

First woman to fly solo from England to Australia

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Having discovered a passion for flying, she decided to fly to the furthestmost point she could find which, after looking at a map, seemed to be Australia.

Amy Johnson was born on July 1, 1903, in Kingston-upon-Hull, Yorkshire, the eldest daughter of Amy and John William Johnson. Her father was a successful fish merchant and herring importer, and was also a religious man, a dedicated Methodist. Amy also had two younger sisters, Irene and Molly.

At the age of 14 Amy was hit in the mouth with a cricket ball, which caused her to lose several front teeth. Although she was fitted with expensive dentures, indistinguishable from her real teeth, she considered herself permanently disfigured. It has since been recognised that this accident and the dentures caused Amy severe embarrassment during her early life, and were the foundation for her depression, moodiness and oversensitivity in later years.

Amy attended Boulevard School (later Kingston High School), and went on from there to the University of Sheffield, where she graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in economics. She also lived for a time in Bridlington.

She found that employment for a woman in any responsible or fulfilling post was almost impossible to attain, so lowered her sights and worked at several jobs she found demeaning, including

working in the silks department of Peter Jones department store in London, earning £5 per week. After this she took a position as secretary for William Charles Crocker, a London firm of solicitors.

Lacking fulfilment at work, Amy threw herself into her interests. Her life was largely taken up with the ephemera of the 1920s: jazz, college rags and a love



Amy (back row, far right), aged about 18, in her school hockey team.

affair that lasted through her twenties. Despite the 300 love letters—skittish and innocently provocative—which she wrote during this time, the affair ended dismally.

By then, however, she had discovered another passion: flying. Most of her spare time was spent at the London Aeroplane Club where she worked on her hobbies of mechanical engineering and flying. She was the first woman in Britain to be granted the Air Ministry's ground engineers licence. For a while she was the only woman ground engineer in the world. She also gained both commercial and private pilots licences during 1928.

She was taught to fly by Captain Valentine Henry Baker, MC AFC, who boosted her self-confidence greatly after it had been dashed so badly by an earlier instructor. Alongside her pilots and engineers licences, Amy also qualified as a navigator. At the time this was no mean feat for a woman.

With success in her aviation studies came ambition and the realisation that



Amy Johnson, engineer.



Amy Johnson, pilot.

this was a field in which she could excel and compete fairly. Her hobby soon became an all-consuming determination, not simply to make a career in aviation, but to succeed in some project which would demonstrate to the world that women could be as competent as men in a hitherto male dominated field.

Her aim in life now seemed clear: she would fly to the furthestmost point she could find which, by looking at a map, seemed to be Australia. With only 50 hours' flying experience behind her, she was ready to be off. Her longest flight at that time had been from Hull to London.

Early in 1930, she chose her objective: to fly solo to Australia and to beat Bert Hinkler's record of 16 days. A wave of publicity accompanied her efforts to obtain support for the venture. She wrote innumerable letters to public figures, appealing for help.

Eventually, her family offered to buy an aeroplane, and Sir Sefton

Brancker, Director of Civil Aviation at the Air Ministry, gave her an interview in March 1930. He then wrote to Lord Wakefield, head of the Wakefield-Castrol oil company, to bring Johnson's ambitions to his notice. On meeting Amy in April 1930, the oil magnate agreed to share the cost of an aeroplane, £600, with her father.

He also offered to arrange fuel supplies along the route to Australia. Preparations for the flight now began, less than a year after her first solo flight. The

aircraft for her epic flight was delivered only three weeks prior to her planned journey. Amy acquired a two-year old De Havilland Moth (G-AAAH) with a Gipsy engine which already had extra fuel tanks, giving it a range of 13 hours flying time. It was named *Jason* after the family business trademark.

Jason now hangs suspended in nostalgia from the roof of London's Science Museum. Dark bottle green with silver lettering, its wheels looking as if they could just support a pram, the whole plane



looks as fragile as a child's Meccano toy. It is dwarfed by a large, ungainly Vickers Vimy hanging alongside. This was the plane in which Alcock and Brown had crossed the Atlantic 11 years before Amy took off.

There's something lonely about the start of a solo flight. The take-off is usually just before dawn so that the flier can get the benefit of a full day's flying. The excitement and strain of the impending flight means the flier has usually had little more than a few hours' sleep.

Whether or not she can finally take off depends on the weather reports. A negative report means the agony of a snap decision which could easily turn out to be mistaken if not disastrous.

On the cold morning of May 5, 1930, Amy set out on her solitary flight from Croydon Airport without much publicity or public interest. Among the few people to see her off were her father and James Martin, the inventor of the ejector seat.



Amy in front of her plane.



Amy perched on top of Jason.

A 27-year-old woman the world had not yet heard about flying in an open cockpit, she averaged three hours' sleep a day. 'It was bitterly cold sitting in the open cockpit and exposed to the icy blast of the slipstream from the propeller. Despite the fact that I was wearing a leather helmet, goggles, a heavy lined flying suit and fur gloves, I felt the cold dreadfully.'

Once she had reached her first stop press coverage was world-wide and her extraordinary feat had captured the public's imagination. Amy's first stop was in Karachi, then in India. It took six days to reach, arriving on May 10, and she had broken the record for that distance. She had improved on the previous one, held by the flyer Bert Hinkler, by two days.

On her next stage, between Karachi and Calcutta, the aeroplane suffered some damage during a landing at Jhansi on May 11. Repairs were quickly done but a more serious delay resulted from a crash landing at Insein, just north of Rangoon, Burma, on May 13. In torrential rain, fading light and low on petrol, Amy landed on a playing field and ended up in a ditch. After hard work and improvisation by Amy and willing helpers, *Jason* was made airworthy and the flight was resumed.

Amy had attempted to break the light plane record for a solo flight to Australia. Regrettably she failed on this attempt by three days. She arrived in Darwin on May 24, after a flight of about 18 000 km over 19½ days. Smiling and unsophisticated, she instantly became the darling of the Press. 'Don't call me Miss Johnson,' she told the reporters, 'just plain Johnnie will do.'

On the next leg of her journey, to Brisbane, Amy was still weary from the long flight, and dispirited at having failed in the record attempt. Consequently she damaged the aircraft on landing at Brisbane airport. This gallant attempt gained her vast publicity and popularity among the British people, and she received a £10 000 gift from the Daily Mail and the Harmon Trophy as well as being awarded

a CBE from King George. The British press dubbed her 'Queen of the Air'.

She received telegrams of congratulations from many dignitaries including King George V and Queen Mary, Ramsay MacDonald, the prime minister, the King and Queen of Belgium, the Lindberghs, Louis Blériot and Francis Chichester. Amy spent 6 further weeks in Australia, attending receptions, dinners, presentations and galas. Wherever she went, she received press and public attention. However, the excitement and pace led to exhaustion, which precluded her from flying herself back to England.

Amy started her return journey by sea to England first stopping at Port Said in Egypt. From there she was flown to Croydon by Imperial Airways, where a huge crowd gathered to welcome her. Her aeroplane, *Jason*, was also there, having been repaired and brought back from Australia. She was met by the Secretary of State for Air, Lord Thomson, and an estimated million people lined the route from the aerodrome as Amy Johnson was driven into London's West End.

At a rally for young people in Hull City Hall, Amy proposed that a special trophy be awarded to recognise any act of outstanding bravery by a Hull child. The children of Sydney had raised a sum of money with which Johnson bought a gold cup. This award is still offered annually at Hull. She continued to receive awards and gifts of all kinds, including two aircraft. One was given by De Havilland, makers of her *Gipsy Moth*, and the other provided by public subscriptions to newspapers.

Not happy with the failed attempt, despite its kind repercussions on her life and reputation, Amy was far from satisfied. Having enjoyed the notoriety after the first flight, she continued to aim for and achieve records.

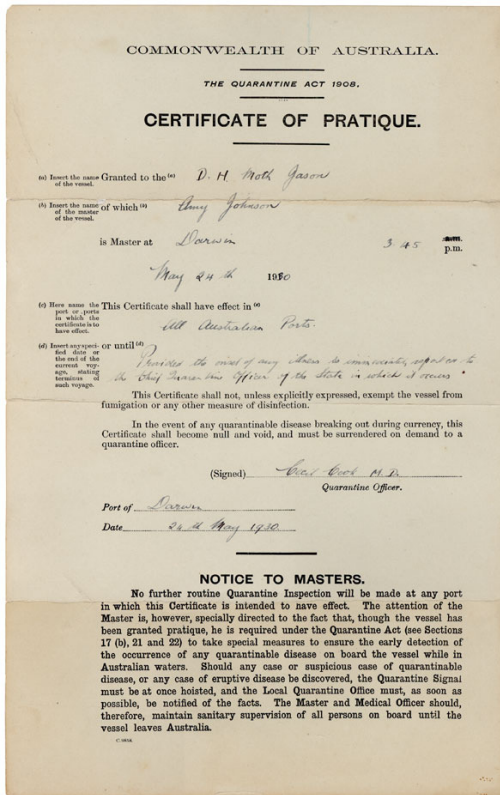
The first of these was in July 1931, when Amy and her co-pilot Jack Humphreys became the first to fly from London to Moscow in one day, completing the 2800 km journey in approximately 21



Amy was feted everywhere.



*Amy at the Kalgoorlie War Memorial,
July 1930.*



Certificate of Pratique issued on arrival at Darwin, confirming that the 'vessel' Jason is free from infectious diseases.



Amy in the cabin of Desert Cloud: note the large extra fuel tank behind her seat.



Amy and Jack Humpheys (right) visiting Francis Chichester in hospital in Japan, 1931.

hours. From there, they continued across Siberia and on to Tokyo, setting a record time for flying from England to Japan. The flight was completed in a De Havilland Puss Moth. They also succeeded in breaking the return flight record.

In July 1932 she married Jim Molison, who was also a long distance pilot who shared many of Amy's drives and ambitions. The famous Scotsman proposed to her only 8 hours after they had met, during a flight together. The papers were delirious with romantic joy but for Amy it was the time when things began to turn sour.

Instead of a partnership, the marriage became a competition. Jim and Amy vied with each other in the air. If Amy established a record, Jim felt he had to beat it; and vice versa. Four months after their marriage, in a De Havilland aircraft DH-80A Puss Moth G-ACAB, known as *Desert Cloud*, Amy beat her husband's solo record from London to Cape Town and back.

Jim had always been a bit of a playboy and Amy slipped easily into his lifestyle. She dressed in a sharp and snappy fashion, posing with a long cigarette-holder and affecting hair styles that made her look sophisticated and certainly older than she was. Gone was the vulnerable girl and in was the brittle social butterfly. Amy began to suspect that fame might have more to offer than smart

clothes and a partner whose drinking and philandering were getting out of hand.

The Mollisons tried to save their marriage by flying together rather than competing. In June 1933, they attempted a non-stop flight from Pendine Sands, South Wales to New York in a De Havilland DH-84 Dragon I, G-ACCV, called *Seafarer*. Unfortunately their aircraft ran out of fuel some distance from the destination and crashed during the attempted forced landing, causing both of them minor injuries.

A photo of them with President Roosevelt shows Jim bandaged after the crash with Amy beside him smiling gently but looking tired and strained. Amy's life appeared to have gone off course.

They also flew non-stop in record time to Karachi (then in India) in 1934 in a fast De Havilland DH Comet Racer, G-ACSP, called *Black Magic* in the MacRobertson England to Australia air race. Amy made another solo flight to Cape Town and back in May 1936, this time beating the record for both journeys. On this occasion she flew in a specially prepared Percival Gull Six, G-ADZO.

She was the guest of honour at the opening of the first Butlin's holiday camp, in Skegness in 1936. For a year Amy ran her own air cruise company, until her marriage with Jim Mollison broke up. The Mollisons were divorced in 1938.

Like the rest of the world, Amy was shocked by the disappearance of Amelia Earhart in 1937 during her doomed attempt to fly around the world. This loss caused her to doubt her own abilities in flying, and gave pause to her ambitions. She did not begin regular flying again until 1939, when she took short-term employment as a pilot for a ferry company near the Solent.

It was exceedingly hard for her to find serious work in the aviation world, after her marriage to Jim ended. Large organisations saw Amy as a publicity seeker likely to damage their reputations. Struggling smaller companies—and there were



Amy in January 1933 after her flight to Cape Town and back. Jim Mollison is by her side.

many of these at this point in aviation history—sought to take advantage of her fame.

Neither was likely to make satisfactory employers, and the situation proved to Amy that aviation was then, as it is now, largely a male preserve. For this period in her career she suffered from depression and financial difficulties. The depression stemmed from her childhood accident, and awoke her feelings of inadequacy and physical disfigurement.

Her flying career inspired many women of her generation to take up flying, and led to there being a pool of experienced women pilots at the beginning of the Second World War. The outbreak of the war changed many things in aviation, and presented many new opportunities for women. One of these was the Air Transport Auxiliary (ATA), an organisation formed to provide pilots to ferry aircraft from factories and delivery ports to operational airfields as well as to test and maintenance units.

Amy joined the ATA on May 20, 1940. She had logged only a mere 2285 flying hours at this time and failed her first flying test with the ATA. However, her experience of a variety of types and long-distance navigation skills showed

through, and Amy was hired at the massive salary of £6 a week.

She devoted all of her time to her job and never again showed signs of interest in romance, even though her ex-husband also worked for the ATA. Moodiness and depression still overtook Amy at this time and on several occasions led her to share a morbid thought with close colleagues; she knew that she would 'finish up in the drink'.

At the beginning of January 1941, Pauline Gower, the commanding officer of No.5 Ferry Pilots Pool Women's Section, Hatfield, gave instructions for Amy to fly an Airspeed Oxford Mk II from Hatfield to Prestwick in Scotland and to return a similar aircraft to RAF Kidlington near Oxford. This was a mission that Amy foresaw no difficulty with. It was not until she actually began the flight and she had to land at a diversion airfield due to bad weather conditions that she fully realised just what she had taken on.

Once she arrived at Prestwick, Amy called Pauline to report in and was told that she need not fly back as the weather was closing in rapidly and she may be too tired to concentrate fully on the remainder of her flight. Pauline offered Amy the opportunity to return by train. Amy chose to fly home and started to return the same day. She flew to Squire's Gate in Lancashire and spent a pleasant night in Blackpool with her sister, Molly and husband Trevor.

Weather conditions had been far from favourable when Amy left for the last leg of her journey. But she told onlookers that 'she would go over the top,' meaning that she would fly over the cloud and miss all the bad weather. Unfortunately the weather conditions worsened during her flight, and this was only one of several factors that would lead to disaster.

Perhaps the most important of these factors was that there was a new protective measure in operation along the coast of England. Balloons were raised to prevent enemy aircraft from flying low to

avoid interception by RAF fighters and accurately strike their targets. The idea was for the balloons to be flown from ground installations on the coast, and from ships just out to sea and in strategic harbour entrances, just below the cloud base. These were known as 'low zone' balloons.

Some time prior to this, on December 17, 1940, a mine exploded in the Thames Estuary killing all the crewmembers of the balloon vessel *Carry On*. This caused great concern as the crew was made up of both military and civilian personnel. The remaining five vessels were evacuated of personnel and allowed to float free at anchorage still with their balloons flying; there had been no time to lower them. On January 3, 1941 one of the five vessels, the drifter *Newspray*, foundered in the night.

Amy, presumably lost above the clouds, would have seen one of these balloons through the cloud coverage and presumed that she was over land, possibly near the London balloon barrage, and therefore it was safe to bail out.

Aircraft had already been dispatched from both North Weald and Hornchurch to search for the Airspeed Oxford and guide Amy home, as local radar had picked her aircraft up and revealed her to be far off course due to the low cloud. They had also been ordered to look for enemy aircraft while they were patrolling for the lost Oxford. Records for that day show that 'no contact made'. It is not clear if this was with Amy or any enemy aircraft. Neither the British or German records reveal any sightings or combat for that day.

On the afternoon of January 4, 1941 seamen of HMS *Haslemere*, a cross Channel steamer saw a parachutist descend from the low cloud followed rapidly by an aircraft. They watched as this circled and fell into the water where it finally broke up. According to records, Amy, for the observed parachutist could only have been her, bailed out some time between 15:00 and 15:37 hours.

The Airspeed Oxford carried sufficient fuel for a 4¾-hour flight in good weather conditions. Meteorological reports clearly show that the conditions were unfavourable, and the time of the crash corresponds with the flying time for Amy's aircraft working from the departure time logged at Squire's Gate aerodrome in Blackpool on the fatal day.

It is presumed that Amy was wearing only a parachute and not a life jacket. The trapped air in the silk of her parachute would have kept her afloat for approximately ten minutes. While in the water she was heard to call out her name and that she needed to be rescued quickly,

A rescue attempt was carried out from the bulwark of HMS *Haslemere*. The captain, Lieutenant Commander Walter Fletcher, selflessly dived in to the freezing Thames water to rescue her. Unfortunately, Amy's body was last seen disappearing under the stern of the vessel and was never recovered.

It is thought that, as the ship manoeuvred to pick her up, she was dragged on to the ship's propeller and was killed. Several other seamen joined in the rescue attempt but could only rescue Fletcher, who later died of immersion hypothermia at hospital in Sheerness.

The drifter *Young Jacob* picked up several pieces of wreckage, including some yellow fabric from the under surface of Amy's aircraft. It carried the black figures '35', which was part of Amy's identification number V3540. Washed ashore on the Shoeburyness coastline the following week was a part of the tailfin from the Airspeed Oxford Mk II.

The Queen of the Air was dead. She was the first member of the Air Transport Auxiliary to die in service. But what of the rumours concerning intelligence missions? and why had Amy not descended earlier in the flight to ascertain her position?

As Amy bailed out of the aircraft the jettisoned cabin door would have given the impression of a falling body

from a distance. As the aircraft was made of wood, the door would have floated, and resembled the head and torso of a body in the water. This is possibly the source of the rumour about Amy's disappearance that linked her to an intelligence mission, carrying unscheduled passengers. This rumour has no other evidence to support it, and is highly unlikely in any case.

Why had she not descended earlier in the flight to check her position from a ground reference?

It is probable that she had in fact done so but experienced windscreen icing, blocking her forward view. Another ATA pilot, Philippa Bennett, experienced exactly this phenomenon in another Oxford in similar conditions at 800 ft en-route to Scotland, flying just below cloud. If this did occur on Amy's flight, she would have been forced to climb again to clear the ice accretion.

Rumours about Amy's death soon appeared and many theories were put forward, including:

- a secret flight to occupied Europe
- an attack by German fighters
- 'friendly fire' shooting down the aircraft, and
- an attempt by Amy to fake her own death.

From the facts and records available, and discounting the wild rumours brought about largely by the pilot's fame, it is possible to deduce the final moments of the flight.

Having descended and been thwarted by icing, Amy had brought the Oxford back above cloud. Vainly searching for any kind of landmark, and by now desperately short of fuel, she saw the barrage balloons and thought she was over land. Not wanting to leave the aircraft to crash on civilians, Amy would have carefully trimmed it for level flight before bailing out, the idea being the aircraft would have continued on its way out to sea.

To leave the Oxford in flight she would have to jettison the large cabin

door, which then gave the impression of a passenger. The drag from the open door and her departure would have changed the trim of the aircraft, initiating the turn that caused the Oxford to spiral into the sea. That the crew of the *Haslemere* were unable to rescue Amy, and the gallant captain died in the attempt, is the final link in the chain of events that began when she decided to leave Squire's Gate in bad weather. A tragedy? Yes. A mystery? No.

Since 2002, several researchers including an official RAF team has been diving in the Thames to try to locate the wreck of Amy's plane.

Amy is best remembered for her record breaking flights during the 1930s, and considering her background and the attitude toward women in aviation, these were all the more spectacular for her success. Amy is also remembered by the British Women Pilot's Association award—an annual Amy Johnson Memorial Trust Scholarship to help outstanding women pilots further their careers.

Many honours were bestowed upon Amy Johnson to acknowledge her remarkable career. In addition to those already mentioned, she received the Egyptian gold medal for valour (1930), the women's trophy of the International League of Aviators (1930), the President's gold medal of the Society of Engineers (1931), the Segrave trophy (1933), the gold medal of honour of the League of Youth (1933), and the gold medal of the Royal Aero Club (1936).

Her flight to Australia was the subject of a contemporary popular song composed by Horatio Nicholls and recorded by Harry Bidgood, Jack Hylton, Arthur Lally, Arthur Rosebery and Debroy Somers in June 1930.

In 1958, a collection of Amy Johnson souvenirs and mementoes were donated by Amy's father to Sewerby Hall, Bridlington, East Yorkshire. The hall now houses a room dedicated to Amy Johnson in its museum.



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A formal painting of Amy by Sir John Longstaffe, c 1930.



This plaque commemorating her birth is displayed where she was born.



The former British colony of Barbuda issued this stamp commemorating Amy.