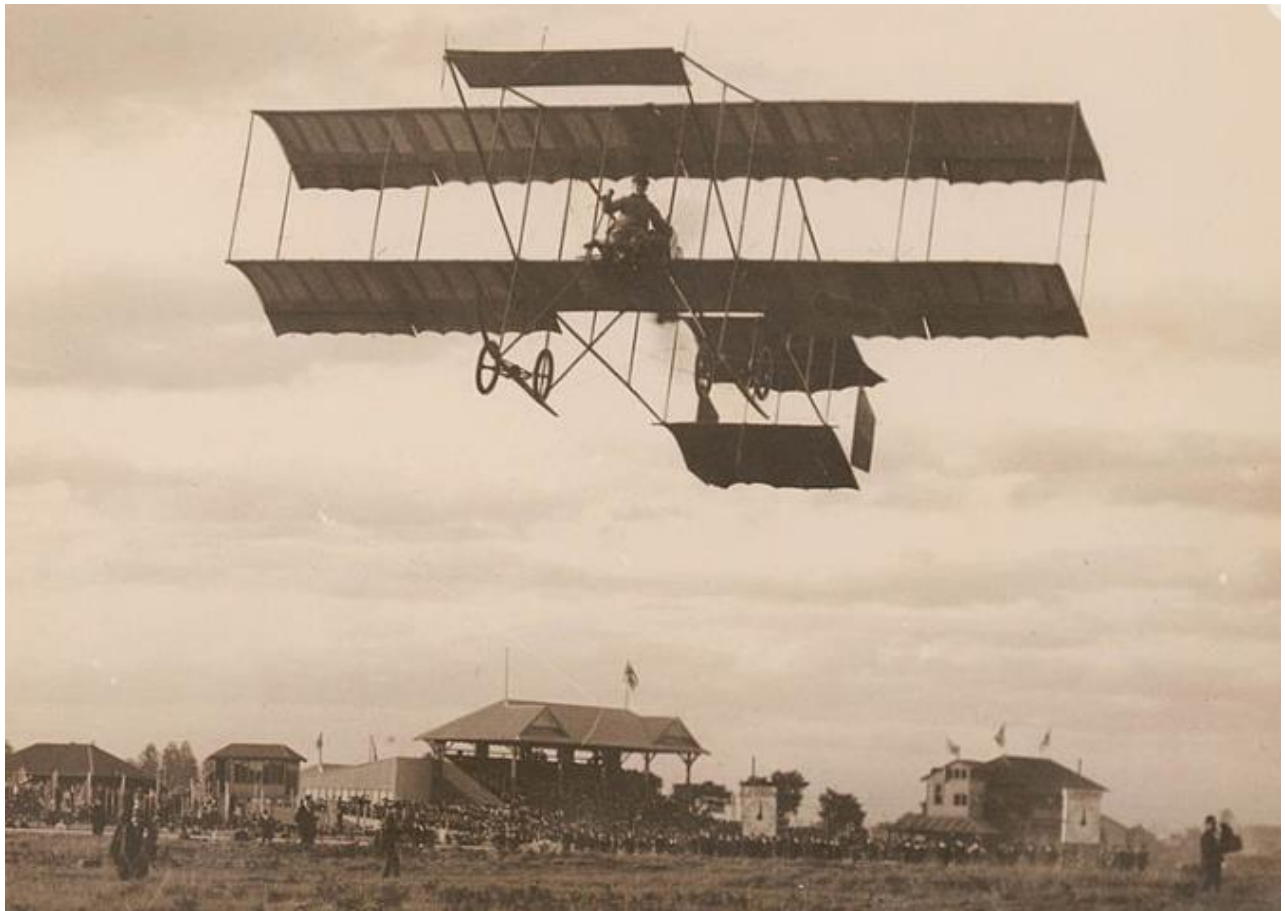


Pioneering flights at Botany Bay, 1910-1911

Percival and Herbert Woodward, and Joseph Joel Hammond, pioneers of powered flight in the Botany area, 1910-1911

By Hugh Tranter



Joseph Joel Hammond flying his Bristol Boxkite at Ascot Racecourse (Mascot, NSW) April 1911. [Image courtesy of State Library of New South Wales, Hood Collection Part II: [Aviation], call number PXE 789 (v.6)]

Introduction

On a windy Saturday in Sydney, on 19 November 1910, father and son Herbert and Percival Woodward wheeled their self-constructed monoplane out of their shed in the suburb of Waterloo. They then transported the monoplane (possibly simply wheeling it on its chassis along the streets) about five or six kilometres south along Botany Road, to a paddock adjoining the beach on the Northern shores of Botany Bay. Here, Percival Woodward conducted a successful eight-minute trial flight of the plane before the aircraft dipped and crashed into the shallows of the bay. Fortunately, Percival was unhurt, but the plane was badly damaged.

Percival Woodward's flight was the second powered, controlled take off in NSW, and the first in the Botany area. For a brief, few days, the flight made headlines around Australia. Unfortunately, it seems the plane never flew again, and the Woodward's monoplane became a by-line in history.

Five months later, New Zealand pilot Joseph Joel Hammond, having already achieved a ground breaking 45-minute flight in Perth on 9 January 1911, arrived in Sydney to conduct a series of flights, using the Ascot Racecourse at Mascot as his base.

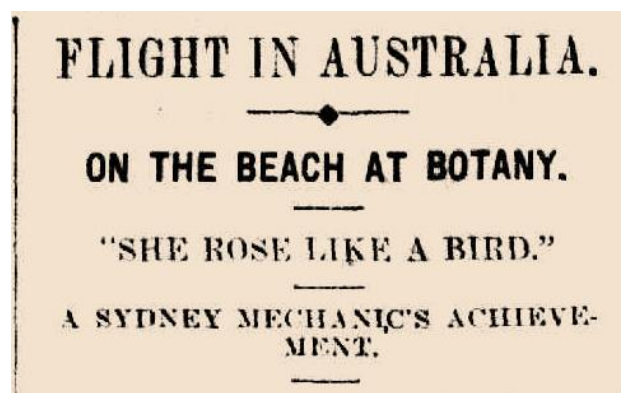
Along with the Woodwards, Hammond and his backers had identified the land around the shores of Botany, flat and accessible to Sydney, as an ideal place to launch flying machines.

The achievements of these two pioneering pilots— particularly Percival Woodward — have become a little lost amongst the milestones of history. In this paper I would like to revisit the detail of their stories, and examine the link to the Botany and Mascot areas of these early 'magnificent men in their flying machines.'

The unheralded Woodwards – flight at Botany Bay in a Bleriot-style monoplane, 19 November 1910

Winston Churchill once made the point that, without records, collective memory fades more quickly than we realise. Churchill wrote ‘No one can understand history without continually relating the long periods which are constantly mentioned, to the experiences of our own short lives. Five years is a lot. Twenty years is the horizon to most people. Fifty years is Antiquityⁱ. Whilst scores of people probably witnessed the transport of the Woodward’s monoplane to Botany and its subsequent flight, those people are no longer with us. We no longer have access to their accounts. The essential fabric of the society and even the streets and houses they lived in are changed forever.

Fortunately, we do have one primary document that gives us a summary of the Woodward flight and the story behind it, a detailed article of 1,000 words in The Daily Telegraph (Sydney) of 22 November 1910ⁱⁱ. The article includes interviews with father and son team Herbert and Percival Woodwardⁱⁱⁱ. It would have been good to have had more details – historians love to have multiple points of reference - but after some research, I realised this was the key surviving record regarding this flight.



The headline of The Daily Telegraph (Sydney), 22 November 1910: flight undertaken by Percival Woodward in a self-constructed Bleriot-style Monoplane

The Woodward catch flying fever

The year 1910 was a breakthrough year for powered flight in Australia. Seven years earlier, the nation had been enthralled at news of the first powered flight in history by Orville Wright at Kittyhawk, North Carolina (17 December, 1903). When Louis Bleriot flew across the English Channel on 25 July 1909, Australians became even more impatient for this remarkable new transportation to be tested on their home shores.


In 1910, two powered, flights occurred in Australia in quick succession. The first flight took place on 17 March 1910, when Fred Constance flew a Bleriot monoplane at Bolivar, South Australia, for 5 minutes, 25 seconds. The next day, in front of a large crowd, the famous and publicity-savvy escape artist and pilot Harry Houdini flew his Voisin aeroplane at Diggers Rest, Victoria. Because Houdini's flight was witnessed by a number of officials – whereas Constance's took place just after dawn in a remote location in South Australia, and was only witnessed by a handful of people- it is Houdini's flight that is recognised as conducting the first controlled, powered flight in Australia (history can be fickle, especially when it comes to establishing 'firsts').

On 18 April 1910, Harry Houdini repeated the dose when he conducted two trial flights in his Voisin biplane in front of a handful of enthusiasts was at Rosehill racecourse in Sydney: the first ever powered flight in NSW. The last flight he conducted in Sydney, in front of a crowd of several hundred, was at Rosehill on 30 April.

In amongst the crowd was a retired mechanic named Herbert Woodward. Herbert Woodward had been employed as an engineer at railway works in England, and had worked at Mort's Docks in Sydney. As *The Daily Telegraph* later reported, 'seeing Mr. Houdini make his sensational flight at Rosehill ... he [Herbert Woodward] caught the flying fever and determined together with his son [Percival], 'to do as well or better.'

Back at their home in the suburb of Waterloo^{iv}, the Woodwards decided to model their plane on Bleriot's monoplane design. Their do-it-yourself approach was like something from a Hollywood movie. They purchased and imported a French Panhard aeronautical engine, at a cost of 55 pounds – about \$8,000 in today's money. They then commenced construction of their monoplane; 'to a great extent, Mr. Woodward's machine is a Bleriot', wrote *The Daily Telegraph*, 'but actually it is of a composite type, there being characteristics of the Antoinette and the Pettier introduced'

The Woodward's built their flying machine with reference to existing designs. The plane was built in six months, with Percival, a mechanic like his father, working on the aircraft in his spare time on Saturdays and Sundays. *The Daily Telegraph* adds 'Mr. Woodward makes no attempt to claim originality in construction. He frankly states that in designing the monoplane he has followed on the lines of several known European machines.'



'The monoplane was taken to Botany Bay, and the father carefully tested every part before he would allow the engine to be started.' (The Daily Telegraph, 22 November, 1911).

The flight

Botany Bay presented itself as an ideal location for the Woodwards to test their monoplane. Botany was only a few kilometres from Waterloo. Botany at that time was made up largely of paddocks, market gardens and bushland. It was a period when aeronautical pioneers picked their own locations: just as Lawrence Hargrave had chosen Stanwell Tops as fit for purpose in testing

his box kite designs in the 1890s, and George Augustine Taylor, in 1909, had flown the first heavier than air machine in Australia at the sand hills of Narrabeen^v.

Saturday 19 November was chosen as a date for the trial flight. *The Daily Telegraph* reported; ‘The weather conditions...were most unsuitable on Saturday last. It was blowing very strongly. But Mr. Percival Woodward would not be restrained. Against his father’s wish, he determined to test the machine by an ascent. The monoplane was taken to Botany Bay, and the father carefully tested every part before he would allow the engine to be started. The machine was anchored to a tree, and Mr. Percival Woodward jumped into the seat and started the engine. In a couple of minutes, the machine was released, and with a run of only about 30 yards rose off the ground to a height at the maximum of about 40 or 50 feet.’

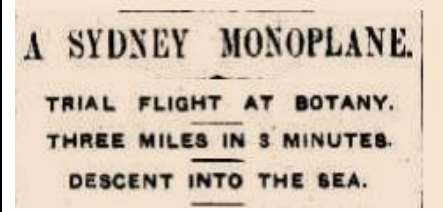



Botany Bay in the 1890s: Courtesy of the State Library of NSW^{vi}

The flight was described by Percival Woodward: ‘I had no doubt that she would rise. I could feel the restless throb under me before the rope was slipped. But when she went tearing off along the ground I, realised that, whatever happened, I must keep her from striking any obstacle. But it could only have been half a minute before I felt a new 'sensation-I was in the air. I followed along the line of beach, so as to keep the wind as nearly as possible dead-on. The steering-gear acted beautifully. A touch of the elevating plane, and she rose like a bird. It's a grand sensation. But I'm sure we should have travelled faster if the wind had not been so strong. In turning I got a fright. The machine nearly canted over, so I made a half right turn instead, and with a big swoop gradually brought her head round to the wind. Then came the mistake. I stopped the engine to descend. I should have slowed down. Instead of gliding down gracefully, the machine was caught broadside on by the wind, and down it went into about four or five feet of water.’

Media reporting and legacy

We do not know if *The Daily Telegraph* approached the Woodwards to report on the flight, or the other way around, but a 1,000-word article showed how newsworthy the event was. There were many short media reports around Australia and New Zealand about the flight. All the reports were shorter and appear to be derivative from the report of *The Daily Telegraph*^{vii}.

	
<p>The Age (Melbourne) 22 November 1910</p>	<p>Barrier Miner (Broken Hill, N.S.W, 22 November 1910 (Both National Library of Australia Trove database)</p>
<p>Examples of media headlines/reports of the flight</p>	

Mr. Herbert Woodward told the reporter that he was planning for their next flight to be ‘officially witnessed and recorded’. But there were no subsequent flights reported. It appears the damage to the plane must have been permanent, and the Woodward’s hopes of conducting subsequent, even more successful flights, did not come to pass. I was unable to find any photographs of the event. Given that it was a trial flight, this is not surprising, although a more media-savvy individual may have made arrangements.

The flight is recognised, and appeared in 20th century lists of early flights, for example, in the *Australian Encyclopedia* (2nd edition, 1977), and the *Victorian Historical Journal*, Volume 28, 1958.

The Woodward’s story was a unique and vibrant one in the age of do-it-yourself pioneers in aviation. It is a pity that the event faded so soon into obscurity. Technology was advancing, and the number of flights taking place were soon to increase dramatically.

‘Up in the bright cerulean over Botany Bay’: J.J. Hammond’s flights in a Bristol Boxkite plane, from Ascot Racecourse, Mascot, March to 1911.

On 9 January 1911, in Perth, Western Australia, New Zealand pilot Joseph Joel Hammond undertook a significant flight of 45 minutes in his Bristol Boxkite plane. This was by far the longest flight conducted in Australia up to this point.

Between January and May 1911, Hammond would go on to conduct 70 flights in Australia. This included a number of flights in Sydney, most of which were conducted from Ascot Racecourse, Mascot located in the area of present-day Kingsford Smith International Airport.

Hammond's first flight in Sydney began on 18 April, 1911 when thousands of paying spectators crowded into the Ascot racecourse to watch Hammond fly a course of about 10 kilometres.^{viii} On 6 May 1911, *The Northern Star* (Lismore) reported flights that Hammond

'Turn your gaze downwards on those dirty sandhills, those thirsty vegetable plots, those squalid huts surrounding them. What vivid colours, what shadows and shades and tints will meet your eyes and gladden your artistic senses!' From a report of *The Sunday Times*, (Sydney), of a flight with JJ Hammond.

conducted on Tuesday 2 May: 'On Tuesday afternoon Mr Hammond made two successful, perhaps, sensational flights at Ascot. The first occupied about 10 minutes and the second about 25. In each he ascended to heights of about 1,000 feet--higher

than ever achieved previously in Sydney. A feature of both flights was the descent. He was seemingly poised at about 1,000 feet above the heads of the spectators, and then, shutting off his engine, and deflecting the plane, came down towards the earth with a rush, gracefully and easily alighting. In his second flight he did some manoeuvring over the racecourse, turning at sharp angles, and so forth.'



Headline from an article in *The Sunday Times* (Sydney), 30 May 1911

On 30 May 1911, *The Sunday Times* (Sydney) published the account of their reporter who flew with Hammond. His report captured the exhilaration of flight, the sensation of seeing the city you live in from a height. He wrote of being in the air: ‘But you are over Botany. Bay now. Is it the force of the wind affecting your sight, or is that imperturbable, cigarette-chewing ox-skin covered automan in front of you playing of some kind of hypnotic tricks on you? The depth of the Bay is surely not more than six inches, wherever you look. Why the sea weed is close to the surface of the water – half an inch, perhaps? And such water! Such sand!’

Conclusion

Mascot became the location for Sydney’s future aerodrome. In 1919, the Australian Aircraft and Engineering Company leased land from the Kensington Racing Club and established an aerodrome at Mascot^{ix}. A canvas hangar was built. In 1921, the Commonwealth Government purchased 65 hectares (161 acres) in Mascot to build an airfield^x. In 1923, when the three-year lease expired, the land leased by the Australian Aircraft and Engineering Company was compulsorily acquired by the Commonwealth Government from the racing club. The first regular flights began in 1924.^{xi}

The pioneering flights of the Woodwards, and J.J. Hammond were unique events around the Botany and Mascot area. It would be great to have witnessed them, and it would be very exciting if this paper were to prompt memories from those, such as grandparents or great-grandparents, that might have left memories behind!



Arrival of Ross and Keith Smith (winners of the England to Australia air race) at Mascot Aerodrome 14 February 1920.^{xii}

Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my thanks to staff at the State Library of NSW for their assistance. I would also like to extend many thanks Kirsten Broderick, Local History Librarian for her information and advice.

End notes

ⁱ Churchill, Winston, *The Birth of Britain*, 1956 (A history of the English-speaking peoples, Book 1). Electronic edition published 2013 by Rosetta Books, LLC, New York. Page 31. Winston Churchill is referring to the beginning of the 'Dark Ages' in Britain, using the 'dim telescopes of research across a gulf of nearly two thousand years.' The quote is generally relevant though, I believe, even though we have such good records through our libraries and institutions. Local history is particularly prone to being lost without eye witness accounts being written down or recorded.

ⁱⁱ National Library of Australia Trove reference: <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/238650063>

ⁱⁱⁱ Every other news report of the flight appears to be derivative from this one source. I referred to about a dozen articles, and when quotes from the Woodward's were included, they were exact words from The Daily Telegraph article

^{iv} I was not able to find records of the Woodwards in the Commonwealth Electoral Roll, or in the *Sands Directory* of 1910 or 1911, which was particularly vexing! I found a birth record of Percival Woodward, whose father's name was Alfred, and Mother, Elizabeth. It enters the world of pure conjecture about the Woodwards when I add that I found an Alfred Woodward living at 8 Lawson Crescent, Alexandria (abutting Waterloo) in the *Sands Directory* of 1910.

^v *Australian Encyclopedia*, 2nd edition, 1977 (Editor in chief, Bruce Pratt), Grolier Society of Australia, Australia, Entry Volume One, on Aviation.

^{vi} Online reference: <https://collection.sl.nsw.gov.au/record/9qoQk151/D5OVWv8jVJJpP>

^{vii} I accessed a range of articles using the National Library of Australia database of online newspapers through Trove. It appears to have been commonplace to use other sources without acknowledgement.

^{viii} *Australian Encyclopedia*, 2nd edition, 1977 (Editor in chief, Bruce Pratt), Grolier Society of Australia, Australia, Entry Volume One, on Aviation.

^{ix} Sydney Airport website fact sheet: <https://www.sydneyairport.com.au/>

^x The Dictionary of Sydney: entry on Botany: <https://dictionaryofsydney.org/>

^{xi} The Dictionary of Sydney: entry on Botany: <https://dictionaryofsydney.org/>

^{xii} From the collections of the State Library of New South Wales [a928596 / SPF/Aeronautics - Smith, Sir Ross & Sir Keith, 1920] (Mitchell Library)