

'CAPTAIN' CECIL CLAYTON, SHOWMAN AND AVIATOR

(The First Person to Make a Powered Flight in Gloucestershire)

The people of North Devon were unlikely to have seen an aeroplane before 1911. My father remembered the first time an aeroplane came to Barnstaple. This was almost certainly Henri Salmel, who flew in from Tiverton in June 1912, and flew out to Westward Ho three days later.



But Salmel was not the first aviator to fly in North Devon. A year earlier there had been an exhibition flight at South Molton and an attempted flight at Coombe Martin. These were attributed to Captain Cecil Clayton, flying a Bleriot XI. Captain Clayton's exhibition flights, in Devon and in other parts of the country, were seen by large crowds. And yet his name is not generally well known among the pioneer aviators. But as we will see, he was not a 'Captain', and his real name was not actually 'Cecil Clayton', but 'Ernest Charles Clayden'!

Clayton was also the first person to make a powered flight in Gloucestershire, just a few weeks after his appearance at South Molton.

The British Newspaper Archive contains a large number of contemporary accounts of the activities of 'Captain Clayton' and 'Cecil Clayton'. Many refer to 'Captain Clayton', the aviator or aeronaut; others refer to 'Cecil Clayton'. But there was another Cecil Clayton whose background and career was not dissimilar and some press reports on theatrical activities could apply to either of them. There is an annex about this other Cecil Clayton at the end of this account.

Ernest Charles Clayden was born at Clavering, Essex, in 1870. His future was almost certainly determined by the fact that his uncle, Thomas Wright, was a professional balloonist, making frequent ascents at Crystal Palace before large crowds. (The "City of York", seen here, was one of his balloons) He probably introduced his young nephew to ballooning and to the other notable balloonists of the era. These included Auguste Gaudron, "Professor" Horace Fleet, and the Spencers, a celebrated ballooning family. And there were lady parachutists such as Nellie Neil and Dolly Shepherd. Many made epic ballon flights as well as giving public exhibitions.

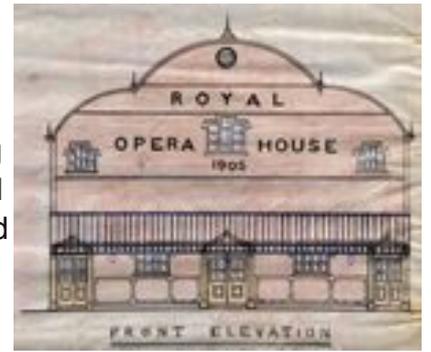


Throughout the 1890s Ernest Charles Clayden was working in his real name of "Ernest Clayden" . He clearly began as an actor and there are references to his "making a name on the London boards" (1893), and "A native Thespian" (1894-Bishops Cleeve). Soon after this he seems to have started a venture with "Professor Fleet", providing entertainments such as "Up in a Balloon at Romford" (1898). He had married in 1897, and it must have been soon after this that he took the name of "Cecil Clayton", eventually making it official, by Deed-Poll, in 1921.

There is a reference to "Cecil Clayton" in 1902 in the "Yeovil Balloon Case" when he was described as Fleet's Business Manager.

In 1903 (now as "Captain Clayton of Walthamstow") he staged his own ballooning event at an August Bank Holiday event at Hastings. The "City of York" was operated as a tethered balloon and large numbers paid 5/- each for a "flight".

Clayton continued ballooning and he was providing entertainers for local shows, fetes and garden-parties. He became particularly involved with the theatre company in Mansfield and Sutton in Ashfield and the building in 1905 of both the "Grand Theatre", Mansfield,(also known as the Royal Opera House) and of the nearby "King's Theatre", Sutton, was attributed to 'Captain Clayton of Walthamstow'. He was later referred to as the "General Manager" or "Managing Director" of the "Grand", as well as being described as "Captain Clayton of Mansfield" thereafter.



In July 1909 he appeared at Pleasley Flower Show (near Mansfield) and 'narrowly escaped death by asphyxiation' due to a gas leak. He is also known to have made balloon ascents at Dursley Fete, and Nellie Neil descended by parachute from one of these flights.



In the same month, Bleriot flew the channel in a Bleriot XI. Bleriot XIs were soon in production. Captain Cecil Clayton was the very first to own one in England and was taught to fly it at the Bleriot Training School at Pau in Winter 2009/10. His machine carried the Tail Number "16". By May 1910 he was arranging to provide flying displays at agricultural and other country-shows. People were

clamouring to see the new flying machines, and people like Clayton could arrange very profitable deals.

He was due to appear on Whit Monday 1910 at the Mansfield Agricultural Show, but on the preceding Saturday he had the first of his crashes, seriously damaging the Bleriot

He flew at other venues in Summer 1910, sometimes successfully, sometimes not. His appearance at Worcester in June 1910 was a disaster. A trial flight on the Wednesday preceding the show resulted in a mishap giving Clayton a sprained ankle. So the pilot for the attempted flight at the show itself was Clayton's mechanic, Ernest d'Artigan (real name Beresford). D'Artigan had been a circus entertainer with a daring loop-the-loop cycle act - and that seems to have been his previous experience of 'flying'. Piloted by d'Artigan, the plane veered into the crowd, killing a woman, and injuring other spectators.

The inquest jury censured Clayton and d'Artigan, and the incident also led to an article in 'Flight' referring to pseudo-aviators who should not be allowed to endanger the public.

Clayton kept flying regardless. He never had a Royal Aero Club Flying Certificate, perhaps regarding himself as an aeronaut of long experience. In July 1911 he appeared at South Molton in Devon. Extracts from a very long newspaper report are interesting, and there are pictures of Captain Clayton on the next page. .

Referring to the 'famous aeroplanist' we learn from the North Devon Journal that" :

"Captain Clayton is an amiable man, with a ready wit and that confidence which one imagined is so necessary to the performance of his daring feats. Well-built, of medium height, he is one who looks as as though the world had treated him well. Every feature betokens an endowment of self-confidence, a nature that knows no fear, and a steady determination to overcome every obstacle. It was apparent from the facile way in which he replied to questions touching the event that Captain Clayton possesses that qualification which is essential to those who undertake perilous feats—the ability to decide immediately what is to be done under any circumstances. He gives

one the impression that he would never come to grief through hesitating; and it is this, perhaps, which accounts for his escaping any serious accident throughout his long career."



CAPT. C. CLAYTON.



CAPT. CLAYTON AND HIS BLERIOT MONOPLANE.

And according to Clayton himself, he had made over 1000 balloon ascents, nearly 400 parachute descents, and a succession of brilliant flights! And he claimed to have been the first person to make a flight in Ireland. In fact that cannot have been true; Harry Ferguson (who would become famous for tractors) had made a flight in Ireland December 1909. Clayton may perhaps have flown at the "Great Bangor Pageant" in 1910.



The event drew thousands to South Molton - but Clayton's flights were disappointingly short, and the Bleriot ended up in a hedge in a neighbouring field. Repairs to the Bleriot by a local garage cost £20.

Later in the same month, Clayton appeared at Dursley, to make the first powered flight in Gloucestershire. He drew a record crowd to the fete and the report in the Cheltenham Chronicle read as follows:

"The chief event of the year, Dursley Fete, was of unusual interest because of the enterprise of the committee in arranging the first aeroplane exhibition which has ever been given in this part of the country. Taking the limitations of the aviation field into consideration, the flights - given by Capt. Clayton, the aviator, must written down as a success, though it was certainly a disappointment to many people that the aviator, in descending rather sharply after his third attempt, should so damage the framework of his monoplane so as to put further flying out of the question"

(There was a brief mention of the Dursley event in a recent article in the Gloucester Citizen on August 3rd 2013.)

Soon after this, Clayton appeared again in North Devon at Combe Martin- and this time he failed to get airborne, which he attributed to the undulating field.

There are no further reports of Captain Cecil Clayton, the aviator, in the British Newspaper Archive. But we know that he continued as Managing Director of the theatre in Mansfield for many more years. He also opened the "Electric Palace", an early cinema, in Waltham Cross.

Clayton was clearly a self-publicist, and a great showman! Many of his claims should probably not be believed. He was obviously not a very competent pilot, but he should still be remembered as one of our earliest aviators whose displays, however limited, were seen by thousands. And he is of special interest in Gloucestershire!



A NOTE ON THE OTHER CECIL CLAYTON

This was William Arthur Parrett, born 1871

By about 1889, William Parrett had become an actor. He adopted the stage name of 'Cecil Clayton' (possibly prompted by the fact that Arthur Cecil and John Clayton were a well known duo who had managed the Royal Court Theatre). Throughout the 1890s he was a member of year-round travelling theatre companies (including the Mary Austin Company). That seemed to continue until 1901.

He joined a touring company which went to Cape Town in about November 1903. That involved him into an extraordinary affair. Roy Redgrave, grandfather of Vanessa, had been having an affair with actress and former trapeze-artist Esther Mary Cooke (whose stage name was Ettie Carlisle). Roy Redgrave's wife Ellen had discovered the affair, and Esther Mary Cooke ran away, joining the touring company. She then had a whirlwind romance with Cecil Clayton, and they married in Cape Town. Two days later, Roy Redgrave arrived in Cape Town and Esther (now Esther Parrett) left her husband of two days and rejoined Roy Redgrave. They went to Australia and in 1906 Esther had a child - Victor Redgrave Parrett. Redgrave did not stay long with Esther. After divorce from his wife Ellen he married Daisy Scudamore who then had their child (Sir) Michael Redgrave in 1907.

Cecil Clayton /Parrett continued his acting career for many more years, including this appearance at Leeds.

There is one area of uncertainty about the two Cecil Claytons. For a number of years from 1901, various pantomimes were presented and also written, by "Cecil Clayton". This could fit Clayton/Clayden, the showman, or Clayton/Parrett the actor.

