

WOMEN WHO MADE BRITAIN

AMY JOHNSON 1903–1941 By Doreen White

Amy was a pioneering English pilot, the first woman to fly solo from London to Australia.

Like many of the woman in the book she had family and financial backing to help her.

She was born on July 1st 1903 in Kingston upon Hull. She was the eldest of four daughters of Amy Hodge and John Johnson who was a fish merchant

Amy was educated at Boulevard Municipal Secondary school which later became Kingston High. She went on to the University of Sheffield, graduating with a BA in Economics.

She worked in London as a secretary to a solicitor, William Charles Crocker. At a loose end one Sunday afternoon she caught a bus to Stag Lane Aerodrome in North London. She was captivated by the early bi planes and watched them

take off. Soon she started to spend all her spare time at the aerodrome

During the 20`s and 30`s aviation was dominated by the rich and famous and most female pilots were titled women such as Lady Heath, the Duchess of Bedford and Lady Barley. Amy gained a ground engineers C Licence and with financial help from her father took flying lessons. In 1929 She was awarded her pilots licence at the London Aeroplane Club

During the 1930`s she was an early member and trainee at the Yorkshire Gliding Club which was close to her home town.

Amy obtained the funds to buy her first plane from her father who always supported her and Lord Wakefield. She bought a second hand de Havilland DH60 Gypsy Moth, which she named Jason.

She achieved worldwide recognition in 1930 when she became the first women pilot to fly solo from England to Australia . Flying Jason she left Croydon on 5th May and landed at Darwin, Northern Territory on 24th May after 11.000 miles. She had plotted the most direct route by placing a ruler on the map. This took her over some of the world`s most inhospitable terrain and meant she had to fly for 8 hours at a time as it was essential she kept to her course as fuel was waiting at each stop. The trip was not without incident as in Rangoon a bumpy landing damaged Jason`s wing and damaged the propeller The local technical institute managed to repair the wing She finally landed to tumultuous cheering crowds. For the next six weeks she was treated like a superstar and fan mail poured in.

She received the Harmon Trophy and was awarded a CBE in George V's 1930 Birthday Honours in recognition of her achievement.

Amy next obtained a de Havilland DH80 Puss Moth, which she called Jason II. In July 1931 she and co pilot Jack Humphreys were the first to fly from London to Moscow in 1 day, completing the 2830km journey in 21 hours. From there they continued across Siberia and on to Tokyo, setting a world record time for Britain to Japan.

In 1932 Amy married a Scottish pilot, Jim Mollison and in July of that year she set a solo record for the flight from London to Cape Town in a Puss Moth named Desert Cloud, breaking her new husband's record.

In May 1936 she made her last record breaking flight, regaining her Britain to South Africa record. She was awarded the Gold Medal of the Royal Aero Club. The marriage didn't work out and in 1938 she divorced Mollison and reverted to her maiden name.

In 1940 during the Second World War she joined the newly formed Air Transport Auxilliary [ATA] which transported Royal Air Force aircraft around the country. On January 5th 1941 she was flying an Airspeed Oxford for the ATA from Prestwick via Blackpool to RAF Kidlington near Oxford. She went off course in adverse weather and reportedly ran out of fuel. Amy bailed out as the aircraft crashed into the Thames Estuary near Herne Bay. The conditions were poor, a heavy sea a strong tide and it was snowing. HMS Haslemere attempted to rescue her but she was lost under a ship. Her body was never recovered.

A memorial service was held for her at St Martins in the Fields on January 14 1941

Much later in 1999 it was reported that her air craft could have been shot down by friendly fire when she twice failed to give the correct identification code during the flight.

During her life she was honoured and recognised in many ways. Several buildings have been named in her honour.

In 1942 a film of her life "They Flew Alone" starring Anna Neagle and Robert Newton as Mollison was made.

In her relatively short life Amy Johnson opened the way for women to become accepted as pilots and fly anywhere around the world, a considerable achievement for a young woman.