

Jessy Blackburn – the full story

Jessy was born 20th April 1894 and christened Tryphena Jessy Thompson the youngest daughter of Wesley and Catherine. Wesley was a wealthy country doctor in Cradley Worcestershire. Jessy had a much older brother, Clarence and sister Eugenie. Just before her 4th birthday her parents died, leaving her in the care of firstly Clarence and then Eugenie once she married.

When Jessy was 16 she was sent to Finishing school, the Ecole d'Etrangers in Brussels. Two years later while visiting Noel Lange an old school friend in Paris she met Robert Blackburn, who would become her husband. The year was 1912 and Jessy was 18 years old. Robert was a young Yorkshire engineer and having met the Wright Brothers in 1908 had a visionary passion for flying.

Robert built his first plane in 1909 but crashed. With the help of his father he started the Blackburn Aeroplane Company. Testing his planes on the flat beach at Filey. The next in 1910 was a successful monoplane and in 1911 he made the first air crossing of the Bristol Channel.

Jessy and Robert married on 31st October 1914 at Old Swinford Stourbridge. During the wedding reception a telegram came from Winston Churchill who at that time was the First Lord of the Admiralty, a request for war planes. The result was 12 Blackburn BF2 aircraft.

Jessy loved flying and she was in her element in the aviation world. She learnt to fly soon after marriage, and with her good looks and vivacious personality became a valued member of her husband's team. She acted as a de facto ambassador on all the trips abroad with Robert running the business side.

With the help of Jessy's legacy in 1914, Robert created the Blackburn Aeroplane and Motor car Company opening a factory at Roundhay Leeds where Jessy learnt to fly. Olympia Works which now has a Blue plaque. Jessy also bought their first house Gledhow Lodge Leeds (its now a Care Home). Their next house was Bowcliffe Hall Bramham Wetherby which is being renovated by Jessy's grandson Robert and great granddaughter Amy, back to its former glory. Once 'The' meeting place for aircraft pioneers, RAF officials and national politicians with an inner circle including Amy Johnson, Lord Northcliffe, Louise Bleriot, Sir Sefton Brancker and Winston Churchill. It's now a conference centre and beautiful venue for weddings and special events with its state of the art designed Blackburn Wing in the grounds. It's also the Aston Martin Drives Club.

During the first 10 years of marriage Jessy had four children two boys and two girls. Also during this time she travelled extensively with Robert. In 1928/9 she travelled 1st class to Buenos Aires on the "Arlanza". Jessy also took part in the Kings Cup 1922 and 1928. These air races were spectacular 2 day events, with around 40 flying machines racing over courses stretching 1,000 miles across Britain.

Jessy has tragedy in her life as well as lots of highs. In 1917 she watched as test pilot Ronald Ding crashed to his death in an experimental plane in Roundhay Park. In 1930 she drove Sir Sefton Brancker to Cardington for an historic flight to India in an airship R101, only to hear on the wireless that it had crashed in a fireball burning all on board. She also has her personal sadness, one son had to be nursed for 2 years gravely ill with Tuberculosis and Robert died in 1935 at the age of 16, being knocked off his bicycle by a car while away at school.

Jessy and Robert divorced in 1936 after 23 years of marriage and after that she had no involvement in the Blackburn company. But she had children and then grand and great grandchildren so her life was quite full. Jessy married twice more once in 1941 to Group Captain Jack Noakes one of the

founding members of the RAF. Then to 1953 to Stanley Barton a farmer. Nether marriage lasted very long.

Jessy lived in Edenbridge in Kent until 1960's then moved to Eastbourne. She celebrated her 100th birthday at the Grand Hotel and died 14th May 1995 in St Margaret's Nursing Home Upper Carlisle Rd. Eastbourne.

Researcher Views

I felt that though she'd had a strange upbringing being moved around between relatives and shipped off to Switzerland, at the time it wasn't unusual. It probably made her quite resilient and strong headed. She wasn't one to sit in the back and just have children, because she became an entrepreneur and insisted on flying which at the time was not something that a woman did. Just imagine flying in a cumbersome outfit like a riding habit, long skirts, lace blouse and wool jacket! Her strong character came through.

Hilary Richards