

# They Came From the Skies

East Anglia is well known for its wide skies and our sky can be busy when the Air Forces are out practising. Looking through the archives I see that several fighter planes fell out of the sky around Ely in the 1950s. However many other unexpected arrivals have appeared over the years.

From The Cambridge Independent Press 21<sup>st</sup> May 1909:

It is stated that a mysterious airship has been discerned in Downham Fen. One evening, about 8 o'clock, a farmer at Oxloode named James Wilkin was walking with his son in one of the droves, when he heard what at first he thought was a motor car. The whirr of machinery caused the farmer to look behind and the in front of him. "Didn't you hear that motor car?" he said to his son, who thereupon replied, "Didn't you see it? Why, it was in the air about 200 feet high. It was an aeroplane." Other workmen near by also witnessed the airship's flight. It was broad daylight at the time.

From the Ely Standard 30<sup>th</sup> September 1927:

When a large monoplane was forced to descend, owing to engine trouble, at Little Downham, on Tuesday afternoon, a large number of residents rushed to the field in which it had landed, one belonging to Mr John Stevens, Hithe Farm. The plane, which was of the Avro Lynx type and bore the registration number F2269, was driven by Sgt. Flowerday, of Uphaven, who had left Duxford R.A.F. aerodrome at 3:05 that afternoon. The machine came down on a piece of the field that had been left fallow and a safe landing was effected. The cause of the forced descent was engine trouble and the aeroplane was still in the field on Wednesday afternoon, the repairing of the engine not having been finished.

Mr Herbert Curtis, one of Mr Stevens' employees, told our representative he was working a tractor in the field when the monoplane came down. "The engine kept backfiring." He said, "and the aeroplane swept round from the direction of Pymoor to Downham and then turned safely."

Several residents kindly showed the Sergeant the way to the Post Office, where ha phoned to Duxford for assistance and about 5pm two aeroplanes came from Sutton Bridge. However, it was found necessary to send again to Duxford and a break-down squad came over to see to the engine. They were under the charge of Corpl. F Robinson and were

billeted in the Fox and Hounds for the night, each taking a turn at guarding the plane.

Sergt. Flowerday, who was flying solo, was uninjured, and the plane was not damaged. The necessary repairs having been effected, the machine was able to leave Little Downham about 4:30 on Wednesday afternoon.

#### From the Ely Standard 26<sup>th</sup> May 1933:

Quite a fair amount of excitement was caused in Coveney on Tuesday evening when it became known that an aeroplane had descended in a field not far from the village.

Local youths raced to the scene on their bicycles and they found that the machine had come to rest in a field belonging to Mr G Green, of the Hythe, Little Downham, and quite near to his house.

It was discovered the plane was owned by the Scarborough Aero Club, and in addition to the pilot, contained two passengers, both gentlemen. It was a Gypsy Moth machine, and quite small, and those young men who were fortunate enough to get near it, were informed that he was flying from Scarborough to Norwich and, having lost his way, descended for information as to his whereabouts.

After being informed that he should follow the railway lines, the pilot quickly got the machine into the air and flew off.

#### From the Ely Standard 24<sup>th</sup> February 1956:

Residents of Little Downham can sleep soundly in their beds tonight - the mystery of "The Thing" is solved. In January we published an account of the finding of an aluminium sphere which had dropped by parachute - after somehow travelling the 70 miles from Nottingham - into a field at North Fen.

Attached to the sphere was a label giving the name and address of the sender. This newspaper, intrigued by the discovery, wrote asking for details of the method of despatch.

After a delay of nearly a month a reply was received this week, in which the gentleman concerned stated: "The spheres are released from my place of work and followed by radar sets with the object of checking the accuracy of the set. The parachute is attached as a protection against damage in case the balloon fails."

When the sphere was found there was no sign of a balloon, or its remains having ever been attached, and the absence of such evidence caused the mystery. (One for the conspiracy theorists there).

From the Ely Standard 29<sup>th</sup> March 1957:

A runaway barrage balloon caused electricity failure in seven villages in the Ely district on Monday, which left most of them without current for more than six hours.

The balloon was one of a pair which escaped from the Ministry of Supply establishment at Cardington, Bedfordshire at 11:30 a.m. They had been moored one above the other, and were being wound in after a frayed cable had been noticed, when they broke away.

Once free they shot up to about 5,000 feet, where atmospheric pressure caused the smaller balloon to burst. The other - of the type used for wartime defence, and about 60 feet long - stayed aloft. With it were carried the tatters of its companion and several lengths of cable and rope.

The first part of its 35 mile flight across country was watched by a Ministry experimental officer from Cardington, who followed it by road. For about 45 minutes it lingered over Caxton Gibbet. Then it was blown in the direction of Cambridge, where the officer lost contact. Eastern Electricity Board officials plotted its course from Oakington, where it was at about 10,000 feet, into the Ely area. It made a rapid descent at this point, and at Wentworth the dragging cables and fabric of the deflated balloon fouled the 11,000 volt overhead power line. The line was severed, two conductors were broken and two poles were left hanging at precarious angles.

The break, which came at 1:50 pm tripped the Histon - Ely feeder at Ely main substation, and supplies were cut off from the seven villages. They were Haddenham, Sutton, Mepal, Witcham, Coveney, Wentworth and Wardy Hill. The balloon's progress over Sutton airfield was followed by two American servicemen. It carried on into the Wardy Hill area, and the cables became entangled round a telegraph pole at Wayhead, Coveney.

Farm workers secured the cable, and the balloon hung overhead for half an hour before its great pulling power freed it once more. It caught up again in a tree not far away, and this time it stayed. In its travels between Wentworth and its final anchor point, the cable uprooted a tree stump and two clothes posts in a farm labourer's garden, and did more serious

damage to the overhead 11,000 volt lines. This was just before it stopped in Coveney. It ripped out three conductors and 30 yards of line, dropping them in a field, pulled out two poles and dragged two more out of straight.

As the balloon swayed above the tree-top by which it was held farmers brought out .22 rifles and the Americans who had followed it took pot shots with their service carbines, but still it stayed in the air.

During the afternoon the Ministry official arrived with R.A.F. personnel from Cardington. They brought the balloon down with a winch and deflated it. Earlier farm workers had suggested using a tractor to try and bring it down. The experimental officer advised against this, pointing out that it had a pulling power of nearly five tons!

Of the villages affected by the power breakdown, Haddenham suffered least, being back in service within 35 minutes. Sutton was "off current" for two hours and the remaining five parishes were reconnected at 8 p.m., six hours and ten minutes after the break.

On Tuesday morning an Electricity Board official had high praise for the speed and efficiency with which his repair gang had coped with the job. The Post Office stated that damage was caused to lines serving the Pymoor and Sutton telephone exchanges, and thirteen subscribers were out of service. Repairs were put in hand straight away and it was hoped they would be completed later on Tuesday.

From the Ely Standard 18<sup>th</sup> April 1958:

*SPUTNIK II OVER ELY*



The Russian Satellite, Sputnik II, which is reported to have come down on Monday, passed over Ely on Saturday evening on one of its last circuits of the Earth. It was a clear night and our picture shows its course.

Sputnik 2 was the second spacecraft launched into Earth orbit and the first to carry a living animal, a dog named Leika who died a few hours into the launch.

**Robin Pearl**