

## Obituary: Jessica Blackburn

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Jessica Blackburn was one of the most colourful and best-known personalities of the early British aviation industry. She was one of the first women to fly in a British monoplane before the First World War, and took part in the King's Cup air races of the 1920s. She also played an important part in the creation and early development of Blackburn Aircraft, whose principal sites in the North of England are still operational today under the ownership of British Aerospace.

Born Jessy Thompson in 1894, the daughter of a wealthy doctor, at Cradley in Worcestershire, she was orphaned in her infancy when both her parents, Wesley and Catherline, died before she was four. She was adopted by her much older brother Clarence, and later by her married sister Eugenie. In 1910 she was sent away to finishing school at the Ecole d'Etrangers in Brussels, and two years later when visiting a schoolfriend, Noel Lange, in Paris, she met her future husband Robert Blackburn, a young Yorkshire engineer who was bitten by the aviation bug of those days of experimental flying machines made by the Wright brothers, and who in 1915 became the founder and chairman of Blackburn Aircraft, one of the most important aviation companies in Britain until the 1950s when it was taken over by Hawker Siddeley. The Blackburn company's long line of successful aeroplanes included the Mercury monoplane, the Swift, the Dart, the Kangaroo, the Iris seaplane, the Beverley, and the Buccaneer.

From the very first day of their marriage in 1914, Jessica Blackburn's whole life was bound up with the flying business. In the middle of their wedding reception, a telegram arrived for her husband from Winston Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty, with news of Robert's first government contract to build aircraft - 12 BE2c biplane machines, to be delivered by April 1915 for the war effort. His presence was required the following day at the Admiralty in London to receive details, and their honeymoon had to be postponed: instead, they spent their first 24 hours together as man and wife travelling direct to London, stopping for one night at the Buxton Hydro on the way.

Jessica Blackburn was due a large inheritance on her 21st birthday or on her marriage, if earlier, and this she received after her wedding. As Robert had no source of personal finance himself, her inheritance was used to purchase their home, Gledhow Lodge, Leeds, and to establish the Blackburn firm as a limited company with an enlarged factory in which it could build the 12 aircraft just ordered by the government.

Before the end of the year, the Blackburn Aeroplane and Motor Co Ltd was created, and the Olympia building in Leeds (a former roller-skating rink) purchased, with

pounds 20,000, coming half each out of Jessica's inheritance and from her father-in-law, George Blackburn, the general manager of the engineering firm of Thomas Green & Son, of Leeds.

Jessica Blackburn's natural charm and engaging personality proved an invaluable asset to the social side of the Blackburn business. Where her new husband tended to be reticent and awkward in making new acquaintances, Jessica was vivacious and outward-going. Their homes in Leeds, and from 1917 Bowcliffe Hall, in Bramham, near Wetherby, which she purchased, became meeting places for other aircraft pioneers, media proprietors, local financiers, RAF and Fleet Air Arm officials and national politicians, all of whom were to be important sources of support in securing the future of the aircraft business. Amy Johnson, Jim Mollinson, Louis Bleriot, Lord Northcliffe, Lord Trenchard, Stuart Hirst, Sir Sefton Brancker, and Winston Churchill were among members of the social circle which Jess orchestrated and entertained.

Jessica Blackburn took her first flight in Roundhay Park, Leeds, the test location for Blackburn's new aircraft. In 1915 she flew as co-pilot with a celebrated test pilot of the day, Roland Ding. Over the next two decades, she attended virtually all the main flying events, and became a personal confidante to many senior aviation figures. She saw off the 1919 England-Australia Air Race, greeted the American World Flyers at Croydon in 1924, attended successive Schneider Trophy competitions in Europe, and personally flew in Blackburn aircraft competing in the 1922 and 1928 King's Cup Air Races - these were spectacular two-day events with around 40 flying machines racing long distances over courses stretching 1,000 miles or more across Britain.

For five years in the 1920s, she and Robert spent much of each year in Greece, living on the outskirts of Athens, where Blackburn Aircraft had been contracted to create an air-force for the Greek government, by building aircraft and constructing Greece's first aerodrome base. Whilst there, she witnessed the collapse of the Greek monarchy in 1925, and was operated on by the Professor of Medicine at the University of Athens, Dr Constantinos Logothetopoulos, who later went into politics and acquired notoriety as the imposed president of occupied Greece in 1942-43.

Amongst the great happinesses of her life, and the deep affection she felt and inspired among her large family and number of friends, Jessica Blackburn experienced more than her fair share of tragedies. In 1917, the Blackburn test-pilot Roland Ding crashed to his death in an experimental plane in Roundhay Park in front of a horrified crowd of on-lookers. In 1930, she drove a close family friend, Sir Sefton Brancker, an architect of the Air Ministry, to Cardington for him to travel in the R101 air-balloon on its maiden flight to India, only to hear over the radio on returning home that Brancker had perished when the airship exploded in a ball of flame over Paris.

Even more devastatingly came catastrophe within her family. In 1934 her youngest son Peter was taken ill with tuberculosis, and she spent nearly two years away from home looking after him while he attended a clinic in Switzerland. In 1935 her second son Rob, then aged 16, was killed in a road accident when a car smashed into his bicycle while he was at boarding school in Somerset. Then in 1936 her 23-year marriage to Robert Blackburn ended in divorce. From this series of blows, Jessica never fully recovered.

With the collapse of her marriage to Robert Blackburn came also an end to her direct personal involvement with aviation and the affairs of Blackburn Aircraft, although already by 1936 most of the adventure and excitement of the early pioneering days had been replaced by scientific certainties and the motivation of big business.

She married again twice, in 1941 to one of the founding members of the RAF, Group Captain Jack Noakes, and in 1953 to Stanley Barton, but both these marriages were short-lived and ended in divorce, after which she reverted to the name Blackburn.

The remainder of her life was devoted to her family. For her grandchildren and great-grandchildren, she was a source of immense pleasure and enjoyment, and she remained vigorous into her centenary, which was celebrated last year by a large gathering at the Grand Hotel in Eastbourne.

Tryphena Jessy Thompson, aviator: born Cradley, Worcestershire 20 April 1894; married 1914 Robert Blackburn (died 1955; one son, two daughters, and two sons deceased; marriage dissolved 1936), 1941 Jack Noakes (marriage dissolved), 1953 Stanley Barton (marriage dissolved); died Eastbourne 14 May 1995.

Source: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituary-jessica-blackburn-1620608.html>