A Magnificent Town and its Flying Machines

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Bexley does not seem to feature significantly in the history of powered flight, but all that is about to change. Stand aside the Wright Brothers and Charles Lindbergh as the town of Crayford steps into the limelight, thanks to a £50,000 grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF).

A Magnificent Town and Its Flying Machines will be going up-diddley-up-up in everyone's estimation with a project that emphasises its major role in early 20th and even 19th century aviation.

Home of the original Vickers Aircraft factory, Crayford is this year celebrating the 90th anniversary of the first non-stop flight across the Atlantic by British aviation pioneers Alcock and Brown in a Vickers Vimy, designed and, it is believed, built in the town.

This year also marks the 115th anniversary of Sir Hiram Maxim's Crayford-built steam-powered flying machine which in 1894 at Baldwyn's Park, Bexley, became the first heavier than air machine to lift itself off the ground; a feat achieved ten years before the Wright Brothers in the United States.

Sir Hiram was better known as the inventor of the Maxim machine gun and Vickers also became known as the manufacturer of aircraft and armaments supplying British forces in both world wars.

As the town's main employer Vickers was responsible for transforming Crayford from a rural village into an industrial town. This transformation together with the historical highlights will be captured on a new website, in educational resources and a play on the life of Sir Hiram Maxim, a touring exhibition and the creation of specially-commissioned artworks involving local schools and the community. The finished artworks will be installed in a new library.

Masterminding the project is the London Borough of Bexley Local Studies & Archive Centre, whose corporate archivist Simon McKeon, explained: "The funding will enable us to deliver a range of innovative and exciting activities, that will involve the whole community, to celebrate Crayford's links with the early history of flight. I can't wait to get started."

For the Heritage Lottery Fund, Head of HLF London Sue Bowers, said: "This project will raise awareness of this overlooked aspect of the UK's industrial heritage and will help to emphasise Crayford's unique and pioneering role in aviation history."

Notes to editors

Captain John Alcock and Lieutenant Arthur Whitten Brown, in a modified Vickers Vimy Mark IV, made the first non-stop aerial crossing of the Atlantic. They took off from Lester's Field, near St. Johns, Newfoundland on June 14,1919, and landed sixteen hours, twenty-seven minutes later at Clifden in Ireland.

Sir Hiram Maxim's 3.5 ton flying machine ran on a track and was propelled by powerful twin naphtha fuelled steam engines. On July 31, 1894 he made a record breaking speed run at 42 miles per hour. The aeroplane lifted from the 1,800-foot track and broke a restraining mechanism, crashing after a distance of about 200 feet.

Using money raised through the National Lottery, the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) sustains and transforms a wide range of heritage for present and future generations to take part in, learn from and enjoy. From museums, parks and historic places to archaeology, natural environment and cultural traditions, we invest in every part of our diverse heritage. HLF has supported more than 28,000 projects, allocating over £4.2billion across the UK, with over £840 million granted in London alone.

Further information

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