

Britain's Aviation Pioneers

Britain can be proud of it's role in the development of early ballooning and flying. TheGenealogist launches searchable database of flying certificates with biographical notes and photographs.

Aviation in Britain started with Samuel Cody and his work for the Army at Aldershot and Farnborough. He designed the first British Airships and went on to develop early aircraft.

One of the founder members in 1903 was Charles Rolls, the motoring and aviation pioneer. His aviation career was initially as a balloonist, with him making over 170 balloon ascents. He was the second person in Britain to be licensed to fly by The Aero Club and won the Gordon Bennett Gold Medal for the longest single flight time.

As powered flight became popular, Rolls tried unsuccessfully to persuade his new business partner, Henry Royce, to design an aero engine. Instead, he purchased one of the early aircraft designed by the famous Wright Brothers and made more than 200 flights. In 1909, he made the first non-stop double crossing of the English Channel by aeroplane. For this achievement, he was awarded the Gold Medal from The Royal Aero Club in 1910 (previous winners included Wilbur and Orville Wright and Louis Bleriot).

The records now available on TheGenealogist from The Royal Aero Club celebrate his successes and also show the esteemed company he kept amongst those early daring aviators. Names such as Thomas Sopwith, Geoffrey De Havilland, Henry Hawker, Cecil Grace and the famed American showman and entrepreneur, Samuel Franklin Cody, are all found in the records now available online.

These fascinating times also held more than their fair share of danger too. Unlike Sopwith and De Havilland who went on to design and manufacture legendary aircraft, Charles Rolls and Samuel Cody both died prematurely in air crashes. Charles Rolls sadly died in 1910 at the age of 32 when the tail of his Wright Flyer broke off during a Bournemouth flying display. Rolls was the first Briton to die in a 'powered aircraft' accident and Cecil Grace, a 'naturalised' Briton and nephew of the Mayor of New York City, was to die a year later when he crashed into the North Sea in bad weather.

All their records are now available to view – where and when they obtained their aviators' certificates and what aircraft they used, whether balloon, aeroplane or airship, any records they set and also records of fatalities. All in a fully searchable format with a number of distinctive images of some of the main aviators of the time.

The vision and achievements of Charles Rolls still lives on today in the form of the classic Rolls Royce cars and the car and aircraft engines still produced and now with his daring aviation exploits available on TheGenealogist.

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