

## The Flying Fleas at Southend

Turn the clock back just over 70 years for an almost incredible contrast of Southend Airport; daring enthusiasts racing across the turf in home-built aircraft of wire and plywood. "Pou-de-Ciel" the French inventor dubbed them; "Flying Fleas" was the English translation, but whatever the name they were just as dangerous, and the men who flew them just as daring.

*It was in the 1930's that M. Mignet, a cycle repairer, built the minimum single-seater aeroplane. There were no roll controls, it being assumed that the fuselage would continue to dangle from the main upper wing. This flea had no ailerons or rudder; control was by tilting the joystick for up/down flight, via a flexible upper wing. It was powered by a motorcycle engine. It couldn't achieve very great height, and if long grass wore away the tips of the wooden propeller too much it, couldn't take off.*

Southend was a big centre for "Fleas", hundreds of spectators flocked to grounds at Ashingdon, Rochford and the present airport site for the thrill of watching a handful of enthusiasts risk their necks for a few seconds flying.

Four of the Flea enthusiasts were well-known figures in Southend. They were Mr. Bernard Collins, MBE, Southend's airport commandant (and later with *Channel Airways*); Mr. Chris Story, proprietor of the Alexandra Street garage that bore his name, Mr. Alick Pearce, by day assistant sales manager with the *Southend Motor and Aero Company*, and by night licencee of the *George and Dragon* on Foulness, and finally Captain Claud Oscroft, a senior captain with *Swissair*.

Two of the four built their own Fleas in garages only a couple of hundred yards apart in the heart of Southend, each advising the other on technical points. Chris Story's Flea took three months to construct, often working through the night.

Just around the corner in Nelson Street, pilot Alick Pearce, Harry Sawyer of the *Anchor*, Great Wakering, and Mr. Leo Len Hendrie, were working on their machine. Their Flea was powered by a converted car engine, and the overall cost of production (£70-80) was shared between the three partners.

Their Flea, the "Fleeing Fly", came to grief almost as soon as it was completed. Chris's flying instruction came straight from the pages of a manual, and he managed a few hops on the first occasion. About a week later he took off '*more by accident than anything*', but then the little aircraft flipped upside down. Hanging head downwards, he

released the seatbelt dropped out onto his head. The damage cost £150 to rectify, but the Fleeing Fly was never to fly again, and lay in his garage.

Bernard Collins was only 20 years old when he set up the British long-distance flying for Fleas - 87 miles from Heston to Melton Mowbray in May 1936. He knew nothing about the record until it was announced on the BBC News while he was sitting at home that evening.

Flea flying was highly dangerous - a number of pilots were killed. The Airport Commandant's first log book gives some idea of the hazards. One entry reads: *Approached Dorking at 3,000 feet, machine dived out of control to 500 feet. Floor gave way. Resolved never to fly Flea again.*

In both Fleas and his Heath Robinson painted drone, bought for £42, he often visited Southend and the Canute Air Park at Ashingdon.

He recalled that one Flea owner was so irate that his machine would not fly - there were many that did little more than hop - that in desperation he sawed off the propellor and let spectators race it round Canute Air Park at five shillings a go. All went well until, with the combination of a light passenger and an overheated engine, the Flea leapt into the air coming to a rest on top of a tree.

Bernard Collins' British long-distance record was challenged by a Southend pilot. "Ossie" Oscroft, a dare-devil, who aimed to fly his machine which was owned by the Aero 8 Club, from Ashingdon to France and back again. Rather than risk crossing the Thames at an early stage of the flight he flew up to Tilbury and then crossed the river. The "Buzzcraft", designed and built at Ashingdon, covered 50 miles until an oil feed pipe cracked, blinding him with oil.

He landed on a hillside running straight into a muck heap, the whirling propellor showering him with foul-smelling manure.

Many more stories of the Fleas remain untold. The era came ungraciously to an abrupt end when, after a long chapter of accidents, insurance companies refused to insure them against the necessary third party risks.

Peter Brown  
November 2009