

High jinks on Helvellyn (and elsewhere)

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During the coffee and brandy stage of a party at Chez Victor's, a notoriously fashionable club off Bond Street, London, Air Vice-Marshal Sir Sefton Brancker, Director of Civil Aviation, said to John Leeming, Chairman of the Lancashire Aero Club, 'What you want to do is to land on a mountain ...

'Propaganda. That's what aviation needs. Now, suppose you were to take an aeroplane and land it on some impossible place, stay a little while, and then take off again and fly back to your home aerodrome. The papers would be full of a stunt like that.

People would realize that modern aircraft can land almost anywhere.'

Leeming, who recalled the fateful conversation in his book *Airdays* (Harrap, 1936) was much taken with this idea and was encouraged by A. V. Roe & Company Ltd (perhaps better known as Avro) which helped the project in every way.

On 21 December 1926 Leeming and the legendary Australian aviator Bert Hinkler reached within a mile of Helvellyn in an Avro Gosport, but, defeated by a gale, flew back to their base in a field at Lancaster and stayed at the County Hotel.

The following day they took off again. Over Bowness-on-Windermere, however, the engine spluttered, banged and the revs dropped, so that the aeroplane lost 500ft. Hinkler shut the throttle, passed over the lake at about 10ft and landed in a field. The field proved to be land in front of Calgarth Park at

Troutbeck Bridge, then the Ethel Hedley Orthopaedic Hospital for Children. Leeming and Hinkler took off again and succeeded in landing on Helvellyn.

On 26 January 1931, Windermere Urban District Council's Town Planning Committee debated a scheme submitted by another aviation legend, Sir Alan Cobham, for an aerodrome at Troutbeck Bridge but the idea was shelved.

On 16 December 1940, the Ministry of Aviation's Supply Board decided to proceed with the construction of a factory to build Sunderland flying boats, which was only 300 yards from the Ethel Hedley Hospital.

After the Second World War, there was no aviation activity on Windermere, save for a solitary floatplane that landed at Low Wood Bay in 1979. Four years later an amphibian Cessna 180 landed at Low Wood, carrying two pilots from South West Aviation, based in Dorset, who held talks with representatives of South Lakeland District Council, Cumbria Tourist Board and Michael Berry, Chairman of English Lakes Hotels Ltd. Their proposal was to offer a floatplane flying school and an air taxi service to other centres, such as Manchester and Liverpool airports, and to offer pleasure flights and also to support lake and mountain rescue teams.

Objections were led by *The Westmorland Gazette*, with an item in their leader column of 30 September 1983 entitled 'Only one answer: No'.

Since then, only two seaplanes have landed on Windermere (in the 1990s). In 2007, however, AirSea Lines based in Corfu, proposed a scheduled service from locations including Windermere, north Wales and London, operating Otter floatplanes.

There is a current application to the Lake District National Park Authority for an exemption from the speed limit byelaws for two days this September for the replica of *Waterbird*, which first flew from the lake in 1911, to fly once more.

