

Sorting the fact from the fiction
The history of Wigram and the "gift" land

Dear Sir, during the present war, aviation has established itself as an important factor in attack and defence. There are indications that in the future it may become the dominant factor. On May 18th, I moved and carried a resolution in the Legislative Council, suggesting that the Government should establish a Flying School preparatory to the formation of an Aviation Corps. The Government replied that it could not at present take up anything not immediately conducive to the winning of the war.

This was Henry Francis Wigram's opening salvo in a letter "to a few people to whom I think would assist", proposing a school of aviation for Canterbury, 17 July 1916.

So, who was Henry Wigram and why did he want a school of aviation?

Born in England in 1857, the son of a barrister, Wigram emigrated to New Zealand for health reasons, settling in Christchurch in 1883. In 1885 he married Agnes Vernon Sullivan the same year founding the first of his many business interests, Wigram Brothers maltsters and brick makers. His first step into public life came in 1900 when he was appointed Chairman of the Memorial Committee for the province's jubilee celebrations.

Wigram was elected Mayor of Christchurch in 1902 and in 1903 was elected to the Legislative Council where he remained until 1920. Although after this he largely retired from his business life, he retained close ties with several well known companies including the Lyttelton Times Company of which he was chairman for 30 years, the New Zealand Refrigerating Co and the Canterbury Seed Co which he had founded in 1887.

Both Sir Henry and Lady Wigram were well known for their philanthropic activities including support of the Royal Life-Saving Society, while one of their gifts to the city was the coping-wall around the Cathedral. Henry Wigram was knighted in 1928 and he died at his home in Park Terrace, Christchurch, on May 6th 1934.

Well, what about aviation. Sir Henry was a man in step with (and sometimes I suspect ahead of) progress. He initiated the electrification of the tramway in Christchurch and he was owner of one of the first automobiles in the city. It is this awareness of technology and progress that I think led Wigram to become interested in the possibilities of aviation. In 1908 he visited England where the new invention was much talked about and although he never saw an aeroplane in flight, let alone flew in one, he could see a future for this new machine.

By 1909, the political situation in Europe had become rather delicate and in June of that year, the New Zealand Government made its famous gift of a dreadnought. Immediately after this Wigram addressed the Legislative Council on the benefits of "aerial navigation" as a method of national defence, but his colleagues were little interested.

Progress towards aviation was being made, albeit slowly. In 1912, the Defence Department Report stated that preliminary arrangements had been made in training some personnel in the subject of aviation but also noted that no expenditure could be incurred in the purchase of aeroplanes. Lieutenants Arthur Piper and Wallace Burn had that year been sent to England for aviation related courses. Burn qualified as a pilot but Piper, who returned to New Zealand as the Army's aviation authority did not finish the course. Burn was killed in Mesopotamia in 1915, the first New Zealand airman to lose his life on active service.

In 1913 the British Army's Inspector-General, Sir Ian Hamilton, visited New Zealand and unfortunately suggested a waiting policy on aviation as New Zealand was not threatened by hostile fleets and this new method of defence was experimental and expensive.

Also in 1913 the Imperial Air Fleet Committee, a group of air minded British businessmen, presented the New Zealand Government with an aeroplane - the Bleriot Britannia. It seems the Defence Department didn't really know quite what to do with this "gift" though. General Robert Godley recorded it in his annual report for that year as the nucleus of a flying corps and the Committee of Supply saw fit to vote the sum of £500 for "aeroplanes and housing of same". A deputation from Christchurch suggested it should be taken there and formed into the nucleus of a flying corps, but instead it was taken to Auckland for a series of demonstration flights. This should have marked a turning point in New Zealand aviation, giving those in positions of power a chance to actually see the advantages of aeroplanes. However, the Bleriot demonstration was marred by a minor scandal.

The Government had hired Fielding born Joe Hammond to demonstrate the machine. Hammond had gained his pilots certificate in 1910 and had been an instructor with the Bristol Aeroplane Company. In January 1914, the Bleriot was assembled at the Epsom Showgrounds. The dignitaries of Auckland were lined up, vying for the honour of being the first to be taken aloft, but Hammond, a lovable rogue by character, chose to take Miss Esme McLennan for the first flight. Esme, a member of the Royal Pantomime Company, was no doubt delighted, however the dignitaries were not. Hammond was fired and with no pilot to fly it, the aircraft was just shipped back to Wellington where it was put into storage. The Government seemed totally devoid of interest in aviation and after the outbreak of WWI, the "nucleus of the flying corps" was shipped back to England for the use of the RFC.

Wigram in the meantime had been back to England where in October of 1913, for the first time he had witnessed an aeroplane in flight. This, coupled with the formation of the Walsh Brothers School in Auckland in October 1915, spurred him to again raise the issue with the Government.

The Walsh Brothers had been experimenting with aviation since 1911 when their first aircraft "The Manurewa" had been successfully flown. It unfortunately crashed in March of that year and was left in a paddock of cows overnight. The aircraft fabric had been made taut with a concoction of boiled sago, which the animals munched happily on all night, smashing with their hooves what they did not devour. There was little left the next morning. The Walshes next venture was to launch their flying school using flying boats or hydroplanes. Surprisingly this was seen as quite a different activity to flying land planes or aeroplanes.

As his 1916 letter suggests, Wigram was again met by apathy and disinterest when he raised the aviation issue in Wellington. However, undeterred, he started campaigning in the public arena with letters to the newspapers. These received sufficient editorial support to bring the matter to the attention of the general public and although Wigram still believed the Government the best agency to train pilots, he gained enough backing to form a private aviation school. In the meantime, in July 1916, he had ordered two Caudron aircraft from England at a cost of some £1700.

The Canterbury (NZ) Aviation Co was formed on August 22nd 1916 when the inaugural meeting was held and a large and influential Board of Directors elected. Not surprisingly, Henry Wigram was elected Chairman. The company quickly set about choosing land for an aerodrome, ordering aircraft and obtaining recognition from the War Office and the Royal Flying Corps as a bona fide trainer of pilots.

The land selected was known as Carr's farm and was located at Sockburn, an area thought to be suitable for long term use as an aerodrome and that would not be eclipsed by future rivals. Wigram, ever the man of foresight, looked to a time when there would be aerial transport and postal services to every town and city in the country. He wanted land close to public utilities, easy to get to and with sufficient space for expansion. The Company purchased 106 acres, a further 50 or so being added over the next few years. William Park was employed as caretaker to turn the grazing paddocks into land suitable for aeroplanes, a job he held for several decades. The site was close to the electric trams and the Sockburn railway station and was also able to take advantage of Lake Coleridge electricity (the power station there had opened in 1915).

The company took over Wigram's order for the two Caudron aircraft and recruited its instructor, Mr Cecil Hill, formerly instructor at the Hall Flying School, Hendon, England. After much bureaucratic wrangling, the aircraft finally arrived in April 1917 and Hill in May. Within two weeks he had the aircraft erected and was making the first flights. The first passenger - Henry Wigram.

The school took students suitable for commissions in the Royal Flying Corps only and once they had gained their pilots certificates (at a cost to them of £100) they would sail for England to join up. A scheme endorsed by the New Zealand Government and the Royal Flying Corps. The best students passed their tickets after only four or five hours flying although this was spread out over several weeks. In between flying lessons, they also learned rudimentary mechanics. Early aircraft were not that reliable and it was essential to be able to fix an engine and carry out as many repairs as possible single handed. As the Walsh Brothers found out, you don't want to have to leave your aeroplane unattended overnight either.

The examination for the Royal Aero Club Certificate of "ticket" comprised three tests taking about twenty five minutes in all. They were: three figure of eights, taking off and landing on a mark and an altitude test and volplane. Volplane was another name for a glide. An engine off descent was very difficult in aircraft of this vintage as they were often possessed of the gliding qualities of a brick! Once the pilot had qualified for his ticket

he sailed for England where he joined the RFC, starting his training almost from scratch. £75 of his Canterbury Aviation Company course fee was refunded as well.

The school began operations on June 19th 1917 with the first six students qualifying for their tickets on 22nd August, the first anniversary of the Company's formation. By the end of the war, the school had trained 186 pilots.

The school's activities were actually quite well received by Defence. The first pupils were examined by the Director of Military Training, Lieutenant-Colonel I.G.S. Sleeman who was quite taken with the aeroplane. I might add that the lieutenant colonel stood on the ground and observed rather than actually flew with the candidates. After a record breaking flight to 4000 feet, the following report appeared in the Lyttelton Times of January 9th 1918.

"Yesterday morning, Lieutenant Colonel IGS Sleeman, Director of Military Training, enjoyed a flight in one of the new 100hp aeroplanes of the Canterbury Aviation Company, rising with Mr C. M. Hill as pilot, to a height of 4000 feet. The day was ideal with fleecy clouds through which the aeroplane appeared and disappeared at intervals. Colonel Sleeman, who has done a considerable amount of aerial photography, was engaged during most of the journey in taking photographs for experimental purposes. The flight was concluded with a spiral descent, cleverly executed and a volplane, which the colonel declared was brilliant."

The report goes on to say.

"Interviewed after the flight yesterday, Colonel Sleeman, expressed his entire satisfaction with the aeroplane and his admiration for the pilot, Mr Hill. Although his experience of flying and instruction is not small, Colonel Sleeman stated that he had never flown with one in whom he had such great confidence. With such an expert and with the magnificent flying school at the disposal of the New Zealand youth, he expressed himself confident that the dominion would not lag behind in matters of aviation. The future, in Colonel Sleeman's opinion, held much in store for aviation in connection with civil life. The majority of thinking people now realised that air navigation was safe and realised also its immense possibilities."

However, once the Armistice had been signed, the Company found the major purpose for which it had been formed, the training of airmen for defence purposes, no longer existed and New Zealand still had no indigenous flying corps. The doldrums set in.

Wigram did have other aviation business ideas. He had hopes of establishing a mail and passenger service throughout the Dominion and in December 1918 had had correspondence with Handley Page Ltd over the provision of an air scheme and aircraft. A total capital of £400,000 was required with an interim service (Auckland, Palmerston North, Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin daily service each way) costing £150,000. This scheme was unfortunately not to be, as the Postmaster General, announced a government air postal service, which Wigram did not wish to go into competition with. The government service never eventuated but it had the effect of halting Sir Henry's plans. It was not until nearly two decades later that New Zealand had a main trunk air service to the same extent as Wigram had envisaged.

In March 1919, at the invitation of the New Zealand Government, Colonel A V Bettington arrived from Britain to advise on aviation policy in New Zealand. Colonel Bettington was followed by four aircraft and two mechanics. His report, which when considered in retrospect was one of great vision, was submitted on 5 June 1919. It recommended the immediate formation of an air arm of trained men returning from RAF service. He did not believe in "the enduring peace" recognising Japan and the Pacific as a future trouble spot and advocated closer ties with Australia. His recommendations called for a permanent establishment of 369 officers and airmen and a territorial force of 1134 men within 8 years. The cost during the first four years was to be £1,294,000.

As far as the Canterbury Aviation Company was concerned, Bettington recommended they undertake initial training of pilots and mechanics for the New Zealand Air Force. He did not think the Walsh Brothers School at Auckland necessary for Defence purposes but suggested recognising the excellent work done by the school by way of purchasing its equipment. In the event the plan was too ambitious for the cautious New Zealand politicians and after a revised plan was also rejected Bettington returned to Britain feeling he had achieved little.

He was followed by other advisors: Air Marshal Sir John Salmond in 1928, who's recommendations were also largely ignored and Wing Commander Ralph Cochrane in 1936. Cochrane was the right man at the right time and his report was heeded. It was only then though that New Zealand was able to achieve an air force staffed to anywhere near the level Bettington had originally recommended. Anyway, back to 1919.

The lack of action on Bettington's report left the two flying schools in a difficult situation. With no air force they had no one to train and no income. Although Bettington's recommendations were not acted on, the schools were given some subsidies to help keep them going. Joy rides, experiments with air mail and public demonstrations were their bread and butter for several lean years. The novelty soon wore off though and prices for fares dropped considerably. In December 1918 a passenger flight cost upwards of £5, in 1920 that had dropped to £2. 2/. An Avro 504K for example, cost approximately £15 an hour to run, so profit margins weren't high.

The Government issued the company one of its promised air postal contracts in 1920 and then canceled it due to retrenchment before it had even started. Worst of all there was now competition. The establishment of Rudolph Wigley's New Zealand Aero Transport Company in Timaru dealt a severe blow to the Canterbury Aviation Company's coffers. When more British gift aircraft had become available to the New Zealand Government in 1920, they were apportioned out to interested New Zealand Companies. Wigley received what Wigram considered more than his fair share. He had no pilots, no mechanics and no infrastructure but the Government handed him seven aircraft. The relationship between the two was made worse as the Timaru Company were not above finding themselves in the places advertised by their Christchurch cousins an hour or so before they arrived.

The Canterbury Aviation Company had some success in the record breaking arena though, most notably being the first to fly Cook Strait. Euan Dickson, who had been appointed to replace Cecil

Hill after his death in a tragic aircraft accident in 1919, had the honour to pilot one of the Company's Avro 504Ks to Wellington in August 1920.

In February 1923, the Canterbury Aviation Company also gave refresher training to WWI pilots under the supervision of Captain Leonard Monk Isitt.

Isitt, a WWI pilot, had been appointed by the New Zealand Government to look after the aircraft brought to New Zealand by Colonel Bettington in 1919 and to supervise military flying training if and when it began. Further aircraft were also obtained by the New Zealand Government in 1920 and two hangars were built on the Canterbury Aviation Company's land to house them.

Also in 1920, the first major move towards military aviation in New Zealand came with the formation of an Air Board with Captain T. M. Wilkes (another WWI pilot) appointed as secretary. In September of that year this very positive statement was made.

"The Government is to make provision for the development of aviation along lines which will enable the Dominion to possess civil aviation for commercial and other needs and at the same time provide for the necessities of aerial defences in case of emergency."

In the meantime the Canterbury Aviation Company were still trying to get some definite answers from the Government as to their long term future role and Wigram was still not happy with the inaction of the politicians. In October 1921, he first suggested that the Government purchase the Sockburn aerodrome as a going concern. An offer that was to be repeated several times over the next few years, eventually being accepted in 1923.

It is this purchase of the land and assets of the Canterbury Aviation Company by the New Zealand Government that gives rise to some of the stories of the Wigram Gift. It is why so many people believe the current Government cannot sell the land here.

In fact, the land, buildings and aircraft were purchased by the Government in agreement with the Canterbury Aviation Company.

Wigram wrote to the Prime Minister on 9 March 1923 stating:

" I am about to leave for England, but before I sail, I desire to make your Government an offer regarding the above named company. If your Government will take over the assets and liabilities of the Company as ascertained by valuation and will make use of the Sockburn Aerodrome for the purposes for which it was formed, viz, the training of airmen and mechanics for the defence of New Zealand, I will subscribe £10,000 as a free gift in reduction of the cost of the aerodrome to the Government."

The method of payment of the £10,000 would be that when the amount payable to the company shall have been ascertained, the Government shall deduct the £10,000 from the total, and pay over the remainder to the company, and that I shall be responsible to the directors and shareholders of the company for the £10,000 shortpaid by the Government."

Wigram entered an agreement with the Company to this effect and the Company entered into an agreement with the Government. The land was transferred without caveat and neither agreement is binding on the Crown to use the land for aviation purposes for any specified period. It can of course be argued that this was Wigram's intent and acceptance of his offer constitutes a contract, but this too is open to varied interpretation. The final purchase price was £31,012 15s 3d with the transfer taking place on 21 June 1923.

On 14 June 1923, the New Zealand Permanent Air Force was formed as part of the Army - New Zealand finally had an air corps and a military aerodrome which was renamed Wigram in honour of the man many believed responsible for both.

This was not to be the end of Wigram's involvement with aviation, nor his last gift. In September 1926 he ascribed £2,500 to the New Zealand Government for the purchase of an aeroplane for Defence purposes. A Gloster Grebe fighter was purchased.

In 1927, Plumpton Park, which adjoined the aviation school, was offered for sale. Wigram, thinking the land might be needed for expansion of the aerodrome didn't hesitate to pay out £6000 for the 81 acres.

Wigram next wrote to the Government on aviation matters on December 8th 1931:

"Dear Mr Forbes, Some years ago I purchased an area of land comprising 81 acres 2 roods 1½ perches adjoining the Wigram Aerodrome which had formerly been occupied by the Canterbury Park Trotting Club. For some time prior to its purchase I was aware that it would probably come on to the market for sale and I feared that if such a sale were carried out it would probably involve a cutting up of the property into small sections and the opportunity for acquiring it in block would be lost. I therefore purchased it with the idea of offering it as a gift to the Government as I felt sure that it would not be long before the requirements of the aerodrome would need additional space. I desire now to offer the above property as a free gift to His Majesty the King. I trust that the Government will see fit to accept this offer and that it will prove to be of the value which my expectations place on it."

Again, Wigram places no legal caveat on the land or enters a formal agreement for its future use. He does however write another note in January 1932.

"Dear Mr Forbes, In making my recent gift of land in connection with the Wigram Aerodrome, I attached no sort of condition, but it would give me sincere gratification if your Government would consider favourably the interests of the Canterbury Aero Club now in occupation of part of the land".

The Government responded:

"It gives me pleasure to state that your wishes in this direction will receive the utmost consideration".

Nothing definite, nothing legal, nothing binding, very polite, very politician.

The 81 acres of the 1931 gift and the land of the former Canterbury Aviation Company make up only a small percentage of the entire base today which is some 688 acres. One of the accommodation blocks used by the first students is still extant although moved from its original site and one of the Government hangars built in 1920 is still in use. Most of the rest of the original aerodrome was demolished to make way for the new buildings erected in the late 1930s and early 1940s under Cochrane's expansion plans.

Since its purchase in 1923 Wigram has been the RNZAF's main training base with pilot training one of the principal activities until the move of the Flying Training Wing to Ohakea in 1993. Wigram still houses two technical training schools which train photographers, avionics technicians, cooks, librarians, administrators and so on. Initial officer training is carried out here as is physical education instructor training. All of these will move to Woodbourne near Blenheim when the base closes next year.

The RNZAF Research and Studies Department, commonly called the Museum, will remain. Sited partly on the 1931 "gift" land, the Museum will be a lasting reminder of the origins of our service.

The Wigram gift land then is more fiction than fact. It can't be denied though that New Zealand aviation has benefited immensely from Sir Henry's gifts of foresight; in believing in the possibilities of the aeroplane, tenacity; in not giving up despite repeated official rejection, and generosity; in the time and money he invested. He gave so much to get aviation in this country off the ground and the base named in his honour has steadfastly served in the defence of New Zealand for more than seventy years. Its closing must surely be the Government's final rebuttal.

A paper given by Thérèse Angelo, RNZAF Museum Research Officer, to the 1994 Archives and Records Association Conference, Wigram, 12 August 1994.

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