

WINIFRED SPOONER, WOKINGHAM'S INTREPID AVIATOR



While reviewing early photographs of Wokingham, Richard Gibbs (a local historian) reported that he had come across a *Pathé News* clip - these screenshots featured a young woman: Winifred Spooner who had received a public civic reception in Wokingham town hall in 1931 and yet her story did not appear to be widely known or celebrated! He therefore dubbed her 'Our remarkable Miss Winifred Spooner'.

The Wokingham Society open meeting on 25 March, at which her story was told, was very well attended in the town hall. We were treated to a very insightful presentation about a barely

celebrated local woman.

A key source of information presented by Richard was the booklet by Jim Bell (now out of print and currently unavailable) on the life of Winifred Spooner.

Winifred was born in 1900 in Woolwich, South London. Her father was a military veterinary surgeon who died shortly before her second birthday. Her grandfather was a professor of veterinary surgery. Her mother was Irish and she had four older brothers. She went to boarding school at Sherborne. The expectations of her class at this time would have been aligned to marriage rather than a career.

Following the end of the first world war, during which many men of her generation and class were killed, there was rapid technological change and huge social upheaval.

In the early 1920s she moved to Wokingham to live with her brother Hugh in South Drive. In January 1927 Hugh qualified as a pilot and he was closely followed by Winnie in the August. She was among the first 16 to 17 women in Britain to gain their licence. Her registration address was recorded as the Polo farm on Barkham Road in Wokingham.

Winnie decided to purchase her own aircraft and established an airstrip at the polo farm. She set up a company to trade and launched an air taxi service including passenger flights and package deliveries on routes across southern England and into France. She was known as an early female driver and attracted frequent speeding offences! However, her abiding reputation was one of a calm and competent professional.

The family subsequently moved their base to Scotts Farm (Northway/Chestnut Avenue). She took part in many public events, races and pageants throughout the late 1920s becoming a well-known character in her field.

In 1929 she was awarded the Harman Trophy as one of the world's top women aviators – in the year before Amy Johnson won the same! She completed countless international challenges and races including a 3000 mile European circuit in which she finished tenth.

She was inspired by long-distance aviation and had planned to fly from London to Cape Town (about 7,000 miles) in five days. She departed from Croydon on 5 December 1930 with her co-pilot Flight Lt. Cecil Edwards

After refuelling in Rome, at 1000 feet, they experienced engine failure and the aircraft crashed into the sea off the coast of southern Italy. Winnie made the decision to swim through rough seas to reach land and raise the alarm. She showed extraordinary resilience in successfully achieving this objective.



Winifred Spooner arrives at Wokingham Town Hall in a fire engine to receive an official welcome from Town Council officials.

She returned to England as a national heroine and was honoured at a reception held at London's Victoria station before being greeted by the mayor, dignitaries and large crowds in Wokingham on 20 December 1931.

She was the first British woman to earn a living as a private pilot. She worked for Sir Lindsay Everard (MP and brewer). Her responsibilities included management of Radcliffe Aerodrome, handling all maintenance, operations and logistics and piloting across the UK, Europe and the middle east.

Tragically, in January 1932 she developed pneumonia. The doctor was delayed due to fog in bringing oxygen to her and this resulted in her untimely death.

Winnie was a woman who defied class expectations to become a pioneering aviator who lived and worked in Wokingham. *She lived a remarkable life of courage, professionalism, and quiet determination. We should celebrate her achievements and legacy.*