

A Prank of Fate – Simon Wilson

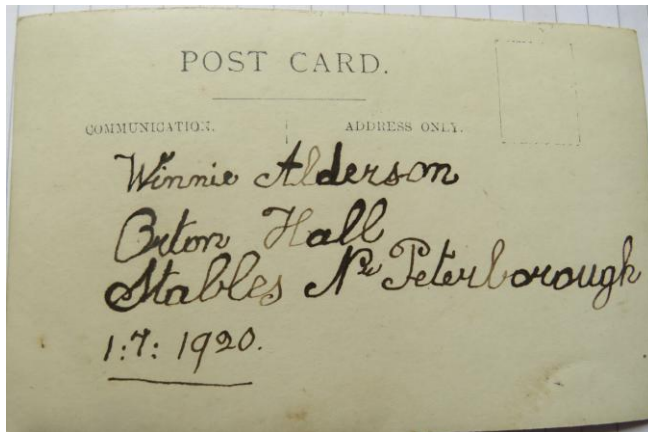
A few years ago I bought some postcards relating to Peterborough and this one (*below*) looked like it could have an interesting story. It isn't, strictly speaking, military, [*I think it is. D.G.*], but my excuse is that early aviation usually has some sort of military link. Most of the aircraft in the early post-war period were ex-military, as were most of the pilots. After an exciting time in the war many of them wanted to carry on flying in various capacities.



Alcock and Brown flew the Atlantic (Alcock demonstrating the transience of both life and fame, when he died in an air crash later that year) and the Smith brothers flew to Australia when a flight that now takes around 23 hours took them 28 days. The second place crew (and the only other one to reach Australia) took 206 days. Two crews were killed in the attempt and the other two crashed and gave up – one hitting a Corfu mental hospital and one (after being arrested as Bolsheviks in Yugoslavia) giving up in Bali.

However, there were other pilots seeking employment and many of them ended up as barnstormers, giving rides to local people who wanted to fly over their home. Cobham's Flying Circus, probably the most famous British operator, gave 10,000 free flights to children in the 1930s, inspiring many aviation careers. His 1935 season included displays at Stamford, Ramsey, Wisbech and Huntingdon, the Ramsey day being marred, in an echo of the Peterborough story, when a gilder broke up in the air during a stunt display.

The aircraft in the picture is an Avro 504, a type which was first flown in 1913 and served through the Great War. Wartime production was over 8,000, and over 10,000 had been built by the time production ended in 1932. A 504 was the first British aircraft to be shot down in the war. It was also the first British aircraft to bomb Germany, when the Royal Naval Air Service bombed the Zeppelin sheds at Friedrichshafen in 1914. Although it was soon withdrawn from front-line service, it continued as a trainer and, at the end of 1917, returned to active service when over 200 were modified as single-seaters for use in Home Defence squadrons.



At the end of the war, the 504 continued in use with the RAF as a training aircraft until replaced by the Avro Tutor in 1933. Around 300 were operated by civilian users and the type saw active service again in WW2, when seven of the remaining civilian aircraft were requisitioned for use in target towing.

This particular example is G-EADR, although it is only possible to make out the bottoms of the final three letters of the registration. It was originally produced for the RAF with

the serial number D6245 and used by the Bournemouth Aviation Co for joyriding before passing to S. Summerfield, who is one of the people named on the postcard.

At that point the only Peterborough connection was the address on the back of the card (*above*), but using the date as a guide I looked for details in the local paper, and that was when the story began to reveal itself.



Most papers ran with variations on "Fatal Aeroplane Crash" or "Three Killed in 'Plane Crash". The *Hunts County News* ran with "The Peterborough Aeroplane Disaster" while the *Lincoln Leader* went with "Lincoln Man in Aeroplane Smash". The *Hunts County News* pointed out that the Germans had used parachutes during the war and asked whether they should have been fitted to this aeroplane. This is a fair question. I first flew as a ten-year-old and remember asking why I had been provided with a life jacket but not a parachute. The paper further pointed out that Peterborough's first aeronautical fatality had been a

parachutist, Mrs Madeleine Bassett, who had plunged to her death whilst jumping from a balloon at Fletton on August Bank Holiday 1895. That, as so often, sent me on a detour through the internet, which is why this has taken so long to write.

The inquest was held on Saturday 26 June at the Cock Inn, Werrington, where the bodies had been taken after the accident. The three dead men were Charles Guest, son of the owner of the Salmon and Compasses Hotel in Long Causeway, Mr Philip Runquest of Lincoln, and Donald Hastings Sadler of Acton, the pilot. Runquest was a traveller for Clayton & Shuttleworth of Lincoln but had been living in Peterborough for nearly a year.

There were mixed stories from witnesses but the consensus was that the wings collapsed while the pilot was attempting to loop the loop and the aircraft fell from 2,000 feet. The engine exhausts appeared to be smoking but the main fire occurred when the aircraft hit the ground. The pilot was either thrown out or jumped at around 1,000 feet, falling to his death and landing approximately 85

feet from the crash site. The wreckage burned fiercely after impact, the petrol tank burst and the nose buried itself three feet in the ground. The flames were up to twenty feet high and extinguishers were obtained from Brotherhoods because water was useless and attempts to extinguish the fire with soil were unsuccessful. By the time they arrived the bodies were already badly burned, though death had occurred as a result of injuries sustained in the impact and not by fire.

Four of the six men in the picture were called to give evidence at the inquest. They gave the information that the aircraft was almost new when purchased by Summerfield in March and properly checked and maintained each day by certified mechanics. They had previously flown a week at Luton and two weeks at Northampton. They had flown over 600 people at Peterborough and had been planning to move on to Lincoln.

Captain Wilkins of the Air Ministry said that he was satisfied that all safety procedures had been followed and a number of witnesses said that Sadler had been a careful and competent pilot. A verdict of "Accidental Death" was returned.



From left to right the people in the photograph above are J G Kitchener, F E Gordon, S Summerfield, D H Sadler, J W Bollands and A H Summerfield. It has been possible to find a little extra information about them, though I'm sure there is, as usual, more to find.

Joseph George Kitchener (1897–1972) was from Islington and served as an air mechanic with the RFC and RAF in the war, much of it with No 1 Aircraft Supply Depot in France. In the 1921 Census he is shown as having been employed by the Anderson Pool Aviation Company as a motor fitter, though he was out of work at the time of the census. In the 1939 List he is shown as a taxi driver. He married in 1921 but is a widower on the 1939 List.



*Top left, Runquest, right, Sadler
and bottom, Guest.*

Frank Edwin Gordon (1889-1971) was also from Islington. He joined the Royal Navy for 12 years in 1907, transferred to the Royal Naval Air Service in 1913, served in France, and finally transferred to the RAF on its formation in 1918 as a Sergeant Mechanic. He is shown as married, and living in Southend on his RAF record for 1919. The 1921 Census shows him living in London and working for the Port of London Authority.

Samuel Summerfield (1894-1967) would make a good subject for a book. He was born in Derbyshire in 1894, but his parents moved to the Melton Mowbray area soon after his birth, where they raised cattle and ran a butchery business. Samuel's name appears in various pre-war papers as an aviation enthusiast. He built his own glider, and in 1913 obtained his Royal Aero Club Certificate – number 292 – at Brooklands. He made a number of flights at this time, including ones in the Melton area, having several narrow escapes with broken cables and flying into hedges.

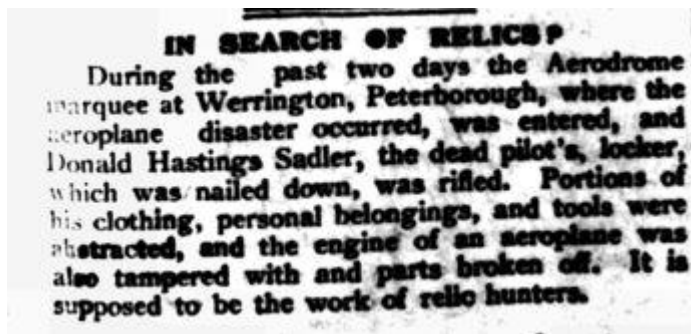
During the war he trained pilots for the British and Canadian air services, training over 500 pilots without mishap. After the war he embarked on a barnstorming career which, according to a newspaper interview, in 1928, involved taking up over 50,000 passengers. In 1926 he had an alarming experience when a passenger stood up during a flight over Morecambe (they didn't have to be strapped in), had a heart attack and fell out of the aeroplane.

In 1934 he sailed to Australia for a tour but his aircraft was damaged in a storm. He was unable to obtain a commercial pilot's licence in Australia due to hearing damage sustained during his flying career, so he registered a gold claim and spent the rest of his life as a gold miner until he broke his hip in an accident in 1966, dying a year later.

Donald Hastings Sadler (1898-1920) joined the Royal Flying Corps in 1917 and was selected for a commission three months later, training as a pilot and then as an instructor. He was listed as "injured" in July 1917, but it can't have been serious as he was back on duty within ten days. He served at Hendon and Croydon, before working for the Avro company at Hounslow. Everyone, including the Avro company, spoke well of him - "a clever, careful pilot, and a perfect gentleman" were the exact words of one man he flew with. At his funeral a wreath was sent by the *Peterborough Advertiser* and 20 passengers who had flown with him, whilst an aeroplane circled overhead.



Samuel Summerfield



Just days after the crash someone broke into Sadler's locker at Werrington, taking tools, clothing and personal effects. It was assumed that this was the work of a souvenir hunter.

John William Bollands (1898-1969) was more difficult to pin down, but a look at the 1921 Census showed he was lodging in Felixstowe. He was a self-employed

motor engineer and worked at no fixed address. This is significant as A H Summerfield was in the same town at that time, describing himself as an aerodrome manager with no fixed address. Knowing that he was on the photograph and in Felixstowe at the same time as Summerfield, it seems likely he was still working for the brothers. He was born in Melton, married in 1929 and was working as a chauffeur in Berkshire 1939.



The final man is Albert Henry Summerfield (1897- ?), a younger brother of Samuel. He was the ground manager of the company, according to his statement at the inquest, a job which including taking the booking. In 1921 he described himself as an Aerodrome Manager on the Census form, an employer with no fixed place of work. He was staying in a Felixstowe boarding house with his wife. In 1939 he is shown as living in Uxbridge and still in the aircraft industry. After that, he seems to fade away.

Mr Arthur Gibbons, an accountant working for the Indian railways, was home on leave, visiting his parents, who lived on Lincoln Road. He was due to go for a flight with his friend, Frederick Weber, a jeweller in Narrow Street, Peterborough, who had served in the Royal Artillery during the war. A number of other people in the story, apart from the ex-RAF men, probably served in the war (Charles Guest had a wreath from the Comrades of the Great War at his funeral and one of the witnesses is described as "a demobilised man"). Considering the narrow escapes some of them must have had in wartime, a short pleasure flight would have held no fears. When Mr Runquest asked Gibbons and Weber to allow him to go up next, they would never have been able to guess what was about to happen - things could have turned out very differently for the four men that day if they had refused to change places.

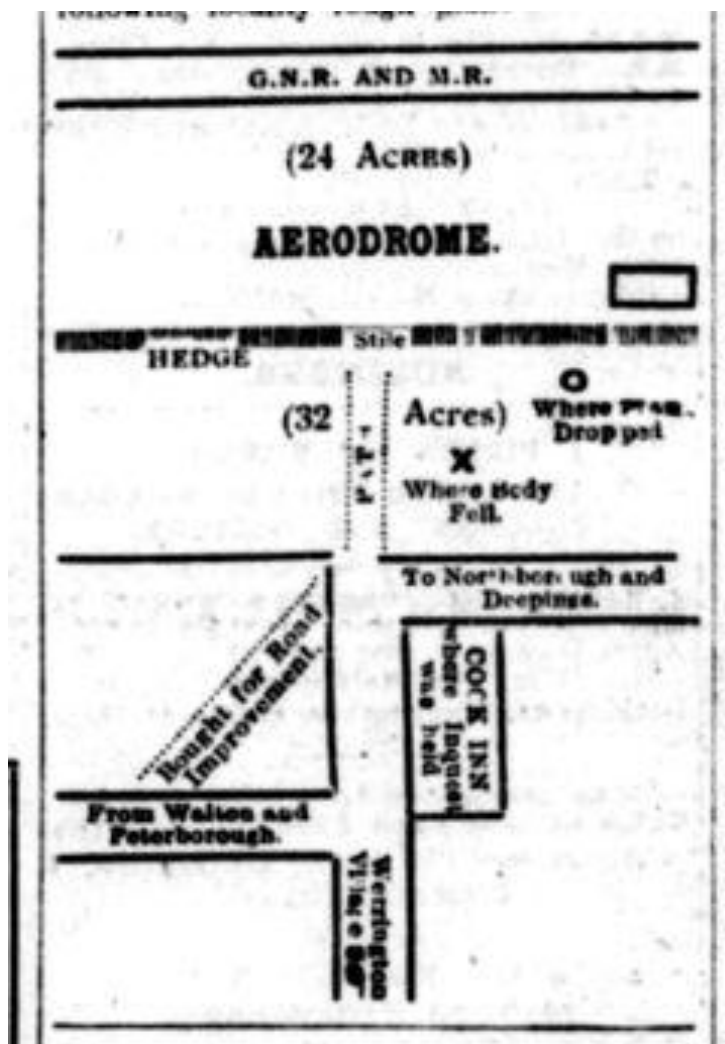
Pilot in the plane crash, *inset*, Guest

I have not been able to find details of war service for Guest, but Runquest was a pre-war territorial soldier in the Lincolnshire Yeomanry. He is noted as being 6' 2" and having a faulty right eye, meaning that he fired a rifle from the left shoulder. He was released from the Yeomanry in 1916 after being on Home Service and went to work for Armstrong

Whitworth, where his services as an engineer were presumably of more use to the country than his services as a one-eyed rifleman.

Gibbons fades into history after this, but Mr Weber would feature in another newspaper report before too long.

On August 2, just 40 days after his narrow escape from death in the plane crash, he took a motorcycle trip to Yarmouth. He was a keen motorcyclist who had owned a motorcycle for 15 years and held a gold medal for a London to Edinburgh endurance run before the war. Whilst negotiating a set of bends on a twisting section of road near North Walsham, he hit a car and sustained fatal injuries, losing consciousness and dying by the roadside before medical aid could be obtained. His death was reported in many papers, most of which made some reference to his previous lucky escape. It is one of these headlines, from the *Penrith Observer*, that supplied the title for this piece.



Left, Plan of the area where the crash took place. Note the Cock Inn is still in existence and gives a good guide to the present day location.