



TASMANIAN AVIATION HISTORICAL SOCIETY Incorporated

MATTHEWS AVIATION BASS STRAIT SERVICE TO TASMANIA

Matthews Aviation Bass Strait Service to Tasmania

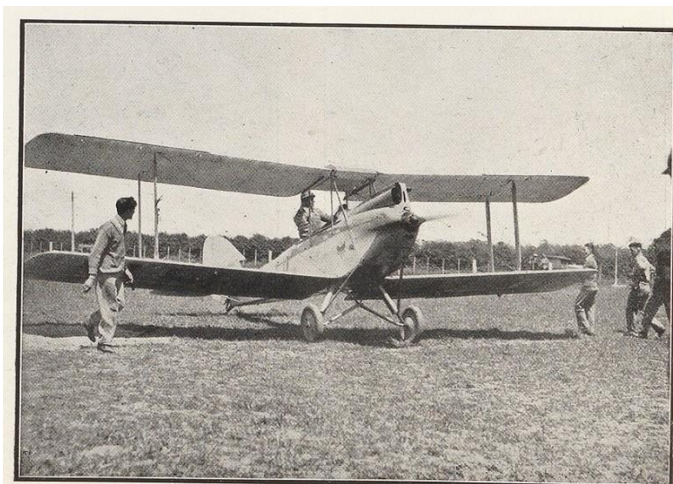
Author: L Millar & C Byrne, December 2021

Following the formation of the Australian Aero Club, Tasmanian Section, in September 1927, the Department of Defence purchased land at Western Junction, south of Launceston and by October of 1930 had completed construction of Tasmania's first aerodrome.

The Commonwealth then built a hangar and provided two De Havilland Gypsy Moths, VH-ULM and VH-ULN for the Club at peppercorn rental. The Club contracted Matthews Aviation from Melbourne to provide staff to allow training of pilots to begin.

The Aero Club also built a clubhouse which was ready for use in December 1930.

Three staff from Matthews Aviation were employed, Captain Joe Francis as Chief Flying Instructor, Lawrence Johnson as Instructor and Manager, and Jack Stubbs as Engineer.



Captain J. Francis takes the 'plane on its first flight.
[Photos by S. Martin]

On the 23rd of November 1930, Chief Flying Instructor Joe Francis piloted VH-ULM to make the first flight from the new aerodrome.

(This aircraft now owned by a Brisbane Neurosurgeon, was restored in 2012 and is still flying in original Club Colours).

The Aerodrome and Clubhouse were officially opened at Tasmania's first Air Pageant on the 28th of February 1931.

Lawrence Johnson would purchase the Desoutter monoplane *Miss Flinders* and start his own commercial service to Flinders Island in March 1932, and Jack Stubs would go on to be the chief engineer at Australian National Airways.

As well as being at the start of pilot training in Tasmania, Matthews Aviation also conducted one of the pioneering services across Bass Strait. This is the story of this service.



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Captain George Matthews

George Campbell Matthews was born on 6th July 1883 at Stranraer in Scotland.



At the outbreak of the First World War, he enlisted in the AIF in South Australia, stating that his occupation was a merchant navy navigation officer.

He served as a Sergeant with the 9th Light Horse at Gallipoli and then as a Lieutenant in France before transferring to the Australian Flying Corp in February 1917. He was promoted to Captain in October 1917 and remained in the AFC till August 1920.

George Matthews competed in the 1919 England to Australia Air Race, which had a £10,000 prize for the first plane to fly the route. (This is about \$800,000 today). The race was won by Ross and Keith Smith in their Vickers Vimy WWI bomber.

Matthews and mechanic Thomas Kay left England on the 21st of October 1919 in a Sopwith Wallaby, G-AUKS. This two-seater biplane powered by a water-cooled Rolls-Royce V8 engine was specially built for the race, with only one plane produced. The Wallaby had both the power and speed to be a potential winner, but luck was not with them. To qualify the trip had to be made in under 30 days.





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Matthews and Kay experienced many mishaps, weather delays and they were even arrested and imprisoned as potential spies in Yugoslavia, before finally crashing heavily in Bali on the 17th of April 1920. The plane was too badly damaged for it to be repaired.

Matthews shipped the damaged plane back to Australia and it was rebuilt as an 8-seater plane, re-registered as G-AUDU, it flew until 1928 when it crashed and was struck off the aircraft register.

On 28 Feb 1923 George Matthews received commercial pilot licence No 5 and then became a pilot for the newly formed QANTAS during 1923 – 1924. He was then involved with the Australian Aerial Mail Services, which had the contract to operate airmail services between Sydney and Adelaide, using G-AUDU.

He then formed Matthews Aviation in late 1928 and established the first service between Melbourne and Philip Island in December 1929. They built a hangar at Essendon aerodrome.

During WW2 George Matthews enlisted in the Citizen Air Force in December 1939 as a Flight Lieutenant, rising to the rank of Wing Commander at the end of the war.

George Matthews died on 27 January 1958, aged 74.

Matthews Aviation Victoria - Tasmanian Service

He established Matthews Aviation at Essendon Aerodrome in Melbourne with the aim to establish a regular commercial airline service between Victoria and Tasmania using amphibian planes, (which could land on the water or on land).

He first purchased the amphibian Saro Cutty Sark VH-UNV which arrived in March 1930. This twin-engine amphibian, with a metal hull and wooden wings. It had 4 seats, carrying 3 passengers and a pilot. 12 of these planes were produced.

Then in December 1931, he purchased the bigger Saro Windhover, VH-UPB, which had a longer range. This three-engine amphibian carried a pilot and 5 passengers. Only 2 of these aircraft were produced, this one being the first.



Cutty Sark VH-UNV



Windhover VH-UPB



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On 18 December 1930, the Cutty Sark completed its first trip from Melbourne to Western Junction. This was just after Matthews Aviation had commenced operation for the Aero Club at the new Western junction Aerodrome. Captain Matthews used the visit to promote the possibilities of a new regular services between the Victoria and Tasmania.

After undertaking some flights across Bass Strait in 1931 and 1932, it wasn't until early 1933, with the opening of the King Island Aerodrome, that Matthews Aviation starting a regular service with the Windhover between Launceston and Essendon via King Island, and occasionally stopping also at Smithton. Initially it was a weekly service, but in April 1933, it changed to twice weekly. A small mail subsidy helped maintain the service.

The Cutty Sark was used for charter flights and joy flight on the mainland, but it did venture to King and Flinders Islands, as well as Launceston occasionally.

In September 1933, Tasmanian Aerial Services, the company formed by Lawrence Johnson, Victor and Ivan Holyman, with *Miss Flinders* and *Miss Currie*, purchased the DH.84 Dragon *Miss Launceston*. With this bigger plane which could carry six passengers, they initiated their Western Junction to Essendon service. This was in direct competition to the Matthews Windhover service.

Later in 1933, the Commonwealth Government called for tenders for the subsidised air mail service throughout Australia, including between Victoria and Tasmania.

The tenders which were accepted to be considered in February 1934 were for six services per week to be operated by multi-engined aircraft. The tender submitted by Matthews Aviation to operate the service for 5 years was £113,958, (about \$11.5M today), while the Tasmanian Aerial Services tender was £60,996, (about \$6.2M today). These tenders reflected the costs Matthews Aviation would have in establishing a service with new aircraft and facilities, whereas Tasmanian Aerial Services already had one plane it could use to support the service.

Presumably Matthews saw the inevitable outcome and that they could not compete with Tasmanian Aerial Services with the Holyman financial backing. Thus they ceased their Launceston to Essendon service with the Windhover in late February 1934 after the tenders were submitted. They had operated the service for just over a year, with Norman M. Chapman being the first pilot to complete more than 100 crossings of Bass Strait in the Windhover.



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The *Examiner* newspaper in Launceston published this article on 02 March 1934:¹

Windhover Ceases Run Sterling Service

By Avian

News has been received in Launceston that the weekly aerial service between Melbourne, King Island, and Launceston conducted by, the Matthews Aviation Company, of the Essendon Aerodrome, Melbourne, has ceased.

So is written this to one of the pluckiest fights with the elements of Bass Strait ever made by an aerial firm. At the outset it was realised by the company that it would be difficult to make a profit with the particular machine, but with the intention of gaining experience to enable a tender to be submitted for the Bass Strait subsidised air service the company went ahead with fortitude and made plans for the weekly service which originally was carried out between Melbourne, King Island, Smithton, and Hobart. Later, however Launceston became the Tasmanian terminus of the company. Smithton being only a port of call when there were passengers to be picked up or set down.

Capt. F. Neale was the first pilot on the run when it commenced in November 1932, but just before the company commenced calling at Launceston Mr. Norman M. Chapman, master-mariner-airman, took over the piloting of the amphibian. At the outset there were technical details to be contended with, but with determination the company looked into each and every matter so thoroughly that within a few months they were running a service that was remarkable for the accuracy with which it kept to schedule. Mr. Chapman up to the present has only missed reaching Tasmania on one occasion, and even then he set out in face of appalling flying conditions that had already turned two machines back to Melbourne on the previous day, and reached King Island. The Windhover is acknowledged to be a difficult machine to fly, and Mr. Chapman earned the admiration of all for his skilful piloting of the craft.

Tenders for the Bass Strait air service closed on Wednesday, and to this fact may be attributed the Windhover's withdrawal from the Strait air service, the company having no further need for experiment so far as Bass Strait is concerned. At present, it is understood, the Windhover is undergoing an overhaul at Essendon.

Holyman's Airways (as Tasmanian Aerial Services was now named) were successful with their tender and an agreement signed in September 1934 where Holyman's Airways would purchase new DH86 aircraft and operate the service.

By the end of 1934, Matthews Aviation had ceased operating services to the Furneaux islands, but still operated charter flights.



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Captain Matthews still had plans to bring back the Melbourne – King Island – Smithton – Launceston service with the Windhover. During a visit to Launceston in January 1935, he was promoting the new service.²

In December 1935, court documents published in the newspapers reported that Matthews Aviation sought to reduce its capital due to “considerable trading losses Incurred in pioneering air services to Tasmania and general aviation, without Government subsidy, and also to losses incurred by the depression”.³

In May 1936 the Windhover was on a charter flight from Essendon to King Island and having been delayed, it was dark when the plane arrived over King Island. Not being able to find the aerodrome, the plane landed in the sea near the Currie lighthouse. While anchored, the plane was hit by a large wave which damaged the wing and the plane was blown onto the rocks and severely damaged. Although the plane was salvaged, it was never repaired.

With the loss of the Windhover, any hope of maintaining the Tasmanian service were dashed and the Cutty Sark was sold.

The company ceased operation sometime after this.

¹ Examiner (Launceston, Tas. : 1900 - 1954) Fri 2 Mar 1934 Page 5

² Examiner (Launceston, Tas. : 1900 - 1954) Sat 19 Jan 1935 Page 6

³ The Age (Melbourne, Vic. : 1854 - 1954) Fri 20 Dec 1935 Page 14

Further Reading

Sopwith Wallaby and the 1919 Air race: <https://aeropedia.com.au/content/sopwith-wallaby/>