



# SOUTH WILTSHIRE CORONER'S INQUESTS



## **Larkhill**

**Leonard WILLIAMS**

**24<sup>th</sup> May, 1912**

### **The Aviation Disaster – Lad Killed at Larkhill**

Salisbury Plain was the scene of a shocking aviation fatality on Sunday evening, when an aeroplane on its descent dashed into a large crowd of people, killing a lad and seriously injuring three others, two of whom were soldiers. The mishap was somewhat similar to that which recently occurred in France, in the French War Minister, who had his arms completely severed from his body, and met his instant death.

A large crowd of people, numbering several hundred, had gathered by the bottom block of sheds at Larkhill to witness the flying. Just before seven o'clock Lieutenant Ashton, of the 4th Dragoon Guards, who is an experienced airman, and has been flying for eight months, went up in a "tractor" biplane, an eight cylinder machine with the engine and propeller in front. He was in the air for some minutes, making a successful flight over Amesbury. He accomplished the descent in safety, and then, without any warning, the machine dashed suddenly into the crowd. There were cries of "Look out" and a shriek, and the people scattered in all directions. Many were knocked down, some by the machine and some bowling others over in their haste to get away, but a few escaped by throwing themselves flat and allowing the machine to pass over them.

The impact with the crowd, which smashed the propeller to atoms, brought the biplane to a dead stop, and its tail rising in the air, it turned a complete somersault in the crowd. The aviator was thrown clear and luckily was unhurt. Leonard Williams, a lad of 15, who was in the employ of Messrs Moore of Amesbury, had been standing in the front of the crowd, and was pinned under the machine. He was extricated as quickly as possible, but died a few minutes afterwards. Another youth named Harry Maggs, aged 17 years, was seriously injured. He received severe wounds around the head, and his back was badly hurt, and although no bones were broken his condition was on Monday reported to be precarious.

Two soldiers, Gunner Ratcliffe, of the 48th Battery RGA, and Gunner Packer, of the 70th Field Battery RHA, both of whom were stationed at the Camp, also received grave injuries, one having a broken collar-bone. Other onlookers, including a lady, received some nasty knocks, and were dazed and shaken, and were taken off in motor cars.

A little boy named Wootton fell under the machine and the wheels passed over his back, but with the exception of a bruise on his head he was unhurt.

The dead body of Williams was at once removed to his home at Amesbury, and the injured men were treated by Dr March and Dr Browne, of Amesbury, and a military doctor, after which Maggs was conveyed home, the soldiers being taken to the military hospital at the Camp.

## THE INQUEST

The inquest was held at the Reading Room, Amesbury on Wednesday evening before Mr W. J. Trethowan (Coroner for South Wiltshire), and a jury, of whom Mr E. J. Brown was the foreman.

Mr H. R. Wansbrough, solicitor, of Bristol, appeared for the British and Colonial Aeroplane Company, the owners of the machine and the lessees of the ground and flying rights at Larkhill. He said the company had no right to send people off the ground.

Mr George Williams, fishmonger, of Flower Lane, Amesbury, identified the body as that of his son, Leonard Frank George Williams, and said he was 15 years and eight months old, and was a bootmaker's assistant. He was in his usual state of health on Sunday, when he left home to go to Larkhill, and witness subsequently saw his body at the aeroplane sheds.

Lieutenant Alexander Edward Burchardt Ashton, pilot of the aeroplane, was then called, and was told by the Coroner that he was not bound to give evidence. The officer, however, elected to do so, and said he was a lieutenant in the 4th Dragoon Guards, and resided at Tidworth. He had been studying aviation for about eight months and was a certified pilot. On Sunday he went to the flying school at Larkhill for the purpose of flying. He had no machine of his own, but used a Bristol Tractor biplane. He examined it before he commenced his flight and found that it was in good order and fit for flying. He had flown in this kind of biplane before. It differed from the other aeroplanes he had used, the engine being in front of the pilot's seat, instead of behind.

The Coroner: Does that in any way make it more awkward for you in flying

Witness: It makes it a little difficult to see out in the front. That is the only difficulty. Proceeding, he said he continued his flight about five minutes to seven. It was a short flight of about ten minutes duration, and it was quite successful.

The Coroner: Had you any difficulty in landing?

Witness: I shouldn't have had in the ordinary course of events. My actual landing was perfectly all right. I slowed the engine down to enable me to alight and then shut it off completely when I got to the ground.

The Coroner: That is the usual thing to do, of course?

Witness: Well, unless you wish to run along the ground for a time and then you might switch it on again.

The Coroner: What happened then, when you landed?

Witness: The machine ran along the ground rather fast.

The Coroner: Much faster than you expected?

Witness: Faster than I expected it too. There was a little wind behind. It would have run perhaps 180 yards.

The Coroner: Is it usual for a machine to run so far after it touches the ground?

Witness: The other type of machine would not have run so far. A very slight wind accelerates the machine considerably.

Questioned about the crowd, Lieutenant Ashton said he knew a lot of people were standing about when he started his flight, but when he descended he did not know they had congregated together so closely. He could not say definitely how far he was from the crowd when he began to alight, but he allowed a distance of 150 to 160 yards between him and the sheds. The crowd was between him and the sheds when he alighted.

The Coroner: Did you see the crowd when you were coming down?

Witness: I could not see them very distinctly. It is rather difficult to see.

The Coroner: Of course you can always find out where you are going to alight. You can look out of your machine and choose your spot for alighting?

Witness: Yes.

The Coroner: Did you see the crowd?

Witness: I did not see the crowd until I was quite close to them.

The Coroner: You were not bound to alight where you did?

Witness: Pretty well. I did not want to land sooner because the ground there slopes upwards.

The Coroner: What happened when you started to go towards the sheds?

Witness: Immediately I landed and shut off the engine, the machine was running fast. I did not see the crowd until I suddenly found people on either side of me.

The Coroner: Did they appear to be trying to get out of your way?

Witness: I suppose they did.

The Coroner: You did not see them run?

Witness: Not until the machine was practically over turned. People came forward just after he had landed, supposing, he thought, that he had stopped dead. If it had not been for the people on both sides he could have turned the machine. He tried to check its progress a little by pulling down the aileron wires but the machine continued to go forward, and subsequently turned a somersault.

The Coroner: How was that?

Witness: I think some people were underneath it and so checked the wheels. I was thrown out. The machine was going in a straight line for the sheds, but I could have turned if the people had not been there.

The Coroner: And as you approached, no doubt the people separated to let you go by?

Witness: Yes, they must have done.

The Coroner: But the boy who was killed could not have been quick enough?

Witness: No, he must have been struck by some underpart of the machine. The propeller was revolving very slowly at the time.

The Coroner: I understand no brake has yet been invented to stop an aeroplane going along the ground in this way?

Witness: No, some have been tried, but none are satisfactory. Probably the effect of a brake would be to turn the machine over. Since the accident I have been told that people ran forward when I alighted.

Mr Wansbrough: As a matter of practise, do you find crowds do run in when an aeroplane alights?

Witness: Yes, that happens constantly. Witness added that the accident happened on War Office property which was rented by the Aeroplane Company. No invitation was given to the public to witness the flights, which were the ordinary tuition of the flying school.

Mr Wansbrough: Have you ever had trouble in inducing the public to refrain from trespassing upon the landing part of the ground?

Witness: Yes, aviators had continually had trouble about it, and on that very evening Mr Pizey ordered the people back and warned them. There is a path where people could stand in perfect safety if they kept in a line with the enclosure.

Dr March, of Amesbury, said he was called to Larkhill about 7.15 on Sunday evening. He found the lad Williams in one of the sheds, he was quite dead. He advised removal home, where he subsequently found that he had sustained a fracture to the base of the skull, and a crushing of three lumbar vertebrae. Either of these injuries were sufficient to cause death. He thought unconsciousness was instantaneous but it was impossible to say whether the boy lived for a few minutes afterwards or not.

John Lawrence Huxham, aged 12, son of Mr J. T. Huxham, of Amesbury, said he was with Williams. There were several aeroplanes in the air at the time of the accident, and he did not see Lieutenant Ashton's aeroplane until it was about ten yards from him, on the ground, coming towards him. He was between it and the sheds, and he ran away after Williams had shouted to him, "We must run out of this." He ran to the right, and he thought Williams either ran the other way, or else fell down. There were hundreds of people around him, and the aeroplane was on them almost directly he saw it. A number of people were knocked over by each other in their attempts to get out of the way.

In answer to Mr Wansbrough, he said the people were standing between the landing ground and the enclosure.

Albert Wootton, errand boy of Amesbury, stated that when the aeroplane landed, instead of stopping as they always did, it ran forward straight towards the crowd. He ran away but as he found that the machine gained on him he threw himself to the ground and the aeroplane wheels went over his back, but he was not hurt.

In reply to Mr Wansbrough, witness admitted that if the people had stood at the side of the enclosure, instead of in front of it, they would have been quite safe.

Mr Henry Cox, blacksmith, of Amesbury, said he thought Lieutenant Ashton descended very nicely. When the machine touched the ground he thought it was going to stop within a short distance, but when it appeared to be going to rise again, and then suddenly it shot forward at a terrific pace and ran straight into the crowd. It was impossible for all the people to get away because they were crowded together so closely. He estimated that there between 150 and 200 people in this particular crowd.

Mr John Turner Huxham, surveyor to the Rural District Council, of Amesbury, said he saw the machine going directly towards the sheds at a fast pace. He saw the crowd rush to get out of the way so as to leave a space for the aeroplane to go through. Some people dropped to the ground to avoid the planes and others were knocked down. He had never seen an aeroplane go so far on the ground after a flight. He considered that it was a pure accident, and that no blame attached to the pilot. He believed that Lieutenant Ashton did everything he could to prevent an accident. He either did not know the crowd was there, or else he could not stop the machine. If the crowd had not been there he thought the machine would have dashed into the sheds.

PC Keays, stationed at Durrington, said he was on duty on the Shrewton Road on Sunday evening and saw the aeroplane in flight. He noticed the machine alight, and then it did what he had not seen a machine do before, shoot forward. He went to the sheds and saw the body of Williams, who was taken home in a motor car by Mr Pizey.

Mr Wansbrough: Do you know there has been a great deal of difficulty in inducing the crowds to keep away from the front of the sheds?

PC Keays : Yes, and last year I know the military authorities had the military police there to keep back the crowd. There would not be any crowd there at all if there was no flying on Sunday nights.

Mr Wansbrough: My point is that between the landing ground and the enclosure is the place from which the public has been told to keep away?

PC Keays: Oh, yes, undoubtedly.

Mr Collyer Price Pizey was then called by Mr Wansbrough. He said he was the \_\_ (field) instructor, and school manager, for the British and Colonial Aeroplane Company at the school on Salisbury Plain. The company rented from the War Office about 2,000 acres of land, which they had the right to use, subject to the military rights. The land was all open, except where the sheds were, and the enclosure. As far as he was aware the company had no power to prevent the public from going on the land, and they continually got between the landing ground and the enclosure, and spread all over the ground which the machines approached. He and the other officials had done all they could to induce the public to keep behind the line of the enclosure, where they would be comparatively safe. About half an hour before the accident he had made a flight, and in taking back his machine very slowly he waved his hands to the people to keep back and spoke to one or two, making them to do their best to keep the people on the other side of the enclosure.

Mr Wansborough: Is the congregating of people in front of the enclosure a source of danger to them and also to the airmen?

Mr Collyer Price Pizey : Yes.

Questioned about Lieutenant Ashton, witness said he was a thoroughly competent and careful airman. He had been flying for about seven months before he actually took his certificate, because he wished to have a great deal of practise. He was qualified to take his certificate as a pilot last December, but did not take it until April.

The Coroner: I take it from you that you have no control over the crowd at all when you are practising?

Witness: None whatever.

The Coroner: Don't you think you had better try and get it?

Witness: We have done our best by getting mounted police there when the Airs Corps are practising, but there are only crowds on Saturdays and Sundays.

The Coroner: You don't suggest that the War Office would interfere with you if you took the necessary steps to warn people off – that you be exceeding your powers under your lease?

Witness: That I cannot say.

In reply to a juror, witness said there were no notice boards warning the people to keep off the land. The only notice board warned the people that it was private property. Technically, the people witnessing the flying on the ground were trespassers.

The Coroner, in summing up, remarked that it was a very sad case, and they all sympathised with Mr Williams in the death of his son. Whether there was any negligence or not, the negligence must have been slight and not culpable, and therefore they need take no notice of it. He didn't think the jury could say there had been any great negligence on the part of Lieutenant Ashton. When he saw the crowd there is no doubt he did all he could to get away from it, but it was impossible. He thought they would agree that this was an accident for which nobody was responsible, as far as they were concerned at the inquest, and that there was no culpable negligence, even if there was any negligence at all, on the part of Lieutenant Ashton. If the British and Colonial Aeroplane Co. hadn't got the power to turn the public off when they were in a place which was dangerous, they ought to have it. Some representation ought to be made to the Company to obtain the necessary power. He was quite sure the War Office would assist them in every possible way, and he hoped Mr Wansbrough would take what steps he could in the matter.

The jury retired, and after a brief absence the Foreman announced that their verdict was "Accidental Death." They wished to express their opinion that no blame attached to Lieutenant Ashton, and that the Bristol Co. had done all in their power to regulate the crowds which assembled on the flying ground. They had also agreed to a rider which they wished added to the verdict.

The Coroner said the Press would take note of it, and it would thereby have more effect than as a rider to a verdict.

The jury's rider stated that they were of the opinion that power should be obtained to exclude the public from the landing approach during the hours of flying, and that danger notice boards to this effect should be erected.

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