

## **AMY JOHNSON PIONEERING AVIATOR**



Amy Johnson was born at 154 St. George's Road, Hull on 1st July 1903, the daughter of John William Johnson, a member of the old-established family firm of Andrew Johnson, Knudtson and Company, fish merchants, and Amy Hodge, granddaughter of William Hodge, Mayor of Hull in 1860. The Johnson's lived on a street associated with the fishing industry; the 1903 Kelly's directory show St. George's Road was littered with marine engineers, skippers and fish merchants. Amy was the eldest of four girls, the youngest, Betty, being born sixteen years later. The Johnson family history is an interesting one. Amy's grandfather (father's side), Anders Jorgensen, had migrated to this country from the Danish island of Fyn. Her father had a brief spell of

prospecting in British Columbia. So perhaps there was a pioneering/adventurous gene passed on through the generations to Amy. On her mother's side, Amy's great grandfather, William Hodge, was first sheriff of Hull, then Mayor of Hull in 1860-61 and then an alderman. He was a mill owner who had prospered and made enough money to buy Newington Hall on Anlaby Road. Hodge also had money enough to present Hull Corporation with a full-length marble statue of Edward I. Unfortunately this sort of philanthropic generosity coupled with a poor business sense meant Hodge had to give up his grand house and move to the more modest Coltman Street.

When Amy was about 6 years old the family moved to 241 Boulevard. This was to be the first of several moves. Next was 48 Alliance Avenue where they remained for 8 years. Then came 85 Park Avenue until 1931 when the family moved to Bridlington. Each one of these moves represented a step up for the Johnson's and was evidence of their rising fortune. Until she was twelve, Amy attended various small private schools with only one end-of-term report surviving from the Eversleigh House School at 557 Anlaby Road (near Glencoe Street). However, in 1915 she started at the Boulevard Secondary School, where she stayed until she was almost nineteen. It was around this time that Amy began a six-year relationship with a Swiss businessman, Hans Arregger, who was living in Hull. Amy was 18 years old, Hans was 27 and between 1922-1928 Amy wrote 286 letters to Hans. Amy had hoped they would marry, but the relationship broke down and Hans married another woman, but he kept Amy's

letters for the rest of his life (they are now held by the Hull Local Studies Library). Three years at Sheffield University followed, and after receiving her B.A. degree in the summer of 1925, she returned to Hull to undertake a secretarial course at Wood's College, on Spring Bank. Her first job was in an accountant's office in Bowlalley Lane, but she left after three months because of a nervous breakdown. The period following this was particularly important for her future. She almost certainly made her first flight at this time, as a passenger on a five-shilling pleasure trip, in a plane operated by the Surrey Flying Services at the Endike Lane flying ground in November 1926 (a fact which seems significant in view of her later achievements). In the spring of 1926 she wrote to Hans: "... Mollie and I went up in the aeroplane. We both enjoyed it, but I would have liked to have done some stunts." She also changed her job for a post in Morison's Advertising Agency, which had its offices in one of the Georgian houses in Albion Street (now demolished). This was a move which made her realise that a career in advertising might be a possibility, and encouraged her to consider leaving Hull for London where there would be more opportunities. Emotional problems and disagreements with her parents added to the pressures on her to leave home, and she eventually went to London in early 1927, when she was twenty-three years old.

Her first weeks in London were not happy. Unable to obtain an advertising job, she took a position as a trainee salesgirl in the Peter Jones store, a post which in the 1920's had a few prospects. Later, through a family friend, she was introduced to one of the partners in a firm of city solicitors, who offered her a secretarial job which she kept for two years. Had flying not intervened it is probable that she would have been articled to the firm and eventually qualified as a solicitor herself.

Aviation as a sport was becoming popular in the late 1920's, and in September 1928, Amy began to take lessons at her own expense, as a member of the London Aeroplane Club, at the de Havilland aerodrome at Stag Lane, near Edgware. After her first six lessons, she wrote home saying: "I have an immense belief in the future of flying", and from then on it became the most important thing in her life. After gaining her pilot's licence, she left her office to work full-time as a mechanic at Stag Lane, to prepare herself for the examination necessary to qualify as a ground engineer, which she passed in December 1929. She was the first woman to receive such a licence from the Air Ministry, and for a time was the only woman in the world in possession of a valid Ground Engineer's licence. This achievement attracted publicity in the popular press, and her decision to fly solo to Australia, to try to break the record set up by the Australian Bert Hinkler in 1928, was announced shortly afterwards. This Australian flight (May 1930), in a Gipsy Moth aircraft named 'Jason', a contraction of the registered trade mark of her father's business, aroused enormous enthusiasm, and the press and newsreel cameras gave her so much publicity that she became one of the world's best-known personalities. Amy failed to beat the record, but was the first woman to fly solo to Australia and in recognition of this was awarded the CBE in the King's birthday honours list. Other honours followed including gold medals from the Society of Engineers and the Royal Aero Club.

There was great public interest in Amy's achievement. In 1930 a song, *Amy Wonderful Amy* was written. In 1931 the first Amy biography, *Amy Johnson, Lone Girl Flier*, was written by the journalist Charles Dixon. He had first met Amy in connection with her flight to Australia and the book is based on his own impressions of her character and personality. It is rather an idealised view, coming so soon after the 1930 flight, but is interesting because in it he predicts her influence on aviation in general, and on the future of Hull in particular. In his opinion, "We may look forward to Amy Johnson taking at least a prominent part in the development of Hull's municipal aerodrome...It would be typical of that enterprising city under the influence of Major Sir Arthur Atkinson to make Amy the first aerodrome manager in this country". Interest in Amy's private life was also seen in the press.

On 29<sup>th</sup> July 1932, Amy married fellow aviator Jim Mollison after a whirlwind romance – they had only known each other for a week when Jim proposed. The pair became a celebrity couple and their lives were not entirely their own anymore. However, marriage and celebrity status didn't stop Amy's flying achievements. Also in 1932 came another record flight, this time it was the UK – Cape return flight. Amy made the UK to Cape leg taking 10.5 hours off the previous record held by her husband Jim. In 1933 Amy and Jim flew together to achieve a new record of flying from the UK to the USA non-stop in a plane named *Seafarer* which Jim had adapted by installing huge fuel tanks throughout the plane in order for it to make the journey in one go. The trip nearly ended in disaster when just 55 miles short of their destination the couple ran out of fuel and crash landed with such force that the pair ended up in hospital. However, they had achieved their goal and were rewarded with a typical American style ticker tape parade along the Broadway in New York.

Amy never forgot her hometown and in 1932 "The Amy Johnson Cup for Courage" was presented to the City of Hull. The cup was paid for with a purse of sovereigns Amy received from school children in Sydney and was to be awarded each year to a Hull child (under the age of 17) for a deed of courage.

In spite of the celebrity and record-breaking achievements, Amy found it almost impossible to earn a regular living as a commercial pilot. Only two jobs had materialised in the 1930s, one for a few weeks in 1934, as a pilot for the daily London to Paris trips of Hillman Airways, the other for nine months in 1939 on the Solent air ferry service. The war gave Amy the opportunity she needed, and she became a pilot in the women's section of the Air Transport Auxiliary, flying machines and men to wherever they were needed. However, it was to cost Amy her life. On Sunday, 5th January, 1941, she was drowned when the plane which she was ferrying crashed into the Thames Estuary during rough weather. She was thirty-seven years old, and in her twelve year career had flown more than two and a half thousand hours.

The circumstances surrounding Amy Johnson's death were mysterious. Rumours at the time suggested that she was involved in some sort of undercover operation, and that she had not been alone in the plane. She was

not officially presumed dead until December 1943, when the Probate Court heard evidence from eyewitnesses of the crash. In 1961, the bones of a woman washed up at Herne Bay were thought for a while to be hers, but this was proved to be untrue, and no trace of her body has ever been found. Recently a claim has been made that Amy's plane was actually shot down by Britain's own anti-aircraft guns (today we refer to this as "friendly fire"). However, some commentators have their doubts about this claim as the anti-aircraft guns were 20 miles from where Amy's plane came down. A rescue boat did reach Amy, but it is believed the current from its propeller sucked her under water and she drowned. However, the mystery may never be resolved.

Her connection with Hull has been marked by the city in several ways. There is of course the Amy Johnson Cup mentioned above. There is a commemorative bust at Kingston High School (formerly the Boulevard Secondary School), her old school. Her personal collection of books, which includes childhood reading, and copies of works presented to her by their authors, is in the Hull Local Studies Library. For visitors to Hull, the most noticeable memorial is the statue in Prospect Street.

In June 1973, an Amy Johnson Memorial Committee was formed by a group of Hull people who felt that her pioneering flights had not been sufficiently honoured in her own city. An appeal to raise £3,000 by public subscription was launched, and a local sculptor, Harry Ibbetson, who had already produced the Robinson Crusoe plaque for Queen's Gardens, was commissioned to design a statue. In three months, half the money had been raised, contributions included gifts from local industry and donations from all over the country. A site was agreed in front of the new shopping complex then under construction in Prospect Street. The airwoman Sheila Scott unveiled the statue on 18th June, 1974. Carved from Portland Stone, it shows Amy Johnson in flying gear, and the inscription reads:- 'Amy Johnson, CBE, 1903-1941, Pioneer airwoman. Born 1st July 1903 at 154 St George's Road, Hull. She made record flights from England to Australia in 1930 (solo 19 days) and to India (solo 6 days) in 1931, to Japan (11 days) and Cape Town (solo 4½). In 1933, to USA, in 1934 to India, in 1936 to Cape Town and back. She died on active service 5th January, 1941 "May her fame live on"'. Guests at the ceremony included civic leaders and Amy's only surviving sister, Mrs Molly Jones, who had travelled from Surrey for the occasion.

In 1959, Amy Johnson's trophies and souvenirs were given by her family to the Bridlington Corporation, and are now permanently on display at Sewerby Hall (the house Amy had opened in 1936). A copy of the printed catalogue which lists more than a hundred items, including gifts, trophies, and the log book of her flights from 1928 to 1938, is in the Local Studies Library at the Hull Central Library. The library also has a collection of books and articles on the famous airwoman, including *Sky Roads of the World*, published in 1939, it is a survey of major air routes and the future of aviation, and *Myself when young*, a chapter taken from a book of memoirs of famous women, edited by Margot Asquith, in which Amy writes of her childhood, her parents, and her schooldays at the Boulevard High School.

Most of the books written about Amy Johnson concentrate on her flying achievements, especially her first great Australian flights; very few give much detail about her private life. One of the more fully researched biographies is Constance Babington Smith's "Amy Johnson", published in 1967, which covers all aspects of her life and career. Information for this very substantial book was gained from newspaper reports, collections of private letters, and interviews with Amy's relatives and friends, and it corrects the inaccuracies in earlier, less objective studies. For Hull readers, particularly, who remember the Johnson family, know the places described in the section of Amy's early life, and who may have been in the crowds who welcomed her back to Hull after the flights, this book is of interest even more for its assessment of Amy Johnson the woman than for its account of Amy Johnson the flier. The decision to take up flying, the motives behind her Australian trip, her unhappy relationship with a Swiss businessman based in Hull, and her strange, brief marriage to Jim Mollison, are described with sympathy, and the book also has many unusual photographs. Two other biographies worth reading are David Luff's *Amy Johnson: Enigma in the Sky* published in 2002 and Midge Gillies' *Amy Johnson – Queen of the Air* published in 2003, the centenary year of Amy's birth (for other biographies see the attached bibliography).

For those interested in finding out more about Amy Johnson and her career contemporary newspaper and periodical articles are of great value and two very interesting items have recently been given to the Local Studies Library. One is a special memorial edition of the *Woman Engineer*, for March 1941. This is the journal of the Woman's Engineering Society, of which Amy was a past president, and this issue contains tributes from men and women who knew her, including Lord Wakefield, her first backer, and the last article she ever wrote, "A day's work in the A.T.A.", sent to the editor a few days before her death. The other is a copy of *Picture Post*, for May 1942, which has a feature on the new film *They Flew Alone*, starring Anna Neagle as Amy Johnson and Robert Newton as Jim Mollison. In it stills from the film are shown alongside photographs of the same events in real life, such as the first meeting of Amy and Jim Mollison, their first flight together, and their crash in the United States in 1933. The library also has complete files of the local daily and weekly newspapers, which cover each step of her career in much greater detail than the national papers, and include special celebration issues.

## SELECT BOOKLIST

### AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

- JOHNSON, AMY                    *Myself When Young*. Collection of essays edited by Margot Asquith.Muller. 1933
- Sky Roads Of The World*. Chambers. 1939.

### BIOGRAPHIES AND BOOKS WITH CHAPTERS ON AMY JOHNSON

- DIXON, C.                         *Amy Johnson - Lone Girl Flier*  
Sampson Low. 1930
- ELSOM, K.                        *Hull Personalities, Part 1*  
Avenues Press. 1990
- FINCH, B.                         *Amy Johnson, Global Adventurer*  
Humberside College of Higher Education.  
1989
- GEORGE, A.D.                   *Amy Johnson - Was she a Feminist?* 1989
- GILLIES, MIDGE.              *Amy Johnson – Queen of the Air*. Weidenfeld & Nicolson. 2003.
- GREY, E.                         *Winged Victory: The Story of Amy Johnson*  
Constable Young Books Ltd. 1966
- HARTLEY, M. and  
INGILBY, J.                       *Yorkshire Portraits*. Dent. 1961
- HEAD, J.                         “Amy Mollison's Life Retold As A Film”  
(*Picture Post*. 23.5.1942.)
- HOLMES, W.                     *Seven Adventurous Women*. Bell. 1953
- HULL CITY COUNCIL           *Silvered Wings*. A commemorative brochure for the Amy Johnson Festival 1980.
- KING, A.                         *Golden wings: the story of some women ferry pilots of the Air Transport Auxiliary*. Pearson. 1956
- LUFF, DAVID.                   *Amy Johnson: Enigma in the Sky*. Airline. 2002

LAUWICK, H. SMITH, C.B.	<i>Heroines of the Sky.</i> Muller. 1960 <i>Amy Johnson.</i> Collins. 1967
SNELL, G.	<i>Amy Johnson, Queen of the Air.</i> Hodder & Stoughton. 1980
"WOMAN ENGINEER"	<i>Amy Johnson Memorial Issue.</i> March 1941
YORKSHIRE POST	<i>Amy Johnson 50th Anniversary Supplement.</i> 19th May 1980

#### **FOR CHILDREN**

BELLIS, H.	<i>Amy Johnson.</i> Newnes. 1953
CHARLES, W.	<i>Amy Johnson, a Brave Yorkshire Girl</i> Blackie. 1966
NEWTON, D.	<i>'They Were First.</i> No.7, Johnson, Earhart. Oliver and Boyd. 1969

#### **PRIVATE LIBRARY**

*JOHNSON, AMY.* List of books in Amy Johnson's private library. (Now held in Hull Local Studies Library)

#### **LETTERS**

286 Original Letters (1922-1928) from Amy to Hans Arregger, the Swiss man she hoped to marry

#### **VIDEO**

Newsreel clips of Amy Johnson in Hull, Australia, Japan, Croydon. (1930)

#### **CASSETTE**

REID, A. *Amy Johnson, 1903-1941: A dramatised biography* in stereo. Ivan Berg Associates (Audio Publishing) Ltd. 1976.

Hull Local Studies Library  
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