



Group of Shannon Aero Club members and some visitors at Ardhu on the occasion of the Whit Air Rally, 1951.—Back row (l. to r.), Sam Pratt, Pat Stanton, Christy Humphrey, Sid Seed, O. Thompson, Pat Duggan, Vincent C. G. Deeney. Centre row—Pat Murphy, Mrs. Brerton, P. Lagan, Olive Byrne, R. Cusack, — McCord, J. Lagan. Front row—E. Brerton, A. Toppin, P. Byrne.



Group pictured at the opening of Coonagh Airfield on August 31, 1947. L. to r. — Quillinan, Captain C. J. Hanrahan, Captain J. P. Seymour, Colonel P. Maher, Colonel P. Maher, A. G. Toppin, J. B. S. Lawlor, P. Byrne, Captain E. W. Kennedy.

Death of the world's oldest pilot recalls an interesting era in Limerick flying

THE EARLY YEARS OF THE SHANNON AERO CLUB

The death last week of Mr. G. Toppin recalls the great part he played over the past 30 years in the promotion of the Shannon Aero Club at Coonagh and in the fostering of public interest in flying. He himself held a flying licence up to the remarkable age of 81, when he was taken to his final rest in the world.

Since an aero club was founded here in 1939, he devoted all his leisure time to the many aspects of flying and in tribute to him and to his comrades, who did so much to popularise flying in Limerick in those early days, perhaps no time is more appropriate than the present to the beginnings of the movement that in recent years has blossomed into the Shannon Flying Services.

It all began in April, 1939, when Mr. C. F. Bruton, honorary secretary of the Irish Junior Aviation Club in Dublin, wrote to a Limerick member, Mr. Gus Quillinan suggesting "why not form a branch of this club in your town? It would help to make the country air-minded."

There were many to lend a hand and the original committee was helped by such as Alderman Dan Bourke, T.D.; A. G. Toppin, P. F. Quillinan, the engineering firm of Messrs. Hays Brothers Ltd. and the City Vocational Education Committee.

The latter body considered the movement as having sufficient educational value to warrant the granting of a room for lecture purposes. And the local Press contributed more than a fair share to the club's ultimate success.

On August 27, 1939, the first local model flying competition was held at Ballycormin. The contest was a great encouragement to the movement. Many new members were enrolled and on September 22 the first general meeting was held and the club formally into being.

The minutes of this meeting showed that a Mr. A. G. Toppin was president, but only after considerable pressure—the office of vice-president, since then, Andrew Toppin had been inseparably linked with the club.

The next object, the introduction of actual flying instruction, was now tackled. At this time the Dublin Club was receiving tuition at Weston Park, Lixfield, where Mr. P. W. Kennedy had established a flying school. In March, 1940, six of the Limerick members travelled there and received their first lessons. During the trip, the possibility of introducing flying instruction at Coonagh was discussed and Mr. Kennedy agreed to send an instructor and one machine to Limerick periodically during the

summer, provided that suitable facilities were available. The Department of Industry and Commerce was most helpful and, after some discussions, the club was granted permission to engage in flying instruction at Rineanna, subject to certain obvious restrictions.

This was, indeed, a remarkable advance in the short space of 12 months. But in the following month, May, a ban which lasted until the end of the War was placed on all private flying.

The summer months of 1940 were troubled ones for Ireland. There were invasion scares, and the real pinch of the many restrictions was beginning to be felt. Many of the club's members joined the Defence Forces or went their various ways, and the organisation that had been built up so hopefully during the previous 12 months had now come to nothing.

However, in the winter of 1943 a few of the old committee got together and prepared plans for the revival that must ultimately come. In August, 1944, an exhibition of models was arranged for the Limerick Horse Show, where a stand was shared with the Maritime Institute.

About this time commercial flying had been resumed at Rineanna and members of the control staff—with the permission of the Department of Industry and Commerce—offered to lecture to the club members. Here the club first contacted Captain J. P. Saul, senior control officer, who was to prove a very good friend to the youthful organisation.

Captain Saul first supervised the preparation of a course of lectures and initiated the programme by giving a public lecture at the Grand Central Cinema. The subject was an account of the historic crossing of the North Atlantic by Sir Charles Kingsford-Smith and companions in the "Southern Cross."

It will be recalled that Capt. Saul was navigator on this flight and his lecture, which was heard by some 1,000 people, was considered one of the best given in Limerick. Its value to the club was considerable.

During the winter months semi-public lectures were given by aviation personnel, but the series of technical lectures to members was given entirely by Captain Saul.

The club was again firmly on its feet and the year 1945-46 was one of great endeavour and optimism. And the World War was over. The president at this time was Capt. Saul and the chairman was a founder-member, Mr. P. J. Moran.

Rooms were acquired at No. 5 Mallow Street and lectures were given there. The finance committee's first scheme was, under the supervision of Mr. Paddy Duggan, carried into effect and led to the purchase, shortly afterwards, of the club's first aircraft.

The pilot who delivered the new machine, Mr. D. B. Fincher, was shortly afterwards appointed chief instructor to

succeed Mr. Kearney, who had taken up residence in South Africa. In 1947 the emergence of the Club as an active flying organisation was complete. On August 31, Coonagh Airfield was officially opened by the Mayor of Limerick, Councillor P. O'Connell. Among those present on that historic day were: P. M. Duggan, Gus Quillinan, Captain C. J. Hanrahan, Captain J. P. Seymour, J. T. Seymour, Colonel P. Maher, A. G. Toppin, J. B. S. Lawlor, P. Byrne and Captain P. W. Kennedy.

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