft electrician, which commenced her remarkable career in aviation. Today in her mid-90s she lives on the North West Coast of Tasmania. After being discharged from the WRAAF she got her private pilot's licence in WA, and got her flying hours up in a Tiger Moth while studying in Melbourne.





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Pat Norton and Nan Watts

In 1947 two young women flew across Bass Strait in a Moth Minor which one of them owned. They were Miss Pat Norton, former Australian Olympic swimmer, and Miss Nan Watts, of Hobart. It was the first time two women have made a flight of this nature across the Strait. They took off from Cambridge aerodrome at 9 am and after stopping for fuel at Flinders Island, arrived at Yarrum (Vic.) about 4 pm, where they stayed overnight. The flight was uneventful.

Miss Watts piloted the machine to Flinders Island and Miss Norton, who purchased the Moth about a year ago, took the controls for the remainder of the flight. They proceeded to Essendon and after a short stay in Melbourne flew to Adelaide, and then on to Mildura, where Miss Norton intended to take up swimming coaching.

Both held pilot's licence and had completed an advanced flying and navigation course with the Aero Club of Southern Tasmania, which they are members.³

Francis Jackson

Among the pioneering women being included on the 2019 Tasmanian Honour Roll of Women is one of Tasmania's first female pilots, the late Frances Jackson, who took to the skies in the 1930s.

Frances Jackson, (née Hyatt) is credited with being the first Tasmanian woman pilot.

Born in 1908, as a teenager, Frances Hyatt lived with her family at Dunalley (Tas) and used to ride a horse along the coast to get the closest possible views of post WWI seaplanes exercising over Norfolk and Frederick Henry Bays. She thought it would be tremendous to learn to fly.

In 1930 she married Mr Jackson and was living at Murdunna (Tas). The same year she was accepted as a student by the Goulburn Aero Club in New South Wales. (The Goulburn Aero Club had the distinction of being the first country aero club established in New South Wales in 1927).

Here Frances was flying solo after only eight instructional flights and graduated top of the nine women on the course. She gained her private pilot's licence on 22nd of December 1930 aged 22, the first Tasmanian woman to do so.

Mrs Jackson entered the Goulburn Aero Club's £1,000 competition for the first woman to fly solo around Australia. While she did not win, she was soon to be the first woman trained at the Goulburn Aero Club to fly from Goulburn to Mascot in Sydney.

One of the other girls who graduated at the same time was 18-year-old Miss Rebe Griffiths, who went on to be the first Victorian and 3rd and youngest Australian to gain her commercial B class licence in 1931.



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DAREDEVIL: Frances Jackson, originally from Tasmania, was 28 years old when she travelled to Goulburn to obtain her pilot's licence. All photos supplied.

Frances Jackson was a thrill-seeking pilot who joined the wave of emancipated women across the country during the 1930s. Between 1931 and 1938 Mrs Jackson participated in air pageants, aerobatics and races in Tasmania, Victoria and New South Wales. It was reported that at one stage she flew a Gypsy Moth VH-ULM under a bridge and had her licence suspended.

Frances was apparently popular with Tasmanian crowds with one newspaper reporting in 1932, "Mrs Jackson, five feet nothing of Australian womanhood, thrilled the crowds, tossing her machine around with fearless skill". She gave up flying at the peak of her career in 1938 following the death of her husband. She later remarried Mr Nicholls and was living in Nubeena (Tas) in the 1970s.⁴

Her aviation exploits were brought to light after the retrieval of a milk jug and sugar bowl in the Goulburn Post, 3 August 2017. The seemingly mundane objects, a vast contrast to the adventurous tale of Mrs Jackson herself, needed a home. Foster daughter Linda, now based in Melbourne, did not know where to take these historic ceramic items but wanted a space for them to be displayed.



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Rocky Hill Museum officer Claire Baddeley received an unexpected inquiry, with an offer of the prized objects as a donation to the facility. They were accepted, providing an insight into the stunt flyer's life.



The milk jug and sugar bowl, currently on display in the Rocky Hill War Memorial Museum and donated by Frances Jackson's foster daughter

Ms Baddeley met a very excited Linda in Melbourne recently to collect the objects and said the story of Mrs Jackson has highlighted the life of a Goulburn aviatrix.

“The donated items provide an important and tangible link between the early history of the Goulburn Aero Club, the Rocky Hill Memorial and Frances Jackson, the famous but little-known Tasmanian aviatrix, who flew in air races in Goulburn during the 1930s,” she said.⁵

Ms Baddeley said the items might have been awarded to pilots who participated in the Goulburn air race in 1931, but was unsure. “From the 1920s, after the First World War, and during the 1930s, women had a new found freedom,” she said. “Flying came along at the time and women were taking to the skies essentially because they could.” The items are now on display at the Rocky Hill War Memorial Museum, which is open to the public.

Air Transport Auxiliary

Recognition of early women pilots, especially those from Tasmania remind me of the WW11 Air Transport Auxiliary (ATA) female pilots – the women who flew Spitfires and many other types of planes from factories to RAF squadrons during World War II.

In January 1940, eight female pilots ferried open-cockpit training planes (De Havilland Tiger Moths) in harsh wintry conditions from a muddy base at Hatfield, near the De Havilland



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factory, up to Scotland. It was a modest start, but within a few years this group of female flyers would be at the controls of fighter planes and four-engine bombers. In time their numbers would swell to 168 out of a total of 1,245 ATA ferry pilots and engineers. In a sense, it was a backroom job, flying across the country, getting the planes to where they desperately needed to be. But without the combined efforts of the ATA's 4,000 employees, the outcome of the war could have been very different.⁶

They had no notion of what they would be flying. In later years at interview an elderly veteran remarked: 'You'd get out of a Tiger Moth after delivery and then into a Wellington bomber. After that, you could be flying a Spitfire.'



The First Women Pilots of the ATA



Women have played a major role in Aviation since the Wright Brothers first took flight On 17 December 1903. That flight lasted 12 seconds making history and just look at where we are today in 2021.



TASMANIAN AVIATION HISTORICAL SOCIETY Incorporated

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¹ Morning Bulletin (Rockhampton, Qld. : 1878 - 1954), Saturday 13 February 1909, p. 7

² <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-08-18/anne-lewis-first-female-pilot-with-royal-flying-doctor-service/100380712>

³ Mercury (Hobart, Tas. : 1860 - 1954), Saturday 20 September 1947, p. 2

⁴ <https://kiosk.pioneerwomen.com.au/herstory2017/woman/jackson-frances>

⁵ <https://www.goulburnpost.com.au/story/4829001/pilots-story-takes-flight/> (3 August 2017)

⁶ <https://www.thehistorypress.co.uk/articles/doing-their-bit-the-female-fighter-pilots-of-world-war-ii/>