

Amy Johnson – Flying from Kingsbury

Amy Johnson was born in Hull, in East Yorkshire, on 1 July 1903, the eldest daughter of a fish merchant. Her home town rightly celebrates a young woman who became a famous pilot, but it was the time she spent living and working in what is now the London Borough of Brent which paved the way for her flying career. Recent research has identified the house in Kingsbury where Amy Johnson lived, and this article will give readers a taste of her story, including her local connections.

A postcard picture of Amy Johnson in 1930.
[Image from the internet]



After school in Hull, Amy went to Sheffield University, thinking that she would probably become a teacher. She graduated in 1925, with an ordinary degree in French, Latin and Economics, but then spent the summer at a secretarial college, and took a job as a short-hand typist at a Hull accountancy firm. In early 1927, she moved to London, first working in a shop for a couple of weeks, before getting a position in April as a secretary in a City law firm. A year later, a bus ride to explore the surrounding countryside brought her to Stag Lane Aerodrome, on the border



between Kingsbury and Edgware. She sat down and watched the planes for several hours, and went back to her rented room knowing that she wanted to fly.

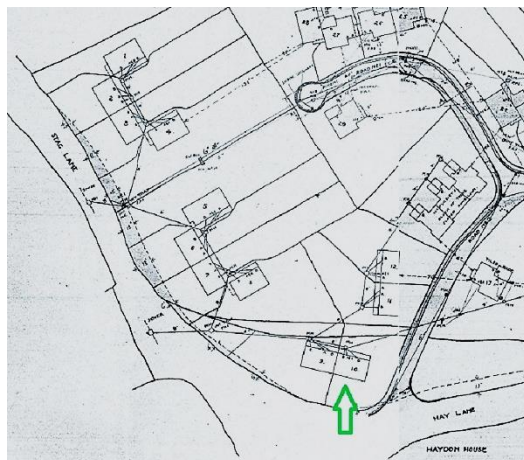
An aerial view of Stag Lane Aerodrome in 1926.
[Source: Brent Archives - online image 582]

Amy found out that the De Havilland School of Flying charged £5 for a one hour flying lesson (more than her weekly wages!), but that if she joined the London Aeroplane Club, also based at Stag Lane, for three guineas, lessons cost “only” thirty shillings. She did join, but had to wait until mid-September 1928 for her first flying lesson. Bad weather through the winter, changes of instructor and the cost of lessons on her limited income, meant that Amy did not make her first solo flight (of just 5 minutes) until 9 June 1929, after 16 hours tuition. In July, she passed the tests to obtain her Private Pilot’s “A” Licence.

It was never Amy's ambition just to fly for fun – she wanted flying to be her career. To achieve that, she had to learn how aeroplanes worked, and to get a “B” Licence (for commercial pilots), which needed a minimum of 100 flying hours. She could not do this just at week-ends. In August 1929 she resigned from her job in the City to devote all her time to aviation, relying on an allowance from her father to pay her way.

Amy found lodgings close to Stag Lane Aerodrome with the Evans family at “Oldways”, at the corner of Stag Lane and Hay Lane in Roe Green, and moved into a ground floor room at their thatched wooden house in early September 1929. Its address at that time was 10 Elmwood Crescent, part of the Elmwood Estate built by the Kingsbury architect, Ernest Trobridge, in 1922.

Trobridge's 1922 plan, with 10 Elmwood Crescent marked >
 [Source: Brent Archives – Wembley plans microfilm No. 6750]



< A house in Elmwood Crescent similar to the one where Amy lived, pictured in 1964.
 [Photo courtesy of Gareth Davies]

allowed her to watch him at work and ask questions. It was a Club rule that no women were allowed in the maintenance hangars (in case they distracted the engineers), but they got round this by calling her “Johnnie”. Once she moved to Roe Green, Amy worked full-time, but unpaid, at the aerodrome, first sweeping the floor and washing aircraft, but in time moving on to working on aircraft engines. In a letter to her father on 25 September she wrote: *‘I'm at the aerodrome at 8am & work hard until we close down, when I walk straight home down a country lane & get to bed about 9.30 or 10pm. Am feeling much stronger, and better in every way.’*

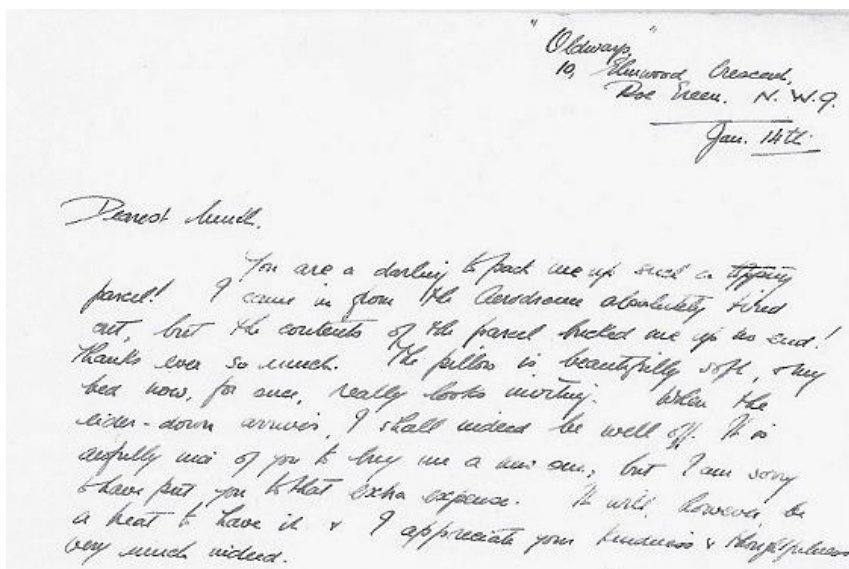


“Johnnie” at work in 1929.
 [Source: “The Illustrated London News”]

The Aeroplane Club's mechanics worked six days a week (with Monday as their "day off"), and Amy did the same. She wrote about the working conditions in a letter to her mother on 6 October, saying: *'It's very cold at the Aerodrome now & I've had to get myself some warm clothes.'* These included a tweed skirt and a warm jumper, as well as: *'2 prs. of woollen stockings & woollen knickers.'* She concluded: *'I shall have to wear a lot of clothes because of the concrete floors and draughts everywhere.'* Her efforts in the hangars paid off, however, as she learned all about the Club's aeroplanes, and had the opportunity to fly them. With Jack's encouragement, she studied for her Ground Engineer "C" Licence, passing her exams and becoming the first woman in Britain to receive this licence in December 1929. She went on to become a fully qualified "A" Ground Engineer in March 1930.

Part of a letter from Amy to her mother ("Dearest Muth"), sent from Roe Green in January 1930.

[Courtesy of the RAF Museum Archive – ref. Ac 77/23/796]



Amy had thought that she might start a business as an agent selling De Havilland aircraft, but she soon realised that she had insufficient capital for this. Nobody seemed ready to take the idea of a professional woman pilot seriously, so she planned a "stunt" which she hoped would make them take notice. In January 1930 she told a newspaper reporter that she intended to fly solo to Australia, and beat the 15½ day record for the journey which had been set by the Australian pilot, Bert Hinkler.



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Amy beside a De Havilland Gypsy Moth at a muddy Stag Lane Aerodrome in 1930.

[Image from the internet]

That same month she proudly wrote to her father about: *'one of the hardest weeks' work I've ever done in my life. ... I've been busy on my first job in aviation, & have earned £3.'* It was a private job for a Club member, who was selling his old aircraft.

'I thoroughly overhauled & inspected it before he handed it over. It was in a shockingly bad state & I nearly exhausted myself cleaning & polishing it – however it's all good training & I'm gradually getting much stronger physically, which I need to be to get to Australia!'

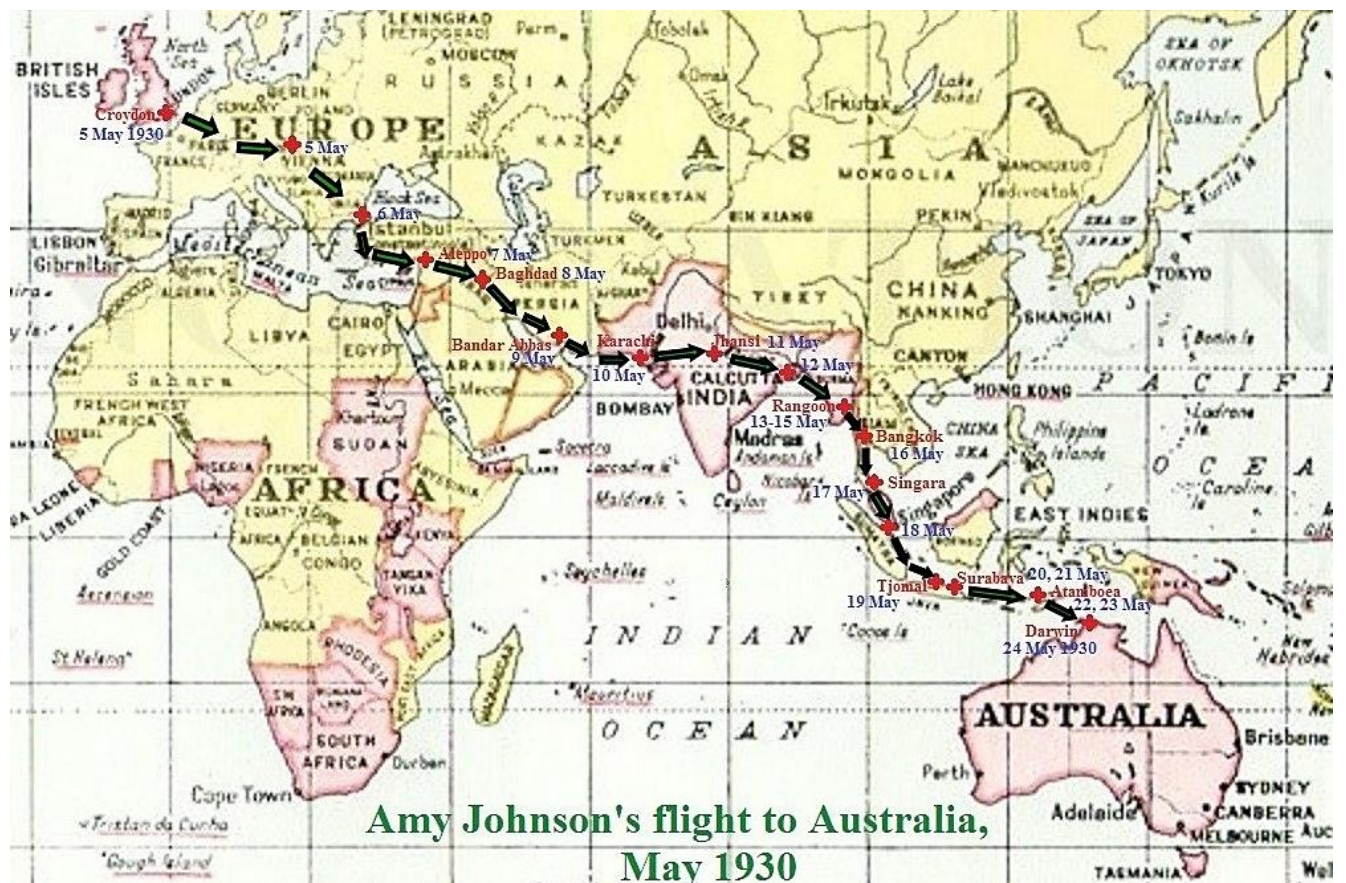
Amy's father, Will Johnson, was very supportive of his daughter's ambitions, even though aviation was not seen as a woman's role then. Her mother, while not opposing her involvement

in flying, was very nervous about it. Amy tried to reassure her, writing in a letter of 14 January 1930: *'I don't consider flying is dangerous if one takes reasonable care, & you may be sure I shall not take any unnecessary risks. So you won't worry, will you?'* She promised to adopt "Be Careful" as her flying motto.

For the next few months, Amy made her plans for the flight, but continued to work at Stag Lane, getting flying hours towards her full pilots licence and taking a navigation course. Much of her time in the evenings at Elmwood Crescent was spent writing letters, and her father sent her a typewriter to help with this. She bought maps, applied for visas and had meetings with possible sponsors. One of the people she hoped would help was Lord Wakefield, the chairman of the Castrol Oil company. Amy did not manage to see him until mid-April, but he agreed to pay for petrol for the flight, to arrange for its supply by Shell along the route, and to contribute £300 towards the purchase of a plane. Amy's father had already offered up to £500 towards this and the costs of the flight.

Amy wanted to set off on 5 May, as she thought this was likely to provide the best weather conditions along the route she had planned. She only managed to buy a second-hand DH Gipsy Moth aircraft, with extra fuel tanks, two weeks beforehand. The plane had an open cockpit, no radio and a top cruising speed of 90mph in good weather. Amy named it "Jason", the trade mark of her father's company, and had this painted in white on the green fuselage.

After frantic work to check and load her plane, Amy left Stag Lane on 4 May 1930. At around 8am the next morning, she took off from Croydon Aerodrome on the flight which was to make her Britain's most famous female aviator. It was an incredible solo journey for a young woman of 26, whose previous longest flight was a two hour trip to Hull!



[1930 World map image from the internet, with flight details added by the author]

I can only give a brief flavour of Amy's adventures in this article, but can recommend the book "Amy Johnson – Queen of the Air" by Midge Gillies (which can be borrowed from Kingsbury Library) to anyone who would like more details. Her first day's flight was to Vienna, and took over ten hours. As well as the physical effort of holding the joystick to control her aeroplane for all of that time, she had to pump fuel from the spare tanks manually, stay alert and navigate by map and compass! She could only fly in daylight, and needed to service the plane's engine at the end of each day.

Although only sleeping an average of three hours a night, Amy made good progress. After she landed in Karachi on 10 May, breaking the record for a solo flight from England to India (as the whole of the sub-continent was then known within the British Empire), her father managed to sell the exclusive rights to her story to the "Daily Mail" for £2,000. However, Amy's chances of beating Hinkler's record to Australia took a serious blow when she crash landed in Rangoon at the end of the ninth day of her flight. In heavy rain, she could not find the racecourse where she was meant to land, and came down instead on a football pitch, colliding with the goal post and ending up in a ditch. "Jason's" left wing was smashed, plus other damage, and that could have been the end of her flight. Luckily, the football pitch was at the Government Technical Institute, and with help from staff, students and local people, both Burmese and British, her plane was repaired in two days.

After further delays, and a 500 mile flight across the Timor Sea, Amy completed her 19½ day journey in Darwin, Northern Australia at around 3.30pm on 24 May. There was a large crowd to greet her, but she was physically and emotionally exhausted. Despite this, she was soon flying around Australia on a publicity trip for Castrol and Shell.

Amy with "Jason" in Australia, late May 1930.

[Photo from "Amy Johnson – Queen of the Air"]



Amy's flight to Australia had made her a celebrity. She was awarded a CBE by King George V, and when she arrived back at Croydon on 4 August, on an Imperial Airways flight from Cairo, she was greeted by a crowd of over two hundred thousand people. As part of her deal with the

"Daily Mail", by then worth £10,000, she was meant to tour around Britain for three months in "Jason", with public appearances and speeches almost every day. However, at the beginning of September her doctor ordered complete rest as a result of her exhaustion.



Amy (right), with the actress Anna Neagle, at the celebrity opening of the 1931 speedboat racing season at the Welsh Harp Reservoir.

[Photo from the book, "Amy Johnson – Queen of the Air"]

Amy made a number of other long distance flights in the 1930's, including return flights to Tokyo in Japan and to Cape Town, down the west coast of Africa. Some of these were solo, and some with fellow pilot Jim Mollison, who she married in 1932. When most of Stag Lane Aerodrome was sold off for housing development in the mid-1930's, its main road (along the line of the former grass runway) was named Mollison Way after her, even though she changed her name back to Johnson after her divorce in 1937.

It was May 1939 before Amy finally got her first regular job as a pilot, with an air ferry service between Portsmouth and the Isle of Wight. When the Second World War broke out the Air Transport Auxiliary ("ATA") was set up, to ferry planes from aircraft factories. At the start it only had male pilots, but late in 1939 the view prevailed that using women pilots for ferry work would free-up male pilots for combat duties. Amy applied to join, but it was not until May 1940 that she was finally accepted into the ATA's 20-strong women's section.

On Sunday 5 January 1941, Amy was delivering an Airspeed Oxford aircraft from Prestwick in Scotland to Kidlington in Oxfordshire. She had broken her journey overnight at Blackpool because of bad weather. Despite very poor visibility, and being advised not to fly, she ignored her own "Be Careful" motto and took off just before midday, saying that she would fly above cloud level. Amy died later that afternoon, drowned in the Thames Estuary after parachuting from her plane, never having found a gap in the clouds through which she could land safely.



< 1 and 3 Hay Lane, after the fire in 1964.
[Photo courtesy of Gareth Davies]

Below: **Kenwood Court.**



The house where Amy had lived in Roe Green (by then re-addressed as 3 Hay Lane) also suffered a tragic end, after fireworks set its thatch on fire, and it burned down on Guy Fawkes Night 1964. The flats at Kenwood Court were built on the site.

When a blue plaque, to commemorate Amy's life, was suggested, it was put up on the wall of Vernon Court, in Hendon Way London NW2, where she lived in a flat after she came back from her flight to Australia. Now that we know her address while she learned her skills as an aviator at Stag Lane Aerodrome in 1929-30, the people of Brent, and especially in the Roe Green area of Kingsbury, can proudly say "Amy Johnson lived here"!



**Philip Grant,
Wembley History Society,
July 2016.**

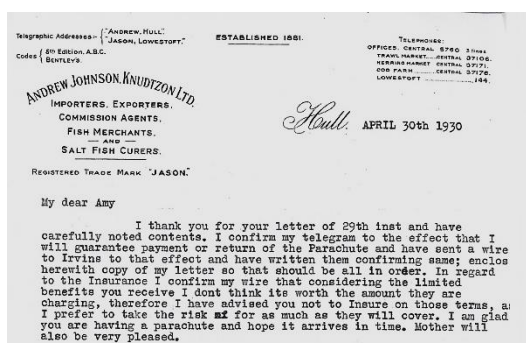
Amy Johnson – further information and resources:-



A detailed biography, “Amy Johnson – Queen of the Air” by Midge Gillies, is available to borrow from Kingsbury Library (ref. 629.13092).



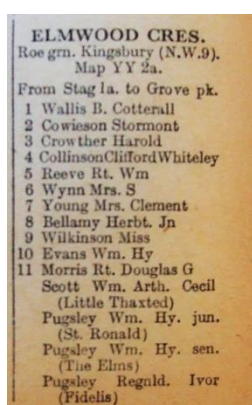
Brent Libraries also have a DVD copy of the 1941/42 cinema film “They Flew Alone” (ref. 791.432) available to borrow. This is a biography about Amy, played in the film by the actress Anna Neagle (see photo on page 5 above), which was made in the year after she died.



The RAF Museum Archive at Hendon has a large collection of letters written by Amy and her family (refs. Ac 77/23/796 and Ac 77/23/802), which are available to look at by appointment. Details at: www.rafmuseum.org.uk.



Among the many aircraft on display at the RAF Museum in Hendon is a WW2 Airspeed Oxford, the type of aircraft Amy Johnson was delivering on her fatal last flight.



Brent Archives, in The Library at Willesden Green, has a wide selection of local history material available, including photographs, street directories, maps and plans. Details at: www.brent.gov.uk/archives. The 1928 directory listing for Elmwood Crescent is aside. In the early 1930's, numbers 1-8 were re-addressed as 345 to 359 Stag Lane, numbers 9 & 10 became 1 & 3 Hay Lane, and from number 11 they were re-numbered 1 Elmwood Crescent onwards.

“Jason”, the De Havilland Gypsy Moth aeroplane that Amy flew to Australia in 1930, became the property of the “Daily Mail” under her deal with the newspaper. After its publicity use following her flight, it was donated to the Science Museum in South Kensington, where it is still on display.

