

An unexpected aircraft landing on the River Shannon

by Michael Kirwan

Limerick people had become accustomed to aeroplanes landing on the River Shannon at Foynes, during the Second World War. However, an unscheduled landing in 1946, a year after the end of the war, caught the people of Limerick city by surprise.

In April 1942 the Royal Air Force established a base in Bishop's Court, County Down. Over the years a number of different units were based there including No. 7 Air Navigation School. The squadron was based there from 31 May 1945 to 4 June 1947.

The Air Navigation School used Avro Anson twin-engine aircraft for training purposes. The Anson was developed from the Avro 652 airliner and named after British Admiral George Anson. It was developed for maritime reconnaissance, but became obsolete in this role. It was then deemed suitable as a multi-engine aircrew trainer and became the mainstay of the British Commonwealth Air Training plan. By the end of production in 1952, a total of 8,138 had been built by Avro in nine variants, with a further 2,882 built by Federal Aircraft Ltd in Canada from 1941. The nickname for the Anson in the RAF was 'Annie'.

On 19 November 1946 an Anson 1 MG902 departed Bishop's Court on a routine navigational exercise around 2 p.m. The call-sign of this particular aircraft was 'FFNH'. The exercises were usually carried out in the North of Ireland, Scotland and around the Isle of Man in the Irish Sea.

The crew of four were Flight-Lieut. Kenneth Jeffrey (21) of Linthorpe, Middlesborough, Yorks; Flight-Sgt. Strainger G Docking (20) of Mount Parade, York City; Radio Officer Terence Thomas (19) of Bracegrove, Tottenham,

Avro Anson ZK-RRA in flight, Ardmore Airport (2012)



and Warrant Officer Donald Messum (20).

They lost their bearings in fog and sent out repeated SOS messages but they made no contact with any radio station. The plane was running low on fuel when they saw the lights of Limerick city.

Retired publican Joe Malone, from Denmark Street, was in Burton's Billiard Saloon in O'Connell Street watching a snooker game between two well-known characters Mickey (Corky) Ryan and Paddy O'Brien. He recalls: As Corky bent over the table, his cue well chalked, the whites of his eyes matched the cue ball in colour. Suddenly the lights flashed off, and an almighty roar was heard overhead. All eyes turned to the ceiling, which was mostly glass. Some ran to the big window, "It's an aeroplane", said young Crowe, as he fled in terror, knocking the pot of glue used for cue tipping..... The snooker game was soon forgotten, as the

plane became the centre of conversation. The engine could be heard missing a beat every now and then.

Meanwhile in other parts of Limerick strange things were happening. A man was seen lighting matches on top of Rank's Silo; people were waving at the pilot and trying to point him in the direction of Rineanna. "It's gone up to Singland", the crowd at William Street shouted. Thousands of eyes turned skywards.

After circling for half-an-hour in the dark over Limerick city between 7 and 7.30 p.m. the crew managed to pick out the street lights along the river and the River Shannon. They decided to land on the river. The plane struck the water roughly where Shannon Bridge is now located and taxied into the embankment and came to rest opposite Limerick Docks in Cleve's Bank embedded in the foreshore. It was a perfect landing. The crew were even able to walk along the wing without even getting wet and walked along the bank



Picture of the Anson after it crash landed on the Shannon.

towards the city. They first met Garda Superintendent Colleran pushing his bike. They then met Mr Edward Molloy, Westfields and Paddy Reid the well-known international rugby player.

Mr. Brian O'Reilly of Clontarf, Dublin, an engineer at Ardnacrusha, County Clare who saw the crash from across the river, procured a boat, under the impression that some of the crew would be in the water. He found the plane deserted, and aware of the possible damage to delicate instruments from the rising tide, he removed the radio, the bomb sights, a parachute, a dinghy and other equipment which he handed over to the Garda authorities. A note was left to the effect that the wireless had gone out of order. Immediately after the crash the Limerick Fire Brigade ambulances and fire services from Shannon Airport rushed to the scene as hundreds of people gathered.

Joe Malone remembers that "The plane was stripped clean in a matter of hours. The scavenger's left no evidence of aeronautical life inside."

Edgar Heenan of Westfield's recalls "young lads going around Limerick with rings on their fingers made from the piping in the aircraft."



Joe Malone

Wing-Commander A.V.R. Johnstone, British Air Attaché in Dublin, came a few days later to inspect the wreckage. He returned taking the bomb sight and radio equipment from the plane with him. He told reporters that the plane could not be salvaged as it had been exposed in the water for too long.

Sadly, in February 1949 Kenneth Jeffrey, the pilot of the Anson, was killed while carrying out his first solo flight in a Spitfire. It was recorded that at the time of the accident he was undertaking unauthorised low flying and aerobatics.



Paddy Reid, famous Limerick rugby player.

Acknowledgement:

I would like to thank Tony Kearns, Colin McKeeman, Edgar Heenan, Joe Malone and Nina Hadaway, Royal Air Force Museum, London for their assistance with this article.

Sources:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avro_Anson
The Irish Times 21 November 1946.
The Irish Press 20 November 1946.
The Irish Independent 20 November 1946.
www.yorkshire-aircraft.co.uk/aircraft/planes/46-50/pk617.html



Scene where the Anson landed in 1946, photographed in 2016. (Courtesy of Michael Kirwan).

Michael Kirwan is a native of Newmarket-on-Fergus, County Clare and is now living in Limerick. He works for the Irish Aviation Authority at their North Atlantic Communication centre at Ballygirreen, County Clare. He has a keen interest in local history and genealogy and is chairman of Emerald Athletic Club in Limerick.