

## Brighton Beach and the Cutty Sark

*A tribute to Esther and the early aviators in this centenary year of flight*

**by Dr. R. Malcolm Fredman.**

It seemed a simple enough question. Malcolm, have you ever heard of the *Cutty Sark*? Of course, Es, I answered. It's the famous sailing ship. No, not that one, the aeroplane. *The aeroplane??*

Now it was my turn to question. I found out how Esther, my mother-in-law, when a teenager, assisted Captains George Matthews and Frank Neale to operate their joy flights from Brighton Beach in the *Cutty Sark*.

Esther was born Esther Solomon on 29th December, 1915 at what was then 30 Beach Road, later 56 The Esplanade, Brighton Beach. She was a descendant of pioneer families - Rachael and Emanuel Ackman who arrived in the Port Phillip District in June 1847 and Esther and Louis Solomon who arrived in Victoria in 1855.

During 1932, the year after she left Firbank school, Esther took up swimming training at the City Baths. Catching the first train into the city, she would swim until 8.30am before going to her classes at the Workingman's College (now RMIT University). She and her brothers were keen members of the Brighton Life Saving Club.

Esther's parents were friends of Frank Shaw, an aircraft engineer with the fledgling Matthews Aviation Pty. Ltd.

After the *Cutty Sark* arrived in 1930, it was used for joy flights from both St Kilda and Brighton Beaches at weekends in the warmer months. When flying at Brighton, Frank Shaw would stay overnight with the Solomons, and the pilots George Matthews and Frank Neale would have lunch at the house.

It was Frank Shaw's idea to utilise Esther's talent, as he knew of her swimming ability, and her detailed knowledge of the beach area. Her job was to test the water depth - if it was up to her neck, it was deep enough - and to check for any rocks or other under water hazards. So, for about three years, starting before she left school at the end of 1931, Esther assisted the pilots at weekends with the joy flights.

The plane operated between Green Point and the Brighton Beach Pier. Passengers either were rowed out to the floating plane in a dingy, or the plane came up on to the sand on its wheels.

The *Cutty Sark* had four seats, including the pilot. Esther went up in the plane many times, if there was room, usually sitting in the left front seat. The plane would average 8 - 10 flights per day. When the pilots were having lunch with her parents at the house, she sat in the plane to mind it.

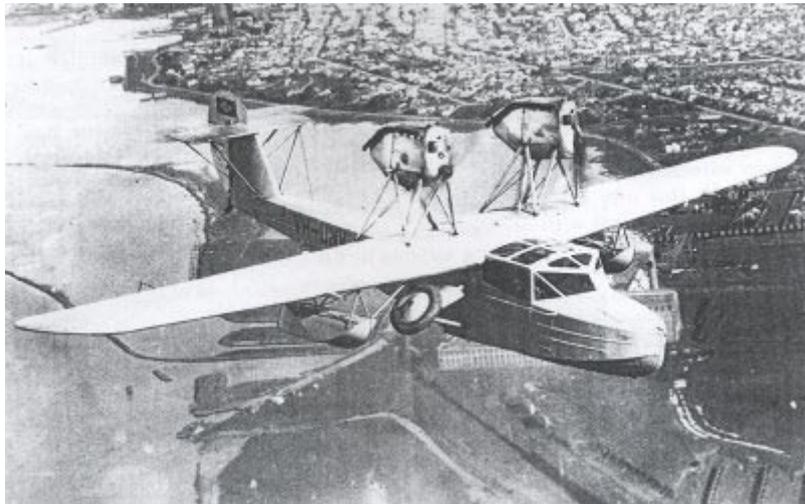
The *Cutty Sark* was a 4 seater cabin amphibian flying boat, with the Fokker type watertight plywood covered cantilever single wing bolted directly to an all metal Alclad hull and fitted with 2 Cirrus Hermes mark 1 engines of 104 hp (78 kW) made by A.D.C. Aircraft Ltd. The prototype first flew at Cowes, Isle of Wight on 4th July, 1929. In this format, it had a maximum speed of 103 mph (165km/h), cruising speed of 85 ph (136km/h) and a range of 300 miles (480km).

Sir Alliott Verdon Roe, who set up Avro in 1910, acquired an interest in S. E. Saunders Ltd., flying boat builders of Cowes, Isle of Wight, UK . This followed after Armstrong Siddeley acquired a controlling interest in Avro in 1928. The first design from the new firm was the *Saro A.17 Cutty Sark*. The second of the 12 *Cutty Sark*s built was shipped to Australia in 1930 for Matthews Aviation Pty. Ltd

Its component parts arrived in 5 large cases on the *SS Ballarat* on 18th March and were assembled at the company's workshops at Essendon Airport. It was registered No. 370 VH-UNV on 5th April, 1930.

Mr. George Matthews, managing director of Matthews Aviation Pty. Ltd. told *Aircraft* magazine to inform its readers that 'the operations of the amphibian between Melbourne and Tasmania should not be regarded as a service in the generally accepted sense. Commencing about the end of May, 1930, the machine will be flown bi-weekly across the Bass Strait, with passengers, freight and mail; but with the sole object of investigating the possibilities of a regular service which, if inaugurated at a later date, would be conducted with a fleet of amphibians of greater horse-power and greater passenger accommodation. The immediate proposal is to conduct an experimental service between Melbourne, Launceston and Hobart, fares Melbourne-Launceston £10/10/-; Melbourne-Hobart £13/13/-, single, crossing time 4 hours. On each outward journey, a landing will be made at Yanakie to refuel and obtain latest meteorological data as to conditions over Bass Strait.'

The staff of Matthews Aviation now consisted of eight licensed pilots and six qualified ground engineers.



*This photo shows the Cutty Sark flying with wheels up, ready to touch down on water*

Captain Frank Neale joined the staff on 15th October, 1930 especially for the Bass Strait service. By 31st October, 1930 Matthews Aviation Ltd had 8 pilots, 14 engineers, 14 aeroplanes and 21 engines in daily use at Essendon. At Launceston the company leased a landing ground, on which the first private hangar in Tasmania was built to house and repair machines and engines.

On 1st September, 1931 this small notice appeared, "Matthews Aviation Pty. Ltd., Melbourne. This concern will operate in Melbourne and in Tasmania. Distributors for Victoria and Tasmania of Moth aeroplanes and Australian agents of Saunders-Roe marine aircraft. Operating joy flights from Port Phillip Bay resorts with *Cutty Sark* flying boat."

The experimental service with *Cutty Sark* must have succeeded, for in the issue dated 2nd November, 1931, of *Aircraft* magazine was a full page article headed, "Plans for Matthews Flying Boat Service. A regular flying boat service across Bass Strait was planned to start next month using the recently purchased Saro Windhoven 6 passenger 3 engine amphibian. The chief pilot of this service will be Captain Frank Neale. The *Cutty Sark* will be available for special flights from Williamstown and Tasmania to King Island, where both an aerodrome and a sea base will be situated."

An interesting commentary on the proposed airport at Port Melbourne was made by Captain Matthews when announcing the details of his service, "If the Melbourne Airport scheme goes ahead, my company is prepared immediately to lease land at Port Melbourne and transfer its hangars and workshops from Essendon. We will be only too glad to operate from Port Melbourne and make it the base for our sea and land aircraft. The Lord Mayor of Melbourne's Airport Enquiry Committee of experts had recently recommended unconditionally that Fisherman's Bend, Port Melbourne was the ideal site for such an airport.

The article concluded with a comment about wireless - a scheme has been put up to Amalgamated Wireless (Australasia) Ltd. whereby planes flying across Bass Strait will receive weather reports and other guidance by wireless.

To put this into some perspective, in 1924 there were only 37 licensed pilots, 36 aircraft with certificates of airworthiness, 10 officially approved aerodromes and 3 functioning airlines in the whole of Australia. And the Royal Flying Doctor Service commenced operations in 1928.

Even joy flights had their problems. On 8th November, 1931, *the Cutty Sark* was driven by wind into a pier at St. Kilda, and Mr E. Lloyd, a passenger who attempted to assist, was killed by a propeller

The Melbourne Sun on 9th November, 1931 carried a photograph with this caption, "The damaged starboard wing of the amphibian, *Cutty Sark*, which was blown against St Kilda pier yesterday by a gust of wind after an engine had stalled. The mishap occurred while the plane was about to take off from the water.

In the issue of *Aircraft* in October 1935 this advertisement appeared, "For sale - *Cutty Sark* Amphibian....Enquiries to A. Barlow, Pioneer Air Services."

The *Cutty Sark* was bought by Keith Caldwell, a Sydney pilot in 1937, with the intention of flying it to Cairns and making joy flights during the winter.

On 15th October, 1937, Qantas Empire Airways Ltd. purchased the *Cutty Sark* from Caldwell for £700, for the purpose of crew training on the Brisbane River. He flew the aircraft himself to Brisbane Airport (now Archerfield). QEA wrote to the Civil Aviation Board on 20th October, 1937 informing them of their purchase. Caldwell joined QEA, and later became a Captain of S23 Empire Flying Boats.

On 5th April, 1938, *Cutty Sark* was flown on a training exercise from Archerfield to the Brisbane River at Pinkenba, near Eagle Farm Airport. In command in the right hand seat was Captain W. H. Crowther, and flying the aircraft was First Officer L. J. Grey. It touched down on the water with its wheels still extended and its nose dived vertically into the river, fortunately with no injuries. A crew with a barge and crane was enlisted to lift it out of the water. They were unfamiliar with aircraft construction and the hull was crushed by the steel cable used to lift it.

Cutty Sark thus came to a sad and unseemly end, and it was deregistered soon after on 4th May, 1938.

Vale George Campbell Matthews, who died in Melbourne on 27th January, 1958. And to Esther Burns, nee Solomon who died peacefully on 23rd November, 2002.

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*The above is part of a much longer article by Dr Fredman. Together with appended references it can be found in our General Files.*

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