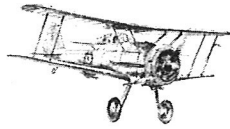


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Air Show at the
Essex County Show
held at Waltham
Abbey in 1914.
Flying demonstration
by B. C. Hucks

Essex and its race for
the Stries 1900-1939

Chapter 5 Graham Smith



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2083

Bentfield 'Benny' Hucks

During the immediate pre-war years there was an Essex-born aviator who became a household name throughout the country on account of his fine and spectacular displays of aerobatic flying. Without a shadow of doubt, Bentfield Charles Hucks, or 'Benny' as he was known to his fellow aviators and the public at large, was the most celebrated pioneer aviator to have been born in Essex.

He really deserves far greater honour and acclaim than has hitherto been accorded him in his home county. Benny Hucks did an immense amount to popularise flying in those heady pioneering years and he was the first Essex man to be awarded the coveted R.Ae.C.'s aviator's certificate. His achievements in his relatively short life certainly deserve a separate chapter in a work devoted to early aviation in the county.

Hucks was born at Bentfield End close to Stansted Mountfichet on 25th October 1884, presumably the reason for his unusual christian name. The son of a consultant engineer, it was not too

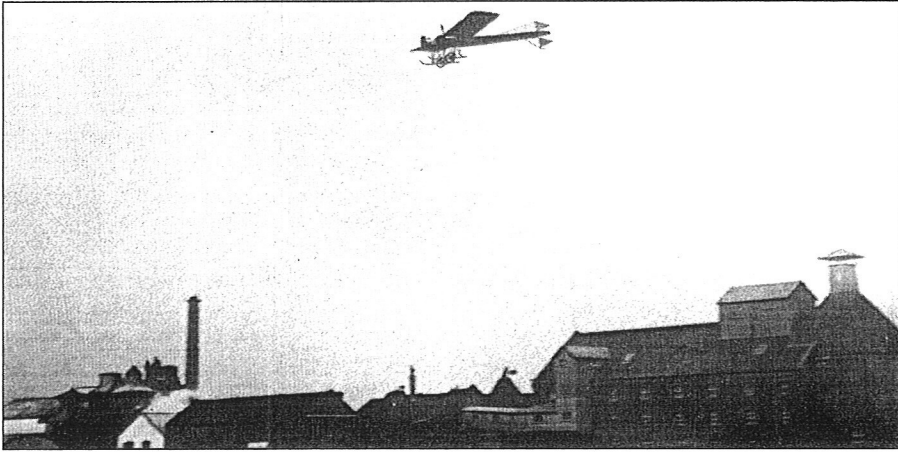
ESSEX AND ITS RACE FOR THE SKIES

there was no serious damage to either him or the monoplane and he was back flying within a few weeks. Hucks later successfully accomplished a night flight of some sixteen miles from Filey to Scarborough and back.

On 18th May 1911 Hucks passed all the flying tests at Filey Sands but for some reason he was compelled to undergo another flying test before he duly obtained his aviator's certificate, No 91, which was dated 30th May 1911. Blackburn also founded a flying school at Filey where Hucks and Hubert Oxley (the second test pilot) acted as flying instructors.

It was during the summer of 1911 that 'Benny' Hucks became known to a wider audience than the relatively small and enclosed world of British aviation. In July he, along with another twenty airmen, many of them British, took part in the *Daily Mail's* 'Circuit of Britain Race' for a prize of £10,000. Blackburn had entered two monoplanes, which were named *Mercury*. The race started and finished from Brooklands, but on the second stage from Hendon to Newcastle his *Mercury* crashed six miles north of Luton in Bedfordshire. The prizes were won by two French airmen; 'Colonel' Cody's aeroplane was the only British machine to complete the race.

Later in the summer Hucks flew the repaired *Mercury* on an extended promotional tour of the West Country as publicity for Blackburn Aeroplane Company. The tour, which started on August Bank Holiday at Taunton, lasted three months, during which time he gave numerous flying exhibitions at Burnham, Minehead, Weston-super-Mare, Newport, Cardiff, Cheltenham and Gloucester, and involved a double aerial crossing of the Bristol Channel; he thus became the first aviator to complete the crossing. On 23rd September over Cardiff, Hucks took part in the first ground-to-air wireless telegraphy experiments conducted by H. Grindell Matthews ('the inventor of the new system of wireless telegraphy everyone is talking about'). *The Aeroplane* of 2nd November 1911 commented on his flying tour: 'the whole performance reflects great credit to Mr. Hucks as an aviator and the



Hucks over Burnham in the summer of 1911.

general excellence of the Blackburn monoplane.' In 1912 he wrote a small booklet as publicity material for the Blackburn aeroplane entitled *The Aerial Tourist: What a well designed British built monoplane will stand.*

In 1912 Hucks left Blackburn's and rejoined his old boss and mentor, Claude Grahame-White at his London Aerodrome, Hendon where he was one of the several 'staff' pilots employed by Grahame-White Aviation Company Ltd. According to Grahame-White, Hucks was an excellent 'demonstration pilot'. The Easter meeting held on 5th April was attended by crowds of over 15,000 and Hucks was one of the pilots giving exhibition flights at the meeting. His innate skill as a pilot was fully recognised by Grahame-White and Hucks frequently flew alongside him during his various exhibitions, perhaps most notably in May over the Fleet gathered in Portland Bay for the Royal Review. Also during May, Hucks flew the first airmail service from Hendon to Bath in a Blériot, a distance of about one hundred miles; he carried letters from the Lord Mayor of London to his counterpart in Bath.

On 8th June Hucks, along with other noted British aviators – Samuel Cody, Gustav Hamel, Thomas Sopwith *et al* – took part in

Castle grounds but unfortunately the winds were too strong to accomplish this.

Besides his exhibition flying and passenger flights, Hucks put his aeroplane to other uses. In 1912 he was engaged in electioneering in Midlothian, canvassing by air for one of the candidates. Later at Newcastle-upon-Tyne he carried out deliveries of tobacco for a tobacco firm. Hucks also made news on the ground; he went on a lecture tour during the winter months when he spoke about his 'Three Years' Experience of Flying'. In June 1913 he returned to Essex to give a flying display at Loxford Park, Ilford, and the following year he appeared at Barking.

In September 1913 a young French pilot, Celestin-Adolphe Pegoud, astonished crowds at Brooklands with 'a most remarkable display of aerobatics including "looping-the-loop" or quite literally flying on his head', as one newspaper reported. Hucks went to France where he was taught to loop-the-loop by Pegoud and on 1st November he became the first British pilot to achieve it in his specially-built Blériot X1 at Hendon in front of a large crowd of over 50,000 spectators. He immediately became the toast of London.

Later another celebrated Hendon pilot and close friend, Gustav Hamel, also looped-the-loop. On 16th January 1914, to celebrate the event, Hucks and Hamel were the honoured guests at an 'upside-down' dinner held at the Royal Aero Club in London, which had been organised by Grahame-White. The tables were suspended from the ceiling and the food was served back to front, starting with coffee and ending with soup! The Directors of the London Aerodrome presented Hucks with a Gold Medal to mark his first 'loop-the-loop'. When RAF Hendon closed down in 1987 an 'Upside-Down' dinner was held in the Officers' Mess to commemorate the first dinner some sixty years earlier.

By 1914 Hucks had three Blériots, two single-seaters and a two-seater for passengers. He had teamed up with Marcus 'Boy' Manton, another Hendon staff pilot, who at the age of 18 had been

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the youngest airman to gain his aviator's certificate. They proceeded to thrill thousands of people around the country with their daring and spectacular flying displays, which include switch-backs', 'spiral vol-planes', 'upside-down flying' and, of course, looping-the-loop; by May it was said that Hucks had completed more than 400, his record then being 13 continuous loops. The sudden and tragic death of Gustav Hamel in May (he disappeared without trace whilst crossing the English Channel) made Hucks, without a shadow of doubt, the most celebrated and brilliant aerobatic pilot in the country.

During the summer of 1914 he and Manton made an extensive tour of the West Country and the Midlands but, in June, Hucks returned to Essex to appear at the Essex County Show held at Waltham Abbey. On this occasion Hucks had to obtain special permission from the War Office because a strict embargo had been introduced on aeroplanes flying over or near to military installations; there was a large munitions factory at Waltham Abbey.

At the outbreak of war Hucks, like so many of his aviation colleagues, joined the Royal Flying Corps. His three Blériots were requisitioned and one was immediately returned to him to fly as a military pilot! In September 1914 2nd Lieutenant Hucks was sent up to the Lake District. There had been persistent rumours that a German Zeppelin was hiding somewhere in the valleys, which according to many locals came out at night to reconnoitre the area! It is perhaps needless to say that Hucks did not find any signs of the 'ghost' Zeppelin.

Hucks was involved in ferrying aeroplanes out to France and is believed to have seen active service, flying B.E.2 scouts with No 4 Squadron. He was later invalided home with severe pleurisy. But now, at the rank of Captain in the R.F.C. Reserve, he perhaps found his true forte – as a test pilot with Ruston and Proctor. His flying prowess was greatly appreciated by Geoffrey de Havilland, the Chief Designer *and* test pilot of the Aircraft Manufacturing Company (A.M.C., but later more generally known as AIRCO).

Because de Havilland had found that combining the two tasks was too onerous, he offered Hucks the post of Chief Test Pilot; so Hucks now found himself back in very familiar surroundings at Hendon. Grahame-White's aerodrome had been requisitioned by the military authorities.

As de Havilland remarked about Hucks: 'as a test and demonstration pilot he was outstanding, far better than I was [fulsome praise from a fine pilot]...he was a most modest and very likeable man'. During the height of his popularity Hucks was a very retiring and unassuming person, who tried to eschew publicity and always referred to himself as plain 'B.C. or Ben'. Some of the famous aeroplanes Hucks first flew and tested at Hendon were the D.H.4 in November 1916, the D.H. 9a and the D.H.10 Mk11, a twin-engine bomber, in March 1917.

It was during his time with A.M.C. that Hucks' inventive talents came to the fore, most notably with his so-styled 'Hucks mobile starter'. In those days aero-engines had to be started by the rather dangerous method of swinging the propeller, which had led to several fatalities and numerous serious injuries. Hucks developed a basic Ford Model 'T' chassis and engine which he adapted to drive a long horizontal shaft that enabled the aero-engine to be started, at which stage it automatically disengaged. The self-starter became an instant success and it was immediately ordered by the Air Ministry and soon every R.F.C. aerodrome was supplied with a 'Hucks Starter'. Thus his name and fame were perpetuated in what became the Royal Air Force long after his death.

Hucks' lack of celebrity in his home county may be due in some part to his early and untimely death. The influenza pandemic of 1918 claimed his life; he died of pneumonia on 6th November aged only 34, just five days before the end of the First World War. According to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, Captain Bentfield Charles Hucks is buried in Grave 39669 in Highgate Cemetery, London.



The **CAMP GROUND**

(Cricket Field Lane, Near Station),

SKEGNESS.

AUGUST 19th, 20th, and 21st.

B. C. HUCKS



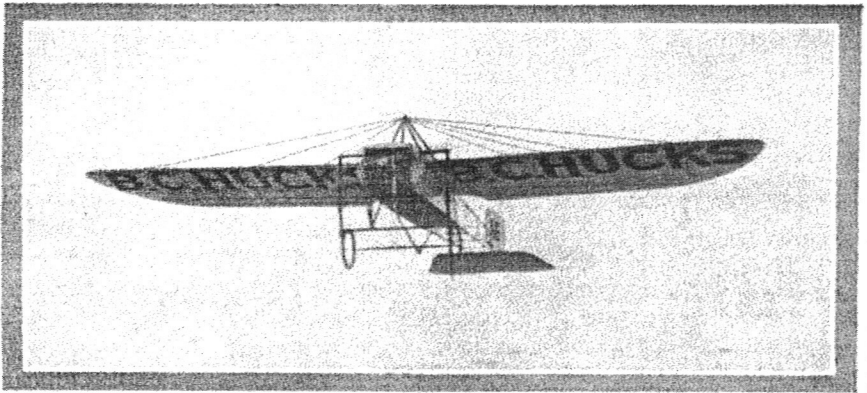
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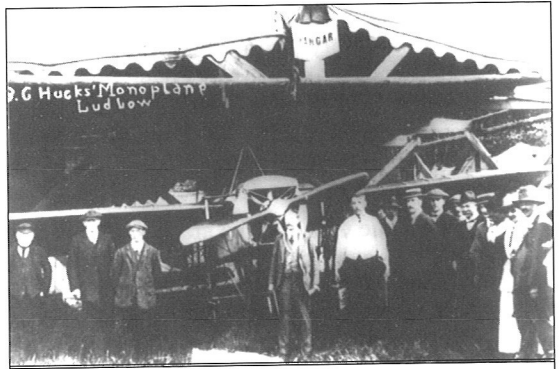
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B G Hucks at Ludford Park, Ludlow