

AEROPLANE ACCIDENT AT CHELTENHAM.

Two Men Injured.

Early on Thursday morning residents within a radius of a mile of the Cheltenham Racecourse were awakened by a loud buzz like that of the engine of a motor car. Many of them guessed that it came from the antarctic aeroplane, and made their way to elevated positions, where a good view of the expected flight might be obtained. Others hastened to the course. A fair number of cyclists, horsemen, and pedestrians were on the roads leading to the racecourse, and men and children were seen in all stages of dress upon fences and house-tops gazing into the sky in expectation. On the flat two score of people had assembled at 6 a.m., and were gathered around the machine, outside the tent of Lieut. Watkins.

—The Flight.—

Lieut. Watkins had been astir since 5.30 a.m., preparing the monoplane for flight. Shortly before 6 o'clock he climbed into the operator's seat, and Mr. F. Wild, of Shackleton expedition fame, seated himself in the passengers' quarters at the rear. The big "bird" was resting upon chocks, and the engine was given a preliminary turn. The propeller went around with a loud burr, but it was remarked by many of the spectators that the engine occasionally "missed," and there was a short cessation of the noise. The engineer (Mr. F. H. Bickerton) did not make the flight, but watched from below. The conditions seemed perfect—a crisp air with scarcely a breath of wind. After a while the chocks were kicked away, and the monoplane ran easily along the turf in the direction of the Cheltenham Station, and about a quarter of the way around the course. It rose into the air slowly and gracefully, and then the pace increased wonderfully. Lieut. Watkins guided her into a straight run, parallel with the railway line from Cheltenham to Woodville Station. She kept fairly low for a while, and seemed just on the treetops, but sometimes a gap of blue could be seen between the frame work and the foliage below. It was a most entertaining sight, and everything seemed to be going well. Just when the southern end of the course had been reached, however, the flyer appeared to be rocking. The left wing inclined downward, and the engineer called out that he could see that the lieutenant was trying to bring it square. It had not been in the air more than five minutes before the structure began to come down towards the green sward with the left wing still lower than the right. The wing struck the ground, in which a big dent was made, and then turned a somersault. Lieut. Watkins and his companion were pinned underneath. It seemed to the crowd watching from the tent that it was impossible for the aviators to escape unhurt, and there was a rush across the arena to the scene of the accident. Both men were jammed on the ground under their seats. Mr. Wild was helped out first. "Are you hurt?" he was asked, and he replied, "No, I am all right. Take this thing off me." He seemed more anxious about Lieut. Watkins than himself. Both were soon freed, and they appeared sorry spectacles. They were able, however, to limp across to the tent, about a quarter of a mile away, apparently not seriously injured. "How did it happen?" asked the engineer of Lieut. Watkins, who replied, "I don't know how to explain it. The thing was upsetting, and I tried to right it."

—The Injured Men.—

Lieut. Watkins and Mr. Wild were soon installed in the course hospital. Mr. G. M. May, of May's Motor Garage, Adelaide, who was present, left in his motor car to secure medical assistance, and he returned shortly with Dr. E. W. Morris. Dr. Morris first examined Mr. Wild, who, except for bruises on the back, was little the worse for his unenviable experience. Fortunately, too, Lieut. Watkins's injuries were comparatively slight. A thorough examination of the aviator failed to disclose any symptoms of injury to either heart or lungs, and Dr. Morris considered that, if no complications supervene, Lieut. Watkins will be about a few days' hence. Lieut. Watkins was deeply concerned about the fate of the monoplane, the mishap to which he felt more than his own personal injuries. Later in the day he was removed from the racecourse to a private nursing home at Alberton. It is feared that he has sustained a slight fracture of the chestbone, but there are no signs of any internal injuries.

Dr. Morris's examination of Lieut. Watkins late in the afternoon revealed no symptoms of complications, and the lieutenant was progressing as well as could be expected.

—Mr. Bickerton's Statement.—

After the breakdown, a reporter saw the engineer (Mr. Bickerton). He said:—"Everything was going well at the start. The machine got off the ground quickly and rose beautifully, but when she got up she rolled as though a wind were blowing. Watkins straightened her up, and she gave another roll. It is possible the condition of wind caused the right plane to rise and the left plane to fall. At any rate, the left plane caught the ground and the machine turned over in a second. I immediately ran to the scene and found the two men pinned beneath the engine. They were both conscious. I, with others, turned the machine over and released the men."

—Damage to the Machine.—

"The lieutenant has not had such an accident before, has he?" asked the reporter. "No," replied Mr. Bickerton, "he is considered a very careful pilot, and has never had his machine broken before."

"He has nothing to explain?"—"The three of us must first put our heads together, but so far we cannot realize what was the cause of the mishap. The thing lost its balance, and Lieut. Watkins's whole aim was to set it right."

The wooden propeller of the aeroplane was smashed in its contact with the earth. The spectators were so quick to grasp relics of the occasion that very soon not a splinter was to be found. After the monoplane had been lifted from the men the wind seemed to get underneath, and turn it over again. It lay on the course right opposite to the grand stand like a dead bird—wings outstretched, and wheels pointing skywards. During the day the machine was removed by Mr. Bickerton to its canvas covering. He has not yet overhauled it, and on Thursday evening was unable to go into details concerning the precise damage. At the first opportunity he will have an interview with Lieut. Watkins. It is believed that the machine may be restored sufficiently at any rate, to allow of its use in hauling sledges over the ice—which was the primary purpose for which it was constructed.

—"Unadulterated Bad Luck."—

Mr. G. M. May, the proprietor of May's Motor Works, Victoria square, was an eyewitness of the unfortunate accident. He said to a reporter afterwards:—

"The machine was in the air only two or three minutes, and she never looked for a moment as though she were out of control. To an onlooker it appeared as though everything was right. It was a misfortune that the aeroplane canted sufficiently for the tip of the wing to touch the earth. That stopped her completely. Lieut. Watkins said afterwards:—'I had her in hand until she absolutely struck. A few feet higher and everything would have been well.' I should say that the accident was pure, unadulterated bad luck. I should like to express my indignation at the action of some of the crowd of 40 or 50, mostly young fellows, who, while we were assisting Lieut. Watkins and Mr. Wild to the casualty room, took away everything they could unscrew or break off from the machine as mementoes of the occasion. The cover from the altitude register was stolen, the propeller was smashed to atoms, and every splinter was taken away. Practically every particle that could be removed was secured by the crowd."

—The Machine Described.—

The aeroplane was obtained by Dr. Mawson for exploratory work and for depot laying in the event of good surface being met with. Combined with it was a motor sledge. In half an hour this could be converted from a flying machine to a sledge, and vice versa. According to Dr. Mawson it was the heaviest, but the best monoplane made, and was the type that seemed most likely to be adopted by the British military authorities. The machine was like a huge bird of nickel steel. It had a body 34 ft. long from nose to tail, and wings that spread 45 ft. from tip to tip. It weighed 1,200 lb., and cost exactly that number of sovereigns. It had such powerful lungs that it could remain in the air for five consecutive hours and cover 300 miles during that time. This marvellous bird was called "Vickers I."

Lieut. Watkins was in love with his aeroplane. "I never knew what flying was until I got into this machine," he remarked to a reporter on his arrival from England more than a fortnight ago. He reckons she is the finest ever turned out—a perfect beauty. "I had her for about a month prior to leaving England, and she is absolutely delightful. She can keep going to any height. Before I came away I had a passenger up 1,500 ft., and she was still climbing when I had to come down owing to approaching darkness. The machine gets off the ground after a 40 yards' run."

—A Minister's Denial.—

The Rev. Lionel B. Fletcher, of the Port Congregational Church, who, with Mr. Bickerton was the first to reach the damaged monoplane, and who helped the engineer to extricate the two aviators from among the ruins, remarked yesterday afternoon:—"Mr. May's expressions with reference to the stealing of mementoes from the machine were unwarranted. It appears from his remarks that the spectators acted without any sympathy or feeling, and that while the two injured men were being assisted from the field they made the best of their time by breaking off relics. As a matter of fact the crowd did not consist of 'mostly young fellows,' for a number of well-known Port Adelaide and suburban residents were among them. They did all in their power to help right the machine, and to assist the sufferers. I had as much opportunity of seeing whether any theft was carried on as anybody, for I was one of the first on the scene, and was there until the men had disappeared into the racecourse buildings. During that time nobody touched the machine. It is true that fragments of the propeller, which were scattered in all directions, were eagerly sought after, as is only natural; but to say that the spectators rushed to unscrew every possible relic is quite inaccurate. The statement casts a slur on a body of well-known and respectable men. Boys may have visited the place afterwards and stolen the articles complained of, but that is another thing."

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DR. MAWSON'S MONOPLANE.

CAN BE REPAIRED.

Mr. Douglas Mawson returned from Brisbane by the express on Saturday. He stated that Lieut. Watkins and Mr. F. Wild, who were injured in the monoplane accident at Cheltenham on Thursday, would come out of hospital to-day. Arrangements have been made to have the machine completely restored to normal condition in two or three weeks. Dr. Mawson was glad to say that the engine, which cost £550, was not damaged to any appreciable extent. One of the cylinders was broken, and some of the tubing was bent, but duplicate parts had arrived with the machine, and these could be adjusted at a cost of about £15. The damage to the frame work may be repaired without trouble, and the aeroplane will be as good as new in the time stated. Dr. Mawson said he desired to correct the impression which appeared to have gained ground that the monoplane was to be used extensively for flying over the icefields of the antarctic regions. This was not the case, as any flying done would be purely experimental. The strong point in connection with the machine, he explained, for antarctic exploration, is its suitability for motor sledging, and when the damage has been repaired he intends to give the public opportunities to see this class of work. Already he has two different types of runners for the sledge, and designs have now been prepared for another set 35 ft. long, built on the pattern of runners used in skiing. The length of these will, he contends, provide a big bearing surface, which should eliminate all chance of the sledge breaking through thin ice or dropping down a crevasse. The machine is fitted with two steering devices. Right and left deflectors will be used in the same manner as on a monoplane when travelling at a high velocity, but with slow speed, when the motor is dragging a load, a metal plough will be attached on a shaft 30 ft. in the rear of the driver, which will be manipulated in the same manner as an oar in steering a boat. When asked whether trouble would not be experienced in the antarctic in starting the engine, Dr. Mawson said:—"You know that petrol does not freeze, and to assist carburetting a benzine blow lamp will be used. Having once warmed the engine, there is no further trouble. As regards lubricating oil, we have to use an article specially manufactured by Messrs. Wakefield & Co., which is guaranteed not to freeze at a temperature of minus 40 Fahr. This, of course, will be employed on the machine only when any air work is undertaken, as oil used in refrigerators, which is guaranteed not to freeze at zero, is good enough for working the sledge. Another point I might remark on is that the plane carries sufficient petrol in its tanks to traverse 300 miles, and it is capable of dragging a load of 15 tons over a medium antarctic surface. The machine is so constructed that it could surmount sandhills, but down south it has to contend with their equivalent in the form of snowbanks. I shall have a boat-shaped canvas body fitted to it, so that if it tops through the thin sea ice the machine will float. The canvas will also be carried high enough to protect the occupants from the wind, as only their heads will be exposed, and a thin mica screen will be fitted to the front of the body to afford protection to their faces."