

**Early Military Flying in the UK
and the building of a replica of British Army Aeroplane No.1
David Wilson**

The speaker was a Farnborough apprentice in the early 1950s. He could look back on a distinguished career in aviation, and since its inception over a decade ago has been a very active member of the Farnborough Air Sciences Trust (FAST). It was his knowledge of the early days of British knowledge of military aviation, until about 1913, and especially in the Farnborough area, plus the work conducted in 2006-08 to construct a replica aircraft that formed the basis of this two-part presentation.

British Army interest in air-based elements in warfare started in 1865 when a team of UK soldiers investigated the use of balloons in the US Civil War. They reported their finding and stimulated interest that led to a Royal Engineers (RE) Army balloon unit being formed at Woolwich Arsenal in 1878. They used hydrogen-filled balloons with spherical envelopes, made of stretched cow-gut (with the distinguished name of 'goldbeater's skin'). This was enclosed by a mesh, from the lower portions of which was suspended a basket for an artillery/troop-movement observer. A more suitable site for the manufacture and operation of balloons was Chatham, where operations started in 1882, and a balloon training school was formed nearby, at Lidsing, in 1886. Between 1890-92 these two units were moved to Aldershot, and by 1906 had acquired a landing ground by combining the Farnborough and Cove Commons and taking the adjacent cleared stretch of woodland that was called Laffan's Plain, and thus establishing the basis of what would become Farnborough Aerodrome. Initially it was planned to support the building and testing of dirigible airships.

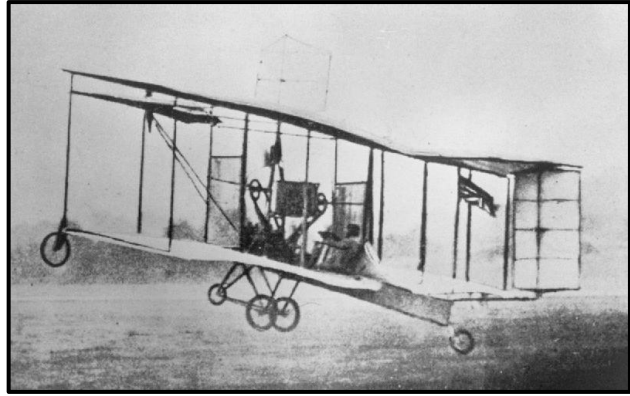
In August 1902 the Army was visited by to the most flamboyant figure in early British aviation history, Samuel Franklin Cody. His surname was Cowdery but his style was that of 'Buffalo Bill' Cody, and he relished the idea that he was regarded as that adventurous cowboy. His ability to embellish and to seek publicity has served history, as he invariably ensured that a photographer was present at significant events thus ensuring many useful photographs are available. Cody demonstrated a man-carrying kite system (several kites linked) to the Army. He proposed that, compared to a balloon, it was less sensitive to the effects of wind, and easier to transport (balloons were carriage-hauled once inflated).



Nulli Secundus over St Paul's Cathedral, London

The Army took little heed, and were to be assailed by Cody until in 1907 when he assisted in the design and build of an airship 'Nulli Secundus' (second to none) which in October 1907 he flew from Farnborough to London, although he failed to complete the return journey against a headwind. His interest remained with the development of his kites into aeroplanes.

On 16 October 1908 Cody flew his British Army Aircraft No 1 at Farnborough, and became the first man to successfully fly an aircraft in Britain: an accolade that is highly contested, but that the speaker regarded as true, as the only contender (Verdon-Roe) - later to form the AVRO company - had no evidence of his claim. As ever, a photographer had taken a picture of Cody on his first flight, when he covered 1,390ft in 27 seconds.



Cody's first flight – 16 October 1908

Again, Cody's attainment did not win the accolade he expected, as no Army order was forthcoming. The Army created its own aircraft design capability (the Royal Aircraft Factory) at Farnborough, and Cody was allowed to stay on site but had to be content to design and fly aircraft for other uses. The lecturer illustrated the types he did build: from No.1C to No.6.

On 7 August 1913 he was flying a version of No.6 aircraft when a structural failure occurred, at about 300ft altitude. He and his passenger – neither was strapped in – were catapulted from the aircraft, and died on impact with the ground. Cody was buried with full military honours in the Aldershot Military Cemetery, his funeral drawing around 100,000 mourners.



The replica British Army Aircraft No.1 in the newly erected FAST hangar at Farnborough

To conclude his lecture, Mr Wilson described how, in late 2006, the FAST Air Museum volunteers asked him to lead a project to create a non-flying replica of Cody's No.1 Aeroplane. Latest completion was to be 16 October 2008, the centenary of its first flight: but then it was decided to exhibit it at the biennial Farnborough Air Show, some three months earlier still. His project timeline (hand-drawn and with humorous annotations) illustrated the tremendous challenge this task presented.

He showed examples of the drawings that were prepared, the procurement of wood ("you cannot get 26ft spars from B&Q": so they were used wood rejected by a ladder-builder), the jiggling of what is a sizeable structure, the 'seamstress' team that clothed the airframe, and an ingeniously-crafted replica engine. It showed what dedicated volunteers, with an incentive to commemorate a notable first can often achieve. Goff Tearle presented the vote of thanks to an appreciative audience of about 100 people: which included members of the Loughborough University Alumni.

Mike Hirst