

Ninety years ago, a humble Avro Gosport and two intrepid aviators braved the weather, and the terrain, to notch up a memorable flying feat

WORDS: MARK BROADBENT



MOUNTAIN MEN



On 22 December 1926, on the wide, rocky summit of Helvellyn in the Lake District, a lone walker sheltered from the mid-winter winds beside the mountaintop cairn. Suddenly, he heard an aircraft engine. A biplane circled overhead before descending and landing on the plateau in front of him.

The hardy soul was Eric Dodds, a then 33-year-old Professor of Greek at the University of Birmingham, and an Oxford contemporary of T. S. Eliot and Aldous Huxley. He'd just witnessed the Lancashire Aero Club chairman John F. Leeming and the A. V. Roe & Company test pilot Bert Hinkler become the first pilots to land an aircraft on a mountain in Britain.

It was the UK's then director of civil aviation, Sir Sefton Brancker, who proposed to Leeming that landing an aeroplane on a well-known mountain might be a good publicity stunt for the LAC and Mancunian aviation overall. Brancker suggested the idea, Leeming recalled in his memoir 'Airdays', during "the coffee and brandy stage of an excellent supper" at a party for light aeroplane club chairmen in Chez Victor's, a club off London's Bond Street, and mentioned Snowdon as a candidate.

Leeming enquired with Avro whether it would be prepared to make an aircraft available for the venture. The company's managing director dismissed it outright. He lived near Snowdon and judged it to be unsuitable.

A few days later it was mentioned to Leeming that Helvellyn might be better. The managing director had, in the intervening time, gone to America, and the other Avro board members reconsidered the proposal with the Lake District peak in mind instead. "The directors were, of course, in an extremely difficult position", Leeming recalled. "The managing director had forbidden the project; they could not reach him. If they now agreed and a crash occurred and a £1,500 aeroplane written off he would be justified in almost any action he might take."

Despite that, the other directors did indeed approve the supply of an aircraft for Leeming's project. Work began on modifying Avro 585 Gosport G-EBPH with a strengthened undercarriage and the company's experimental 100hp Alpha radial engine. Bert Hinkler came up from the Hamble plant to test-fly the aircraft and suggest improvements.

Leeming walked up Helvellyn to survey possible landing sites with a Mr Sandham, the manager of Thirlmere, at the peak's foot. Sandham agreed to have a team of his men prepare a strip, lay out markers and, on the day of the landing, light lanterns to indicate the wind direction. It was also arranged for a field near Lancaster to be used as a refuelling stop.

At Woodford, Hinkler pegged out a newspaper on the grass and challenged Leeming to land as close to it as he could to train him in precision landings. Leeming recalled: "I remember how he once said, 'Every landing is a forced landing. Every time I land I pretend I haven't got an engine'."

A Mr W. D. Murray and a Mr A. E. Marsden from the Air Ministry inspected the Gosport and awarded a certificate of airworthiness on 8 December. The intention to land on Helvellyn was announced in the next day's *Manchester Guardian*. That paper arranged with Avro for Hinkler to fly its photographer, Walter Doughty, in another aircraft alongside the Gosport to record the landing from the air.

Lakeland fellsmen doubted the venture would succeed. On 15

December, a *Guardian* correspondent wrote from Grasmere: "The fellsmen are good sports. One does not find among them any prejudice against new-fangled ideas such as aeroplanes. But one does find a feeling that no-one will be more surprised than they if Mr Leeming does get onto Helvellyn and off again."

On that same day, Leeming and Hinkler left for the Lakes. Fog covered Lancashire. Towns were barely distinguishable as they flew north; only Blackpool Tower poked up through the white blanket beneath.

The fog broke and they refuelled near Lancaster, but they ran into it again over the Lakes. "We did not know exactly our whereabouts and were forced to descend", Doughty recalled in the *Guardian*. "On diving down we found ourselves almost on the top of a mountain."

The fog then caused the pilots to lose each other. They eventually rejoined over Morecambe Bay but, on returning to Lancaster for fuel, decided to abandon the flight for the day. On the journey south to Woodford, visibility remained poor because of the typical build-up of the day's factory smoke and the gathering darkness. Leeming let Hinkler take the lead in flying through the murk. The Manchester Ship Canal and then Rostherne Mere near Knutsford appeared, helping them navigate to Woodford, where they arrived amid a snowstorm. Clearly the decision to abort was a wise one.

Further fog and snow prevented any new attempt for another week, a delay that prompted one wag to write a poem, published by *Flight*:

*"Our Leeming had an Avro with great big wheels on
And a very special engine that was Avro's joy and pride,
And daily he would take it up
And put it down and shake it up
And land it on a handkerchief, till all the papers cried:-
This is John Leeming — Attaboy!
This is John Leeming — Have a care!
There isn't any tellin'
He might land upon Helvellyn,
So look out! Take cover! Beware!"*

'We did not know exactly our whereabouts. We found ourselves almost on top of a mountain'

Flight said the verse was "received from some low fellow who seeks the cloak of anonymity". That was likely because the author was poking gentle fun at the venture. They might also have realised that their William McGonagall-esque prose wasn't exactly a strong suit.

TOP LEFT: Leeming (right) and Hinkler in the cockpit of a Gosport. AEROPLANE

LEFT: During his solo attempt to make Helvellyn on 15 December 1926, John Leeming dives Avro 585 G-EBPH through the clouds over the Cumberland hills to check his position. GUARDIAN NEWS & MEDIA

The weather finally improved and a second attempt was planned for 21 December. But that morning Hinkler's aircraft had an engine problem. Leeming insisted they should make the most of the better conditions, and urged Hinkler to join him in the dual-control Gosport and leave Doughty behind. "One thing that will always

They flew north but, above Bowness-on-Windermere, the Alpha spluttered. Hinkler took control and, spotting an open area of land bordered by tall trees, flew the Gosport through a series of descending, decelerating S-turns over the lake before putting it down. They had landed in the grounds of Calgarth Park, a Georgian mansion

Putting his landing-on-a-newspaper practice into use, Leeming landed the Gosport on the summit at 13.35hrs. A strong headwind and a rising gradient pulled it up quickly, stopping just 10 yards from the cairn. Hinkler ran the Alpha at full throttle to prevent G-EBPH rolling back down the slope. Leeming jumped out and, helped by Dodds — who had come over to the aircraft — lodged rocks behind the wheels to hold it in position.

Leeming and Hinkler discovered that Dodds was in the Lakes visiting his father-in-law, the parish vicar of Watermillock in nearby Ullswater. Dodds had read about their venture and said he'd climbed Helvellyn anticipating that they'd have another go before Christmas.

"Have you got a piece of paper?" Leeming asked. Dodds rummaged through his bag and found an old receipt and a pencil. Resting on the Gosport's wing, Dodds signed his name beside a statement Leeming had hastily scribbled: "I hereby certify an aeroplane, G-EBPH, pilots Bert Hinkler and John Leeming, landed on the summit of Helvellyn on December 22, 1926."

After Leeming took photos with a pocket Kodak, he and Hinkler assessed the summit. They found there were only around 30 yards of the plateau remaining before an abrupt drop down towards the sharp-topped ridge of Striding Edge, and a 1,000ft fall to Red Tarn below.

"I don't like it", Hinkler said. "I like it a lot less", added Leeming. Rolling the aircraft down the slope for a longer take-off run would be fruitless, they reasoned, as the rising gradient that helped them to stop would work against them.

After saying goodbye to Dodds and removing the makeshift 'chocks', Leeming ran the Alpha at full throttle. The Gosport slowly accelerated. "Five yards from the edge the wheels were still on the ground", he remembered.

"Just for an instant the nose seemed to drop as we shot away into space."

In the moments that followed, the Gosport gained enough airspeed to enable Leeming to — just — pull the aircraft away from the looming Striding Edge. The margin was narrow but the mountain landing and take-off had succeeded. The pilots arrived back at Woodford in fading light at 16.20hrs.

Leeming spoke to newspaper reporters who'd assembled there, recounting the details of the feat: their battle against the elements, the Calgarth Park landing and the precipitous drop from the summit. He was simply relieved to have completed the flight. "I am proud to think that the landing has been made", he told reporters. "It was certainly attended with risk."

The landing was front-page news on the next day's *Daily Express* and *Daily Mirror*. The *Mirror* carried pictures of the Gosport, a mugshot of Leeming and the summit with an 'X' superimposed on it to show where the aircraft had landed. In typical tabloid style the story sat beside eclectic unrelated news, including the Empire League delivering a Christmas pudding to Buckingham Palace for which, naturally, "only products of the Empire were used".

Despite Doughty being left behind, the *Guardian* gave over most of page seven to the flight. The paper expressed surprise at the landing, reflecting that Leeming and Hinkler had contradicted what they'd told the paper's correspondent in Lancaster.

The surprise factor probably helped secure more press attention than might otherwise have been achieved. *The Aeroplane* was quick off the mark with an item its 29 December issue. Local papers countrywide, from the *Hull Daily Mail* and the *Yorkshire Post* to the *Aberdeen Journal* and the *Western Morning News*, covered the landing. Most accounts inevitably focused on



the flight's more dramatic aspects. The *Nottingham Evening Post*, for example, led with "Air Pocket Thrills, Aeroplane Tossed About Like a Coin".

There wasn't a unanimously positive reaction. A *Dundee Courier* editorial grumbled: "The harassed pedestrian will hardly hail [Leeming] as a benefactor of the race. The time seemed visibly approaching when the mountain sides and tops would be the pedestrian's last sanctuary. Now, when his mind is turning to the mountains as the only place where he may commune with nature unmolested by the aggressive products of mechanical ingenuity, he is confronted with the prospect of an aeroplane coming down on top of him."

The *Courier* worried about copycat flights, and even urged the government to pass a bill banning mountain landings. The writer, or anyone else anxious the feat might be the first step to mountains becoming new airfields, needn't have worried. Nobody again attempted to land a light aircraft on Helvellyn, nor the summit of any other mountain in the UK.

What of the machine and men? Avro operated G-EBPH for three more years before withdrawing it from use. It was one of five developmental Gosports that tested different engines — others had an Armstrong Siddeley Mongoose, a Genet Major and a Gnome Monosoupape. Avro eventually picked the Mongoose for the production Gosport, which was exported to Argentina (where another 100 were built under licence), Estonia and Peru. It later used the engine for its 621 Tutor.

Dodds continued his academic career, becoming Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford in 1936. Later, he was chairman of the Society for Psychological Research, and died in 1979 aged 86.

Hinkler achieved world fame in 1928 for his then record-breaking

15-day flight from England to Australia in Avian G-EBOV. In 1931 he was only the second person after Charles Lindbergh to fly the Atlantic solo, during his odyssey from Canada to Britain via Jamaica, South America and Africa. He was killed in 1933 when his Puss Moth crashed in the Pratomagno Mountains in Tuscany.

Leeming was only LAC chairman for two more years, but his later life (he lived to January 1965, aged 70) was scarcely less eventful. On 29 June 1927 he flew a reporter above northern England to gain an airborne view of that day's solar eclipse. The following year he co-founded Northern Air Lines to fly charters and pleasure flights from Manchester's first airport at Barton.

He volunteered for the RAF in 1939 and became the personal pilot of Air Marshal Owen Tudor Boyd, AOC-in-C of RAF Middle East. In 1941, while flying Boyd to Egypt, their Wellington was hit by enemy fire over Sicily and forced down. Leeming was captured and imprisoned by the Italians, but he was repatriated on medical grounds in 1943 after successfully convincing doctors he was going mad.

Away from aviation, Leeming ran a company in Salford making cleaning cloths. He wrote several novels; of one, 'A Girl from Wigan', his pen-friend P. G. Wodehouse wrote to him: "I hope it sells thousands, it certainly deserves to". He bred pedigree pigs, helped found the National Delphinium Society and kept bees. They inspired him to write 'Claudius the Bee', of which Disney bought the film rights to use in a Mickey Mouse cartoon.

A stone tablet on Helvellyn's summit commemorates Leeming and Hinkler's landing. Their unique endeavour typified inter-war aviation: the willingness to try spectacular and outlandish feats, and the audacious spirit to carry them out.

ABOVE: Both Leeming and Hinkler aboard the Gosport, with smoke from the ground adding to the poor visibility.

VIA AVRO HERITAGE MUSEUM

'Leeming landed on the summit. A strong headwind and a rising gradient pulled the Gosport up just 10 yards from the cairn'

haunt me is the look of reproach on Doughty's face", Leeming later wrote. "I have always felt that my action was selfish and unsporting."

The pair left Woodford at noon. They reached the vicinity of Helvellyn but encountered severe gales. Despite holding for them to ease, low fuel forced them to Lancaster. There Leeming announced to a *Guardian* reporter that they would have to postpone the landing for the year.

On taking off to return to Woodford, with Hinkler flying, the Alpha suddenly cut out. Hinkler immediately pointed the Gosport nose-down and swung the aircraft round, gliding it down towards the field. A blocked carburettor was to blame but, with daylight fading, the pilots decided to stay in Lancaster overnight. Only when sitting down to dinner at a hotel did the pilots realise neither had brought their wallets. The owner of a nearby garage bailed them out the next morning.

The unplanned overnight stay emboldened Leeming. The next morning, he asked Hinkler whether they might make one final attempt given they were so close. "Hinkler looked round. Visibility was good; a steady wind of perhaps 30mph was blowing. 'Don't you say anything', he murmured. 'We're going to have a look at it'."

that was then a children's orthopaedic hospital. A nurse told Leeming that some kids thought Father Christmas had arrived early. Blocked petrol filters were at fault. After cleaning them they prepared for departure. "We'll be on top of Helvellyn in 10 minutes!", Leeming reportedly quipped.



After leaving Calgarth Park they again ran into turbulence over the fells. One gust caused them to drop 500ft, "an awful slip in which we seemed to be falling faster than gravity", Leeming said afterwards. They were pushed upwards from their seats against their straps and Hinkler's seat cushion was thrown out over the side. The bumps subsided as they reached Helvellyn.

"One minor difficulty had been worrying me subconsciously all morning", Leeming recalled. "We had told no-one that we were going to attempt the flight that day. Sandham and the other watchers did not know we were coming". Aside from not having any ground assistance, there would be no witnesses.

But then the lone figure, Dodds, was seen at the summit. Leeming told the press that, at this moment, "we decided to go for it" at the top rather than land on the prepared strip lower down.

BELOW: G-EBPH (foreground) with two other Gosports, the Armstrong Siddeley Mongoose-powered G-EBUY, and an example with a Gnome Monosoupape.

AEROPLANE

