



### Tasmanian Aero Club – Part 1– The Early Years 1927 – 1939

*Author: W. Dearing, August 2022*

Over the next issues of our newsletter, we will present a history of the Tasmanian Aero Club and the role played by the club in the development of aviation in Australia. The club, now 95 years old, is one of the oldest continually operating flying organisations in Australia with probably only Qantas and the RAAF having a longer history. So, onto the club's story.

Early 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. Mr J.E. Thyne was the first president. The committee comprised of Messrs J E Thyne, E S Headlam, E J Tabart, V C Holyman, J A S Boag, C W B Martin and A R Brown. Tasmania now had an Aero Club but no airstrip or aircraft!



***File photo of the first committee of the Australian Aero Club (Tasmanian Division)***

One of the club's first projects was to lobby the Federal Government to establish an aerodrome near Launceston. Captains Holyman and Martin were appointed to undertake this



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### TASMANIAN AERO CLUB – PART 1– THE EARLY YEARS 1927 – 1939

task and as a result of their work the aero club was appointed as the authority on aviation matters in the state and was requested to survey an area near Launceston for a potential airstrip that would be inspected by the Department of Defence. One of the sites selected was on the Hogarth property near Western Junction. The airport site was chosen and purchased by the Defence Department in 1928 and work to prepare the airstrip began in 1929.

The site selected proved to be a good one as the old Western Junction Aerodrome still forms the southern end of the Launceston Airport. On the 5<sup>th</sup> May 1928 the Club sponsored a visit by Australian aviator Bert Hinkler, who made the first solo flight from England to Australia, to Launceston. Hinkler accompanied by his wife landed at Elphin showground. The visit was used by the Club to raise funds. A charge of one shilling (10c) for adults, and sixpence (5c) for children raised much-needed funds and the visit created a huge interest among the citizens of Launceston. A scale model of Hinkler's Avro Avion aircraft that undertook that flight still hangs in the club rooms of the club



***File photo of Bert Hinkler and his Avro Avion aircraft***

In 1929 work progressed on the construction of the Aerodrome. 1930 was a busy year for the Aero Club with arrangements made for the construction of a hangar and clubhouse, the lease of two aircraft, and the provision of an instructor and engineer. In July 1930 the Department



## TASMANIAN AVIATION HISTORICAL SOCIETY Incorporated

### TASMANIAN AERO CLUB – PART 1– THE EARLY YEARS 1927 – 1939

of Defence called tenders for the construction of a hangar for the Club. The tender was won by W.H. Cox of Launceston, the cost being 698 pounds 15 shillings (approx. \$1400.00).

The hangar was completed in October 1930. The Club leased land (where the control tower now stands) and built a clubhouse at its own expense. This was completed in December 1930 at a cost of approximately 750 pounds (\$1500). In September/October 1930 the Club negotiated the lease of two Gypsy Moth aircraft from the Department of Defence at 'Peppercorn' rental. i.e. 'The payment of one peppercorn per annum on demand'. The Western Junction aerodrome was ready for use in October 1930.



*File photo of the original clubhouse and members during the 1931 air pageant*

On November 2<sup>nd</sup> 1930 Mathews Aviation of Melbourne were appointed to supply an instructor and engineer. The Chief Instructor was Mr. Joe Francis, Instructor Laurie Johnson and the engineer was Mr. Jack Stubbs.

The two aircraft arrived in Launceston by ship in November 1930. The first aircraft DH60 Gypsy Moth VH-ULM was the first to fly from Western Junction on November 23<sup>rd</sup>, followed by the second VH-ULN on November 29<sup>th</sup>. After three busy years the Club was finally airborne with flying training starting in November 1930. It became very obvious the Australian Aero





## TASMANIAN AVIATION HISTORICAL SOCIETY Incorporated

### TASMANIAN AERO CLUB – PART 1– THE EARLY YEARS 1927 – 1939

Club (Tasmanian Section) played a major role in the establishment of commercial and private aviation Tasmania and 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 clubhouse, and the first aircraft to fly from the aerodrome were the club's two Gypsy Moths, VH-ULM/ULN. The Tasmanian Aero Club has now occupied a position on Launceston Airport for over ninety years.



*File photo of the club's first aircraft VH-ULM*

The period from 1925 to 1936 was one of a great many pioneering flights and record attempts. Aircraft, and in particular engines were becoming more reliable and the probability of completing long distance flights was improving year by year. Names like Smithy, Ulm, Hinkler, our own Harold Gatty, Affleck, Mollison, Johnson, Earhart, Batten, Lindbergh, and many more became household names in Australia. It is not surprising that the arrival of the Aero Club aircraft on the Western Junction Aerodrome created a large interest in aviation.

Once the club commenced operations, many locals took advantage of the opportunity to learn to fly. Planning also began for Tasmania's first Air Pageant to celebrate the official opening of the aerodrome. In 1931 Dr John Ramsey of Launceston replaced Mr. Thyne as President.

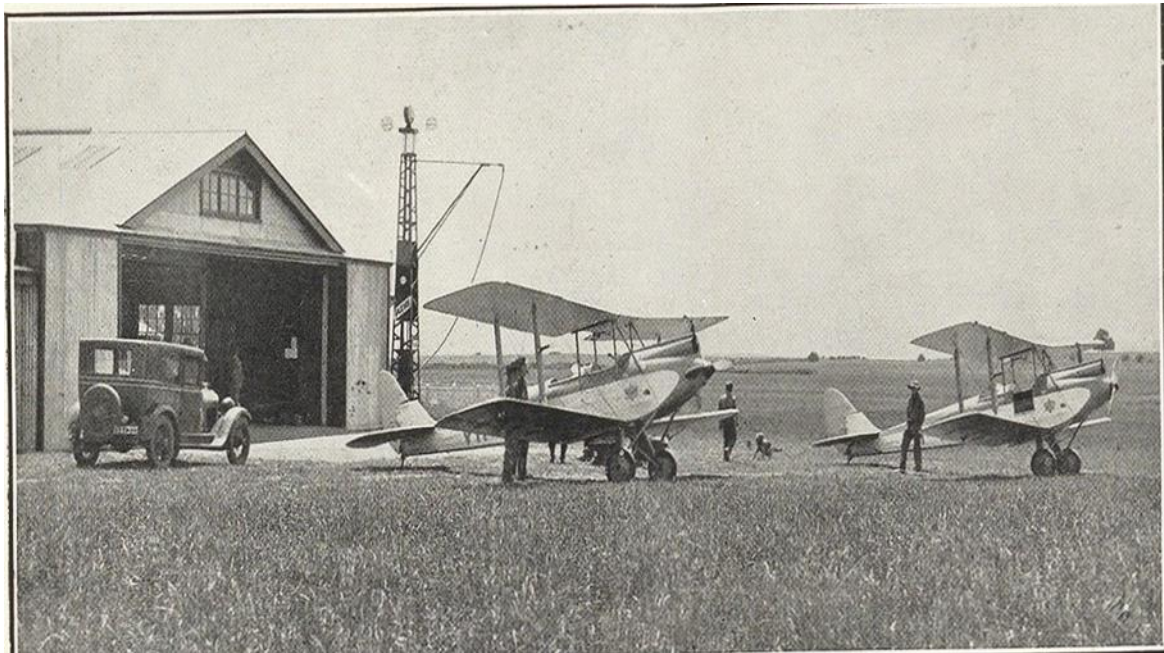


## TASMANIAN AVIATION HISTORICAL SOCIETY Incorporated

### TASMANIAN AERO CLUB – PART 1– THE EARLY YEARS 1927 – 1939

On February 28<sup>th</sup> 1931 15,000 people turned out to see Tasmania's first Air Pageant. It is reported that the traffic built up created Tasmania's first traffic jam. The crowd was treated to a display that included Westland Wapiti, Bristol Bulldog, Club and visiting Gypsy Moths, and Smithy's Avro X. The Aerodrome was opened by the controller of civil aviation in Australia Col. H.C. Brinsmead, and the Clubhouse by Air Commodore Richard Williams, later to become Air Vice Marshall Sir R. Williams. In his opening speech, Air Commodore Williams congratulated the Club on its efforts to establish the Aerodrome and to build a Clubhouse at its own expense.

The first Air Pageant was not without a tragic accident when a Gypsy Moth VH-UNL piloted by L. Johnson, spun into an oat paddock opposite where the Clubhouse now stands, killing the lady passenger in the front cockpit.



*File Photo of the Club's First Aircraft VH-ULM and VH-ULN*

For the Australian Aero Club (Tasmanian Section) the early 30s saw a rapid expansion in flying activities. After the opening of Western Junction in March 1931 the club moved quickly to establish a branch in the Hobart area. A lease was obtained on the infield of the Brighton Racecourse and an aerodrome established. An instructor was appointed and flying training commenced in April 1931. Flying training was now available in both the North and South of the state.

The membership in the south increased rapidly and before the end of 1931 southern members were attempting to form their own club. Perhaps they never got over the fact that the Australian Aero Club (Tasmanian Section) was formed in Launceston and not in the capital city Hobart.



## TASMANIAN AVIATION HISTORICAL SOCIETY Incorporated

### TASMANIAN AERO CLUB – PART 1– THE EARLY YEARS 1927 – 1939

Not surprisingly the civil aviation authorities rejected the application as they felt that the development of aviation in Tasmania would be best served by having only one club to service the entire state.

As flying training and private flying increased the need arose for a third aero club aircraft. Once again, a 'peppercorn' lease was arranged with the defence department for the supply of a DH60 Cirrus Moth. RAAF Cirrus Moth A7-13 formerly in seaplane configuration was converted back to wheels and became VH-UAU. In September 1932 VH-UAU was shipped to Launceston by boat. The first entry in the logbook read: Kings Wharf to Western Junction, 15 minutes, pilot V.C. Holyman. The aircraft was unloaded, wheeled to the paddock behind the Wharf, unfolded, fuelled, checked, and flown out. Try that today and see what happens.

Club records show that from November 1930 to December 1931, club aircraft flew 850 hours and trained 13 pilots to 'A' license. The 'A' license was the equivalent of a private license, and the 'B' license was the equivalent to a commercial. Seems back to front, but that's the way it was. As a comparison, in 1931 the Royal Aero Club of NSW trained 26 pilots and the Royal Aero Club of WA trained 12 'A' license pilots and 1 'B' license pilot. Between 1930 and 1939 the Club operated six DH-60 Moths. One VH-UAU was powered with a Cirrus 2 engine and had a wood framed fuselage. The remaining 5 were all DH-60M Gypsy Moths using the DH Gypsy 1 or 2 engines. They were registered as VH-ULM, ULN, UVO, UMD, and UNQ.

The original DH-60 proved to be a success for De Havilland. They were an ideal training aeroplane and also popular with private owners. The 80HP Cirrus 2 Moth in 1927 cost 730 pounds Sterling (\$1600), and cruised at about 70-80 MPH. It became one of the most popular light aircraft in the world for the next fifteen years. As a tail dragger with no brakes, it was a handful to fly in windy conditions and club records of this time reflect this problem with many minor accidents involving bent undercarriage, wing tips, and propellers. In this period the club at all times employed an engineer who would have been kept busy mending broken aeroplanes.

The early 1930s were the formative years for aviation in Tasmania. Australia was just beginning to recover from the 1928-30 depression and given the circumstances it is surprising that the Aero Club and commercial aviation were able to 'get off the ground' during this period. But get off the ground the club did and during the thirties proved to be somewhat of a catalyst for early commercial aviation operations from Western Junction.

During this period the aero club saw the emergence of some of Australia's greatest aviation pioneers. People like Hudson-Fysh, Arthur Long, Harold Gatty and the Holyman brothers appear in the club's history books. Additionally international aviation greats paid the club a visit. Names like Ulm, Hinkler, Earhart, Lindberg and Wiley-Post all stopped-off at the club. On January 16th 1931 the first airline passenger flight arrived at Launceston from Melbourne. Sir

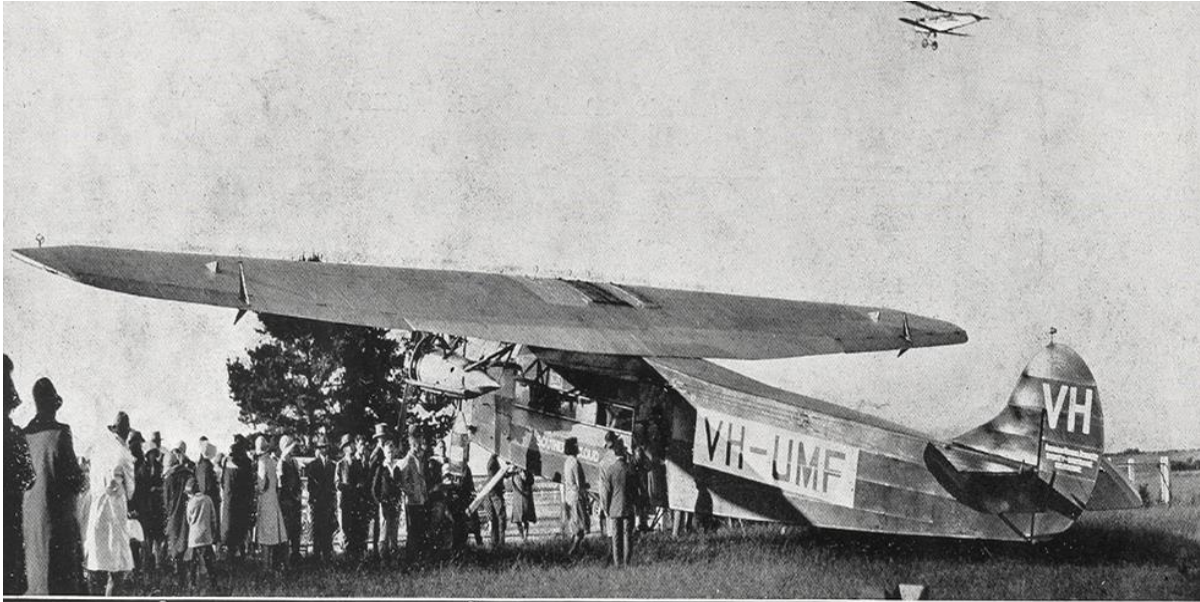




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TASMANIAN AERO CLUB – PART 1– THE EARLY YEARS 1927 – 1939

Charles Kingsford Smith piloted the historical flight in the ill-fated “Southern Cloud”. The flight returned to Melbourne on January 19, 1931.



*File photo of the “Southern Cloud” after landing on the inaugural flight from Melbourne to Launceston*

The following table shows the growth in hours flown and pilots trained from 1930 to 1938

Year	Total Hours Flown	Pilots Trained	Total Members
1930/31	830	13	
1932	666	25	
1933	855	33	
1934	989	44	167
1935	1221	56	
1936	1368	65	100
1937	1042	72	
1938	1094	86	126

Information courtesy of “Aircraft” Magazine and Annual Reports of Tasmanian Aero Club



## TASMANIAN AVIATION HISTORICAL SOCIETY Incorporated

### TASMANIAN AERO CLUB – PART 1– THE EARLY YEARS 1927 – 1939

During the 1930's the Club operated 6, DH-60. "Gypsy Moths" from Western Junction, Latrobe, Wynyard, Smithton and Brighton until 1935 and then from the new Hobart Cambridge Airport. One of these aircraft was sold in the mid 30's and two were written off after accidents in 1939, however, at the outbreak of WW11 the Club ceased flying operations and the three remaining "Moths" were placed in storage at Cambridge with the RAAF taking over the Clubhouse and hangar at Western Junction.

After more than ninety years the first aircraft owned by the club, VH-ULM, has been magnificently restored and is still flying today, a tribute to those early years.



*File Photo of the club's first aircraft VH-ULM magnificently restored*