



Marion Wilberforce ...World War II Hero



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Marion Wilberforce.....World War II Hero

The British Air Transport Auxiliary (ATA) was formed in September 1939. The idea was for pilots, who for various reasons, such as being too old or unfit for RAF service but who were still more than capable to pilot light aircraft. They transported mail, dispatches, medical supplies and later, flying training aircraft, fighters, bombers and flying boats from factories to front line squadrons. This enabled the release of desperately needed fully trained pilots for combat duties. They were given the nickname '**Ancient and Tattered Airmen**'.



What has this to do with Marion Wilberforce? Well! Marion became one of the first of eight women to form the Women's section of the ATA in December 1939. At the time she was living with her husband Robert at their farm, 'Nevendon Manor'.

Marion was born at Boyndlie House, Fraserburgh, Aberdeenshire on 23 July 1902 to John Charles Mathias Ogilvie-Forbes the ninth Laird of Boyndlie and his second wife Anne Marguerite Prendergast. Marion was educated at home by a succession of French governesses and was obviously fluent in French. By the time she was fourteen she was helping out on the estate by collecting rents from the tenants. At sixteen she was sent off to the Convent of Jesus and Mary at Stony Stratford, Buckinghamshire and then in 1922 she went to Somerville College, Oxford, obtaining a diploma in agriculture in 1925, graduating the following year. While at Oxford she also took a keen interest in sport: she was accomplished in Ju-Jitsu and was a member of the University French Club and Mountaineering Club.

Marion married Robert William Francis Wilberforce who had befriended her brother David at Ampleforth College, Oxford. Robert however was not sure whether he wanted to follow a life as a priest or matrimony so to test his strength he spent six months as a monk at Ampleforth Abbey before deciding against it and at the gate waiting for him was Marion. In the meantime, while she was waiting for him, she joined a Field Sports magazine, in addition to travelling widely. In 1931 she visited Quebec, arriving back on 22 July 1932 on the "Duchess of York" just before they married on 3 September 1932. They had acquired the Essex farm 'Nevendon Manor' where she kept chickens, bred pigs and cattle. The piglets she named after her brothers, with the runt of the litter being given the name of her youngest brother Malcolm.

Having no children of her own and with her interest and experience in farming she found herself becoming involved in the work of Fairbridge Farm Schools. These were schools set up first in Australia then in Canada by Kingsley Fairbridge and his wife Ruby. It was a charitable organisation set up to help settle orphan children into the agricultural way of life and before she was married. she travelled widely, inspecting these farm schools in Australia and Canada. She was for many years Chair of the child care committee and often had children from the school stay with her at Nevendon Manor.

Marion took up flying in 1930, encouraged by her two aviator brothers. She learned to fly at Stag Lane Aerodrome, Edgware where she gained her pilot's licence. Quite an achievement as

many women at that time did not even drive motor cars.

She purchased her first aircraft, a de-Havilland Cirrus Moth after investing successfully on the stock exchange. This aircraft she later replaced with a Hornet Moth. She had them registered as farm implements for tax purposes - she used them to transport livestock around. She would take a trip to Europe to visit friends for lunch and bring back chickens or the odd calf placed in bags behind her seat.

Those days instrumentation in aircraft was minimal and navigation was carried out visually. If she got lost, she would land and ask the way or read the local signposts. By the time civilian flying ceased in 1939 she had accrued 900 flying hours. So, there is no question that by the time war broke out she was a very experienced pilot.

It was because of her piloting experience that she was invited to go to Whitchurch on 16 December for a flight test and was chosen to become one of Pauline Gower's first eight women to join the ATA. She reported for duty at Hatfield No 5 Ferry Pool.



The founding ATA pilots and their Tiger Moths: left to right Pauline Gower, Winifred Crossley Fair, Margaret Cunnison, Hon. Margaret Fairweather, Mona Friedlander, Joan Hughes, Gabrielle Patterson, Rosemary Rees and Marion Wilberforce.

Pauline Gower had been a 'joy ride' pilot during the 1930s and with her partner had started one of the earliest all-women commercial flight businesses. As war approached and with 2,000 flying hours and 33,000 passengers under her belt, she looked for an opportunity to contribute to the war effort.

Even though women had tackled male tasks exceptionally well during the Great War, it was still

a male dominated world so it took a lot of persuading but eventually she was granted permission in November 1940 to start up a women's section. Their salary was 20% lower than their male equivalent

They initially flew light training planes, such as Gipsy and Tiger Moths, from the de Havilland factory at Hatfield to training bases in Northern England and Scotland.



de-Havilland Tiger Moth



de-Havilland Gipsy Moth

However, with the loss of Pilots in the Battle of Britain, by the end of 1941 Marion and the others were flying Spitfires, Hurricanes and twin-engine types. She was initially First Deputy but then took over command of No5 Ferry Pool and in early 1943 she was transferred to No12 ferry pool, Cosford and took command of the second all-women pool, becoming one of only two women pool commanders in the whole of the ATA. In 1944 she became one of only eleven women allowed to fly four-engine Lancaster and Stirling bombers. Though she would seem quite formidable at first, she was affectionately remembered as being kind and motherly to the younger girls of the ATA Ferry pool.

The first spitfire she flew was donated by the citizens of Grimsby and was named Grimsby 11.



On one occasion, she arrived at a factory to discover that there was a strike and that the aircraft she had come to collect could not be released. She went to the workers' canteen and gave a rousing speech about the war effort; the plane was duly released.

By June 1940 there were twelve women pilots, which rose to more than 160 by the war's end. One of them was the famous trail blazing Amy Johnson who was killed in January 1941. They became known as the "ATA-girls". At the end of the war Marion had flown over 2400 hours and 100 different aircraft. She returned to her Essex farm and immersed herself into country life and peacetime flying. Characteristically she declined the offer of an MBE and like many others rarely spoke about her wartime exploits

While Marion was flying around the skies in her Spitfires her husband Robert served in 134th Field Regiment RA (TA). In his business life he was a solicitor and a partner in Travers, Smith, Braithwaite & Co a corporate law firm. He was also a descendent of William Wilberforce (1759-1833) a leading light in the abolition of slavery.

Marion was described as a 'quintessential "Attagirl" - resourceful, daring and skilled, with more than a touch of eccentricity in her makeup'. So, it is not surprising that in peacetime she was best known in aviation as someone who did what she was not supposed to do. Such as skirting the ground at two hundred feet to avoid radar, when flying a route, she should not have been on, or disrupting a NATO exercise. She also had little faith in doctors and would obtain her medicines from a vet, claiming her horse was sick.

So, there is no doubt that Marion was a very energetic person, full of life and loved adventure. Soon after moving to Nevendon Manor, she began hunting and on her return from the war she served on the Essex Union Hunt committee from 1962 to 1982, becoming the only woman master of foxhounds in the Hunt's 236-year history. She was known as a fearless and tough rider. In her seventies she fell into a ditch breaking her collar bone, she re-mounted and completed the hunt before taking herself to hospital. She only stopped hunting in her early eighties after taking another fall and breaking more bones.

In 1947 she became a co-owner of a Hornet Moth G-ADKM with her brother Neil and though the skies became more regulated, Marion continued to fly out of a field at Nevendon Manor, round the British Isles visiting friends in the same happy-go-lucky way of pre-war days. Her post war log book records her slipping in and out of European Countries to have lunch with friends in Luxembourg or listen to music at the Vienna Staatsoper. She took particular pleasure in taking her sister-in-law to Paris to pick up Molyneux culture. On one occasion in May 1949, she set off to visit her brother Neil who was then an air attaché in Moscow. She travelled via Amsterdam, Copenhagen and Stockholm, arriving in Helsinki two days later on the 7th May. To her annoyance she had to leave the aircraft there and go by other means to Moscow. She acquired another Hornet Moth G-AEZG in 1964 and continued her adventures flying until the age of eighty and would have probably continued but for the fact she became disenchanted by all the rules and regulations imposed on the private pilot.

They sold Nevendon Manor in 1971 and moved into a Georgian house in nearby Ramsden Heath called Foxes. Marion's aircraft during her time here was housed at Stapleford Abbots airfield.

Her husband Robert died in December 1984 so she returned to her family home at Boyndlie to live with her brother Malcolm. Though the house was in a state of decay, gardens overgrown and the family chapel derelict they lived happily amongst the decay.

As one would expect she became impatient with physical frailties and refused to wear a hearing aid. She spent her last few months in Stratford Park Nursing Home, Stroud, where she died on the 17 December 1995 at the age of 93. Though she was cremated at Stroud, her ashes were interred at Markington Roman Catholic Church, Harrogate, Yorkshire, near the Wilberforce home.

It is no surprise that Marion took up flying - she really did not have much choice. Her younger brother Neil born 12 December 1900 was commissioned as a Pilot Officer on 1 November 1922 being promoted to Flying Officer on 1 May 1923. He had a long and distinguished career with the Royal Air Force, was awarded the O.B.E. and at his own request retired retaining the rank of Air Vice Marshal on 5 July 1952.

Running a home, a farm, flying, hunting and charity work (Fairbridge Farm Schools) - **What a lady and a Basildon one at that!**

Appendix 1

The following is an extract from internet web site 'WordPress': -

'When I was learning to fly at Ipswich Airport in the early 1980s, I can remember an elderly lady flying into the field in an immaculate vintage de Havilland Hornet Moth. She used to come for checks on her flying skills, and also to practice aerobatics in a Cessna 150 Aerobat.

The instructor who flew with her, said she had been a ferry pilot during World War 11 and was one of the best pilots he'd ever sat with.

Searching through the Air Transport Auxiliary, I found this page, which talks about the first eight women pilots of the organisation. This is one of the eight.

Marion Wilberforce

Marion Wilberforce was an experienced pilot in the 1930s, flying her own Gypsy Moth. In the ATA she rose to become Deputy Commander of the No. 5 Ferry Pool at Hatfield and later became Commander of the No. 2 Ferry Pool at Cosford. She served the full 5 years until the ATA was disbanded. After the war she purchased a Hornet Moth and continued flying until she was 80. She died at age 93, in July 1996.

I'm absolutely sure, that the pilot was Marion Wilberforce and she was doing aerobatics at an age of almost 80!

Appendix 2

This is about a very remarkable Lady Marion Ogilvie-Forbes. Born in 1902, daughter of the 9th Laird of Boyndlie. She grew up loving the countryside and horses. One of seven children she wanted to emulate two of her brothers who had become aviators. So, she worked and worked and eventually obtained her private Pilot's licence and by playing the Stock Market as her uncle Prendegast had taught her she bought her first aircraft – A de Havilland Cirrus Moth, and later, a de Havilland Hornet Moth



de Havilland Cirrus Moth

As the 1930s advanced with war being declared in 1939, a small group of Ladies who could fly were required to be flight tested. Eight were selected – They were then beginning of the ATA – The Air Transport Auxilliary – Marion Wilberforce (married name) was one of these intrepid ladies. By 1943 she had become Commander of the No. 12 Ferry pool at Cosford. One of the only two women pool commanders in the whole of the ATA.

The contribution to the war by these brave women was enormous. Their hazardous task was to ferry all types of aircraft from factories or dispatch points to the airfields and operation stations where they were needed. She flew many aircrafts - Spitfires, Hurricanes, Lancaster Bombers, Wellington Bombers and Mosquitoes – on some days she would ferry as many as four different planes from one aerodrome to another, sometimes beyond our shores.

The original male prejudice encountered soon changed to respect and admiration for ATA and the service given to aviation in the war. Marion herself was very private and modest, declining publicity and the MBE.

In peacetime she and husband Robert Wilberforce (a descendant of William Wilberforce) lived at Nevendon Manor in Essex. They farmed poultry, pigs and Dexter cattle.



Dexter cattle

However, her beloved Hornet Moth was very much still part of her life. Kept in a barn in one of the fields she would regularly take off on jaunts - Paris, lunch in Luxemburg, The Opera in

Vienna, friends in Scotland, and Ireland. In that little plane she always had a dinghy in case she came down over water.



De-Havilland Hornet Moth

She also rode fearlessly with the Essex hounds becoming the only Essex Woman Master of Hounds.

In the early 1970s she reluctantly decided to sell Nevendon Manor, after her husband was almost blind and being very tall the low Tudor beams had become a difficult for him. They moved to a Georgian house, four miles away – Before putting the house on the market she discussed things with friends in the hunting fraternity – Hoping one of them would buy it. A very dear friend of ours who rode with the Union decided to view and wanted Bill (my husband) to go with him to see its condition and what worked would need to be done. They arrived with torches on a cold dark November afternoon. With each step Roy (our friend) became more daunted, Gaps in floorboards – crooked floors – beams – great brick inglenooks. No way would he bring his family there. Bill though knew, with each step how beautiful and unspoilt it was and how he and I would love it. Despite the superb modern house, he had built for us on a side of a hill, we must try for the Manor.

So, Roy phone lady Marion and told her his friend would not buy, but he knew someone who might. She was not happy; Mr. Marven (my husband) might ride but he did not hunt! A property developer as well! Despite assurances that his main business interest was to conserve old and listed properties No! No!

As a last result the phone was thrust into my hand. I could only speak of what I knew. How the house could make a superb setting for my collection of 18th and 19th century costumes, textiles and dolls, and for the visitors who came to learn about them. “Silence!” Then “Very Well, tell Mr. Marven to contact my agent in the morning.” And the phone was put down.

So, that was it – A wonderful home and a wonderful friend became part of our lives. She would visit often. Sometimes on horseback, sometimes with friends. They were such interesting people. Ladies in waiting, diplomat's wives, one never knew who would arrive., but best of all! knowing Bills interest in flying she took us both to see her beloved Hornet Moth. In her early eighties she still flew and kept it at Stapleford Abbots airfield. She insisted Bill flew with her, off they went and after a long time they landed back safely, turning to me she insisted that I too must fly as well. So, I did in this little two-seater plane over half of Essex and under her instruction took the controls for a little while – I never forgot it.

Until she retired from flying, she would often fly over Nevendon – Tipping her wings in salute if we were in the grounds.

So – such wonderful memories! She was admired and loved by all who knew her - a great horsewoman and a very great flyer.

Mrs. Marven

Appendix 3



Nevendon

Manor

Nevendon Manor – South Essex

Is a 16th Century, Grade II listed building and was previously known as Broomfords Manor, dating back to at least the early 15th Century? There are the remains of a moat.

Markington Hall – North Yorkshire

The family home of the Wilberforce family since 1731. The current Grade II listed building was built in approximately 1410 with two wings added in 17th and 18th centuries. A previous hall on the site was built between 1285 and 1309.*

Boyndlie House – North Aberdeenshire

The family estate of the Ogilvie-Forbes family. The house was built in 1814 and Grade listed C(s)

Appendix 4

The following article is by Graham Watts of the Women's Commemoration Committee that appeared in then Essex Life Magazine August 2023.

MARION WILBERFORCE – THE “ATA-GIRL” AIR ACE

If you lived in Basildon anytime from 1932 - 1971 you might have been treated to the sight of a female pilot taking off from Nevendon Manor in Wickford, on her way to visit the opera in Vienna or perhaps landing with a calf in the back of her aeroplane that she'd purchased in Hungary for her farm. You might have even spotted her at Ipswich Airport where, into her 80's, she was still performing aerobatics. This was Marion Wilberforce who, far from being an eccentric old lady, was a genuine Essex war hero.

Marion took to the air in 1930 and achieved her pilot's license in an age when most women didn't even drive cars. By the time civilian flights ceased at the start of WW2 she had accrued 900 flying hours. The British Air Transport Auxiliary (ATA) had been formed in September 1939 for men, unfit for operational service but still functional flyers, to take on vital tasks such as transporting mail, dispatches, and medical supplies. This enabled the release of desperately needed fully trained pilots for combat duties. It was joked that ATA stood for 'Ancient and Tattered Airmen.'

In November 1940, after much debate, permission was given to start up a women's section of just 8 female aviators two of whom – Joan Hughes and Marion Wilberforce – were from Essex.

By 1943, Marion was Commander of the all-female Ferry Pool at RAF Cosford (near Telford,) one of only two women Commanders in the whole Air Transport Auxiliary which by then boasted 1,152 male and 168 female pilots. She flew over 100 different aircraft including Spitfires, Hurricanes, Mosquitos, and Lancaster, Halifax, and Wellington bombers.

Working 13-day shifts, the “Attagirls” (now dubbed “Anything To Anywhere”) would ferry newly manufactured aircraft to front line squadrons and airbases. These were by no means easy missions. Such was the heavy workload that Marion's flying hours increased by a further 1800 in just 3 years. All the more remarkable when you consider that the women were never trained in the use of radio (male fighter pilots being the priority) and had to rely on a map, a watch, and a compass!

The risks were enormous flying planes that had been constructed so swiftly. 1 in 10 ATA women lost their lives during the war; a statistic you don't often hear quoted. These included the famous Amy Johnson, the first woman to fly solo from London to Australia. Their importance to the war effort was so valuable that they were eventually awarded financial parity with their male colleagues which made the ATA one of the first equal opportunity employers in Britain.

At the end of the war Marion returned to Nevendon Manor, retaining the same single mindedness that had made her such a successful maverick within the ATA. She continued to fly, using just a map as she was used to, and often skirted at 200 feet so that she was under the radar. This got her into hot water as she accidentally strayed into Soviet airspace and was shot at by the Red Army.

When Marion wasn't sure of her route she would simply land in a field and ask the way. One farmer objected to this and angrily protested "You can't land here!" to which Marion replied "I already have done I'm afraid."

Although offered an MBE, this was declined along with many requests for interviews regarding her service career. Joy Goodenough, who cared for Marion during her final years in a Nursing Home, explains: "She disliked publicity intensely and could not understand being interviewed about simply doing one's duty. She was in her early 90s by the time I knew her and would greet me in the morning by opening one eye and enquiring "Darling am I dead yet?"

Marion Wilberforce passed away on 17th December 1995, aged 93.

By Graham Watts

Appendix 5

MARION WILBERFORCE IS SET TO BE RECOGNISED WITH A BLUE PLAQUE

Our own ground-breaking Second World War hero 'ATA-girl' pilot

MEMORIES

By Louise Harrison

TRAIL-BLAZING Second World War hero Marion Wilberforce was one of the first "ATA-girl" pilots.

Marion, who lived with her husband Robert at their farm, Nevedon Manor in Wickford, went on to become one of only two women pool commanders in the whole of the British Air Transport Auxiliary (ATA).

She will be honoured with a Blue Plaque which is set to be unveiled in Nevedon on August 9.

The experienced pilot had accrued 900 flying hours by the time civilian flying ceased in 1939, and she was invited to go to Whichchurch on December 16 1939 for a flight test to become one of Pauline Gower's first eight women to join the ATA.

The ATA had been formed in September that same year for male pilots who were too old or unfit for RAF service, but who



■ Pilot - Marion Wilberforce

were still more than capable to pilot light aircraft.

They were given the nickname "Ancient and Tattered Airman". They transported mail, dispatches, medical supplies and later, flying training aircraft, fighters, bombers and flying boats from factories to frontline squadrons. Pauline Gower had to fight for the creation of the women's section and Marion became one of the first of eight women to form the Women's section of the

ATA, who, by the end of the war were dubbed the "ATA-girls".

Marion had taken up flying in 1930, and had learned to fly at Stag Lane Aerodrome, Edgware where she gained her pilot's licence.

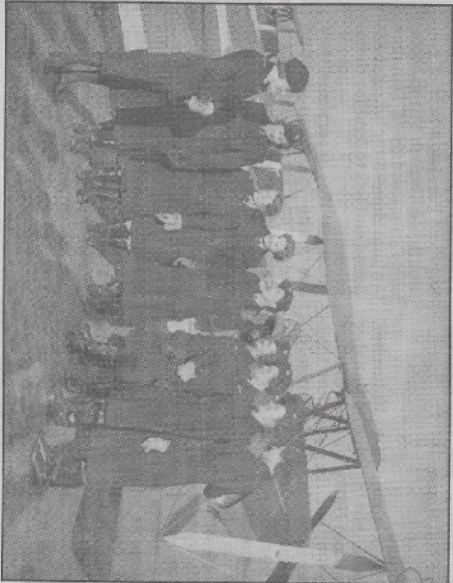
This was quite an achievement as many women at that time did not even drive motor cars.

She was initially first deputy but then took over command of Nos Betty Pool and in early 1943 she was transferred to No12 ferry pool, Coxford and took command of the second all-women pool.

They initially flew light training planes, such as Gipsy and Tiger Moths and by the end of 1941 they were flying Spitfires, Hurricanes and twin-engine types.

After the war she returned to her Essex farm and immersed herself into country life and peace-time flying.

All of the research detailed here was collated by Basilidon Heritage Group. See www.basilidonheritage.org.uk.



■ ATA Pilots and their Tiger Moths - left to right Pauline Gower, Winifred Crossly Fair, Margaret Cunison, Hon. Margaret Fairweather, Mona Friedlander, Joan Hughes, Gabriell Patterson and Rosemary Rees. Image: Basilidon Borough Heritage

Appendix 6

The following article is the speech that John Lumsden gave at the unveiling of the Marion Wilberforce plaque at Nevendon Manor on the 9th August 2023

My Aunt Marion

Maggie Appleton has told us the history and importance of the ATA, Ken Porter has written a great article for Basildon Heritage website, and Louise Howeson wrote about it in the Echo two weeks ago, so I won't repeat that a remarkable story. If you want to know more, John Webster, Secretary of the ATA Association and a fund of knowledge is here.

My first memory of my Aunt Marion, my mother's elder sister, was, as a teenager. Having helped her with her horses, she threw the keys of her Land Rover to me and told me to take it and trailer back here to Nevendon. "But Aunt Marion" I said "I haven't got a driving licence". She replied, "But you know how to drive?" I foolishly replied "Yes, Aunt Marion". One did not argue with Aunt Marion!

With great trepidation, I drove the Land Rover and trailer back here without mishap. Aunt Marion, having ridden across the fields, was here to meet me (I was going to say 'greet me', but that was not in Aunt Marion's character). She said, "I told you, you could do it".

Another story probably also gives an accurate impression of Aunt Marion (she was always Aunt Marion, never just Marion). One day she got back to her farm in Essex find a burglar in the house. When the police arrived, they found the burglar cowering in the corner of the kitchen demanding to be taken away from this mad woman who had set about him with the wrong end of a riding whip. Today, she would probably be taken off to the cells and the burglar set free, but times were different then.

My Aunt Marion was very keen to share her love of flying, taking friends and family, including me, my brothers, and all my cousins for joy rides and some for longer flights. She even lent her Hornet Moth to me while I was a Flight Cadet at Royal Air Force College, Cranwell, when I was just 20. I and a fellow cadet, Mike Mckinley, flew across Europe to Cannes and Rome and back via Venice and the Brenner Pass. The next year, I flew my girlfriend (now my wife, Anne, a Billericay girl) to my Graduation Ball at Cranwell, then Mike and I and flew across Denmark and Sweden to Finland, and then back via the Norwegian Fiords. We thought we were trailblazers, but Aunt Marion had been there before us!

Marion had over 900 hours flying before she joined the ATA – crisscrossing the UK from Shetland to the Scilly Isles and to Berlin, Munich, and Budapest.

Then, with no flying in her Hornet allowed and many civilian aircraft being requisitioned by the Government, Marion offers G-ADMP to the Air Ministry but receives a rather terse reply.

However, the situation soon changes and by September, she has 'sold' her aircraft to the Air

Ministry for slightly more than she paid for it; the official description of its condition is given as 'excellent', Marion has altered this to read 'perfect'!

I'd like to provide a little detail to her ATA flying. I'm lucky to have most of her flying log books and those of her brothers, on loan from my cousins, four of whom are here today. I also have my father's log book. All three men flew together in Canada once in September 1930. Marion was also in Canada, but on the West Coast, flying at the same time. But that's another, long, long, story!

Now to that detail of her 1500 hours of ATA flying, I looked through her log books to see what she was doing in the months of August between 1940 and 1944. In August 1940, the women pilots in the ATA were restricted to flying trainers and some basic twin-engined aircraft; mainly ferrying male pilots to and from their various tasks, all over the south of England.

In August 1941, things have changed, the women are now permitted to fly some fighter aircraft and a few have had a quick 20 minutes or so practice in a Hurricane in the middle of July. On this day, the 9th August 1941, Marion delivers her first Hurricane from Cowley near Oxford to Prestwick in Scotland. By the end of the month, she has delivered another eight Hurricanes as well as 10 other aircraft. She has to wait until November to deliver her first Spitfire.

On one day she arrived at a factory to discover that the employees were on strike and that the aircraft that she had been sent to collect could not be released. She went to the canteen, stood on a table and gave a resounding speech about the war effort. This secured the release of her aircraft. Nobody argued with Aunt Marion!

By August 1942, Marion is qualified to fly the heavier twin-engined aircraft. She flies twenty-five times in just 10 days, 11 different aircraft types – Wellington and Whitley bombers and a Botha, four Mosquitos, a Blenheim and an Oxford, a Mustang fighter, and a Gull together with her fair share of taxi runs in the Argus, Anson, and Puss Moth.

August 1943 is quiet, just a few flights recorded, but there are many blank lines in her log book between the end of May until the middle of August; she had been ill. However, between the 18th and the end of the August, she flies 12 times; 2 Swordfish biplanes, a Walrus amphibian, 2 Spitfires, a high-speed Tomahawk fighter, 2 Blenheim bombers and, again, her share of the taxi flights.

August 1944 is a more typical month; if you can believe it. Starting on the 9th, she flies 40 times, sometimes six times in one day. The list of aircraft is unbelievable – let's get the 'dull' ones out of the way; 16 taxi flights in either the Argus or Anson, then the really heavy four-engined aircraft, two Lancasters, four Stirlings, and one Halifax, Marion is one of the very few women pilots cleared to fly these, then the medium bombers – a Mosquito, two Beaufighters and a Beaufort, also a Wellington, then the fighters, three Spitfires and one each of a Hellcat, Mustang and Wildcat, and also a Barracuda torpedo bomber.

Her ATA Log Books make remarkable reading, but we must remember that all ATA pilots, the 1,154 men and 168 women, were doing the same, and they were well supported by engineers,

operations staff, and some Air Cadets.

After the war, Marion flies another 1200 hrs in Hornet Moths. Again, covering the length and breadth of the British Isles and to Tunis, Helsinki, Zagreb, Florence, Rome, and most places in-between.

As an example, in May 1949, she heads north in via Amsterdam, Copenhagen, Stockholm to Helsinki on her way to visit her brother Neill, who is Air Attaché in Moscow. This visit has been described elsewhere as “an alarming experience for him—she was not good at observing the restrictions imposed by the Stalin regime”. The story being that she wanted to fly on to Moscow and was refused permission by the Soviet Authorities. A flight plan had to be submitted and accepted by the destination airfield for all flights that crossed an international border. She flew on by a civil airliner!

In 1964, French newspaper article recorded that she stopped at Darois to refuel on her way to Cannes. In perfect French she told the paper “Cet avion n’était rien d’autre a ses yeux qu’une bicyclette...” “this plane was in her eyes nothing more than a bicycle...” Her last recorded flight was in 1978 at the age of 76.

On their behalf and on behalf of Marion’s nieces and nephews, my cousins, may I thank you, especially Graham Watts and his Committee, for organising this Blue Plaque in her memory – there are many more that need to be unveiled.

One last point, as has been said, Aunt Marion avoided publicity and declined an MBE. “I was just doing my job.” But now, not only having a Purple Bus in Hatfield named in her honour, but also a Blue Plaque here as well, I can hear her say “What ever will they think of next”.



Unveiled on 9th August by Maggie Appleton MBE, Chief Executive of the RAF Museum at Nevendon Manor.





RAF Museum

Basildon Borough heritage Society
Ken Porter
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