

**To what extent did the Press influence the development of aviation in
Britain in favour of the aeroplane over the airship?**

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Abstract

The role of the newspaper Press in the development of aviation has barely been examined by historians, particularly in relation to the concurrent development of the aeroplane and airship in the early 20th Century. Most studies, such as John Swinfield's (2012) *Airship Design, Development and Disaster*, focus on the technical details and capabilities of the technology or on political-economic concerns. However, in attempting to explain the choice of the aeroplane over the airship by both civilian and military organisations by the early 1920's, these studies have not considered the role of contemporary newspapers in mediating and moulding decisions about Government aviation policies.

The ability of the early 20th Century Press Barons to influence British governments has been well documented by Curran & Seaton (2010). This influence was recognised by many politicians who sought the support of the Press for their campaigns. Lord Northcliffe, owner of *The Times* and *Daily Mail*, was well known for his interest in aviation and sought to influence government policy in regard to aerial defences against continental powers. His influence was demonstrated in the Shell Crisis of 1915, when the intervention of his papers led to the downfall of the Asquith government.

By drawing on recently digitized Press sources this thesis explores the role of the press in debating the comparative merits of the airship and aeroplane, covering the periods before, during and after the Great War. I argue that as a strong advocate of aviation, Lord Northcliffe attempted to use his newspapers to influence public opinion and Government policy in favour of developing both heavier and lighter than

air technologies, especially given the evidence of their complementary strengths during the war. I thus show that newspaper reports and articles may have had a significant effect on the evaluation of the airship in Britain, which, contributed to its eventual demise.

Table of Contents

To what extent did the Press influence the development of aviation in Britain in favour of the aeroplane over the airship?.....	1
Acknowledgements	2
Abstract.....	3
Table of Contents.....	5
List of Figures.....	7
Chapter 1.....	9
1.1 Introduction	11
1.2 Literature review	12
1.3 Methodology and Sources	18
1.4 Thesis Outline.....	20
1.5 Conclusion	22
Chapter 2.....	25
Britain and the Scareship:1909 – 1914	25
2.1 Introduction	27
2.2 The State of Play	28
2.3 Government Plans	33
2.4 Airship Scares.....	35
2.5 The Press intervenes	39
2.6 His Majesties Airship.1 “Mayfly”	41
2.7 Renewed Interest	53
2.8 Last Minute Developments.....	55
2.9 The 1913 Scare	57
2.10 Conclusion.....	58
Chapter 3.....	61
The experience of War: 1914-1918.....	61
3.1 Introduction	63
3.2 Censorship: The Guiding Hand of Government	66
3.3 Warned but Unprepared: First Strike	69
3.4 Strengthened Defences: From Talk to Action	79
3.5 Zeppelins Eclipsed: The Rise of the Aeroplane	88
3.6 A New Threat: Gotha’s and Giants.....	90

3.7 The British airship at war: A well-kept secret	94
3.8 Conclusion	98
Chapter 4	101
Deflated Hopes: The Post War Deconstruction of the Airship in Britain.....	101
4.1 Introduction	103
4.2 Record Breaker: NS.11	105
4.3 Race to Cross the Atlantic: Aeroplane vs. Airship / Britain vs. United States.....	107
4.4 A Commercial Future	117
4.5 Closing the Service: A Necessary measure or False Economy	122
4.6 Saving the Service: The Imperial Conference	125
4.8 R.38: The Humber Tragedy	129
4.9 Conclusion	133
Chapter 5	137
Conclusion.....	137
5.1 Summary of the Argument	139
5.2 The influence of the Press.....	143
5.3 The implications and further research.....	145
Bibliography.....	149
Primary Sources	151
Historic Newspaper Articles.....	151
Hansard	158
National Archives	160
Secondary Sources	161
Appendix A	166
List of Members of the Aeronautical Sub-Committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence 1909-10.....	166
Appendix B	167
The Defence of the Realm Act (DORA) August 1914 (4 and 5 Geo.V c.29) ...	167

List of Figures

Figure 1:Portrait of Alfred Harmsworth, 1st Viscount Northcliffe, by Gertrude Kasebier.....	9
Figure 2: Richard Haldane, Ist Viscount Haldane.....	25
Figure 3: Count Ferdinand Von Zeppelin.....	30
Figure 4: Nulli Secundus. Britain's First Airship.....	32
Figure 5: LZ 4 über dem Bodensee, © Archiv der Luftschiffbau Zeppelin GmbH.....	32
Figure 6: HMA No.1 (Mayfly) in 1911 at her mooring.....	41
Figure 7: The Naval Airship HMA No.1 "Mayfly" with her back broken.....	48
Figure 8: Airship Identification Chart.....	61
Figure 9: Portrait of Flight Sub-Lieutenant R.A.J. Warneford VC.....	74
Figure 10: Admiral Sir Percy Scott.....	77
Figure 11: Leefe Robinson, photographed at Suttons farm in 1916.....	85
Figure 12: Be2c.....	85
Figure 13: Gotha V.....	91
Figure 14: HMA Rigid Airship. No.9.....	96
Figure 15: NS11 at Cranwell.....	105
Figure 16: Vickers Vimy Bomber, 1918.....	108
Figure 17: Landing of the R-34 at Mineola, Long Island, N.Y. 1919. ...	113
Figure 18: Airship R-38/ZR-2 makes its first trial flight at Cardington.....	131
Figure 19: Wreckage of the R101.....	135

All Images used in this thesis are open source.

Chapter 1

Introduction

“I feel that I can do better work if I maintain my independence and am not gagged by a loyalty I do not feel towards the whole of your administration.”

Lord Northcliffe to Lloyd George - 16 November 1917¹

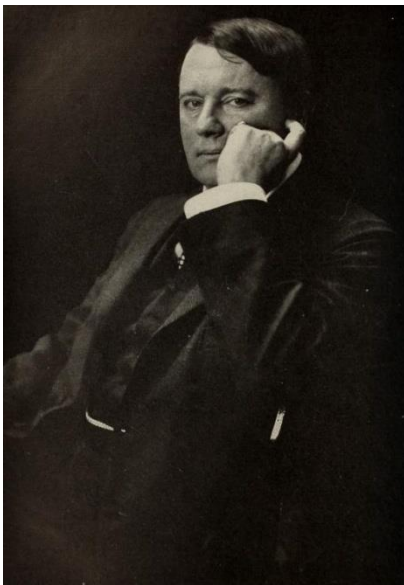


Figure 1:Portrait of Alfred Harmsworth, 1st Viscount Northcliffe, by Gertrude Kasebier

From *“The Worlds Work”*, December 1908, p.10948.

<http://archive.org/stream/worldswork17gard#page/10948/mode/2up>

¹ *The Times*, 16 Nov. 1917, p.7.

1.1 Introduction

The history of early 20th Century aviation has had a tendency to focus primarily on technical factors such as the performance of aircraft, in terms of size, speed, carrying capacity and range. Writers such as David Edgerton treat the adoption of the aeroplane by Edwardian Britain as a *fait accompli*. Indeed until recently the airship has been considered a technological dead end, only worthy of study in order to explain the apparently inevitable dominance of the aeroplane in both military and civil aviation.

Yet, at the end of the First World War this dominance was by no means assured, let alone self-evident. Between 1914 and 1921 a total of 244 airships had been constructed in Britain,² having flown approximately 89,000 hours, covering a distance of at least 2.25 million miles.³ Wartime experience had demonstrated that airships, particularly the large rigid airships such as the German Zeppelin, had superior range and carrying capacity to contemporary land and seaplanes; offering the British Government the possibility of regular aerial communications with distant corners of the Empire. However, by the end of 1921 airship development in Britain had been largely abandoned.

Where traditional histories of aviation have focused on technological and political arguments in order to explain this phenomenon, my thesis adopts a theme from media history to examine the role played by the newspaper press in the comparative

² Abbott 1989, p.136.

³ Whale n.d, p.73.

fate of the airship and aeroplane. Specifically I look at the role of the Northcliffe Press in moulding the development of aviation technology in the early 20th Century. By 1908, the 'Press Baron' Lord Northcliffe controlled a significant Press Empire comprised of *The Times*, *Daily Mail* and the *Observer*, which he soon utilized in attempting to influence the British population and government of the importance of aviation for the maintenance and defence of the British Empire. In light of the contribution of the Northcliffe Press to the downfall of the Asquith government in 1916 through its handling of the 'shell crisis' in the munitions industry, my thesis asks: how far did his Press-mediated power extend to influence both British patterns of aviation and its relation to government?

1.2 Literature review

This review is divided into three sections, first books relating to media history, secondly books relating to the early history of aviation in Britain and its impact on British society. The final section deals with the mainstream histories of the airship, highlighting the traditional focus on technical, financial and political factors in explaining the fate of the airship in Britain.

The mainstream historical literature on the Press, such as Curran and Seaton's *Power without Responsibility*, (7thed), largely avoids the First World War focussing instead on the attempts by Press Barons such as Lord Northcliffe to influence politics during the 1920s; this is probably due to the assumption that government wartime censorship of the press might distort the overall story of the power of the civilian press when viewed in the longer term. Such factors are explored in Tania Rose's *Aspects of Political Censorship 1914-1918*, although, without touching on aviation

history. Rose instead focuses primarily on the impact of censorship on political protest and anti-war activists.⁴

Peter Broks, *Media Science before the Great War*, (1996) deals the role of the press in the popularisation of science in late Victorian and early Edwardian Britain. Broks' understanding of the scope of the media is limited making no mention of daily newspapers such as *The Times* or *Daily Mail*. He instead focuses on periodicals such as Pearson's Magazine and Tit-bits that were "more concerned with the curious strange and the bizarre" than they were with science.⁵ Broks thus, does not consider developments in technology, but focuses instead on topics such as the relationship between science and religion, nature and evolution.

The importance of the press in the public acceptance of new technologies has been considered by historians such Graeme Gooday in *Domesticating electricity* (2008). Chapters three and four focus on issue of danger and safety in electricity using press reports to demonstrate the manner in which the press attempted to influence the debate on domestic electricity during the late 19th Century.⁶ However, the role of the press has not been nearly so well examined in relation to technologies seen as being primarily military in nature, such as aviation.

⁴ Rose 1995, pp, 42-100.

⁵ Brok 1996, p.27.

⁶ Gooday 2008, pp. 61-120.

Alfred Gollin's, *The Impact of Air Power on the British People and their Government, 1909-14*,⁷ is a rare example of a volume which makes the connection between the Northcliffe press and the early years of aviation in Britain. Gollin shows the attempts by Northcliffe and other elements of the press to influence government policy in the direction of a more practical and less theoretical approach to aviation as well as documenting attempts by government ministers such as Viscount Haldane to harness the press in support of the government's aerial policy.

Although Gollin also deals more generally with the media reporting of British developments in aviation, he only covers the period up until 1914 and while much has been written about aerial conflict during the First World War by authors such as Joseph Morris⁸ and John Morrow,⁹ they do not consider the impact of aerial warfare and the way in which it was reported in the press, on the attitudes of the British public, military and politicians on the aircraft industry in Britain.

Turning to the civilian experiences of aerial warfare, in, *At Home and Under Fire*¹⁰, Susan Grayzel considers the impact of air raids on British society in both the First and Second World Wars. Grayzel points to the experience of the British population during the First World War as being fundamental in restricting spending on armaments, particularly on aviation during the 1920's. However, despite making use of

⁷ Gollin 1989

⁸ *German Air Raids on Britain, 1914-1918*. (1925).

⁹ *The Great War in the Air, Military Aviation from 1909 to 1921*. (1993).

¹⁰ Grayzel 2012.

newspaper sources, she does not fully examine the impact of the press reports on British attitudes to aviation during the interwar period or its implications for the development of civil aviation. Instead Grayzel focuses on the impact of the air raids on the post war armaments treaties, such as the Geneva Disarmament conference in 1932.¹¹

Moving to the conventional histories of the airship, Douglas Robinsons, *Giants in the sky* (1973) focuses primarily on the German Zeppelins as the 'original' airships, contrasting British designs as inferior imitations. In a broader vein Robinson views the airship and the aeroplane as being in open competition with each other, arguing that whatever the early advantages the airship held these were soon taken over by the aeroplane. Robinson's focus on the technical details of airship design excludes political, financial or social considerations from significantly influencing the fate of the airship.

The same focus on design history rather than social history can be found in John Swinfield's *Airship, design, development and disaster* (2012). Swinfield charts the history of the airship from the early attempts in Germany in the late 19th Century to the giants of the 1930s. Swinfield examines the roles played by different people, such as Count Von Zeppelin, and organisations, such as the Royal Air Force, in the development and eventual demise of the airship. While Swinfield covers the political intrigues surrounding the British airship service, he does not consider the role of the press in the formation of public opinion either in favour of or against the airship.

¹¹ Grayzel 2012, pp. 149-176.

Patrick Abbott's *The British Airship at War, 1914-1918*, (1989) focuses on the operational experiences of various classes of British Naval airships during the Great War. Abbott focuses on the tactics used by these airships against German U-boats and assesses the effectiveness of the airships in this defensive role. He concludes that the airships performed a vital role in the protection of British shipping, but one which remained largely unknown to the British public due to official Admiralty policy which "decreed that no details of airship construction or activity should be revealed[.]"¹² However, despite this Abbott does not comment on the effect of this news blackout on British perceptions of the airship. This dissertation thus picks up where Abbott left off to map the very selective reporting of the airship in the press, and exploring how far that reporting – or lack thereof – was responsible in part for its disappearance from British skies.

One text which focuses on the political and economic factors of British airship development is James Neilson's 2008 PhD thesis, *Flights of Imagination: Episodes in the Development of the British Navigable Airship 1900-1930*. In this thesis Neilson focuses primarily on the political and economic factors which effected the development of the airship in Britain, paying particular attention to the relations between the Royal Navy, the Army and when applicable the Royal Air Force. In attempting to place the development of the airship within its social and political context Neilson largely ignores the technical issues favoured by other airship historians. However, while making use of journals and periodicals such as the *Daily*

¹² Abbott 1989, p.3.

Sketch, a Manchester based tabloid Newspaper, Neilson fails to seriously consider the importance of the major newspapers such as the *Times* and *Daily Mail* in reflecting and examining public reactions to aviation related issues. Although, having failed to make use of these newspapers, Neilson does point out that Lord Northcliffe had appointed a 'special correspondent' to report on aviation related issues for both the *Times* and the *Daily Mail*¹³, thus indicating an awareness of the importance of the press.

A further text which examines social factors in the development of 'modern' technologies, such as the airship, is Bernhard Rieger's 2005, *Technology and the culture of modernity in Britain and Germany, 1890-1945*. Rieger explores the development of oceanic liners such as the Titanic, film and cinema, and aviation technologies such as the aeroplane and airship, during the early years of the 20th Century. Rather than focusing on the technical aspects of these technologies, Rieger instead sets out to demonstrate the importance of these new and innovative technologies as symbols of modernity in Britain and Germany. He highlights the contrasting public meanings assigned to these technologies and the ways in which these impacted on, the means and reasons by which Britain and Germany sought to develop them.

Chapter three focuses on accidents involving the modern technologies of aeroplanes, airships and ocean liners and the ways in which these accidents were viewed by the general public both in Britain and Germany. In terms of aviation Rieger focuses on

¹³ Neilson 2008, p.74.

incidents such as the loss of the R101 in 1929 and the Hindenburg in 1937, noting that the press had a tendency to focus on those incidents involving significant loss of life, while ignoring those in which safety systems had been effective in preventing any significant casualties.¹⁴ However, the book makes no mention of earlier airship disasters in Britain either before or after the First World War. Two incidents which generated a high level of interest in the British press were the destruction of the Mayfly in 1911 and the loss of the R38 over Hull in 1921. While the Mayfly incident did not result in the huge loss of life that Rieger feels to be necessary to influence ensure public interest the incident was followed closely by the British press, on a local and national level. In addition to this, while he makes use of press reports from papers such as the *Times* and the *Manchester Guardian*, Rieger does not attempt to assess the impact of these reports on contemporary readers nor does he consider the possibility of the reports influencing political decisions.

1.3 Methodology and Sources

In this thesis I build on the work of Gollin, Abbott and Rieger in order to demonstrate the importance of the newspaper press to the development of aviation in Britain between 1909 and 1922, particularly in respect to the airship. I access a variety of newspapers from the Gale Newsvault and the British Newspaper Archives, searching by date for key milestones in aviation history such as the wreck of the Mayfly in 1911. I then conduct a page by page search for up to two weeks on either side of the relevant date. This allows me to deal with one issue with digitised collections

¹⁴ Rieger 2005, p.71.

identified by James Mussell: While searching for key words and terms allows the researcher instant access to articles containing that information. However, that information alone does not show how it fits within the paper as a whole.¹⁵ Searching on a page by page basis allows me to build up a picture of the editorial opinion on the importance of the topic which can be shown by its location within the paper and whether or not the article is spread out over multiple connected columns and pages or distributed throughout the paper.

My major focus is on *The Times* which, according to Thompson (2000), was widely regarded as being “a voice of official government opinion.” Moreover, this newspaper was certainly viewed by Northcliffe himself as being more influential on the government than his other papers.¹⁶ In order to understand the ways in which newspapers report on events in aviation I have also examined the issue of framing. Dietram A. Scheufle defines framing as a central organisational idea or storyline that provides meaning to events. Scheufle notes that frames provide “working routines” for journalists allowing them to quickly and efficiently “identify and classify information and “to package it for [...] relay to their audiences. (Gitlin 1980, p.7)” Finally Dietram also notes that while this concept of framing can include the “intent of the sender” this may not be conscious.¹⁷ Due to the mercurial nature of Lord Northcliffe it is difficult to assess the importance of framing to my overall argument. However, there is evidence that stories related to aviation have a generally positive

¹⁵ Mussell 2012, pp.56-61.

¹⁶ Thompson 2000, p.145.

¹⁷ Deitram 1999, p.106.

spin, even when discussing fatal accidents. I also examine a combination of Hansard, Cabinet (CAB), Admiralty (ADM) and Air Ministry (Air) documents using key term searches in order to examine government and military attitudes towards aviation and their reactions to reports on aviation in the press.

1.4 Thesis Outline

In chapter two I examine the state of aviation in Britain between 1908 and 1914, particularly the competition between airships and aeroplanes. I also examine the interactions between the government and the newspaper press, particularly those papers owned by Lord Northcliffe. I also examine the impact of the 'phantom airship scares' of 1909 and 1913 and the way in which the press reports on the subject had attempted to persuade the public to call for greater investment in British aviation. In addition to this I examine the press reporting on the development and destruction of Britain's first rigid airship, the 'Mayfly' in 1911, and the impact this had on the development of the airship in Britain. Finally I consider the causes of the renewed interest displayed in airship development in Britain immediately prior to the First World War, including newspaper articles and official reports from the military/naval attaches in Berlin on the latest German developments in airships.

In chapter three I examine the impact of press censorship on the reporting of German air raids on Britain during the Great War. Noting the changes in style and content of the press reports throughout the course of the war and the ways in which these reports helped to shape the perception of the airship amongst different

sectors¹⁸ of the British population. I also examine the difference in reporting on the Gotha raids of 1917-18 in comparison to the Zeppelin raids during 1915-1918 and the way in which these differences shaped official policy in favour of the aeroplane over the airship. Finally I examine the limited reporting on the work of British airships during the First World War and the ways in which the lack of publically available information on their wartime role and activities contributed to the negative wartime image of the airship.

In chapter four I examine the development of the airship in the post-war period between 1919 and 1922. I begin by studying key events in the development of the airship during this period, both in terms of achievements, such as the transatlantic crossing of the R.34, and disasters such as the loss of the R.38 over Hull. I examine the ways in which these events were reported in the press and the impact of these reports on the perception of the airship by the British Government, armed forces and the general population.

I also examine the role of the newly formed Royal Air Force and its parent body the Air Ministry in the decision to abandon airship development in Britain, using newspaper sources to expand on Neilson's work in this area. While the Air Ministry was not against the airship, ministers such as Winston Churchill viewed it as being a competitor for scarce funding as well as potentially providing an opening for the Royal Navy to regain control of its air arm, which would have threatened the survival of the RAF as an independent force.

¹⁸ Government, Military, Naval and Civilian.

1.5 Conclusion

I will show that the traditional narratives of aviation in Britain are not sufficient to explain the decisions by the British government and the Royal Air Force in the early 1920s to develop the aeroplane instead of the airship for both civilian and military uses. At the end of the First World War, when judged on purely technical grounds, the aeroplane and airship were often viewed as complementary technologies, both serving distinct roles within aviation. Indeed, during the immediate post-war period, this view was regularly expounded by well-known British advocates of the airship such as General Maitland¹⁹ and Major Scott.²⁰ Maitland had suggested that airships would be used for long distance journeys landing at hubs and people would continue to their destinations by aeroplane.²¹

A study of Post-World War One financial and political intrigues does not however, suffice to explain how the aeroplane came to be the dominant means of air transport in Britain. While as Neilson demonstrates, it is clear that politics played a significant role in the decision to abandon development of the airship, politics cannot operate in a vacuum. During the early 20th Century the Press Barons such as Lord Northcliffe²² realised the power of the press to shape public opinion and influence Government

¹⁹ Jones 2004.

²⁰ Richards 2004.

²¹ Swinfield 2012, pp.75-76.

²² Boyce 2004.

policy, a realisation which was shared by politicians such as Lloyd George²³, but ignored by others such as Asquith²⁴ – to his cost in losing office after intensive press coverage of the shell crisis in 1916.

Overall this thesis will examine the nature of reporting on aviation in papers such as *The Times*, and will demonstrate the perceived potential of the Edwardian press to influence public opinion, as well as government and military decisions, on innovative technological matters such as aviation. I will also show that the British Government appreciated this potential and that some attempts were made to use it to secure public opinion. However, like the technological, political and financial arguments put forwards by mainstream aviation historians, my thesis avoids reductive single factor explanations for the decision to abandon development of the airship in Britain.

²³ Morgan 2004.

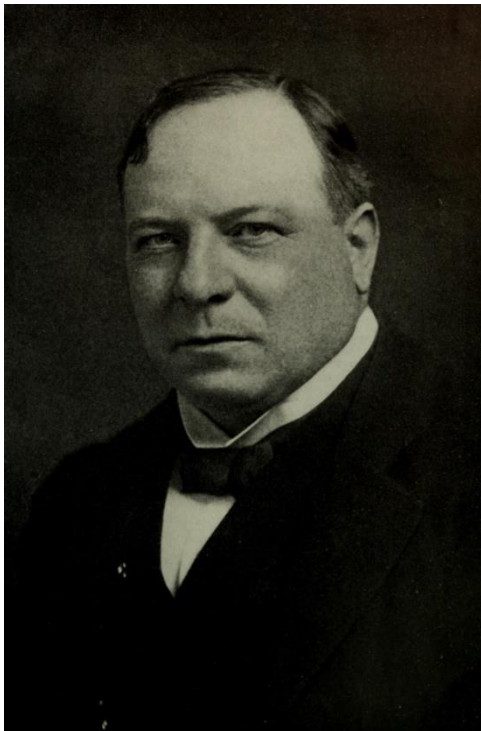
²⁴ Mathew 2004.

Chapter 2

Britain and the Scareship:1909 – 1914

“There is quite a natural dislike in Government offices to anything new. We all know that when torpedoes, smokeless powder, breech-loading rifles, and other improvements in the art of war came in, it took some time before the War Offices were inclined to look at the inventions; and, as a rule, it has been found that private individuals have to work out the early stages of these inventions before Governments will look at them.”

- Lord Montagu of Beaulieu, House of Lords 16th March 1909²⁵



From, "The Worlds Work", May 1913, p.490.

<https://archive.org/stream/worldswork26gard#page/490/mode/2up>

Figure 2: Richard Haldane, 1st Viscount Haldane.

²⁵ HL Deb 16 March 1909.

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter I examine the development of airships in Britain in the period between 1908 and 1914. I begin by focussing on the state of aviation in Britain in the early years of the 20th Century and examine the ways in which three key groups, politicians, the military and journalists reacted to and exploited the fears and promises generated by the rapid emergence of aviation in the early years of the 20th Century. I focus on three main topics: firstly, the state of aeronautics in Britain prior to the First World War paying particular attention to the different levels of interest displayed by the government, armed forces and the press. Secondly, I examine the “Phantom airship scare” of May 1909, which illustrated the fear held in certain parts of British society that Britain was falling behind continental powers such as France and Germany in the development of this new technology. Finally I investigate the development of the “naval airship” between 1909 and 1911 paying special attention to the interest shown by Members of Parliament and by the newspapers in the design and construction of this vessel and the different reactions to the wreck of the ship before its first test flight.

In this analysis I will be building on and critiquing Alfred Gollin’s, *The impact of airpower on the British people and their Government, 1909-14*²⁶. Deborah Douglas’s 1991 review in *Technology and Culture* identifies a series of five problems with Gollin’s text: two of which are relevant to this study.²⁷ Douglas’s fourth criticism is

²⁶ Gollin 1989.

²⁷ Douglas’s remaining criticisms are that: Firstly, Gollin’s style requires the reader to have a firm grounding in British history and politics for the early 20th Century. Secondly the narrative is poorly organised and jumps backwards and forwards through time in a confusing manner. Thirdly, Gollin quotes an excessive number of primary sources in their entirety but makes little or no reference to secondary sources.

that although discussing the impact of air power on the government he ignores the British people therefore ignoring the influence of the general population on government decisions. Douglas's final criticism is that Gollin treats aircraft as a merely being a catalyst used to spark debate and does not test his ideas against the capabilities of the technology at the time, seeming to treat it as inevitable that the aeroplane would become the dominant form of aerial travel when this was not obvious to those involved.²⁸ I aim to build on this final criticism by demonstrating that prior to the First World War the airship was seen as both a plausible threat to the security of Britain and a possible solution to the needs of the British armed forces. No British firms seriously considered using the airship for commercial travel until the early 1920s.

2.2 The State of Play

By 1908 aviation had begun to take off throughout Europe and aviators in both France and Germany had made progress in improving the performance of the early flying machines often building on the early work of the Wright brothers. Many of these early achievements were initiated by private individuals but often supported by the state. In March 1909 Lord Montagu of Beaulieu, a conservative peer and an early advocate of aviation rose to speak in the House of Lords, challenging the Government over both the slow pace of development and the general lack of interest shown in aviation by the British Government and Military authorities in comparison to that demonstrated by the Governments of France and Germany.

²⁸ Douglas 1991, pp. 163-166.

Montagu outlined the developments that had taken place in aviation over the previous twenty years and stated that he believed the time had come for the government to take an active role in the development of aviation. He emphasized the distances flown by French and German airships, comparing this to the distance between points in Britain and on the continent, in an attempt to demonstrate Britain's vulnerability to aerial attack. The government response, issued by Lord Crew, outlined a policy of making use of private enterprise in the development of aeronautical technology; however, it was admitted that this excluded airship experimentation which was the responsibility of the War Office and the Admiralty. Lord Crewe further stated that the policy of watching foreign developments in order to take advantage of others experience at little cost to the British government had been successful in the past particularly in the case of the submarine.²⁹

The unease felt by Lord Montagu was echoed in the popular press, in particularly in the Northcliffe owned *Daily Mail* and *Times*. Between 1906 and 1925, in an effort to promote aviation in Britain, Lord Northcliffe regularly offered prizes for achievements in aviation.³⁰ The main source of this unease emanated from Germany, where Count Ferdinand Von Zeppelin, a retired cavalry officer with the Prussian army, had developed an interest in airships following his experience with observation balloons while serving as an observer with the Union Army during the American Civil War. Zeppelin began his work on airships partially in response to the

²⁹ House of Lords Debate, 16 March 1909.

³⁰ Hugh 1997,p.23.

threat he felt from French developments during the 1880s.³¹ After almost a decade of fighting for funding for his designs Zeppelin finally succeeded in raising the money to build his first experimental airship which was finally launched in July 1901.

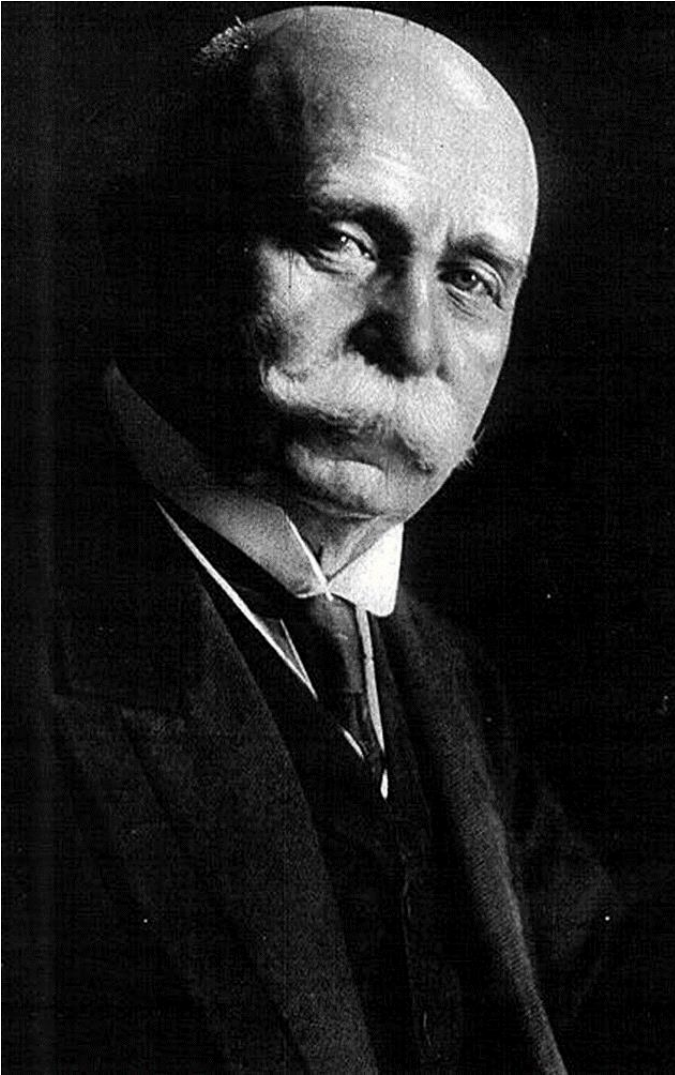


Figure 3: Count Ferdinand Von Zeppelin.

Source : Current History of the War v.II (April 1915 - September 1915). New York: New York Times Company

³¹ Robinson 1973, p.14

On the 6 July 1908 an article was published in the *Evening Telegraph* comparing the new British non-rigid airship Nulli Secundus (figure.4)³² with Zeppelins LZ.4. (figure.5) The newspapers lauded the British achievement but lamented that it was the best Britain could hope to achieve given the lack of funding being made available by the War Office.³³ A letter to *The Times* on 13 July 1908 began by pointing out the number of announcements in the press regarding aerial developments on the continent before going on to describe Britain as “only a third-class power as regards her equipment for aerial warfare.” The correspondent went on to describe the level of spending on aerial development in Britain and accused the Government of being unaware of the gravity of the situation. The letter concluded by pointing out that England’s secure position as an island was under threat from the air.³⁴ Meanwhile on 11 July 1908 the *Daily Mail* had published a report from their Berlin correspondent outlining an interview with Rudolf Martin, a German Privy Councillor, who suggested that in the event of war between Britain and Germany it would be possible for Germany to land 350,000 men in Dover using airships. All it would take would be an undisclosed sum of money and Germany would only need two years to construct the required airships.³⁵

³² Second to none.

³³ *Evening Telegraph*, 6 July 1908, p.2.

³⁴ *The Times*, July 1908, p.10.

³⁵ *Daily Mail*, 11 July 1908, p.5.

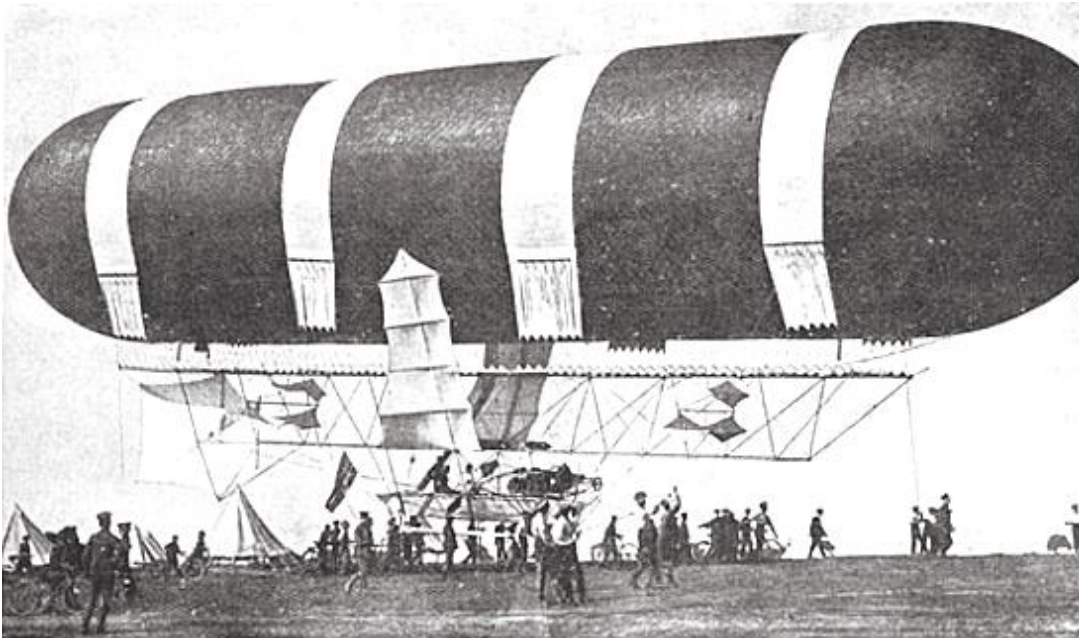


Figure 4: Nulli Secundus. Britain's First Airship.

Picture by, Frederike J. van Uildriks. First published in "Omhoog in het luchtruim! Praatje over het luchtvaartvraagstuk "De Aarde en haar volken" Obtained from <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14178/14178-h/14178-h.htm>



Figure 5: LZ 4 über dem Bodensee, © Archiv der Luftschiffbau Zeppelin GmbH.

Source: <http://www.snipview.com/q/LZ%204>

2.3 Government Plans

Contrary to the concerns exhibited by elements of the press, neither the British government nor the military had been idle. In October 1908 a Sub-committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence on Aerial Navigation was formed under Lord Esher with instructions to investigate three aspects of aerial navigation. First to investigate the dangers posed to Britain, either on land or at sea by probable developments in aerial navigation. Secondly to consider the possible military or naval advantages that could be gained by developing aviation technologies. Finally to consider how much expenditure should be given over to aerial experiments and to which department/s it should be allotted.³⁶ When, in January 1909, the sub-committee reported back, it concluded that developments in aviation had now reached a stage where it would be “improvident and possibly dangerous to assume that the rapid developments which the art of aerostatics has recently made may not entail in the near future risks by land and sea.” As a result the committee decided that in order to ascertain how serious a threat might be posed by developments in aerial navigation, it was first necessary to develop British airships, recommending that £35,000 should be added to the Naval Estimates to provide for the design and construction of a large rigid-airship while a further £10,000 should be included in the Army Estimates in order to provide for continued experiments into non-rigid airships.³⁷

³⁶ Cabinet Documents. 38/15/3

³⁷ Cabinet Documents. 38/15/3.

On the 5 May 1909 the Liberal Prime Minister Asquith, announced in the House of Commons the appointment of a Special Committee for Aeronautics to place the development of aviation in Britain on a proper scientific basis.³⁸ To that end the committee comprised ten members, seven of whom were Fellows of the Royal Society,³⁹ with a representative from the Army and the Navy also included. In preparation for this Haldane⁴⁰, the Minister for War had written to Lord Northcliffe, in order to gain the support of his papers for this move. He had explained that the new department would be connected to the National Physical Laboratory and would be linked to the Army and Navy only through the Treasury. Both the Army and Navy were to have their own construction departments but would receive technical support and advice from the committee;⁴¹ a move which it was hoped would prevent the duplication of research by the two groups.

This decision was well received by conservative papers such as the *Daily Mail* the *Daily Telegraph* and *The Times*, all of which responded positively to the establishment of aeronautics on a firm scientific basis. However, other papers such as the *Daily News* were less enthusiastic about the government's approach. Alfred Gardiner, editor of the *Daily News*, was a supporter of the Liberal Government but was opposed to the militarization of the air. On 6 May Gardiner stated in a leader that, while he disliked the idea of developing airships for military purposes, the

³⁸ House of Commons Debate, 05 May 1909.

³⁹ See appendices A.

⁴⁰ Matthew 2004.

⁴¹ Gollin 1989, pp.29-30.

Government had waited too long in allowing other nations to take the lead in aviation and that it was to be hoped that this new Government venture would be more successful than previous efforts. The ultra-conservative *Morning Post* took an even more extreme view. In what amounted to an outright attack on the government the lead article accused the government of having virtually ignored aviation up to the present. This article concluded by warning that the development of aviation would mean the end of Britain's insular position, and that the "danger of attack from the air can only be prevented by the creation of a strong fleet of airships." On the 7 May a further article in the *Morning Post* raised concerns that the Government's approach to aviation was overly theoretical; it included an interview with Lord Montagu in which he warned that, while the committee established by the government was strong in terms of theory, it did not appear to contain anyone with practical experience in aviation.⁴²

2.4 Airship Scares

Around this time various newspapers began reporting sightings of mysterious airships in the skies over England, the majority of these reports being centred around the Eastern counties bordering on the North Sea (or as it was sometimes named, the German Sea). One such report in the *Daily Mail* was of a Peterborough Police Constable, who reported sighting an airship early in the evening on the 23 March 1909, with corroboration by a fellow officer.⁴³ Further sightings were reported across

⁴² Gollin 1997, pp.34-35.

⁴³ *Daily Mail*, 25 Mar. 1909, p.3.

East Anglia but, despite being investigated by the police and by the *Daily Mail*, they, were unable to be confirmed and several cases turned out to be hoaxes.⁴⁴

This flurry of reports was quickly followed by a sighting in Cardiff on the 19 May, where several independent witnesses reported an airship flying over the city; a second report was made of a previous sighting some hours before in which a traveller reported seeing an airship on the ground with two foreign gentlemen studying a map who, on being approached returned to their ship and flew off towards Cardiff.⁴⁵ This story was reported in an almost identical fashion in most of the major newspapers throughout the country and over the course of the next few days a number of possible explanations were suggested. Some papers seemed to support the idea that the airship in question was of foreign, probably German origin and was operating from a German ship cruising in the Bristol Channel.⁴⁶ A further possible explanation was that the airships could be toys sold by Percival Spencer of C.G. Spencer and Sons Balloon Manufacturers. A noted aeronaut in his own right, Spencer suggested that the numerous airship sightings around Britain at the time could be accounted for if “some enterprising firm in search of a colossal advertisement has been purchasing large quantities of model airships.” He suggested that the lights reported on the sighted airships could be the spirit lamps used in

⁴⁴ *Daily Mail*, May 1909, p.7.

⁴⁵ *The Western Times*, 21 May 1909, p.16.

⁴⁶ *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 20 May 1909, p.4.

models to create lift.⁴⁷ This was supported by a report in the *Aberdeen Journal* on 24 May 1909, when a Mr. Thomas reported sighting a large airship bearing the name “BOVRIL” on the side: he estimated the ship to be about twenty five feet long which Spencer, had reported as being the average length of the unmanned airships sold by his firm.⁴⁸

Despite the more balanced approach taken by some parts of the British press (a factor largely ignored by Alfred Gollin) papers such as the *Morning Post* continued to raise fears of invasion or attack by foreign airships.⁴⁹ However, the *Daily Mail* often offered a more nuanced approach to the airship scare and at least attempted to explain to its readership the difference between what was currently possible and the predictions being made about future developments. Lord Northcliffe was also alarmed by the impact of the “phantom airship scare” on German attitudes towards Britain. Writing from Berlin Lord Northcliffe cited three German newspapers. First the *Berliner Neueste Nachrichten*, which describe the “scare” as “the English melodrama” and stated that the scare itself was ridiculous and potentially dangerous to relations between Britain and Germany. The second paper quoted by Northcliffe was the *Hamburger Nachrichten*; the writer reported suspicions that England was attempting to provoke Germany, although he was unsure as to what the ultimate purpose of this might be. Meanwhile the *Berliner Tagblatt* likened the relations between Britain and Germany to the piling up of explosives in a magazine, stating

⁴⁷ *Western Times*, 22 May 1909, p.4.

⁴⁸ *Aberdeen Journal*, 24 May 1909, p.5.

⁴⁹ Gollin 1989, p.57.

that it would only take a small spark to set it off. Northcliffe went on to suggest that rather than focusing on sensationalist stories regarding phantom airships, his readers would be better off considering the very real threat posed by the increases to the German Navy and the alliances being formed between Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire.⁵⁰ Shortly after Northcliffe's article was published the panic surrounding the scare began to die down: however, it had already served to reinforce the fear that the slow paced theoretical approach favoured by Haldane would not enable Britain to successfully compete with aeronautical achievements on the continent. Letters from the British Naval Attaché in Berlin dated as early as November 1908 show an increasing degree of interest in investigating the utility of airships for naval purposes.⁵¹ It is interesting to note that at the time of the "phantom airship scare" the German navy had not yet expressed any official interest in obtaining Zeppelins for the Fleet, and that the *Kaiser* regarded the idea of a German invasion of England by airship to be laughable.⁵² However, none of this information was available to the general public and it is unclear how far it was disseminated throughout the British military. This episode serves to highlight the fears of the British population about Britain's relatively backwards position in aviation matters and the importance of the press in either exacerbating or calming those fears.

⁵⁰ *Daily Mail*, 21 May 1909, p.5.

⁵¹ Herbert Heath, Germany Naval Attaché Report 48/08.

⁵² Herbert Heath, Germany Naval Attaché Report 16/09.

2.5 The Press intervenes

On 21 June 1909 an editorial in *Morning Post* declared that “with respect to British aeronautical achievement: ‘... so far as any useful effort goes absolutely nothing is being done, and nothing will be done.’”⁵³ As a result on 22 June Arthur Du Cros, Secretary of the “Parliamentary Aerial Defence Committee” announced that an arrangement had been concluded to attempt to fly a modern airship from Paris to London in order to undergo trials with the possibility of the craft later being purchased on behalf of the nation. The only obstacle to this was the need for a shed to house the airship during its time in Britain. Du Cros, appealed to the public for the £5,000 required for the construction of this building. This sum was immediately volunteered by the *Daily Mail* on the condition that the airships’ designer should remain in Britain for one month. This was reported in the *Hastings and St Leonards Observer* on 26 June. The paper included the text of the letter, dated 21 June, sent from Du Cros to Parliament in which he reveals that the committee had for some time been in communication with the Clement-Bayard company in France, arranging for trials to be carried out on a new airship with specifications comparable to the latest Zeppelin. The arrangement would include the option to buy the airship for the British military. The intention was to have the airship shed completed in time for the ship to be flown over in August,⁵⁴ but due to unforeseen delays the ship did not arrive in England until 16 October 1910. On delivery it was discovered that the airship was in a poor state of repair; according to Gollin (1989) the War Office did not

⁵³ [In] Gollin 1989, p.65.

⁵⁴ *Hasting and St Leonards Observer*, 26 June 1909, p.7.

wish to purchase the vessel for the asking price and a private subscription was required to make up the difference in cost. Once the airship was handed over to the War Office on 28 October 1910⁵⁵ it was discovered that the envelope⁵⁶ leaked badly and it was uneconomical to keep the ship in use.

A similar attempt by the press to provide an airship for the Army took place at approximately the same time. In June 1909 the *Morning Post* launched a National Airship Fund aiming to purchase another French airship for the country. In this case a Lebaudy-type non-rigid airship was purchased and delivered on 26th October 1910. While the airship made it safely to Britain, the manufacturers had taken it upon themselves to increase the dimensions of the envelope without informing the *Morning Post* or the War Office of these changes, as a result the shed constructed was too small and the airship was damaged while being housed.⁵⁷ Once the required repair work was completed in May 1911 the craft was taken up for a test flight. The ship crashed while attempting to land and was damaged beyond economical repair.⁵⁸ While these two incidents ended any direct attempts by the press to influence the development of airships in Britain they demonstrate the interest displayed by the conservative papers in promoting active experiments in airship development and the frustration felt by some at the slow pace of the official efforts. However, by mid-

⁵⁵ *Aberdeen Journal*, 29 October 1910, p.7.

⁵⁶ The outer covering of an airship encompassing the gas bags; on a non-rigid airship the shape of the envelope is maintained by the pressure of the lifting gas, whereas on a rigid airship the shape is maintained by the internal framework.

⁵⁷ *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 27 October 1910, p.6.

⁵⁸ *Lincolnshire Echo*, 5 May 1911, p.3.

1911, after a great many delays and extra expense the experimental rigid airship being built for the Royal Navy by the Vickers Company was finally complete and almost ready for launch.

2.6 His Majesties Airship.1 “Mayfly”

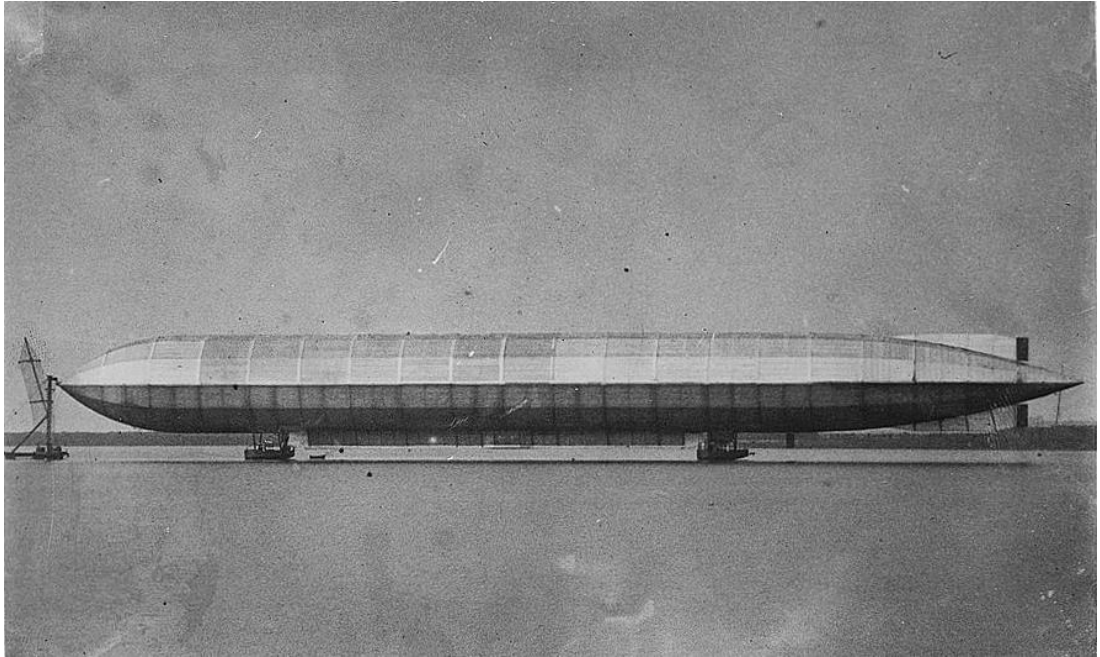


Figure 6: HMA No.1 (Mayfly) in 1911 at her mooring.

from the George Grantham Bain Collection - Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540 USA

First conceived in 1909 by Captain Reginald Bacon, *HMA.1* was widely and unofficially known as the “*Mayfly*”. The ship had been built to provide the Royal Navy with experience in the capabilities of rigid airships when working with the fleet. Designed in response to contemporary German Zeppelins, *HMA.1* was intended to act as a reconnaissance unit for the fleet. The Admiralty specified that the ship should “have a speed of 40 knots over twenty-four hours; she was to be able to ascend to 1,500 feet: and she was to have a powerful (and therefore heavy) wireless

apparatus, [...].”⁵⁹ As conceived the Mayfly was a highly advanced design, utilizing materials and technologies that would not be used by other nations until well into the First World War.

As with other aviation-related issues the newspapers closely followed design and construction of “The Naval Airship”. On 13 March 1909 the *Aberdeen Journal* in reporting on the Naval estimates mentioned in passing that the Admiralty had decided that the navy should carry out further experiments with dirigibles and would construct an aerial vessel.⁶⁰ However, papers such as The *Hull Daily Mail* while giving a little more detail about the construction plans and monies allocated, still suggested that aviation in general was not yet being taken seriously.⁶¹ Meanwhile, the *Yorkshire Post* reported that Mr Haldane had made a speech on Naval and Military aeronautics⁶² in which he had confirmed that Messrs Vickers at Barrow were in the process of constructing a large rigid airship for the Royal Navy. The ship was to be at least as large as current Zeppelin airships and the work, which was being carried out in great secrecy, should be completed by the spring of 1910.⁶³ For the remainder of 1909 little information was revealed about the airship, although by late December more information had become available detailing the rigorous testing taking place

⁵⁹ Scot 1962, p.71.

⁶⁰ *Aberdeen Journal*, 13 March 1909, p.5.

⁶¹ *Hull Daily Mail*, 03 August 1909, p.4.

⁶² House of Commons Debate, 02 August 1909.

⁶³ *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, 03 August 1909, p.7.

for all the components of the design. The reports again mentioned the high level of secrecy surrounding the design and construction. One such report, published by the *Evening Telegraph* on 31 December 1909 detailed the process used to test the engines and propellers for the airship and pointed out that “no detail is allowed to enter into the design until it has stood all the tests”⁶⁴

In January 1910 the media interest in the Naval Airship continued with the *Evening Telegraph* writing about the impending appointment of an Inspecting Captain of Aeronautics to take command of the development of Britain’s Naval Airship. The article likened this to the similar appointment of Rear Admiral Bacon to the post of Inspecting Captain of Submarines in the early years of submarine development and expressed the hope that Britain would soon be as advanced in airships as it now was in submarines.⁶⁵ On 31 January a further notice appeared in the *Dundee Courier* reporting that the *Morning Post’s* Barrow correspondent had discovered that the airship was not yet ready for launch and would not be for some months as the construction shed itself was not yet completed.⁶⁶

The delay in launching the ship did not go without comment in parliament and questions were asked as to the reason for the delay and the expected launch date and also requesting an update on the costs incurred so far in design and construction. On each occasion the First Lord of the Admiralty, McKenna responded

⁶⁴ *Evening Telegraph*, 31 December 1909, p.2.

⁶⁵ *Evening Telegraph*, 20 January 1910, p.2.

⁶⁶ *Dundee Courier*, 31 January 1910, p.5.

by saying that the ship was nearly ready and that there had been no delays that would not be expected in an experimental project.⁶⁷ When the ship was finally launched on 22 May 1911 newspapers across the country reported on what was a major event in British aeronautics, promising to redress the perceived imbalance between Britain and Germany in aerial matters. The *Evening Telegraph* reported the event, beginning with an account of the launch procedure itself before moving on to a more detailed description of the airship.⁶⁸ It should be noted that the report in the following days paper was more circumspect, stating that experts were concerned about the elaborate structure of the ship and suggesting that the money would have been better spend producing aeroplanes. The article ended with the hope that the ship would fulfil the expectations of her designers but commented that the name *Mayfly* was “not too convincing.”⁶⁹ In contrast to this the report in the *Daily Mail* focused on the technicalities of the airships construction and equipment; commenting on the size of the ship describing it as an “improved rigid (or Zeppelin) type.”⁷⁰ A separate article in the same paper revealed more details of the launch before again delving into a detailed description of the ships features.⁷¹ A further

⁶⁷ House of Commons Debate, 13 February 1911.
House of Commons Debate, 10 May 1911.

⁶⁸ *Evening Telegraph*, 22 May 1911, p.3.

⁶⁹ *Evening Telegraph*, 23 May 1911, p.2.

⁷⁰ *Daily Mail*, 23 May 1911, p.9.

⁷¹ *Daily Mail*, 23 May 1911, p.9.

report in *The Times* went into some detail about the trimming and stability tests to which the ship would be subjected to over the coming weeks.⁷²

In the course of carrying out those tests the “*Mayfly*” remained moored outside in the dock for ten days, during which time the ship withstood strong winds while remaining safely moored. A report in *The Daily Mail* noted that the ship had withstood winds of up to forty-five mph, commenting that no other airship had succeeded in remaining moored without shelter for that period of time. The report also noted that the ship was due to be returned to the shed in order to make some minor adjustments.⁷³ These adjustments turned out to be more involved than either the press or Parliament had been led to believe. Questions were asked in the House of Commons on both the 4 and 5 July about the reason for returning the airship to its shed and how long it would before any trial flights took place. In both cases the First Lord was unable to give a date.⁷⁴ No further questions were officially raised in Parliament about the Naval Airship until October 1911.

On 2 June of that year the *Daily Mail* had published an article defending the new airship, stating that, contrary to the opinion of those who considered the ship a failure, it could already be considered a great success. According to the *Daily Mail* by simply remaining moored in the open for an extended period of time, the airship had

⁷² *The Times*, 23 May 1911, p.8.

⁷³ *Daily Mail*, 25 May 1911, p.5.

⁷⁴ House of Commons Debate, 04 July 1911.

House of Commons Debate, 05 July 1911.

demonstrated its superiority over previous British airships such as the *Nulli Secundus* (Army Airship Number 1)⁷⁵ as well as over the contemporary German Zeppelins. The editorial suggested that this achievement was vital in allowing for the future use of the airship for both civil and military functions and emphasised the fact that the airship was an experimental craft and that problems and delays were to be expected.⁷⁶

This was the last mention of the naval airship in the newspapers for almost two months. On 24 July the *Sheffield Daily Telegraph* reported that the Naval Airship was due to make a reappearance having had some structural alterations made following the tests in May. The report detailed the changes that had been made to strengthen the ships frames, as well as to the mooring arrangements.⁷⁷ The source of this information is unclear, as the primary historical narratives make no mention of any work being done during this period to strengthen the ship. Some commentators appeared sceptical of the airship and on 29 July the *Evening Telegraph* published an article entitled “Is Naval Airship a White Elephant?” pointing out that many people were of the opinion that the ship would never be a success; however, the paper was quick to note that this viewpoint was not shared by the naval officers responsible or by Vickers Limited.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ *Nulli Secundus* was a non-rigid airship designed for the British Army, first flown on 10 September 1907. On 5th October the crew were forced to land at Crystal Palace due to adverse headwinds, the ship was deflated on 10 October while still moored at Crystal Palace due to damage caused by strong winds.

⁷⁶ *Daily Mail*, 2 June 1911, p.7.

⁷⁷ *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 24 July 1911, p.5.

⁷⁸ *Evening Telegraph*, 29 July 1911, p.4.

By the end of August the Airship, still the centre of a great deal of public interest had not yet left the Vickers construction shed. Reports at the time offered a range of conflicting explanations for this though mainly focussed on issues of trim and stability. On 18 August the *Daily Mail* had reported that a crowd of thousands had been disappointed when the anticipated launch was again delayed due to doubts about the vessels buoyancy.⁷⁹ A report in *The Times* on 10 August explained that, in an attempt to increase the available lift an external gangway had been removed and the gondoliers altered.⁸⁰ Prior to this there had been no indication that the airship was too heavy. However, by mid-August the press revealed that the trials had been suspended due to issues with the lift, which still did not meet the specifications laid down by the Admiralty. On 23 August *The Times* reported that a conference was to take place between the Admiralty and Barrow as to the best way to proceed, the options being either to add an extra bay and increase the lift or for the Admiralty to accept the ship despite it being overweight.⁸¹ It seems that a decision was made quite quickly as on the 29 August the *Daily Mail* reported that Vickers were attempting to lighten the airship so as to meet the contract specifications.⁸² Meanwhile, the *Aberdeen Journal* suggested that the design of the airship may have been faulty.⁸³ On 2 September the Journal issued another article claiming that the

⁷⁹ *Daily Mail*, 18 Aug. 1911, p.3.

⁸⁰ *The Times*, 10 Aug. 1911, p.6.

⁸¹ *The Times*, 26 Aug. 1911, p.6.

⁸² *Daily Mail*, 29 Aug. 1911, n.p.

⁸³ *Aberdeen Journal*, 26 August 1911, p.7.

airship had proved to be an official “white Elephant” and that either as a result of miscalculation or due to poor design, the ship was too heavy to fly, suggesting that this had been the reason for the lack of official information being released about the progress of the airship.⁸⁴

The Accident



Figure 7: The Naval Airship HMA No.1 "Mayfly" with her back broken.

Imperial War Museum Photo Q 112311

By mid-September the problems appeared to have been addressed and the ship was being readied for re-launching by its naval crew. Both the *Times* and the *Daily Mail* reported on a new method of inflating the gasbags that it was hoped would eliminate some of the issues of gas purity which had caused stability problems on

⁸⁴ *Aberdeen Journal*, 2 September 1911, p.5.

earlier trials.⁸⁵ The *Mayfly* made its second and final appearance on 24 September. While being withdrawn from the shed the airship was caught by a gust of wind causing it to roll over onto its beam. After righting the ship, the crew attempted to manoeuvre its bow round into the wind, at which point the ship broke in two leaving the crew to jump over-board in order to avoid being caught under the hull as it collapsed. This was reported in the *Times* on 25 September and readers were reminded that on 26 August the paper had suggested that the airship would not be able to carry its contract weight.⁸⁶ On the same day the *Daily Mail* released a more detailed version of events as witnessed by their Barrow correspondent. He speculated that the collapse might have been caused by one of the gasbags bursting, placing additional strain upon the structure, before commenting on the efficiency of the naval crew in returning the wrecked airship to its shed. He went on to report that the officers concerned did not appear to be discouraged by the incident but expected repair work to begin almost immediately.⁸⁷

On 28 September the *Daily Mail* published a letter to the Editor from someone signing themselves as *Per Mare Per Aera*.⁸⁸ This individual was concerned that members of the press would magnify the *Mayfly* accident “beyond its true proportions” and use it as an excuse to glorify the aeroplane over the airship, suggesting that any tendency to do so may be due to the numbers of people who

⁸⁵ *Daily Mail*, 19 Sept. 1911, p.6.

⁸⁶ *The Times*, 25 Sept. 1911, p.6.

⁸⁷ *Daily Mail*, 25 Sept. 1911, p.5.

⁸⁸ Latin translation “by the sea, by air”.

had invested in aeroplanes compared to those investing in airships. The author pointed out that both the airship and the aeroplane would have a role to play in naval strategy. He went on to point out that it had taken Germany “many disheartening failures and much money expended” before they had a ship that could be considered successful. He highlighted the valuable data and experience gained in constructing the *Mayfly* and warned that to abandon this would risk losing supremacy in the air which he believed would be as vital to Britain’s safety as the ships of the Royal Navy.⁸⁹ This proved to be a salient concern when on 26 October a question was asked in the House of Commons about possible plans for the development of naval aeroplanes due to the failure of the airship.⁹⁰

Both the *Dundee Courier* and the *Aberdeen Journal* printed articles on 25 September describing the incident and discussing the probable causes. One thing that both agreed on was that over the previous few weeks many articles and statements had appeared in the papers discussing the lightening of the ship, which they believed to be in error. Both papers argued that any changes made to the airship’s structure had been intended to improve the strength and rigidity of the hull rather than to lighten it in any way. Indeed it would appear that the airships buoyancy had never caused any apprehension in either the builders or government.⁹¹ This contrasts with the official histories of the *Mayfly* which state that one of the causes of the accident was

⁸⁹ *Daily Mail*, 28 Sept. 1911, p.4.

⁹⁰ House of Commons Debate, 26 October 1911.

⁹¹ *Dundee Courier*, 25 September 1911, p.5.
Aberdeen Courier, 25 September 1911, p.5.

the removal of the external keel; this action which had been opposed by a member of the Vickers design team, H. B. Pratt. Who, had warned that doing so would compromise the strength of the hull.⁹² Not all the papers were so sympathetic in their reporting of the incident. On 26 September the *Sheffield Daily Telegraph* called for a searching enquiry into the disaster and stated that “ever since its inception the Admiralty has been strongly criticised for its adoption of a type of craft that has long since been shown ... to be a hopeless failure.” The report went on to point out that with only a single exception every rigid airship produced thus far had been destroyed in some form of accident, and questioned the lack of experiment undertaken before building such a large and costly vessel.⁹³

The Enquiry

An enquiry into the Mayfly disaster had already been ordered by the Admiralty. No work was to be carried out on the airship until aeronautical experts⁹⁴ had examined it and the court of enquiry had reached a decision as to the cause of the incident. It has been impossible to find the precise date of the court of enquiry and the records, which were never released to the public, no longer exist. However, the court did exonerate the officers and crew from any blame in the accident.⁹⁵ When the matter was raised in Parliament Winston Churchill, now the First Lord of the Admiralty,

⁹² Swinfield 2012,p.36.

⁹³ *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 26 September 1911, p.7.

⁹⁴ There is no indication as to who selected these experts or what knowledge/expertise was required to qualify.

⁹⁵ *Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette*, 2 December 1911, p.6.

stated that the Navy did not intend to make the enquiry public and that the future development of naval airships was still under consideration at the Admiralty.⁹⁶

The decision taken by the Admiralty was based on the recommendation of the Technical Sub-Committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence dated 28 February 1912. The sub-committee was of the opinion that the prospects of successfully employing large rigid airships were not yet sufficiently favourable to justify the high costs expended and recommended that for the present naval experiments should be limited to developing aeroplanes and hydro-aeroplanes. They also suggested that a watch should be kept on foreign developments and the question re-examined if any new developments appeared to make it desirable.⁹⁷ This decision temporarily put an end to the Royal Navy's interest in the rigid airship. As had been noted by the *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, the *Mayfly* had met with a large number of accidents and disasters during its construction. However, as others such as the mysterious *Per Mare Per Aera*, noted the rigid airship still promised to fulfil a role at sea, for which the aeroplane was unsuitable.

The Admiralty decision to halt research can be at least partially explained by the reports being received from the British Naval Attaché in Berlin throughout the 1910/1911 period. These appeared to suggest a diminishing level of interest in the airship in favour of the aeroplane, due to the number of airship crashes during 1910/1911 as well as the success of French aeroplanes during this period.

⁹⁶ House of Commons Debate 21 November 1911.

⁹⁷ Cabinet Documents, 38/20/1 [88].

Unfortunately very few of the pertinent reports have survived due to the highly selective record keeping process of the Naval Intelligence Department⁹⁸. One surviving report dated 9 December 1911 stated that *“before the last few months the opinion largely held in Germany was that airships were useless and that aeroplanes would soon supplant them. This opinion we were voicing in our Report of October 6th.”*⁹⁹ (Original Italics)

2.7 Renewed Interest

Nevertheless subsequent reports seem to confirm a renewed German interest in the airship as a vehicle of war. While many historians such as Douglas Robinson have focussed on the rigid Zeppelin-type airships, Germany also invested a considerable amount in the non-rigid ships such as the Parsavel type. A further report from the Berlin Naval attaché on 11 December suggested that while aeroplane development in Germany lagged behind that of Britain and France he believed that Germany had overcome many of the difficulties associated with operating rigid airships.¹⁰⁰ While a communication in January 1912 reported on a conversation with a serving German Naval Officer who expressed an opinion that the German authorities were considering the possibilities of using airships offensively against British ships, towns and dockyards, it was recommended that representatives from both the army and

⁹⁸ For more information see Seligmann, M. S. ed., 2007. Naval Intelligence from Germany: The reports of the British Naval attaches in Berlin, 1906-1914. Aldershot: Ashgate.

⁹⁹ Naval Attaché No.37/11. / Military attaché, No.35/11.

¹⁰⁰ Naval Attaché No.40/11. / Military attaché, No.37/11.

navy should be sent to investigate the situation in Germany.¹⁰¹ Finally on 29 March 1912 the naval attaché reported on the purchase of a Zeppelin-type airship for the German Navy with the probability of more being ordered in the near future.¹⁰² Shortly after this, in April 1912, Winston Churchill reported to the Cabinet that airship development in Germany had made such great strides and that as the aeroplane still did not possess sufficient range or endurance for naval reconnaissance, investigations into airships should be resumed.¹⁰³

Following the recommendation from the naval attaché in Berlin Captain Murray Sueter¹⁰⁴ and Mr O’Gormon¹⁰⁵ were sent to Germany in order to study foreign airship development. Their report submitted to the Technical Sub-Committee of the C.I.D in July 1912 showed that airship development in Germany had reached a point at which patrols by airship would be able to prevent the British Fleet from approaching the German coastline unobserved, rendering the Admiralty policy of close blockade useless. It also indicated that Germany had made progress in refuelling airships at sea while on patrol as well as in the dropping of ordinance from an airship. As a result of this report it was decided to attempt to purchase non-rigid

¹⁰¹ Naval Attaché No.1/12. / Military attaché, No.2/12.

¹⁰² Naval attaché, No.23/12.

¹⁰³ Cabinet Documents, 38/20/9.

¹⁰⁴ Kemp 2004.

¹⁰⁵ Head of the Royal Aircraft Factory.

airships from both Germany and France in order to gain experience in the handling of larger airships.¹⁰⁶

On 7 October *The Times* reported that the Zeppelin constructed for the German Navy, had been inspected by the Naval Commission who had witnessed its trials. The paper then gave a remarkably detailed description of the ship, which was interesting for this Zeppelin's similarities to the failed British HMA No1 in terms of size and layout.¹⁰⁷ At the same time the British Naval attaché in Germany reported on the arrival of this airship in Berlin after a 30-hour flight from Friedrichshafen. He reported that the craft had carried 21 passengers and that the original intention had been to remain airborne for 48 hours but due to extra personnel being carried to test the wireless system this had been reduced.¹⁰⁸ This event was also reported in *The Times* on 15 October, thus, demonstrating how closely foreign aeronautical developments were being followed by the British press.¹⁰⁹

2.8 Last Minute Developments

On the night of 14 October 1912 an incident occurred, the reporting of which re-awakened fears of the possibility of attack by German airships. At about 7.30 p.m. an unknown airship was heard passing over Sheerness. No newspaper report was made of this incident at the time and it was not mentioned in Parliament until November

¹⁰⁶ Cabinet Documents, 38/22/32.

¹⁰⁷ *The Times*, 7 Oct. 1912, p.6.

¹⁰⁸ Naval attaché, No. 76/12.

¹⁰⁹ *The Times*, 15 Oct. 1912, p.5.

that year. However, when the incident was questioned in parliament, Churchill was unable to state whether the craft was an aeroplane or airship, but did state that flares had been lit at a nearby air station in case it was a foreign vessel requiring assistance.¹¹⁰ On 18 November an article in *The Times* suggested that the only airship which could have been over Sheerness on the 14 October was the German Naval airship L.1.¹¹¹ On 25 November the British Naval attaché submitted a report stating that he did not believe it was possible for the craft reported over Sheerness to be the German Naval L.1; he had also investigated all the German airships capable of making such a flight and had accounted for their movements on the night in question.¹¹² This information was not made available to the press. The identity of this airship remained unknown and as far as I have been able to ascertain has never been established, although suggestions that the L.1 made a detour en-route to Berlin were published in the *Manchester Courier* in February 1913.¹¹³ This incident was to be of great value to Winston Churchill and Admiral Jellicoe in their efforts to re-start the production of rigid airships in Britain. An Admiralty report on 'Aerial Navigation' dated June 1913, noted that the Admiralty had entered into negotiations with Vickers Limited for the construction of five airships, four of the Parseval non-rigid type to be built under licence from Germany and one large Zeppelin type airship.

¹¹⁰ House of Commons Debate, 27 November 1912.

¹¹¹ *Daily Mail*, 18 Nov. 1912, p.7+.

¹¹² Naval attaché Reference sheet Germany, No.69/12.

¹¹³ *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, 24 February, 1913, p.7.

This was partly in response to the decision by the German Navy to build a fleet of ten Zeppelin type airships and fifty hydro-aeroplanes.¹¹⁴ By December 1912 the potential utility of the airship for naval duties had become obvious to most parties. It was revealed that the Royal Navy had placed orders with the Astra Company in France and the Parsavel Company in Germany for airships, as well as for some fixed wing aeroplanes from France. This was quickly reported in the British press with the *Evening Telegraph* reporting on the 5 December stating that a large ship had been ordered from the Astra Company and was now nearing completion, having been laid down¹¹⁵ in August.¹¹⁶ On 12 December the *Aberdeen Journal* reported that the Admiralty had ordered a Parsavel type airship from Germany which should be ready for acceptance trials sometime in the spring.¹¹⁷

2.9 The 1913 Scare

The early part of 1913 was to witness yet another “phantom airship” scare with reports of airship sightings throughout England and Scotland. Many of these reports included no details as to the type of airship sighted but merely reported hearing aero engines and sighting moving lights in the sky. A report in the *Daily Mail* on 26 February mentions a supposed sighting over Hull although the *Daily Mail*

¹¹⁴ Cabinet Documents.37/115/35.

¹¹⁵ In Naval terminology being laid down is the first stage in construction of a ship.

¹¹⁶ *Evening Telegraph*, 5 December. 1912, p.4.

¹¹⁷ *Aberdeen Journal*, 12 December. 1912, p.5.

correspondent was convinced that this was a star.¹¹⁸ As with the previous scare in 1909 the German reaction was scathing. On 27/28 February *The Times* reported that according to official German sources, it was impossible that any of the supposed sightings could be a German airship as any flight of this nature would have entailed a daylight departure and over flight of Belgium which would surely be noticed and reported. Further to this it was reported that the German press viewed the latest “scare” as an example of Britain being in a “perpetual state of nervousness or panic.”¹¹⁹

2.10 Conclusion

By the time war broke out on 4 August 1914, the Royal Navy had made great strides in the development of both rigid and non-rigid airships. Having taken over the army airships in April 1913 the Royal Navy had a total of six non-rigid airships available, including the German-built Parseval and the French-built Astra Torres. Only one rigid airship was in the process of construction at Barrow by Vickers Limited. Throughout this period the Admiralty had been unable to commit to a definite program of airship development and while acknowledging an interest in using airships for scouting purposes they were unable to agree as to the best type to develop, either rigid or non-rigid and were not willing to spend huge sums of money on a technology which as yet did not appear to have the potential to significantly affect the outcome of a battle. In this the development was very similar to that of Submarines and was

¹¹⁸ *Daily Mail*, 26 Feb. 1913, p.5.

¹¹⁹ *The Times*, 27 Feb. 1913, p.6.

primarily driven by a small dedicated core of officers; in many cases the same ones who had been involved in the early submarine experiments. Development was further hindered by the political upheavals taking place in the Admiralty; between 1908 and 1914 the Royal Navy had undergone four changes of First Sea Lord, while the First Lord of the Admiralty had changed three times. Each new appointment brought about changes in the priorities and strategy of the Navy with new development often appearing to be spurred by developments abroad. This had been picked up by the press who, by highlighting the advances made in foreign aviation when compared to those made in Britain, stirred fears of invasion and national vulnerability in order to provoke the government and armed forces to invest in aviation.

The attempt by Haldane to secure Northcliffe's support for the government's plans in 1908 suggests that at least some politicians believed that the support of the press could be a powerful tool in shaping and steering public opinion. However, without any firm evidence it is difficult to substantiate this claim.

The "phantom airship" scares of 1909 and later 1913 also played a significant role in shaping British attitudes towards the airship. Whether or not the sightings were real, the mere fact that Germany and France possessed airships capable of such a flight and that the British government could do nothing to prevent it turned it into a powerful tool for those who felt that aviation of all types had been neglected by the Government. When the invasion fears failed to provoke increased spending the Conservative press led by the *Daily Mail* and *Morning Post* attempted to directly intervene in the procurement of airships while these attempts failed to produce any

worthwhile results they demonstrated the interest of the papers proprietors in the development of aviation.

By 1914 the airship already had something of a mixed reception throughout all levels of British society. Seen by some as a vehicle offering great potential for the defence of the country and as a means of increasing the reach of the Royal Navy, for others the airship was a potent threat demonstrating Britain's decline in relation to the continental powers. Due to the slow pace of British development and the setbacks caused by the loss of the *Mayfly*, Britain had been unable to assess the effectiveness of the airship for either military or civil use and had not had any opportunity to test or practice defensive measures. The First World War would provide the first opportunity for the hopes and fears of the British press, politicians and military to be put to the test.

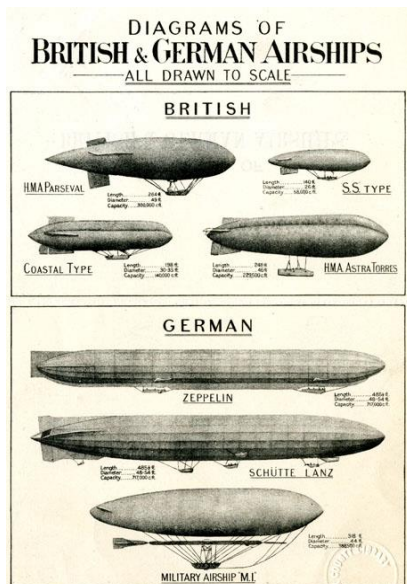
Chapter 3

The experience of War: 1914-1918

“Friday January 1st 1915: London: I was suddenly seized with a creepy dread of Zeppelins, against which the London population had been warned”

*Vera Brittain, War Diary 1913-1917: Chronicle of Youth.*¹²⁰

“Why newspapers are prohibited from publishing details of Zeppelin raids”



[HEADLINE]: *Hull Daily Mail*, Monday 7 June 1915.¹²¹

Image taken from: <http://norfolkinworldwar1.org/2014/01/21/zeppelin-raids-on-norfolk-2/>

Figure 8: Airship Identification Chart.

¹²⁰ Brittain 1981, p.145.

¹²¹ *Hull Daily Mail*, 7 June. 1915 p.3.

3.1 Introduction

While aviation technologies such as the static observation balloon had been used by British Military forces in previous conflicts, the First World War was the first in which the dirigible balloon or airship played a major role. However, when war broke out British forces were not expecting that airships would be a major feature of combat. In August 1914 Britain had just six non-rigid airships available with a single rigid “Zeppelin” type airship under construction. Two of the available ships had been purchased abroad in 1913 including one Parsavel-type airship which had been brought from Germany. On the outbreak of the war these airships began patrolling the English Channel in an attempt to protect the ship-bound British Expeditionary Force from attack by German submarines; they were also used to scout for the German army’s advance in Belgium but were soon withdrawn to Britain as their vulnerability to rifle fire became clear to the naval authorities. This scale of activity can be contrasted with a reported eighteen German airships which had the capability to reach Britain from bases in Germany.¹²² However, due to the secrecy imposed by Admiralty, the British public were largely unaware of the existence of the British airships used in supportive missions and more generally the work which was undertaken using them during the war. They were instead, reliant on the newspapers for information. However, given the censorship activities, the editorial staff of the Newspapers focused only on the German Zeppelins, reporting both their attacks on Britain and their destruction at the hands of Britain’s aerial defences. No historian has previously asked to what extent this negative publicity of the German

¹²² *The Times*, 6 Aug. 1914, p.4.

Zeppelins, and the absence of positive reports on the work of British airships, influenced British perceptions of the airship.

In this chapter I examine the effects of press reporting of the airship during the First World War on British perceptions of the airship. I build primarily on the work of Barry D. Powers¹²³ and Thomas Fegan.¹²⁴ While Powers cited the Zeppelin and Gotha attacks to illustrate how the RAF and its policy of strategic bombing came into being, he ignored the importance to the development of the post-war aircraft industry in Britain of those Zeppelin and Gotha raids and the ways in which they were reported, particularly by the Northcliffe press. Similarly, while Fegan has provided detailed information on the major Zeppelin and Gotha raids he did not consider the extent which these affected the subsequent development of airpower in Britain. In what follows I show that these events and the ways in which they were reported significantly influenced the post-war fate of the airship in Britain.

I begin by examining the ways in which press reports contributed to creating a high level of fear concerning the Zeppelin attacks, possibly as a means of diverting public attention from the events on the Western Front and the Dardanelles. Ariela Freedman describes the Zeppelin threat as being more imaginary than real, yet Zeppelins became the “defining markers of the home-front wartime sky.”¹²⁵ While it is incontrovertible that people died during the raids, the vast majority of the British

¹²³ *Strategy without slide-rule*, 1976.

¹²⁴ *The 'Baby Killers' German Air Raids on Britain in the First World War*, 2012.

¹²⁵ Freedman 2004, p.50.

civilian population did not have first-hand experience of a raid, instead relying on newspaper reports and rumour. This is demonstrated by the level of importance attached to the Zeppelin raids by the newspaper proprietors compared to other events in the war. An article appearing in the April 1916 edition of W.T. Stead's *Review of Reviews* argued that the threat posed by the Zeppelins was being blown out of proportion. This was at least in part because the public could relate to the Zeppelin attacks in a way which they could not relate to events on the Western Front.¹²⁶ In fact, little has been written by historians about the impact on individuals of seeing Zeppelins destroyed during the Great War, beyond noting the contemporary descriptions of the destruction and celebrations by the British citizens on the ground. I therefore show that witnessing the violent end of the German Zeppelins created an additional if unconscious level of fear in the minds of the British civilians and military forces regarding the safety of airships compared to aeroplanes. This was again re-enforced by the lack of information in the press on British airship activities during the war, in particular the low casualty rates suffered by the defensive use of the British airship Service which due to press censorship were not publicly reported until after the war in 1919.

Finally I examine the effects of the Gotha bomber aeroplane raids on Britain which occurred from May 1917 until late 1918, to demonstrate that the high levels of destruction caused during these raids in comparison to the earlier Zeppelin raids served to strengthen the perception, created by the press, that the aeroplane was a

¹²⁶ "The Real Danger of the Zeppelin", 1916, *The Review of reviews*, vol. 53, no. 316, pp. 304-306.

more powerful and reliable means of flight. I argue that this influenced the post-war Royal Air Force to develop the heavy bomber instead of the airship as the RAF viewed the aeroplane as having greater utility as a strategic bomber; this in turn provided a stronger argument to retain the RAF as an independent force after the war.

Due to the number¹²⁷ of German air raids on Britain during the First World War, it is neither feasible nor appropriate to discuss the impact of each and every individual raid.¹²⁸ Instead I focus only on those raids which can be considered noteworthy either due to the significant way in which the press reported them, or because of the conspicuous success or failure of Britain's aerial defences in dealing with the raid as was implicitly reported in the newspapers which, due to censorship, were rarely able to publish complete details of air raids.

3.2 Censorship: The Guiding Hand of Government

One of the defining features of the First World War was the unprecedented level of censorship operated by the British State. Although censorship had theoretically been applicable in previous conflicts such as the Boer War, it had not always been rigorously enforced; indeed the high level of censorship in the First World War can be at least partly explained by the lack of trust engendered in senior military officers by the behaviour of journalists, such as Winston Churchill, during previous conflicts.

¹²⁷ Morris 1993, gives the numbers as fifty-one Zeppelin raids and fifty-two attacks by aeroplanes, although it is unclear whether this later number is solely raids involving the Gotha and Giant bombers or includes earlier attacks by single flying boats.

¹²⁸ See Morris 1993, *German Air Raids on Britain. 1914-1918*.

As Deian Hopkin pointed out this topic is difficult to research due in part to the sheer volume of source material available, with many newspapers producing daily editions making it extremely laborious to examine even a single week's worth of reports to check for evidence of censorship. More importantly Hopkin pointed the historical researcher to the strategic study of two main threats to the State posed by the press during wartime. The first of these was the possibility of publishing information which might have been of military value to the enemy. The second concern was that the press might publish information damaging to the government's mandate and its ability to prosecute the war, irrespective of its effect on the enemy.¹²⁹

On the outbreak of war in August 1914 the government created an official Press Bureau charged with controlling the supply of information from the frontlines to the papers and also with monitoring any telegrams and cables sent or received from the papers. The Press Bureau was "a delegate exercising the powers which ordinarily belonged to other government departments" in this case from the Admiralty and War Office. Tania Rose stated that all government departments were asked to use the Bureau in order to disseminate information to the press.¹³⁰ In order to set boundaries on what could be published the Press Bureau issued directives known as "D" notices¹³¹ with instructions as to how certain news items should be treated. In

¹²⁹ Hopkin 1970, pp. 151-152.

¹³⁰ Rose 1995, pp. 16-17.

¹³¹ Defence Notice: An advisory request not to publish items on topics of national security.

relation to this the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA),¹³² which came into force on 7 August 1914, gave the government a broad range of powers to deal with any publications which breached these censorship rules. One clause referred to the need to “prevent the spread of false reports or reports likely to cause disaffection to His Majesty or to interfere with the success of His Majesty’s forces by land or sea or to prejudice His Majesty’s relations with foreign powers.”¹³³ Given the success of the Northcliffe press in highlighting and reporting on the Shell Crisis in 1915 and the pre-war interest in aviation demonstrated in his newspapers, described in the previous chapter it remains to be adequately explained why no concerted attempt had been made to address the state of Britain’s aerial defences during the early years of the war. This stands in stark contrast to the fears raised by the press and described in the previous chapter. These fears were also reflected in the questions asked by MPs in Parliament and by letters and editorials in the newspapers about the state of aviation in Britain and the possibility of aerial bombardment or invasion raised during the phantom airship scares of 1909 and 1913. One hypothesis I explore in this chapter is that Northcliffe had political backing from senior military commanders and politicians to expose the weaknesses of British munitions production, allowing his papers to circumvent the censor. By contrast I show that the Northcliffe press did not have such backing when it came to reporting on Britain’s aerial defences during the Zeppelin and Gotha raids of the First World War.

¹³² See appendices B.

¹³³ Rose 1995, pp. 107-110.

3.3 Warned but Unprepared: First Strike

The first aerial attack on British soil was carried out at Dover on 24 December 1914 by a German seaplane dropping a single bomb; it was reported in the *Dover Express* the following day indicating that a number of windows had been broken and a man was blown out of a tree (but otherwise uninjured). An article on the same page advised readers on the precautions to take in the event of aerial bombardment; this amounted to instructions to remain indoors and not to congregate on the streets to watch the raid.¹³⁴ This December raid on Dover along with a further single aircraft raid up the Thames was reported in *The Times* on 26 December. *The Times* report offered its readers description of this raid including the route taken by the attacking aircraft and the approximate locations of the anti-aircraft batteries which engaged the craft forcing it to return to German held territory.¹³⁵

In January 1915 the First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, presented a report to the War Council on the likelihood of Germany attempting to attack London using airships, declaring that there was “no known means of preventing the airships coming, and not much chance of punishing them on their return.” The report made it clear that the Admiralty was, at that stage powerless to prevent any attack by Zeppelins.¹³⁶ Indeed when the first Zeppelin raid on Britain occurred on the night of 19/20 January 1915, with bombs being dropped on King’s Lynn and Yarmouth on the

¹³⁴ *The Dover Express*, 25 December. 1914, p.5.

¹³⁵ *The Times*, 26 Dec. 1914, p.7+.

¹³⁶ Cabinet Documents, 37/123.

Norfolk coastline, there was no defensive response. Given the historic significance of this raid, it was reported in great detail in both local and national newspapers. *The Times* followed the story closely reporting in detail on the track of the attacking airships and locations on which bombs had been dropped.¹³⁷ On 21 January *The Times* suggested that the Germans hoped to provoke terror in the British population, but had failed in this respect as the raid was met “with interest, but with absolute calmness”; its reporter enjoined its readers to a stoic response.¹³⁸ When reporting on the damage done to Yarmouth the writer claimed the attack was less effective than the coastal bombardments carried out at Hartlepool and Scarborough in December 1914.¹³⁹ The final report in *The Times* on the Norfolk raid came on 23 January, with one article detailing changes to street lighting regulations in Yarmouth, reducing the level of lighting¹⁴⁰ and a further article noted that appeals had been made to Parliament for aeroplanes and high angle guns to protect against further Zeppelin raids.¹⁴¹ It is unclear if any response was received to this. Although given the situation facing Britain at the time it is somewhat doubtful.

¹³⁷ *The Times*, 20 Jan. 1915, p.8.
The Times, 20 Jan. 1915, p.8.
The Times, 20 Jan. 1915, p.8.

¹³⁸ *The Times*, 21 Jan. 1915, p.9.
The Times, 21 Jan. 1915, p.5.

¹³⁹ *The Times*, 21 Jan. 1915, p.9+

¹⁴⁰ *The Times*, 23 Jan. 1915, p.10.

¹⁴¹ *The Times*, 23 Jan. 1915, p.10.

The intensity of the reporting on the Norfolk air raids provides an insight into the degree of importance attached to them by the press. This contrasts with the apparent lack of interest displayed in Parliament where discussions of air raids were limited to the topic of whether or not German spies had used car headlamps to guide the Zeppelins to their targets.¹⁴² The topics under Parliamentary discussion indicate that at this point the threat from aerial attack was, at least from the government's point of view, considered to be inconsequential. The reports in *The Times* appear to indicate that the bombs had little impact on the populations of the targeted towns. Thomas Fegan notes that although the national papers had denounced the raid as being murderous and cowardly, many people in Norfolk were more upset by the damage caused and the lack of any warning issued prior to the attack.¹⁴³ It is unclear precisely what form citizens expected this warning to have taken; indeed the debate over whether or not to provide air raid warnings to the general population was to continue in both Houses of Parliament and the newspapers for much of the war. Following the Norfolk raid no further Zeppelin attacks on Britain occurred until 14 April when the German airship L.9¹⁴⁴ made an opportunistic raid on the Tyne area.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴² House of Commons Debate, 09 February 1915.

¹⁴³ Fegan 2012, pp.19-20.

¹⁴⁴ Airship numbers are largely taken from Joseph Morris, *German Air Raids on Britain: 1914-1918*. Airships with the prefix LZ belonged to the German Army, Airships with the L prefix belonged to the German Navy, While SL indicated a Schütte-Lanz, wooden framed airship, often mistakenly referred to as a Zeppelin.

¹⁴⁵ Fegan 2012, p.21.

The next significant raid occurred on 31 May 1915 when a single Zeppelin¹⁴⁶ managed to bomb London. On 1 June *The Times* published a brief account of the raid which merely reported that a raid had taken place causing a number of fires which according to the official Admiralty communiqué could not be “absolutely connected” with the airships presence. This article reported a communiqué from the Admiralty forbidding the press from publishing any information pertaining to aerial attacks on London: “the Admiralty communiqué is all the news which can properly be published.”¹⁴⁷ The *Daily Mirror* gave a very similar report which also mentioned these Admiralty restrictions concerning reporting on air raids.¹⁴⁸ *The Times* nevertheless published further details of the raid on 2 June, including an initial count of the casualties sustained. Yet the paper supported the Admiralty’s decision to restrict publicising information on air raids and instead only reported that “bombs fell in various localities not far distant from each other.”¹⁴⁹ Elsewhere in the same edition a *Times* journalist attempted to draw lessons from the Zeppelin attack, suggesting that it was pointless boasting about the calmness exhibited by the population during the attack and stated that ‘sneers’ about the amount of damage caused by bombs were also pointless as they did not account for the probability that the raids carried out were merely experimental in nature. The *Times* went on to

¹⁴⁶ Later Identified as the German Army Zeppelin LZ.38.

¹⁴⁷ *The Times*, 1 June 1915, p.8.

¹⁴⁸ *Daily Mirror*, 1 June 1915, p.3.

¹⁴⁹ *The Times*, 2 June 1915, p.6.

suggest that people were 'not willing to face up to the reality of the situation.'¹⁵⁰

Although it is unclear precisely who these 'people' are, it probably referred to members of the government. It may thus be taken as an early indication of the dissatisfaction of the Northcliffe press with the state of Britain's aerial defences, a concern which was to be expressed regularly in his newspapers over the following year.

The next air raid to occur was on 6/7 June 1915 and this caused severe damage and casualties in Hull. The report of the Hull attack in *The Times* was limited to the official Admiralty announcement which simply stated that "bombs were dropped on various places, but little damage was done."¹⁵¹ The raid was carried out by four zeppelins, two of which were forced to turn back from the British coast due to heavy fog. One of these was the LZ.37 which, at one o'clock in the morning, was sighted over Ostend by Flight Sub-Lieutenant Warneford.¹⁵² *The Hull Daily Mail* reported that Sub-Lieutenant Warneford¹⁵³ had been able to ascend above the Zeppelin and drop six bombs at least one of which hit the target. The writer suggested that the engagement had proven that the aeroplane is superior to the more expensive airship.¹⁵⁴ This event was also reported in *The Times*, which published the

¹⁵⁰ *The Times*, 2 June 1915, p.7.

¹⁵¹ *The Times*, 7 June 1915, p.8.

¹⁵² Morris 1993, p.34

¹⁵³ Gunby 2004.

¹⁵⁴ *Hull Daily Mail*, 8 June, 1915, p.2.

Admiralty's official report of the night's events along with corroboration from a source in Belgium.¹⁵⁵ Warneford was awarded the Victoria Cross¹⁵⁶ for this achievement which was announced in *The Times* on 9 June.¹⁵⁷ His official report of



Figure 9: Portrait of Flight Sub-Lieutenant R.A.J. Warneford VC.

Photo taken 17 February 1915. Imperial War Museum catalogue number HU 64169

¹⁵⁵ *The Times*, 8 June 1915, p.8.

¹⁵⁶ *The Times* 19 June 1915: p. 9.

¹⁵⁷ *The Times*, 9 June 1915, p.8.
The Times, 9 June 1915, p.9.

the encounter provides more precise detail on the timing and altitude of the attack but in all other regards is similar to the reports in newspapers.¹⁵⁸

Warneford's success in destroying the Zeppelin eclipsed the attack on Hull which had been carried out the same night by the German navy's Zeppelin L.9.¹⁵⁹ The *Hull Daily Mail* report for 7 June carried the headline "why newspapers are prohibited from publishing details of Zeppelin raids."¹⁶⁰ This was followed up on page three by an article explaining that the paper was in support of this censorship due to the possibility of published information on the raids being of use to German airship commanders in establishing the accuracy of their navigation over Britain. The only aspect of the censorship to be criticised was the lack of information provided on the casualties caused as doing so would possibly help stop the spread of rumours.¹⁶¹ The *Hull Daily Mail* did not publish a direct criticism on the British air defences and indeed on 9 June the paper pointed out that in spite of the number of letters received on the topic of air raids it was unable to discuss the issue.¹⁶² However, following the raid a series of letters and articles were published which provide some indication as to the feelings stirred up by the raid among its readers and the publication of these letters indicates the importance attached to the topic by the

¹⁵⁸ Air 1/672.

¹⁵⁹ Morris 1993, p.36

¹⁶⁰ *Hull Daily Mail*, 7 June, 1915, p.1.

¹⁶¹ *Hull Daily Mail*, 7 June, 1915, p.3.

¹⁶² *Hull Daily Mail*, 9 June, 1915, p.3.

editorial staff. In one example on 9 June a reader made the suggestion that “A committee of gentlemen should be got together ... to form a corps of aviators and provide air machines ... for the protection of the city.”¹⁶³ This topic remained in evidence for several issues with many correspondents writing in to offer their services.¹⁶⁴

The first complete record of the casualties for this raid finally appeared in *The Times* on 17 June as part of a report on a further attack on the north east coast on 16 June.¹⁶⁵ Morris noted that this attack on Tyneside was conspicuous due to the “accurate bomb practice on military objectives”¹⁶⁶ which went unreported by the British press. However, there is some evidence of papers attempting to circumvent the censor’s guidelines. On 17 June the *Newcastle Journal* reported on the “Local Air Raid”; with the exception of the title, the article was restricted to the information available from the Press Bureau.¹⁶⁷

In early September the German Zeppelins carried out almost nightly raids on the east coast of England. On 8/9 September 1915, the *Daily Mirror* reported that airships had raided the metropolitan district, but did not give any more detailed descriptions as to the areas bombed. The paper also reported on the casualties from a raid on 7

¹⁶³ *Hull Daily Mail*, 9 June, 1915, p.5.

¹⁶⁴ *Hull Daily Mail*, 10 June, 1915, p.2.
Hull Daily Mail, 11 June, 1915, p.4.
Hull Daily Mail, 18 June, 1915, p.2.

¹⁶⁵ *The Times*, 17 June 1915, p.8.

¹⁶⁶ Morris 1993, p.38.

¹⁶⁷ *Newcastle Journal*, 17 June, 1915, p.5.

September, emphasising the deaths of women and children, before quoting from Arthur Balfour¹⁶⁸ who had previously described the Zeppelin raids as being brutal but ineffective. The paper noted that although both local anti-aircraft guns and aeroplanes had been active the Zeppelins had not been sighted by them.¹⁶⁹

The defence of the capital city against aerial attack was a matter of the gravest concern. The ability of the Zeppelins to breach London's defences and escape unharmed caused a great deal of worry to the military authorities and government. On 14 September, in a House of Commons debate on London's anti-aircraft defences, McNamara¹⁷⁰ announced the appointment of Admiral Sir Percy Scott¹⁷¹ to command London's gunnery defences.



Figure 10: Admiral Sir Percy Scott.

The New York Times Current History: The European War (April–June 1915). Volume 3. p. 160

¹⁶⁸ Mackay 2004.

¹⁶⁹ *Daily Mirror*, 9 Sept, 1915, p.3.

¹⁷⁰ The Parliamentary Secretary to the Admiralty.

¹⁷¹ Lambert 2004..

During this debate the question of which department was responsible for London's defences was raised but left unsettled.¹⁷² Scott's reputation as a gunnery specialist was widely known and reported in the press¹⁷³ and may indicate that the Navy was still unconvinced about the ability of the aeroplane to destroy German airships.

However, Morris states that one of Scott's first requests was for a "fleet of at least a hundred aeroplanes armed with guns ... and pilots to fly them well trained in night-flying and attack." Although, he also pointed out that Scott had requested that "anti-Zeppelin guns should receive priority over all other orders."¹⁷⁴

The Final Zeppelin raid of 1915 occurred on 13 October, when a squadron of no less than five Zeppelins attempted a co-ordinated raid on London. The raid was reported in the *Daily Mirror* on 14 October and only included a preliminary report from the Admiralty stating that further details would be released when known.¹⁷⁵ While *The Times* carried the same initial reports,¹⁷⁶ articles and editorials over the following week demonstrate a high level of dissatisfaction with the state of Britain's aerial defences. These included an account of a protest organised by the *Globe* on 14 October in which business leaders and other people of influence had called on the

¹⁷² House of Commons Debate, 14 September 1915.

¹⁷³ *The Times*, 14 Sept. 1915, p.8.
Daily Mirror, 14 Sept. 1915, p.3.

¹⁷⁴ Morris 1993, pp.63-64.

¹⁷⁵ *Daily Mirror*, 14 Oct. 1915, p.5.

¹⁷⁶ *The Times*, 14 Oct. 1915, p.8.

government to undertake reprisal raids on Germany as well as calling for the establishment of a properly equipped national air service.¹⁷⁷ The issue of whether aeroplanes were effective in combating Zeppelins was re-visited when on 22 October *The Times* naval correspondent published an article citing several issues which remained to be solved in operating aeroplanes against zeppelins. In particular the dangers involved in landing aircraft at night as well as co-ordinating the activities of the aeroplanes with the anti-aircraft batteries.¹⁷⁸

3.4 Strengthened Defences: From Talk to Action

The first airship raid of 1916 took place on 31 January and involved nine of the German Navy's latest airships. However, due to the large area covered by the Zeppelin attack, British authorities were initially unable to provide much information on the raid.¹⁷⁹ An article published on the same day commented on the renewed airship activity¹⁸⁰ and suggested that the best means of defence against the Zeppelins was to ensure a supply of quick climbing aeroplanes to attack the Zeppelins in the air. The writer stated that he was well aware of the difficulties in using aeroplanes in this role but hoped that the relevant authorities would be able to

¹⁷⁷ *The Times*, 15 Oct. 1915, p.5.

¹⁷⁸ *The Times*, 22 Oct. 1915, p.6.

¹⁷⁹ *The Times*, 1 Feb. 1916, p.8.

¹⁸⁰ Clearly written prior to the raid on Britain, the article was inspired by the first Zeppelin raid on Paris in ten months, which took place on 29 January 1916 and had illustrated that given the right conditions it was possible for Zeppelins to make a successful attack no matter how well prepared the defences.

provide solutions to the problems.¹⁸¹This raid demonstrated importance of censorship in denying Germany accurate information on the effect of the raids and the precise course taken by the Zeppelins which were unable to accurately navigate over Britain due to the lighting regulations and bad weather. The report in *The Times* on 2 February described the damage caused as being militarily insignificant but stated that casualties had been heavy. *The Times* contrasted this with the German report on the raid which claimed heavy damage to Liverpool and Sheffield.¹⁸² A further article supported the need for censorship in denying information to the Germans but nevertheless also suggested that the lack of information for the British public would lead to rumours and wild speculation which could itself be significantly damaging to public morale.¹⁸³

This issue and other related questions were addressed in the House of Commons on 16 February in a debate on the future of the air services. Joynson-Hicks, a strong proponent for the creation of a unified air force independent of the army or navy, cast himself in the role of a prophet who had delivered stark warnings prior to the war only to have seen them come true. He accused the government of having been complacent, stating that, due to the role of the press the “whole of England” was more aware of the possibilities of aviation than the government. After discussing the state of Britain’s defences and summarising the different methods of aerial defence, Hicks proposed that the aerial forces of the army and navy should be brought under

¹⁸¹ *The Times*, 1 Feb. 1916, p.9.

¹⁸² *The Times*, 2 Feb. 1916, p.8.

¹⁸³ *The Times*, 2 Feb. 1916, p.9.

the command of an “air minister” who would have sole responsibility for the aerial defence of Britain.

The M.P. Cecil Harmsworth, Lord Northcliffe’s younger brother, suggested that although a state of panic did not yet exist as a result of the air raids, there was a danger of one being created if the public were unable to trust those responsible for the aerial defence of the country. Harmsworth also pointed to the contrasting success of the Ministry of Munitions and stated that a similar department should be established to assume sole command of the air-services. Mr. Lynch, the MP for Galloway supported the amendment and when speaking in reference to Zeppelins, expressed the hope that Britain would not attempt to emulate the German success with these craft but instead should focus on the aeroplane as being more versatile and cost efficient than the giant airships.¹⁸⁴ Although the amendment was eventually withdrawn the debate had aired a large number of issues which had been festering since 1908 and regularly raised, particularly in the Northcliffe controlled press. Like all other Parliamentary debates throughout the War this was reported in the national papers as the Hansard records were not censored.¹⁸⁵

As had been stated by Harold Tennant in Parliament on 16 February,¹⁸⁶ it was not yet possible to provide complete protection over Britain without denuding the Western Front of men and machines. While London and a few select areas were well

¹⁸⁴ House of Commons Debate, 16 February 1916.

¹⁸⁵ Rose 1995, pp.26-28

¹⁸⁶ The Under-Secretary of State for War.

defended, much of the country, particularly the North, lay open to attack. On 5/6 March the Zeppelins made a return visit to Hull, causing severe damage and a large number of casualties. On 7 March the *Hull Daily Mail* published an in-depth report on the raid stating that the report had been sent to the Press Bureau early the previous day but that the paper had not received permission to publish in time to make use of it.

In keeping with previous reports, despite the German commanders having correctly identified Hull, the newspaper report did not confirm the location raided although it did include descriptions of the damage along with eye-witness accounts of the raid.¹⁸⁷ *The Times* also published an account of the raid, commenting on the “devious nature” of the Zeppelins flight and suggesting that the Zeppelins had been uncertain as to their location. This report also provided some descriptions of the damage and casualties before stressing that no military damage was done and the no soldiers had been killed in the attack.¹⁸⁸ The raid was discussed in Parliament on 7 March by Mr. Ferens, the MP for Hull who questioned what steps were being taken to protect against future raids. The government declined to respond as it would not have been “desirable to discuss defensive measures.”¹⁸⁹ Further reports in the *Hull Daily Mail* illustrated the outrage of the city’s population at the failure of the promised defences while the editor noted that the paper was unable to publish many of the

¹⁸⁷ *Hull Daily Mail*, 7 March. 1916, p.4.

¹⁸⁸ *The Times*, 7 Mar. 1916, p.7+.

¹⁸⁹ House of Commons Debate, 07 March 1916.

letters due to the censorship regulations.¹⁹⁰ This is supported by Thomas Fegan who noted that the raid revealed an anti-aircraft gun, which had been mounted on a factory roof, to be a dummy designed to reassure the local population.¹⁹¹

A further raid on 31 March was remarkable for the destruction of the German Naval Zeppelin L.15 by anti-aircraft fire. The raid was reported in *The Times* on 3 April. The official reports from the Admiralty and the War Office which had been released on 1 April stated that a Zeppelin had been damaged by gunfire and forced down onto the sea of the Thames Estuary; the crew had been taken off and an unsuccessful attempt was made to tow the damaged ship, which broke up and sank.¹⁹² H.B. Latham describes the destruction of the L.15 as being significant as it was the first time an airship was destroyed over the British Isles.¹⁹³

Several further raids occurred during the spring of 1916 with mixed results ending with a failed attempt to attack Scotland; the *Edinburgh Evening News* reported that no casualties had been caused in Scotland and that one of the attacking ships had been wrecked in Norway.¹⁹⁴ On 4 May a Royal Naval operation to draw the German fleet over British minefields resulted in the

¹⁹⁰ *Hull Daily Mail*, 9 March. 1916, p.3.

¹⁹¹ Fegan 2012, p.28.

¹⁹² *The Times*, 3 Apr. 1916, p.9.

¹⁹³ Latham 1950, p.465.

¹⁹⁴ *Edinburgh Evening News*, 4 May. 1916, p.3.

destruction of the German Naval Zeppelin L.7 by British cruisers. This was soon reported in *The Times* which described the achievement as being a “good augury” to the recent zeppelin activity.¹⁹⁵ Possibly the most significant Zeppelin raid of 1916 occurred on 2 September. A total of 16 German airships departed to attack Britain and all but two successfully crossed the British coastline. On 4 September *The Times* reported that the raid was significant for two reasons, firstly the number of airships involved in the attack, which the paper numbered as being thirteen. Secondly, this was the first raid in which a Zeppelin was brought down over British soil and in the full view of “[t]housands of Londoners.”¹⁹⁶ This was the Schütte-Lanz¹⁹⁷ SL.11, which was shot down by Lieutenant Leefe Robinson¹⁹⁸, flying a BE 2C¹⁹⁹ and using incendiary ammunition. Robinson was quickly awarded the V.C.²⁰⁰ which as Michael Paris pointed out demonstrated how unusual this feat was.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁵ *The Times*, 6 May 1916, p.8.

¹⁹⁶ *The Times*, 4 Sept. 1916, p.9.

¹⁹⁷ Wooden framed airship similar to and often referred to under the generic name Zeppelin. A report in *The Times* demonstrates this confusion.

The Times, 4 Sept. 1916, p.9.

¹⁹⁸ Gunby 2004.

¹⁹⁹ The BE.2C. was a two-seater aircraft which was mainly used in reconnaissance roles due to its extreme stability which made it an easy target for German fighter. However, due to this stability it proved to be suitable for use as a night fighter against Zeppelins.

²⁰⁰ *The Times*, 6 Sept. 1916, p.9.
The Times, 6 Sept. 1916, p.9.

²⁰¹ Paris 1992, p.9.



Figure 12: Leefe Robinson, photographed at Suttons farm in 1916.

Photo taken from Oxford Dictionary of National Biography. Attributed to the RAF Museum.



Figure 11: Be2c

Source: Canadian forces, Expired Crown copyright.

The next raid by the Zeppelins took place on 23 September when eleven Zeppelins attempted to reach London, according to Morris the attackers had learnt from the loss of the SL.11 and attempted to approach from a more southerly direction. Only one of the three ships attempting this route succeeded in penetrating London's defences,²⁰² causing severe casualties and damage to residential properties.²⁰³ The other two ships attempting this route the L.32 and L.33²⁰⁴ were both lost, one to anti-aircraft fire which punctured the gas bags forcing the commander to abandon his craft in Little Wigborough just outside Colchester in Essex.²⁰⁵ The L.32, was attacked by Second Lieutenant Sowrey flying a BE 2C, coming to ground just south of Billericay.²⁰⁶ *The Times* reported that both wrecks were visited by "thousands of enthusiasts" eager to see the fallen craft.²⁰⁷ The award of the D.S.O.²⁰⁸ rather than the V.C. appears to indicate that it was now expected that the Zeppelin attackers would be destroyed and that such an event was no longer considered to be worthy of special notice. This

²⁰² Morris 1993, p.137.

²⁰³ *The Times*, 25 Sept. 1916, p.9.

²⁰⁴ The wreck of the L.33 was recovered almost intact and used as the basis for the 33 class rigid airships constructed by the Admiralty towards the end of WW1.

²⁰⁵ *The Times*, 25 Sept. 1916, p.10.
The Times, 25 Sept. 1916, p.10.

²⁰⁶ Morris 1993, p.14.

²⁰⁷ *The Times*, 25 Sept. 1916, p.9+.

²⁰⁸ *The Times*, 5 Oct. 1916, p.7.

is also demonstrated by *The Times* which, on 27 September, was still unable to report on the name of the airman responsible for the destruction of the L.32.²⁰⁹ The loss of these three airships within a matter of weeks was soon followed on 1/2 October when eleven Zeppelins set out to raid Britain. The raid was scattered over a wide area and achieved very little in terms of damage or casualties. Of greater significance was the loss of the L.31 under the command of Heinrich Mathy, who was widely regarded as the most successful of the Zeppelin commanders. The destruction of the Zeppelin was again visible for many miles and the site of the wreck was quickly placed under armed guard as “tens of thousands” of people attempted to visit the site.²¹⁰ By now it appears that the destruction of a Zeppelin had become almost common place as there is no mention of the pilot involved in any report on the event until 15 October when it was announced that he had been awarded the D.S.O.²¹¹

This was again followed on 27/28 November by the destruction of the L.34 by Second Lieutenant Pyott and the L.21 by a combination of Flight Lieutenant Cadbury, Flight Sub-Lieutenant Fane and Flight Sub-Lieutenant Pulling. This was the last airship raid of 1916 and it is evident from the reports in *The Times* that these raids were now considered to be unremarkable. Where it had once made every effort to acknowledge the individual pilots involved in the Zeppelins

²⁰⁹ *The Times*, 27 Sept. 1916, p.8.

²¹⁰ *The Times*, 2 Oct. 1916, p.9.
The Times, 3 Oct. 1916, p.9+.

²¹¹ *The Times*, 14 Oct. 1916, p.6.

destruction it now appeared that the destruction of Zeppelins at the hands of British pilots was to be considered the norm rather than the exception and no longer worthy of special mention.²¹²

3.5 Zeppelins Eclipsed: The Rise of the Aeroplane

The first reported raid of 1917 occurred on 16/17 March when *The Times* reported that hostile airships had raided the south eastern counties and that bombs had been dropped on Kent.²¹³ A further raid on 17 June saw the destruction of the L.48 by a British fighter craft;²¹⁴ the paper included a detailed account of the airships destruction at the guns of the British pilot.²¹⁵ The incident was particularly unusual in that several members of the Zeppelins crew survived to be taken prisoners.²¹⁶

On 19 October a raid occurred which became one of the best known of the entire war; the “silent raid” was the result of the attempt by the Zeppelins to escape Britain’s air defences by flying at extreme heights approaching 20,000 feet. Due to the unpredictable winds at these heights the raiding airships were at the mercy of the weather and had only very limited control over their course.

²¹² *The Times*, 29 Nov. 1916, p.9.
The Times, 29 Nov. 1916, p.9+.

²¹³ *The Times*, 17 Mar. 1917, p.6.

²¹⁴ *The Times*, 18 June 1917, p.9.

²¹⁵ *The Times*, 18 June 1917, p.9+.

²¹⁶ *The Times*, 28 June 1917, p.7.

According to Morris of the eleven Zeppelins which set out that night four were either destroyed or captured, and only one, the L.45, succeeded in bombing London.²¹⁷ *The Times* report on 20 October stated that six or seven Zeppelins had been involved in a raid on eastern and north eastern counties and bombs had been dropped in various places including London.²¹⁸ Further details followed on 21 October describing the raid as a disaster for the Zeppelins.²¹⁹ Another report stated that the destruction or capture of four Zeppelins in a single night “confirms the impression that the Zeppelins are too vulnerable to become a formidable feature of air warfare.” A final report on 23 October quoted experts as agreeing that the raid offered conclusive proof of the failure of the Zeppelin as a bomber.²²⁰

Despite several attempts in 1918 the Zeppelins were unable to successfully penetrate Britain’s defences. The final Zeppelin raid of the war took place on 5 August 1918. Five Zeppelins approached the Norfolk coast only to be intercepted by air units of the RAF. On 7 August *The Times* reported that the Zeppelins had been engaged by British aircraft and one shot down with another damaged. None of the Zeppelins had succeeded in crossing the English coast.²²¹

²¹⁷ Morris 1993, pp.178-188.
Fegan 2012, pp. 64-66.

²¹⁸ *The Times*, 20 Oct. 1917, p.6.

²¹⁹ *The Times*, 22 Oct. 1917, p.8.

²²⁰ *The Times*, 23 Oct. 1917, p.9.

²²¹ *The Times*, 7 Aug. 1918, p.6.

Between January 1915 and August 1918 the Zeppelins had carried out a total of fifty-one raids dropping a total of 500,000 pounds of bombs, causing 556 deaths with a further 1,357 people wounded. The vast majority of these occurred in 1915. By November 1916 Lord Grey had recorded that he believed the Zeppelin to be a complete failure for offensive operations and was no longer anxious about it.²²² By the end of 1916 the cause of Vera Brittain's "creeping dread" had largely been mastered. However, although the threat from the Zeppelins had been largely eliminated it was quickly replaced by a new and more dangerous threat.

3.6 A New Threat: Gotha's and Giants

The Times reported on 28 May 1917 that three days earlier a large squadron of enemy aircraft had attacked the South-East of England, causing 76 deaths and 174 injuries. The report also contained the official German account of the raid which identified Dover and Folkestone as being the targets. The raid was identified as having caused the highest death toll of any air raid in the war. *The Times* commented on the "perfect formation" of the attackers and mentioned that they were not engaged by British aircraft until the return flight.²²³ The report in the *Dover Express* on 1 June highlighted the fact that the raid had caused the greatest loss of life of any air raid thus far. There was also concern that such a large force had been able to attack the town without warning or

²²² Powers 1976, pp.50-51.

²²³ *The Times*, 28 May 1917, p.7+.

effective opposition.²²⁴ A further article in *The Times* stated that there were three main conclusions to be drawn from the attack. The first was that censorship was pointless as “beyond all question they knew precisely where they were going and when they were there.” The second was that “the aeroplane not the Zeppelin [was] the really formidably instrument of invasion. The cumbrous [...] airships cannot stand comparison with these fast flying [aeroplanes].” The final point was “the only means of coping effectively [...] [was] by an aggressive aeroplane policy of our own.”²²⁵ This raid was discussed in Parliament on 5 June during which Noel Pemberton-Billing stated that the chances of successfully defending against a daylight attack by heavier than air machines was small and that it would be even more difficult to defend against a night attack.²²⁶



Figure 13: Gotha V.

source: <http://www.earlyaviator.com/archive1.htm>

²²⁴ *Dover Express*, 1 June. 1917, p.3+.

²²⁵ *The Times*, 28 May 1917, p.7.

²²⁶ House of Commons Debate, 05 June 1917.

The next major attack using aeroplanes occurred on 13 June and was the most devastating of the war in terms of casualties. On 14 June *The Times* reported that an initial count showed a total of 536 casualties. The response to the raid was especially vitriolic due to a bomb hit on an infant school,²²⁷ with renewed calls for reprisal raids on German towns and cities.²²⁸ Morris notes that while the anti-aircraft arrangements were adequate for dealing with Zeppelins they were not suitable for attacking massed formations of heavier than air bombers.

The Gothas' carried out several more daylight raids over the coming months, during which time the British aerial defences were strengthened further eventually forcing the German raiders to switch tactics and attack at night.²²⁹

The first major night time raid took place on 4 September and involved a force of at least twenty-six Gotha bombers. According to *The Times* eight or ten aircraft broke through to attack London, with further formations attacking targets throughout the southeast including a raid on the Naval barracks at Chatham which killed or injured some 193 sailors.²³⁰ Over the next few days it emerged that the damage and casualties in London had been remarkably light and that one of the German bombers had failed to return to its base.²³¹ The raids

²²⁷ *The Times*, 14 June 1917, p.7+.
The Times, 14 June 1917, p.8.

²²⁸ *The Times*, 16 June 1917, p.7.

²²⁹ Morris 1993, p.232.

²³⁰ *The Times*, 5 Sept. 1917, p.7.

²³¹ *The Times*, 7 Sept. 1917, p.3.

continued through September and October causing huge amounts of disruption as Londoners sought shelter on the Underground platforms, but did not cause any appreciable damage or suffer any serious casualties themselves.²³²

In early 1918 the Germans began to deploy the new Giant bombers in increasing numbers. However, the early attacks proved disappointing for the Germans, although Morris did note that the size of the Giant bombers proved disconcerting for the defending pilots and anti-aircraft gunners who were used to ranging on the smaller Gothas.²³³ On 19 May the Germans attempted the largest raid of the war and as it turned out it was also the last raid carried out on Britain before the armistice. Morris notes that a force of approximately forty Gothas and Giants took part in the raid although very few of these managed to reach their target in London.²³⁴ *The Times* report on 21 May records that a considerable force approached London and bombed the city causing a total of 192 casualties. However, the raiders were strongly attacked by fighters and anti-aircraft guns with at least seven of the enemy being destroyed.²³⁵ One interesting feature which appeared in the *Daily Mirror* at this time was the inclusion of a table showing the last six raids on London by Gotha bombers. This table included the number of casualties, the number of bombers involved in the

²³² Morris 1993, pp.240-246.

²³³ Morris 1993, p.251.

²³⁴ Morris 1993, pp.257-258.

²³⁵ *The Times* 21 May 1918, p.6+.

raid and the number of enemy craft which were destroyed. Between 28 January and 19 May 1918 the Gothas had caused 582 casualties for the loss of just five aircraft.²³⁶

By the end of the war German aeroplanes had caused 857 deaths and at least 2,000 further casualties.²³⁷ The combined impact of the Zeppelin and Gotha raids was to have a lasting impact on the British population. The experience of the war appeared to indicate that the advantage lay with the aeroplane as a bomber, and indeed that the aeroplane appeared to be more efficient as a strategic bomber than the airship. This was despite the numerous advantages such as range, carrying capacity and safety which were demonstrated by the Zeppelins as well as by British airships over the course of the war, but which remained largely unknown and unreported.

3.7 The British airship at war: A well-kept secret

As was mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, British airships were amongst the first of Britain's naval units to see any action in the war, with His Majesty's Airship no4 patrolling the Thames Estuary and later in conjunction with HMA no3 patrolling the English Channel to prevent German U-Boats from interfering with the movement of the British Expeditionary Force to the continent.²³⁸ This unglamorous anti-submarine and patrol work made up the bulk

²³⁶ *Daily Mirror*, 21 May. 1918, p.2.

²³⁷ Fegan 2012, p.81

²³⁸ Abbott 1989, pp.19-20.

of British airship operations throughout the war and proved vital in sustaining the flow of supplies into Britain. Abbott noted that “[t]he British airships did not win the war by themselves, but without them the war might never have been won.”²³⁹

On 28 February 1915 the First Sea Lord, Lord Fisher, had issued a specification for a new type of airship to protect convoys and carry out anti-submarine patrols; the design was to be ready without delay.²⁴⁰ A variety of designs were tested and within a month the prototype had been tested and accepted. By the end of the war Britain had one-hundred-and-seven airships in service including six rigid airships.²⁴¹ The British rigid airship programme had been restarted in 1913 in reaction to the success of the latest German Zeppelins. The programme was then abandoned in March 1915 on the orders of Winston Churchill, who believed that the war would be over before the ship could be completed and that it would be a waste of resources needed for other projects. However, the programme was reinstated in May 1915 following Churchill’s resignation in the wake of the Dardanelles fiasco.²⁴² The only news released about this was part of a report on a debate in the House of Commons in which it was revealed that the

²³⁹ Abbott 1989, p.4.

²⁴⁰ Abbott 1989, p.22.

²⁴¹ Abbott 1989, p.114.

²⁴² Swinfield 2012, p.39.

rigid airship under construction at the start of the war had finally been completed and was ready for trials.²⁴³

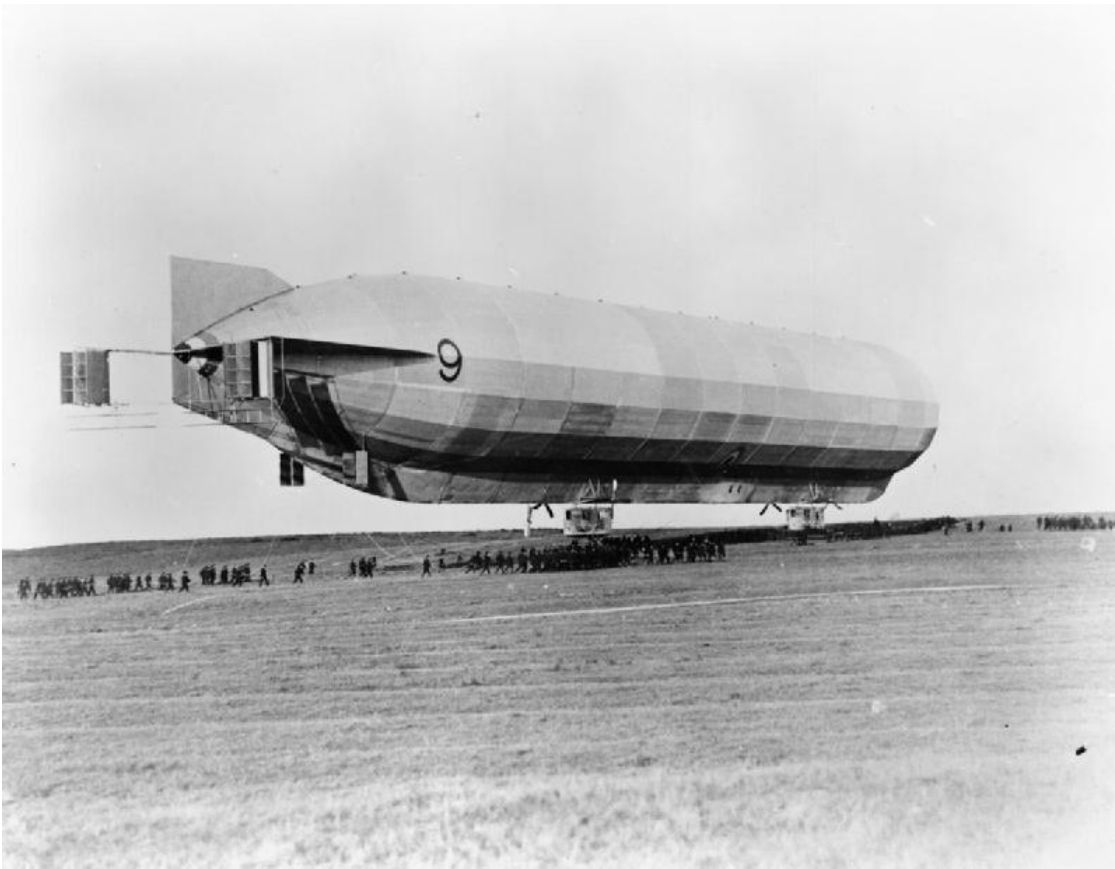


Figure 14: HMA Rigid Airship. No.9

Source: Imperial War Museum RAE-O 948.

Other reports highlight the general lack of information made available to the press about British airship operations. One, which stands out was published in September 1916 when a picture and caption in the *Illustrated London News* portrayed an attack on a German submarine by a British Naval Airship as a means of explaining how the Royal Navy was keeping Britain's supply lines open.²⁴⁴

²⁴³ *Liverpool Echo*, 15 March. 1916, p. 6.

²⁴⁴ *Illustrated London News*, 2 Sept. 1916, pp.274-275.

Reports of British airships occurred infrequently throughout the war. Of the few reports released, one, published in *The Times* on 24 April 1917, stands out due to its description of the loss of a British airship which was “seen to descend in flames in the straits of Dover”.²⁴⁵ This report correlates with the loss of the Coastal Class C.17 on 21 April 1917 which was reported to have been shot down by a German seaplane. This was apparently one of only two British airships lost to enemy aircraft during the entire war.²⁴⁶ Another notable account of a British airship occurred in *The Times* on 7 December 1917 which published an account of the flight of a “British “Zeppelin”” over London the previous day. The writer commented on the smoothness of the airships flight as well as its speed and response to the controls.²⁴⁷

As has been previously noted the work carried out by British airships remained largely secret until the end of the war. By this point the airship service had been absorbed into the newly formed RAF, although the vessels themselves had remained under naval command. Abbott noted that this transfer of command had little immediate effect on the men flying the airships, with the only outward sign being the change in uniform.²⁴⁸ Due to the unpublicised nature of their work the British airships had neither the glamour nor the dread of their German counterparts, despite many unique and often astounding accomplishments in

²⁴⁵ *The Times*, 24 Apr. 1917, p.6.

²⁴⁶ Abbott 1989, p.60.

²⁴⁷ *The Times*, 7 Dec. 1917, p.9.

²⁴⁸ Abbott, 1989, p.116.

craft which compared to the German Zeppelins could be considered primitive. It was not until the war had ended that books and articles began to be published outlining the remarkable feats carried out by British airships and their crews in the course of their duties. As John Swinfield notes by the end of the war the airship had been defined “as a tool of the military, its capability judged as an instrument of war.”²⁴⁹

3.8 Conclusion

I have shown that the way in which the press reported on the Zeppelin and Gotha raids potentially influenced opinion against the airship in two ways; firstly, by portraying the Zeppelins as “Murderers and Baby Killers”, emphasising the attacks on defenceless towns and cities as being uncivilised and outside the “rules of war”. Secondly, by highlighting their destruction at the hands of British fighter planes the papers demonstrated the superiority of the aeroplane over the airship. Whether this was done intentionally or not is a matter for further research. It is also possible that the government used the controversy surrounding Britain’s defence against Zeppelin attacks to divert attention from other theatres of the War such as the Gallipoli campaign in 1915. The destruction of Zeppelins during 1916 could also have provided a welcome distraction from the disasters on the Western Front. John Terraine noted that

²⁴⁹ Swinfield 2012, p.45.

the Gotha attacks in 1917 became the main preoccupation of the press, diverting attention from the threat posed to Britain's lifeline by the German U-Boats.²⁵⁰

I have demonstrated that although Zeppelins had some early success as strategic bombers and were able to overpower the unprepared defences of Britain, they proved unable to survive against strong co-ordinated defences. The Gotha bombers demonstrated a superior ability to survive and in a few raids caused more widespread damage and casualties than the combined Zeppelin raids, demonstrating the superiority of the aeroplane in this role. This was picked up in press reports, however, it is unclear to what extent these reports impacted on public opinions on aircraft.

The Airships of the Royal Navy proved to have a higher rate of survivability than their German counterparts, according to Abbott this was because they were used more sensibly "being concentrated on the role at which they excelled [rather than] wasted on suicidal bombing missions over land."²⁵¹ However, as this role went largely unreported and unrecognised this could have little influence on the future of the airship in Britain and as will be discussed in the following chapter was an inconvenient fact which the RAF was only too keen to ignore.

²⁵⁰ Terraine 1989, p.48.

²⁵¹ Abbott 1989, p.118.

Chapter 4

Deflated Hopes: The Post War Deconstruction of the Airship in Britain

“It is a very curious thing that the Admiralty, through the most amazing obstinacy, has gone on, right through this War, building an airship which clearly was of no use during the War, but now turns out to have a certain use from the commercial point of view.”

Lieut.-Colonel MOORE-BRABAZON House of Commons 24 July 1919²⁵²

I do not want Lord Northcliffe to run the country.

Sir F. Hall House of Commons 9 December 1920²⁵³

²⁵² House of Commons Debate, 24 July 1919.

²⁵³ House of Commons Debate, 09 December 1920.

4.1 Introduction

The immediate post war period saw a sharp decrease in the number of airships operating with the British Fleet. On 11 November 1918, there were one hundred and seven airships in service; by October 1919 that number was reduced to only a handful. Despite the rapid rundown of the service, the period between November 1919 and August 1922 witnessed some of the most impressive aerial feats carried out by British airships' including long distance flights by the North Sea Class NS.11 and the Rigid R.34. The same period also witnessed some of the greatest disasters to overtake the British airship programme, with the loss of the NS.11 in a lightning storm over the North Sea and the dramatic destruction of the rigid airship R.38 over Hull in 1921. However, I believe that these incidents are insufficient to account for the displacement of the airship by the aeroplane in the years following the First World War.

In this chapter I demonstrate that the primary group responsible for halting the development of the airship in Britain was the Royal Air Force. Powers (1976), suggests that the Gotha raids of 1917 were a key catalyst for the creation of the RAF. By the end of the First World War senior officers in the RAF as well as prominent politicians, such as Lloyd George, had come to believe that strategic bombing offered a means of warfare which would avoid the costly land battles of the Great War.²⁵⁴ As was concluded in the previous chapter, German forces had found the Zeppelin to be unsuitable for use as a strategic bomber when compared to fixed

²⁵⁴ Powers 1976, pp. 75-106.

wing aircraft such as the Gotha, an assessment which many British air force officers and politicians agreed with. In July 1919, Captain William Benn, the MP for Leith, spoke in the House of Commons stating that “as a fighting weapon the Zeppelin is a failure.”²⁵⁵ In contrast, British naval airships had been successful in carrying out anti-submarine patrols suffering minimal casualties. However, as was indicated in the previous chapter, this went largely unreported in the press at the time. In attempting to secure its new dominant position the Royal Air Force was willing to sacrifice the airship, which being viewed as a primarily naval or civilian craft, threatened to divert Air Ministry funds from areas deemed to be more vital to the ‘mission’ of the RAF such as the development long distance heavy bombers.

I examine the way in which the Northcliffe press epitomized in *The Times* reported on four key events relating to British airships during this period: Firstly, the Long distance flight of the ‘North Sea’ class airship NS.11 in February 1919, followed, secondly, by the loss of that ship in July the same year. Thirdly, I examine the record-breaking flight of the R.34 to America and back comparing the coverage to that received by Alcock and Brown’s transatlantic crossing the previous month. Finally I examine the loss of the R.38 over Hull in 1921 and the impact this had on public and military audiences mediated by the press as well as through direct personal experience. In addition to this I examine the role and fate of the airship in the struggle between the Military and Civil branches of aviation in Britain. Due to its expense and potential as an aerial liner the airship had become symbolic of civil

²⁵⁵ House of Commons Debate, 24 July 1919.

aviation in Britain. Advocates of civil aviation, such as Lord Northcliffe, feared that attempts by the Air Ministry to abandon development of airships would spill over into other areas of civil aviation with disastrous consequences for British Aviation. In an attempt to combat this, Lord Northcliffe used his newspapers to argue the case for the ongoing development of the airship in post war Britain. I begin with an examination of the non-rigid airship NS.11, one of the first airships to be discussed in the press following the end of wartime censorship.

4.2 Record Breaker: NS.11



Figure 15: NS11 at Cranwell.

Source: www.ns11.org.

The North Sea class airship was developed out of a 1916 Admiralty requirement for a non-rigid airship, capable of operating with the Fleet as a stopgap until the next generation of large rigid airships came into commission beginning in 1918.²⁵⁶ The

²⁵⁶ Ultimately none of the 33 class rigid airships came into commission before the end of the war; this was partly due to changes in design to take advantage of new information following the capture of the German L.49 in France.

ships were required to be capable of carrying out extended patrols of at least twenty-four hours. The North Sea Class was the first British designed non-rigid airship to feature a fully enclosed control car allowing the crew of ten to operate in shifts, even providing facilities to cook hot meals. In terms of speed, endurance and lifting power, the performance of the North Sea class airships was comparable to the wartime rigid airships built by the Royal Navy. However, they were also quicker, easier and cheaper to build.²⁵⁷

In 1919 one particular airship of this class came to the attention of the press. The NS.11 was involved in multiple record-breaking flights beginning with a sixty-one hour patrol carried out on 17-19 November 1918. This was followed on 9 February 1919 by a 101-hour flight covering a distance of over 1400 miles. There is no record of whether these flights were deliberate attempts to set new world records. This second flight was discussed during a House of Commons debate, by Major-General Seely, in order to demonstrate the advances made in aviation and the Air Ministry's commitment to promoting air travel by any means.²⁵⁸ The story was reported in the *Aberdeen Journal* on 22 February, which referred to Seely's speech connecting it with the flight of an airship from Longside,²⁵⁹ which had passed over Aberdeen the previous week.²⁶⁰ However, despite the record breaking nature of the flight, it was

²⁵⁷ Abbott 1989, pp.71-77.

²⁵⁸ House of Commons Debate, 21 February 1919.

²⁵⁹ A village in Aberdeenshire home of RNAS Longside the Northernmost Airship base in Great Britain.

²⁶⁰ *Aberdeen Journal*, 22 February. 1919, p.2.

not mentioned in the Northcliffe owned *Times*. Between 16 and 18 March 1919 the ship undertook a further long distance flight, remaining airborne for forty hours during which time it covered a distance of 1,285 air miles and made a circuit of the North Sea.²⁶¹ This was reported in local and regional Newspapers such as the *Aberdeen Journal*.²⁶² *The Times* also carried the story although there was a greater focus on the weather problems experienced during the flight. Pointing to the ease with which these problems had been overcome and describing the flight as “among the most notable flights that have ever been undertaken ... [and] the longest non-stop oversea voyage of any British aircraft”.²⁶³ However, this record was soon to be challenged.

4.3 Race to Cross the Atlantic: Aeroplane vs. Airship / Britain vs. United States

The race to complete a nonstop transatlantic flight had begun prior to the First World War in 1913 when Lord Northcliffe had offered a £10,000 prize for the first crossing of the Atlantic in seventy-two consecutive hours. The competition had been suspended for the duration of the First World War but was reinstated in November 1918. Entrants from the United States and Great Britain made attempts for the prize, which was only open to aeroplanes.²⁶⁴

Alcock and Brown: Non-stop across the Atlantic.

²⁶¹ NS11.org.

²⁶² *Aberdeen Journal*, 22 March. 1919, p.6.

²⁶³ *The Times*, 22 Mar. 1919, p.7.

²⁶⁴ *Flight Magazine* 21 November 1918

The Air Force had been beaten to the first non-stop crossing of the Atlantic by Alcock²⁶⁵ and Brown,²⁶⁶ who had landed in Ireland on 15 June 1919 after a flight, from the United States, lasting fifteen hours and fifty-seven minutes in a modified²⁶⁷ version of the Vickers Vimy bomber.²⁶⁸



Figure 16: Vickers Vimy Bomber, 1918.

Source: Royal Air force Museum. Crown Copyright Expired.

In *The Water Jump: The story of Transatlantic Flight*, David Beaty comments that the British Government played little role in the attempt to cross the Atlantic, the effort being left to “British individuals and aircraft manufacturers,”²⁶⁹ This was

²⁶⁵ Cooksley 2004.

²⁶⁶ Shepherd 2004.

²⁶⁷ The plane was fitted with more powerful Rolls Royce Engines and extra fuel tanks in order to give it the range needed to cross the Atlantic.

²⁶⁸ Beaty 1976, pp.25-31.

²⁶⁹ Beaty 1976, p.11.

demonstrated during a Parliamentary discussion in May 1919 when the possibility was raised of using British Naval vessels to rescue any fliers forced down in the Atlantic. The proposal was mooted as it would require more personnel to remain on active duty and conflicted with demands for demobilisation.²⁷⁰ The flight had been in the papers from early May 1919 when on 6 May *The Times* published an account of a new entrant for the *Daily Mail* Prize sponsored by Vickers and Rolls Royce giving a description of the plane and a brief description of Alcock and Brown's backgrounds and military service.²⁷¹ This interest was also evident in other newspapers such as the *Evening Telegraph*, which, on 9 May published a picture of the two men.²⁷²

The details of the flight were reported in *The Times* on 16 June In an article, which labelled Alcock and Brown as heroes. It reported that the aviators had won the £10,000 prize²⁷³ from the *Daily Mail* and had received letters of welcome from the King and from Lord Northcliffe, congratulating them on the achievement and speculating on what it would mean for future relations between Britain and America. During the interview with the correspondent Alcock made the suggestion that while his flight demonstrated that flying across the Atlantic was practical it should be done using a flying-boat rather than a sea-plane or aeroplane making no mention of the

²⁷⁰ House of Commons Debate, 28 May 1919.

²⁷¹ *The Times*, 6 May 1919, p.14.

²⁷² *Evening Telegraph* 9 May. 1919, p.11.

²⁷³ The prize was created in 1913 by Lord Northcliffe, the owner of the *Daily Mail* and *The Times*. It was one of many such prizes created in order to promote aviation within Britain.

possibility of using airships in this role.²⁷⁴ This was tempered by a further article in the same issue which pointed to the upcoming voyage of the R.34, suggesting that it “may reveal undisclosed qualities” in lighter than air craft.²⁷⁵ The scale of celebration surrounding Alcock and Brown's achievement, including the Knighthoods received by both men²⁷⁶ was reported in *The Times* over the next few days²⁷⁷ and as will be seen stands in stark contrast to the welcome received by the crew of the rigid airship R.34 on their return to Britain.

There and back again: A Much Reported Journey

The R.34 was one of the 33 class rigid airships, which were based on the design of the German naval Zeppelin L.33, which as mentioned in the previous chapter, had been shot down outside Colchester in September 1916. Work was begun on the R.34 on 17 December 1917, with the ship being completed just over a year later on 20 December 1918: too late to play a role in the Great War. After completing trials the Air Ministry decided that the ship would be used in an attempt to cross the Atlantic in both directions. This would demonstrate that they were just as capable of operating airships over the sea as the Royal Navy, thus defeating one of the arguments for returning control of all airships to the Royal Navy.

²⁷⁴ *The Times*, 16 June 1919, p.13+.

²⁷⁵ *The Times*, 16 June 1919, p.13.

²⁷⁶ *The Times*, 21 June 1919, p.7.
The Times, 23 June 1919, p.14.

²⁷⁷ *The Times*, 18 June 1919, p.13+.

As has been mentioned the R.34's impending flight to America and back was overshadowed by Alcock and Brown's arrival in Ireland. Prior to departure the R.34's flight did receive several mentions in *The Times* including a report of a trial flight along the coast of Germany and Scandinavia which lasted for sixty hours and according to *The Times* covered a distance of between two-thousand and two-thousand-five-hundred miles, which the writer suggested boded well for the Atlantic flight.²⁷⁸ On 1 July 1919 *The Times* carried a detailed full-page report on the upcoming voyage of the R.34. This report gave details of the proposed course before going on to give a detailed description of the ship and its equipment. It also included a section on the day-to-day operation of the airship, likening it to an ocean going vessel in the way the crew was organised. This section also mentioned the possibility of the passenger carrying airships in the future.²⁷⁹ On 2 July *The Times* published two further articles, the first wishing the crew good luck on the voyage²⁸⁰ and the second reporting on the departure of the airship from East Fortune Airship Base, giving an account of the preparations made on the previous day. This latter report also named and described the senior officers on board, giving a brief account of their careers and experience.²⁸¹ *The Times* reporting continued on 3 July with copies of Wireless messages received from the airship as well as a more detailed account of the launch. The paper also reported on the American preparations for the R.34's arrival,

²⁷⁸ *The Times*, 21 June 1919, p13.

²⁷⁹ *The Times*, 1 July 1919, p.7.

²⁸⁰ *The Times*, 2 July 1919, p.13.

²⁸¹ *The Times*, 2 July 1919, p.13+.

commenting on the numbers of people expected to turn out to watch the airship landing. However, a further news item on the same page reports on the explosion of an American airship the previous day²⁸² thus highlighting one of the potential dangers of airship travel. However, it is somewhat unclear as to how many readers would continue past the end of the main story.

The reporting continued throughout the voyage, and it is evident that some official effort was being made to downplay the voyage. On 4 July *The Times* noted that “it was originally intended that the public should be able to follow [...] the flight of the R.34 across the Atlantic, [...] a huge chart was to have been erected in Trafalgar square [...] The scheme was not allowed to develop and only those whose business takes them to the Air Ministry can see anything of the sort.”²⁸³ An article on 5 July stated that the current voyage had re-opened the “war-time controversy of the airship vs. the aeroplane.” The writer pointed to the safety of airships compared to aeroplanes when operating in fog stating that the only obstacles to be overcome were related to cost.²⁸⁴ Cost was a key issue for the post war government, which was wary of being seen to spend excessive amounts of money developing military technology and the airship service was uniquely vulnerable due to its uncertain position between the Navy and Air Force as well as the uncertainty surrounding its use for either military or civilian roles.

282 *The Times*, 3 July 1919, p.12+.

283 *The Times*, 4 July 1919, p.14.

284 *The Times*, 5 July 1919, p.13+.



Figure 17: Landing of the R-34 at Mineola, Long Island, N.Y. 1919.

Source: Library of Congress.

The R.34 landed in the United States on 6 July 1919, this was reported in *The Times* the following day. The article describes the airships reception by a “crowd of thousands,” giving account of the voyage taken from the airships logbook.²⁸⁵ On the same day an editorial criticised the balance of spending between military and civil aviation, implying that it limited the development of civilian aircraft to those that the military had use for.²⁸⁶ This attitude is unsurprising as during the War Lord Northcliffe had been appointed to a committee charged with developing civil

²⁸⁵ *The Times*, 7 July 1919, p.12+.

²⁸⁶ *The Times*, 7 July 1919, p.13.

aviation after the war.²⁸⁷ There is also some evidence to suggest that Northcliffe had a significant editorial role in all of his papers. In *The real Lord Northcliffe*, Louise Owen, his private secretary, wrote that, Northcliffe held an editorial meeting every afternoon and would often alter decisions already made by his editors.²⁸⁸ More recently Thompson notes that although Northcliffe had allowed *The Times* to pursue a semi-independent course for much of the War, this did not continue beyond July 1918,²⁸⁹ indicating a desire to more directly influence the contents of the paper on key issues such as aviation.

Reports in *The Times* over the next few days dwelt on the reception of the airship and its crew by the Americans as well as on what the success of the complete voyage would mean for the future of air travel between the two countries and other distant parts of the world.²⁹⁰ General Maitland gave an interview in which he confidently predicted that airships would take over the role of ocean liners within a few years.²⁹¹ Problems with the weather and the need to carry out a number of repairs to the ship delayed the return flight, extending the planned refuelling stop of eight hours to three days, finally departing in strong winds just prior to midnight on 10 July.²⁹²

²⁸⁷ Thompson 1999, p.137.

²⁸⁸ Owen 1922, p.11.

²⁸⁹ Thompson 2000, p.316.

²⁹⁰ *The Times*, 8 July 1919, p.13+.

²⁹¹ *The Times*, 9 July 1919, p.12.

²⁹² *The Times*, 10 July 1919, p.12.
The Times, 11 July 1919, p.12+.

The R.34's return flight was covered in much the same manner as the flight out with *The Times* reporting on the progress of the voyage, quoting from the wireless transmissions received from the ship. The report also included a further account of General Maitland's vision of airship travel in the future, describing the possibility of a ship five times larger than the R.34 and expressing the hope that within five years he would be able to pilot such a craft across the Atlantic.

However, it is significant that this report also included a section on the flight of two flying boats between Felixstowe and Dundee, which had taken six hours, the plan of the voyage being to fly to Sweden and Denmark, mapping out a route for a commercial flying boat service.²⁹³ This final section indicates that whatever the promise of lighter-than-air craft, commercial aviation had a more immediate future in the utilization of the aeroplane and flying boat.

After the attention granted to the voyage itself, the airships return to Britain was muted, standing in stark contrast to the reception of its arrival in America. A report in *The Times* on 14 July stated that the ship had successfully landed at Pulham airship base in Norfolk after a seventy-five hour flight. No report was made of the greeting received by the ship and its crew, although *The Times* did suggest that there was no greater example of the pioneering work carried out by British airmen without "adequate encouragement from the state."²⁹⁴ This was followed by an article on 15 July, which after reporting that the airship despite some damage was still capable of

²⁹³ *The Times*, 12 July 1919, p.13+.

²⁹⁴ *The Times*, 14 July 1919, p.13.

flight, went on to describe the visit of the airships crew to London, stating that “the general public at [Liverpool street] station seemed to be unaware of the identity of the visitors, and there was no demonstration.”²⁹⁵ In *R.34 Twice Across the Atlantic*, Ian Bunyan states that no reason was ever given for the change in destination from East Fortune to Pulham, he further points to the small crowd and Royal Air Force band which had gathered to welcome the ship and crew at the suddenly re-designated landing sight.²⁹⁶ In comparison to Alcock and Brown, the officers and crew of the R.34 went unrewarded; on 25 August 1919 *The Times* reported that Major Scott had been awarded the CBE²⁹⁷ while four other crew members were awarded the Air Force Cross²⁹⁸. Beaty notes that on receiving the crew, King George V appeared to me more interested in the pigeons carried on-board the airship than in the voyage itself.²⁹⁹ This lack of interest was also evident in Parliament. Between 17 July and 22 December 1919 the R.34 was only mentioned sixteen times, often not in relation to the flight but instead as part of debates on the financial costs of aviation. One of the results of this was the by 27 October 1919 it had been decided to sell the as yet uncompleted R.38 to the United States Navy.³⁰⁰

²⁹⁵ *The Times*, 15 July 1919, p.12.

²⁹⁶ Bunyan 1989, p.16.

²⁹⁷ Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire.

²⁹⁸ *The Times*, 25 Aug. 1919, p.16.

²⁹⁹ Beaty 1976, p.33.

³⁰⁰ House of Commons Debate, 27 October 1919.

4.4 A Commercial Future

The R.38 airship was based on the design of the late war German height climbers such as the L.48, which had been brought down in Suffolk in June 1917. The L.48 was an example of a height climber; these Zeppelins had been designed to fly above the altitude of the British aerial defences; as such the ship was designed with a lightweight hull in order to achieve the desired altitude. The consequences of this design choice were not obvious to the British design team, which, according to Swinfield, had copied the designs without fully understanding them with, as was demonstrated by the R.38, tragic consequences.³⁰¹

The rundown of the British Airship Service had begun on the declaration of the Armistice in 1918. By 2 September 1919 *The Times* reported on the Government decision to halt airship construction and the potential sale of airships and facilities for commercial development. It quoted from an unidentified source who, believed that the "Government's decision to discontinue the building of airships, far from being a step in the direction of economy, will deal the country its death blow so far as aviation is concerned." In fact this would allow countries such as America, France and Germany, to take the lead in the air. The paper also quoted a Mr. Golightly, the superintendent in charge of the R.39 who warned that in opposing lighter-than-air development, the supporters of heavier-than-air craft would ultimately be hurting themselves.³⁰² A further article on 4 September suggested that the firms producing

³⁰¹ Swinfield 2012, pp. 80-85.

³⁰² *The Times*, 2 Sept. 1919, p11+.

airships had been shocked by the Government's decision to halt development. An unidentified official at the Armstrong works near Selby suggested that some firms would attempt to construct airships for commercial purposes on their own but that there was some doubt as to whether it would be possible for firms to continue without the Government subsidies.³⁰³ During this period Parliamentary debates only refer to airships or the airship service in reference to its position between the Navy and Air Force, with only the occasional mention being made of the promise of the airship for civilian use and even when the topic was considered economics played a dominant role in the debate. One debate which stands out occurred on 26 November 1919 when Lieutenant Commander Kenworthy asked Winston Churchill about the numbers of rigid airships in commission or under construction and the estimated costs of the Airship service over the next year. Churchill noted that it was not possible to show separate estimates for any part of the Air Force.³⁰⁴

The R.33

In an apparent effort to convince commercial enterprise to take over airship development the Air Ministry sent the R.33, sister ship to the R.34, fitted out as an aerial liner and carrying ten passengers on a thirty-six hour trip Belgium and France. The flight carried a well-known professional chef and waiter³⁰⁵ in an attempt to demonstrate the possibilities of luxury airship travel. The flight also boasted the first

³⁰³ *The Times*, 4 Sept. 1919, p.10.

³⁰⁴ House of Commons Debate, 26 November 1919.

³⁰⁵ *The Times*, 11 Sept. 1919, p.10.

“aerial edition of *The Times*” which was printed on board the Airship while in flight. *The Times* reported that on their return to Pulham all the passengers were “convinced of the great possibilities ... in the realm of commercial flight by the medium of the dirigible.”³⁰⁶ On 20 Sept an editorial response to a letter in *The Times* which, had questioned the government’s motive in abandoning the airship and pointed to its value as a scout for the fleet as well as the commercial possibilities of the airship,³⁰⁷ suggested that the airship had a clear future as passenger and cargo carriers, and would be invaluable in providing quick communications across the British Empire. The writer also commented that Government assistance would be essential in the development of the airship due to the expense involved.³⁰⁸

Aerial Liners

On 20 July 1920 *The Times* reported on the launch of a brand new airship, constructed by Vickers Ltd. Although smaller than the R.34, the R.80, designed by Barnes Wallis,³⁰⁹ was reported as being technically superior to all previous designs and it was hoped that the ships design would provide the basis for future ships.³¹⁰ While not placed in direct competition with earlier designs, which had been copied from the German Zeppelins, the report does emphasize the improved capabilities of the design particularly in terms of speed and lift. According to John Swinfield the

³⁰⁶ *The Times*, 12 Sept. 1919, p.10.

³⁰⁷ *The Times*, 19 Sept. 1919, p.6.

³⁰⁸ *The Times*, 20 Sept. 1919, p.11.

³⁰⁹ Morpurgo 1972, pp.84-97.

³¹⁰ *The Times*, 20 July 1920, p.12.

R.80 had originally been commissioned by the Royal Navy as a reconnaissance airship but was completed to a commercial design after the Air Ministry pulled out in the summer of 1919. A plan was developed to use the ship on a regular service between London, Paris and Rome, carrying up to thirty passengers and four-hundred pounds of mail. Vickers had estimated that it would cost about £600,000 to set up the service.³¹¹ This airship-focused vision of aerial liners was picked up by the press. On 17 September 1920 an article in *The Times*, discussed the potential of the airship as a means of connecting England with remote locations in the British Empire such as India or Australia. The writer mentioned a talk by Commander Sir Trevor Dawson of the Royal Navy who pointed out that a flight between England and Australia by aeroplane had required twenty-eight stops to refuel compared with the mere two which he calculated would be required by an airship. The report highlighted the Commander's talk, focusing on the estimated costs of establishing such a service and questioning whether it should be owned by private firms or by the State, with Dawson suggesting that the infrastructure should be run by the state while the aircraft themselves and the commercial service should be privately owned.³¹²

A further report on 27 October 1920 emphasised that airships were already capable of carrying out such flights, the article pointed to the flight of a German Zeppelin between Jamboli in Bulgaria and German East Africa and back between 17 and 25

³¹¹ Swinfield 2012, p.66-70.

³¹² *The Times*, 15 Oct. 1920, p.6.

November 1917.³¹³ The airship was the L.59 which was specially lengthened to undertake the journey, although the ship was unable to carry out its primary mission to resupply the German forces in East Africa, the flight was a remarkable undertaking covering a distance of 4,200 miles and remaining airborne for 95 hours.³¹⁴

R34's Final Flight

On 28 January 1921 the R.34, the airship that had made the successful dual crossing of the Atlantic, struck a hill while on a training flight. This caused severe damage to some of the engines and the wireless, with further damage to the control car as well as to some of the girders. Temporarily out of control the ship was blown out to sea before the officer in command managed to get the damaged ship back under control and eventually bring it in to land at Howden airship station. Due to the strong winds the ground crew were unable to return the ship to the shelter of the shed and by the following morning the ship had been damaged beyond economic repair.³¹⁵ The incident was reported in *The Times* on 29/31 January, the first report included speculations as to why the ship had crashed before noting the safe return of the ship to its base. The second report commented on the damage caused by the winds due to the mooring arrangements. Both reports highlight the difficulties of operating airships in high winds and point to the need for a safe form of mooring apparatus at

³¹³ *The Times*, 27 Oct. 1920, p.8.

³¹⁴ Hartcup 1974, pp.108-109.

³¹⁵ Bunyan 1989, pp.18-19.

all airship stations, pointing out that such a mooring apparatus did exist but was not installed for financial reasons.³¹⁶

4.5 Closing the Service: A Necessary measure or False Economy

By February 1921 the Air Ministry had come to the decision to disband the airship service, this decision was discussed in *The Times* on 1 February when it reported that the RAF was no longer going to operate lighter than air craft and that all rigid airships and their equipment were to be transferred to the civil aviation authorities. The report pointed out that only a few airworthy rigid airships remained in the country, the wooden framed R.32 and the R.80, which the paper described as being out of date. The R.33 was mentioned as already being under civil control and a further three ships were under construction, one of which the R.38, had been sold to America. The report goes on to suggest several options for the future of airship operations in Britain, including the transfer of control back to the Royal Navy for use as reconnaissance vessels. Other options included sale to foreign powers or for the ships and bases to be turned over to a civil syndicate to operate a commercial service. The writer again pointed out that the cost of operating airships could prove to be prohibitive without Government assistance.³¹⁷ An Editorial on the following day suggested that the transfer of the airships to civil control could well be the best option describing commercial development of aviation as “the best preparation for

³¹⁶ *The Times*, 29 Jan. 1921, p.10.
The Times, 31 Jan. 1921, p10.

³¹⁷ *The Times*, 1 Feb. 1921, p.11.

the military needs of the future.” The writer outlines the routes on which it is believed that the airship should operate on but again questioned where the money for these operations would come from.³¹⁸

The Government view on the airship was elucidated in March 1921 by Winston Churchill, who stated that, “ I do not say for a moment that [airships] are not good objects in themselves if only we had the money for them, but when it comes to cutting in upon necessities in order to provide what, after all, at their best are conveniences, surely we should be committing a very great folly. Let us see what would happen if such a course were adopted. First of all the present Air Force, moderate in scale, modest in demeanour, modern in outlook, would go to pieces. Its organisation would be completely broken up.”³¹⁹ Churchill also pointed out that the Government was perfectly happy to “give away” the ships and facilities providing a strong business case could be put forwards which would not rely on government support.³²⁰

The R.33 distinguished itself during this period, having been placed at the disposal of the Metropolitan police for traffic control³²¹ during the Derby races.³²² This was

³¹⁸ *The Times*, 2 Feb. 1921, p.11.

³¹⁹ House of Commons Debate, 01 March 1921.

³²⁰ House of Commons Debate, 01 March 1921.

³²¹ The R36 was also used in this role for the Ascot races on 14 June 1921; the ship also carried newspaper representatives and photographers who were able to drop reports and negatives out over Croydon. The writer expressed his pleasure and surprise at the smoothness and comfort of the flight and questioned the lack of response from British firms willing to take over the airships from the Air Ministry. *The Times*, 15 June 1921, p.12.

³²² Robinson 1973,p.166.

reported in *The Times* as having been a complete success with observers on the ship being able to spot traffic problems and redirect the flow of traffic by radiotelephone to officers on the ground.³²³ It is likely that this flight was part of an attempt by the government to attract interest from commercial syndicates to the possibility of taking over the British airships. A report in *The Times* on 31 May indicated that unless an agreement had been reached by August all airships and facilities would be handed over to the Disposal Board as the Air Ministry felt unable to justify continued expenditure.³²⁴

By 4 June 1921 the R.38 had been completed for the United States Navy, *The Times* gave a description of the ship comparing its capabilities to those of the R.34³²⁵ the report commented on the increased range and speed of the airship and gave some indication what this would mean in terms of travel between continents suggesting that journeys from Pulham to Tokyo would be possible. However, it does mention any possible implications for future airship development or operation in Britain. Shortly after this on 7 June *The Times* was able to report on possible plans for an Imperial Air Route between Britain and the Dominions which would have involved the Dominion governments in providing funding for the scheme which would provide

³²³ *The Times*, 2 June 1921, p.12.

³²⁴ *The Times*, 31 May 1921, p.11.

³²⁵ *The Times*, 4 June 1921, p.8.

for faster communications throughout the Empire as well as providing an established scouting force for the Navy in times of war.³²⁶

The R.38's maiden flight took place on Thursday 23 June 1921 and was reported in *The Times* on the 25 June. The report did not contain any new information, although the paper does state that the design was entirely British³²⁷, a claim which airship historians such as John Swinfield have disputed describing the ship as being a bad copy of the German height climbers.³²⁸

4.6 Saving the Service: The Imperial Conference

In July 1921, In light of the completion of the R.38 and the £40,000,000 that had been spent on airship development in Britain *The Times* began a campaign to save British airships from the scrapheap, calling for proper experimentation to assess whether the airship had any value for commercial or military use. The paper pointed out that all the airships currently in existence were based on wartime designs and requirements and that given the chance more powerful and versatile ships could be developed. *The Times* stated that the sum of £250,000 suggested by the department of civil aviation to complete the current trials was not enough but that given £750,000 a complete set of trials could be carried out in order to establish the success or failure of the airship for commercial transport.³²⁹ As an example of the

³²⁶ *The Times*, 7 June 1921, p.10.

³²⁷ *The Times*, 25 June 192, p.12.

³²⁸ Swinfield 2012, p. 79.

³²⁹ It is unclear how the paper came to these figures.

possible progress the paper pointed to the development of the mooring mast which enabled airships to dock and land in winds of up to 40mph which was a he advantage over ships which were reliant on enclosed sheds for protection It also made it considerably cheaper to operate airships as the large expensive sheds would now only be required for construction and maintenance work. However, the paper went on to point out that numerous other issues still needed to be addressed and that to do so would cost money. *The Times* called on the British Government and Dominions to raise the money required claiming that if successful the improved communications links would benefit the entire British Empire. It was also stated that the failure to rescue the airship would amount to wastage of the “most extravagant kind”.³³⁰

Shortly after this the paper reported that the Parliamentary Air committee had met with the Secretary of State for Air in order to urge the preservation of the Airships and bases; while no details could be released the *Times* noted that the committee received a gratifying response reviving hopes that the airship would be saved for Imperial travel. The paper again pointed to the vast distances involved, stating that heavier-than-air-craft were as yet unable to safely and economically cross.³³¹ *The Times* went on to raise the possibility that if Britain does not develop a fleet of airships capable of crossing large oceans then others will, pointing to a possible alliance between Germany and America.³³² Due to the summer recess there are no

³³⁰ *The Times*, 4 July 1921, p.13.
The Times, 4 July 1921, p.13+.
The Times, 9 July 1921, p.11.

³³¹ *The Times*, 14 July 1921, p.11.

³³² *The Times*, 14 July 1921, p.11.

Parliamentary records available during this period making it difficult to ascertain the motives behind this apparent change of tack by the Secretary of State.

On 19/20 July 1921 *The Times* reported on the formation of a special committee to investigate the possibility of using airships to establish a commercial service connecting the Empire, as well as for “service purposes”.³³³ The committee was also to consider whether aeroplanes could also be used in these roles.³³⁴ The earlier of these two reports commented on the role of Winston Churchill in opposing the development of the airship stating that “He has never ... concealed his disbelief in, and dislike for, airships. [...]” The writer went on to note that despite his opposition to the airship Churchill would at least give it a fair trial, noting that “impatient refusal to recognise [the possibilities of the airship] would be the mark of a small man. Mr. Churchill is not that [...] we do not share the fears of those who see in his appointment [...] the doom of the British airship.”³³⁵

A report in *The Times* on 22 July indicated that there was some confusion as to the practical issues associated with the airship. According to *The Times* only two choices existed; either to completely and immediately abandon the airship or to allow time and funding in order to carry out a complete set of tests and trial. The writer noted that the committee had suggested that the trials might be concluded over the course of a “few months” pointing out that various issues such as the lack of overseas

³³³ Naval or Military.

³³⁴ *The Times*, 20 July 1921, p.12+.

³³⁵ *The Times*, 19 July 1921, p.11.

mooring facilities would need to be addressed before any useful trial could be carried out. These preparations would, in themselves, take several months.³³⁶ A further article on 28 July 1921 pointed out that finance had become the “overriding element” in deciding whether or not to support continued development of the airship.³³⁷ On the same day *The Times* published a letter which reiterated the arguments in favour of the airship before concluding that it was vital that the British Empire develop airships or risk disaster due to failure to provide modern equipment.³³⁸

On Monday 1 August *The Times* reported that the committee had recommended further development and that it was likely the decision would be endorsed by the full conference and if this happened it was likely that the British Government would also agree to continue funding. The article goes on to suggest that if it was decided to go ahead with the funding that it would be a worthwhile investment; stating that, within ten years it would be considered inconceivable that there had ever been any reluctance to invest in airship technology.³³⁹ By 3 August 1921 the Dominion Ministers had voted to save the airships while they consulted with their respective Parliaments. *The Times* criticized the extreme secrecy surrounding the deliberations and looked forwards to the reports and documents being released for study. The

³³⁶ *The Times*, 22 July 1921, p.11.

³³⁷ *The Times*, 28 July 1921, p.11.

³³⁸ *The Times*, 28 July 1921, p11.

³³⁹ *The Times*, 1 Aug. 1921, p.9.

article again mentioned that financial constraints lay at the heart of the issue but that the costs would be spread over several years rather than coming as a single lump expenditure.³⁴⁰

4.8 R.38: The Humber Tragedy

With the future of the airship at least temporarily secure *The Times* returned its focus to the R.38, and examined the plans for the ships upcoming voyage to America. On 6 August *The Times* reported that the ship had still not been formally handed over to the American crew and no precise date had yet been set to the ships departure for the United States. It was also mentioned that the ship still needed to complete the last of its acceptance trials.³⁴¹

On 23 August *The Times* reported on the concerns of the Australian Prime Minister, Mr Hughes, who feared that the hostility of the Air Ministry towards the airship might undermine the wishes of the Dominion Prime Ministers before they could secure funding from their own Parliaments. *The Times* went on to suggest that the treatment of the airship by the Air Ministry also raised several questions about the relative importance of commercial and military aviation suggesting that the former had so far suffered in comparison to the latter.³⁴² These fears were confirmed on 27 October 1921 the matter was raised in the House of Lords by Lord Nunburnilolme who raised concerns that Howden airship station was being dismantled. Lord Gorrell

³⁴⁰ *The Times*, 3 Aug. 1921, p.8.

³⁴¹ *The Times*, 6 Aug. 1921, p.8.

³⁴² *The Times*, 23 Aug. 1921, p.9.

replied that as a result of the Imperial Conferences no decision could be made about the airships or stations until the Dominion Prime Ministers had been able to consult with their respective Parliaments.³⁴³

Icarus in the Humber

However, in August 1921, a disaster occurred which put an end to any plans for the further development of the airship and likely influenced the Dominion Parliaments to reject plans for an Imperial Airship route. On 25 August the *Times* reported that the R.38 had exploded and fallen into the river Humber while flying over the city of Hull the previous day. Only five out of the forty-nine people on board survived the explosion. Of the seventeen American airmen on board only one survived. The Air Ministry did not yet know what had caused the incident.³⁴⁴ From interviews with the survivors it emerged that the incident had taken place while the controls were being tested at high speeds, several petrol tanks are known to have exploded and the ship broke into at least two parts.³⁴⁵ *The Times* also mentioned unconfirmed reports that there had been several issues revealed in the ships structure during previous tests; while these defects were supposedly corrected the editors surmised that they may have at least in part reoccurred. The paper called for a full enquiry but also stated that there is risk in all great accomplishments and that from disasters such as this

³⁴³ House of Lords Debate, 27 October.

³⁴⁴ *The Times*, 25 Aug. 1921, p.8.

³⁴⁵ *The Times*, 25 Aug. 1921, p.8.

great lessons could be learned suggesting that to do otherwise would dishonour the men who had died in the ship.³⁴⁶

Photo # NH 1216 Airship R-38 (U.S. Navy ZR-2) on its first trial flight, 23 June 1921

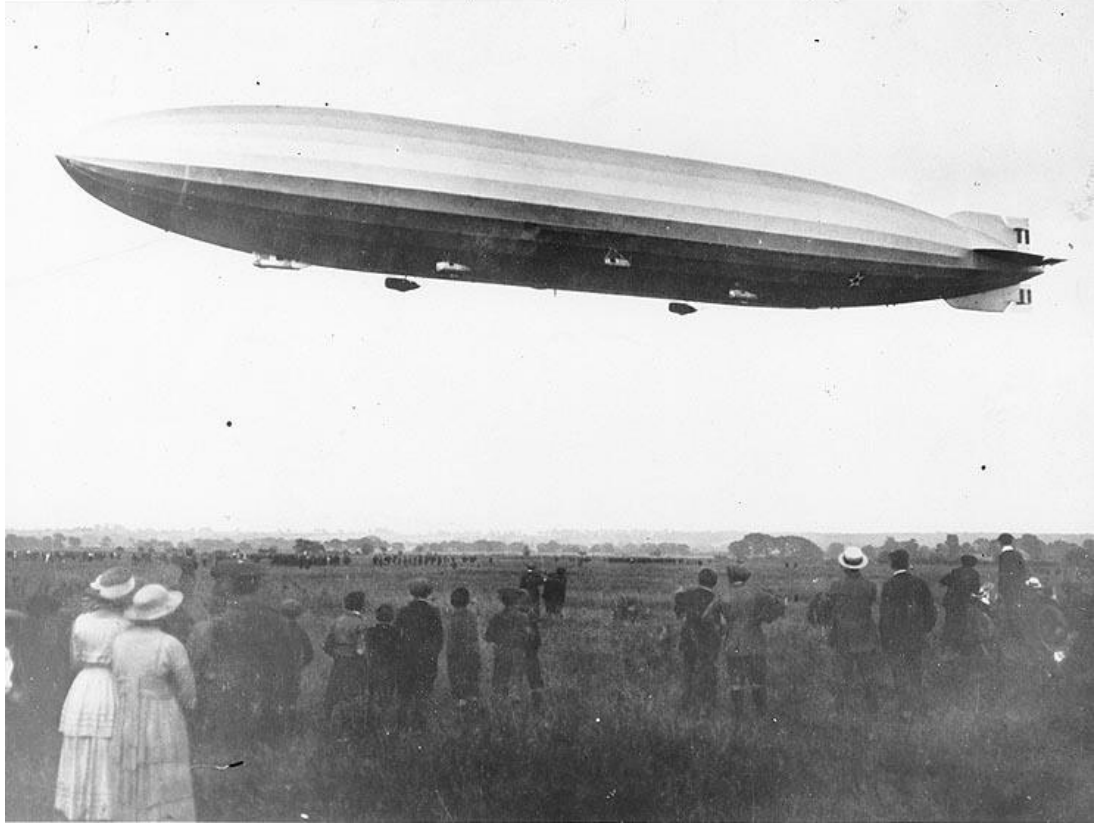


Figure 18: Airship R-38/ZR-2 makes its first trial flight at Cardington.

Source: US Navy Historical Centre.

Inquest and Enquiry

The initial inquest as reported in *The Times* on 4 October 1921 returned a verdict of accidental death due to the breaking of the airship owing to unknown causes. The Coroner had questioned all the survivors excluding the captain, who was still in hospital, as well as several members of the construction team. All concerned stated

³⁴⁶ *The Times*, 25 Aug. 1921, p.9.

that up until the airship broke apart everything had seemed normal and they had been happy with the condition of the ship.³⁴⁷

This was followed on 8 October, by a report of the Air Ministry investigation into the incident. This report in essence shifted any blame for the incident from the Air Ministry to the Admiralty, concluding that the ship had been designed to Admiralty specifications and that much of the work had been completed while the Admiralty was still in control of the Airship Service. It was further concluded that the design had never undergone the level of scrutiny, which a new design of this type required. The report also stated that the system of work at the airship factory was unsound as the same team responsible for construction was also responsible for inspecting the ship.³⁴⁸ The report also noted that the final stages of construction had been rushed but concluded that this had no impact on the quality of the workmanship. The Admiralty responded by announcing that it would conduct its own enquiry into the initial stages of construction up until the transfer to the Air Ministry in October 1919.³⁴⁹ The Admiralty report, released in January 1922, found no issues with the Admiralty designs or procedures pointing out that at the time of construction the only people qualified to comment on the design were already engaged in working on it.³⁵⁰

³⁴⁷ *The Times*, 5 Oct. 1921, p.10.

³⁴⁸ This point is interesting as a similar charge was made by Nevil Shute and Barnes Wallis in relation to the R101 following the crash in France.

³⁴⁹ *The Times*, 8 Oct. 1921, p.8.

³⁵⁰ *The Times*, 11 Jan. 1922, p.7.

The final report by the Aeronautical Research Committee into the R.38 incident was covered by *The Times* on 22 February. The report concluded that the R.38 was lost due to poor design caused by the lack of calculations on the part of the design staff into the aerodynamic stresses on the Hull during high-speed manoeuvres. The report made recommendations for future airship design, including the use of theoretical and physical models.³⁵¹ *The Times* commented that, “in the study of the science of flying too much haste not only means less speed but, as bitter experience has shown, brings disaster in its train.”³⁵²

On 7 March 1922 *The Times* reported on the decision by the Government to cease funding research into airships, all remaining airships and materials were to be turned over to the Disposals Board. The report states that the decision was made due to the unwillingness of the Dominion Parliaments, with the exception of Australia, to fund an Imperial airship Service. No mention is made of the R.38 disaster, although it is likely that the incident will have influenced the decision by both the Dominion and British Parliaments to abandon the airship as a commercial and military vehicle.³⁵³

4.9 Conclusion

Guy Hartcup describes the early 1920's as “The Uncertain Years”, a description which certainly holds true for the period between 1919 and 1922. As I suggest at the beginning of this chapter this period witnessed both the dramatic success and also

³⁵¹ *The Times*, 24 Feb. 1922, p.6.

³⁵² *The Times*, 24 Feb. 1922, p.11.

³⁵³ *The Times*, 7 Mar. 1922, p.12.

failure of the airship in Britain. However, despite the unstinting support of the Northcliffe press for all forms of aviation, the airship was unable to entirely shake off the stigma of the German Zeppelins particularly in the plans of the Air Force. For the post war Government, finance played a huge role, particularly the desire to reduce spending on armaments which affected all three of Britain's military forces, especially the Royal Air Force, which was struggling to justify its existence in the post war world. The limited resources available forced the Air Ministry to make some tough choices and the rigid airship, favoured by the Navy due to its superior range and payload, had already been identified as an expensive technology that was not yet commercially or militarily viable and as such made an easy target despite the striking success of the R.34.

In many ways the high profile nature of the airship worked against it, not least in terms of the accidents to the NS.11 and the R.38, which played out in a very public manner reminiscent of the highly visible destruction of the German Zeppelins during the War. It is probable that this would have served to reinforce the opinion of politicians in favour of heavier-than-air technology.

A further aspect of the R.38 incident was the political embarrassment caused by the loss of the American crew members as well as the loss through "bad design" of a highly complex and expensive airship for which America had already paid a substantial amount, and Britain, having failed to deliver the goods had to pay back. Additionally, the death of General Maitland in the R.38 meant that the British Airship Service lost one of its most ardent and articulate supporters at a crucial time. This

was compounded in August 1922 by the death of Lord Northcliffe depriving British civil aviation of one of its strongest and most powerful supporters.

The R.38 was not the last British venture with airships during this period, although it was to take a great deal of political wrangling amongst politicians and the Service Departments of the Air Ministry and Admiralty to revive airship construction in Britain. A venture which, was destined to be short lived, ending in the burnt wreckage of the R101 on a hillside in Beauvais France on 5 October 1930.³⁵⁴



Figure 19: Wreckage of the R101.

Source: http://www.airshipsonline.com/airships/r101/Crash/R101_Crash.htm

³⁵⁴ Swinfield 2012, pp. 181-202.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

“With the death of Lord Northcliffe [...] Aviation in particular must for many years mourn the loss of this great enthusiast and far seeing genius.”

Editor – Flight Magazine 17 August 1922

5.1 Summary of the Argument

The period between 1909 and 1922 saw dramatic developments in the field of aviation. Historians of the British aviation industry, such as David Edgerton have tended to focus primarily on the aeroplane, as embodied by landplanes such as the Vickers Vimy bomber,³⁵⁵ pointing to the dramatic improvements in performance, such as speed, range, and carrying capability, while largely ignoring the parallel development of the airship during the same period. However, in this study I have shown that, the airship, in particular the rigid airship maintained a significant lead in terms of range and carrying capacity over any other form of aerial transport. Yet, by the end of 1921 development of the airship had largely been abandoned in Britain. My thesis has been devoted to explaining this apparent paradox. This paradox is easier to explain if one looks at the power of the press to mould technological developments linked to the First World War: a point on which mainstream literature on the power of the press e.g. Curran and Seaton, *Power Without Responsibility*, has tended to say little or nothing.

To compensate for that lack of scholarship on that topic, in this dissertation I have demonstrated that the press, led by Lord Northcliffe, had maintained a significant degree of interest in aviation in early 20th Century Britain and had at times attempted to manipulate the discussion in order to steer official policy. As discussed in chapter two, prior to the First World War the Northcliffe led press had consistently called for greater government and military efforts to develop British aviation, often

³⁵⁵ The Vickers Vimy was a First World War heavy bomber of the Royal Air force which also saw use in the 1920's on commercial services as well as being used by Aviators such as Alcock and Brown in their 1919 transatlantic flight.

highlighting foreign developments and the potential threat posed by these to the safety and security of Britain. The phantom airship scares of 1909 and 1913 had raised the profile of the airship in Britain, demonstrating the potential of this type of aircraft in terms of range, as well as the inability of the British Government to prevent foreign aircraft flying over the country. Although no direct contrast was drawn between the success of the German Zeppelins and the failure of British designs such as the Mayfly, the apparent inability of the British military to counter the perceived threat created a culture of fear reported in the British and German press.

As was demonstrated in chapter three, this fear was heightened and exaggerated by the early wartime impact of the German Zeppelins in attacking British towns and cities and the apparent inability of the armed forces to prevent these attacks. The way in which this was reported in the British press, particularly in the Northcliffe owned *Times*, contributed to what Vera Brittain had described as a “creepy dread of Zeppelins”. By mid-1916 the development of improved fixed defences as well as aeroplanes such as the BE 2C capable of intercepting the Zeppelins served to provide a further reason to fear the Zeppelins, as for the first time people witnessed and read about the dramatic fiery destruction of these airships over southern Britain.³⁵⁶ Contrast this with an almost complete blackout on any news relating to the work of the British Naval airships employed on anti-submarine patrols in the North Sea and English Channel. For example, due to censorship, the Northcliffe press could not

³⁵⁶ While other Zeppelins had previously been shot down over France these events were neither witnessed nor reported by British Civilians.

report on the impeccable safety record of British airships. Throughout the war British airships had flown approximately 89,000 hours covering a distance of over 2.25 million miles,³⁵⁷ losing a mere 44 out of a total of 232³⁵⁸ airships, to all causes. However, although this could not be revealed until after the War, *The Times* had however, been able to reveal the existence of a new British “Zeppelin” in 1917,³⁵⁹ possibly in order to demonstrate British progress in this field of aviation to both the British Public and foreign Governments.

The contrast between the Zeppelin and Gotha raids, in terms of numbers of casualties compared to aircraft lost,³⁶⁰ was not explicitly spelled out to the press or general public until 1925. Although tables published in the papers at the time did include casualty figures for raids as well as listing the losses suffered by the attackers. By 1918 the government and in particular the newly formed Royal Air Force, had already concluded that the only way to prevent an aerial attack on Britain was to possess an aeroplane based bomber force equal or superior to that of any other European power. As the Zeppelin was not regarded as being a successful strategic bomber the Royal Air Force did not have a vested interest in continuing

³⁵⁷ Whale n.d, p. 73.

³⁵⁸ Abbott 1989, p.136.

³⁵⁹ See Chapter 3.7.

³⁶⁰ Between 28 January and 19 May 1918 the Gothas had caused 582 casualties for the loss of just five aircraft. In contrast to this, between January 1915 and August 1918 the Zeppelins caused 556 deaths in Britain losing a total of 18 Airships British defences with several others being lost in accidents or in attacks over the Western or Eastern Fronts. (Robinson 1973, pp.330-343) Morris lists a total of 29 German airships lost to all causes during the War. (Morris 1925, pp.273-279).

airship development. By contrast as John Swinfield explains,³⁶¹ the airship was more closely associated with the Royal Navy and its development would have weakened the Air Ministry's claim over naval aviation, potentially threatening the continuing independence of the RAF.³⁶²

As was explained in chapter four, these factors combined with the financial crisis of the early 1920's led the Air Ministry and Royal Air Force to prioritize the aeroplane over all other forms of aviation basing their judgment on military utility rather than on commercial viability. While the Northcliffe led press continued to push for developments in all forms of aviation, the main focus was on the development of civil aviation. Especially links between far flung corners of the British Empire, for which, according to *The Times* and other advocates of the airship such as Charles Dennistoun Burney,³⁶³ the range and comfort of the airship arguably provided the best compromise between the speed of the aeroplane and the comfort and reliability of the ocean liner. This had been demonstrated in the successful flight of the R.34 to America and back in July 1919 as well as by the achievements of other British airships such as the NS.11 and R.36. However, the high levels of publicity devoted to aviation in the press also ensured that accidents such as the loss of the NS.11 in a lightning strike and the collapse of the R.38 over Hull were reported in

³⁶¹ Swinfield 2012.

³⁶² This issue is also explored in Geoffrey Till's, *Air Power and the Royal Navy: 1914-1945* (1979) and while Till focuses on the development of carrier aviation his arguments on inter-service politics during the early 1920's are still relevant to the story of the airship.

³⁶³ A Former Naval Officer and aviation enthusiast, In March 1922 Burney had written to Sir Hugh Trenchard outlining a proposal for a bi-weekly airship service to India. Burney also sent a similar proposal to Amery at the Admiralty. For more information see: Hackmann 2004.

detail to a public which could still remember the violent destruction of German Zeppelins.

5.2 The influence of the Press.

Throughout the period covered in this dissertation I have attempted to map the influence of the press on technological matters. My finding is that this influence varied greatly, depending on such contingencies as the topic being covered and the level of political support from senior politicians and military commanders such as Lloyd George. Prior to the First World War while the Northcliffe press had been an outspoken advocate of aviation, it appeared to have very little influence over government decisions to support the development of either aircraft or aeroplanes. Nevertheless, it is evident that the support of Northcliffe and his press empire was sought and appreciated by the government on certain issues such as aviation. This was demonstrated in 1909 when Haldane secured Lord Northcliffe's support for the proposed Special Committee for Aeronautics.

The importance of political support is evident in the reporting of the Shell Crisis by the *Daily Mail* and *The Times* during 1915. While the initial reaction to this included people burning copies of the *Daily Mail* in the streets, the campaign was successful in improving munitions production and eventually resulted in the fall of the Asquith Government in December 1916.³⁶⁴ This was the highpoint of Northcliffe's influence

³⁶⁴ For a more complete discussion of the Shells Crisis see:

Fraser, P 1983. *The British "shells scandal" of 1915. Canadian Journal of History/Annales Canadiennes d'Histoire*, 18(1), 69.

and it is clear that it was made possible through political connections that were able to protect his Newspapers from the Press Bureau.

In contrast to this the Northcliffe press's influence on aviation during the war, particularly in its effect on the perception of the airship, appears to have been largely indirect or unplanned. Due to the operation of the Press Bureau and the high level of secrecy surrounding the Royal Navy's airship force, the papers were rarely able to provide a positive account of British airship activities during the war. Instead most stories focused on the destruction caused by the German Zeppelins, or the destruction of the Zeppelins by British fighters or artillery.

In the period immediately after the First World War Northcliffe's interest in aviation and his passionate belief in its importance to the British Empire was demonstrated by the immense number of articles published in *The Times* on the potential of the airship for long distance flights, although, It is difficult to assess the impact of this on government decisions. However, a closer study of Lord Northcliffe's biography for this period³⁶⁵ does indicate that he no longer enjoyed the same level of influence with Lloyd George as he had during the First World War. While it is possible that *The Times* influenced the deliberations of the 1921 Imperial Conference in favour of retaining airships to develop some form of Imperial Air Route, the dramatic loss of the R.38 in August 1921 along with the increasing financial pressure on the British government and the armed forces in particular proved to be more significant than Northcliffe's partisan press.

³⁶⁵ Thompson 2000.

5.3 The implications and further research.

As Curran and Seaton have noted, since the late nineteenth century the newspaper press became a powerful tool able to shape public opinion, influence which political party was in power, and on occasion to shape and steer official policy. Lord Northcliffe had realised this and frequently attempted to use his newspapers to influence and shape British society, not least its means of defence and transportation. This is something that has also been recognised by politicians who have attempted to gain the support of the press in order to promote their own ideals and policies. However, my dissertation demonstrates that the specific effects of the press's intervention did not always arise directly from Northcliffe's intentions. Despite his support for the airship as a means of transport, the negative imagery surrounding airships endures to this day, in part due to the close association of Zeppelin with all airships regardless of the type of airship as demonstrated by the *Times* during the First World War.³⁶⁶

This thesis has also highlighted the difficulties in demonstrating the ability of the press to influence government decision making or public opinion. Most politicians are unlikely to publically admit to being influenced by newspaper reports and any correlation between a decision being made and the reports and articles published in any particular newspaper are purely circumstantial. While it may be possible to use personal writings such as journals and memoirs to reveal a politician's motivations and feelings on a particular subject it should be remembered that most politicians

³⁶⁶ See Ch. 3.7.

write journals and memoirs with the eventual aim of publication or at least an awareness of their historical interest. One possible avenue of research would be to examine the writings of family members or personal assistants such as Northcliffe's personal secretary Louise Owen. However, these writings also suffer from a degree of personal bias towards the figure or topic being studied.

Finally there is the difficulty of establishing the level of impact of the press on public opinion. To a certain extent this can be gauged through careful reading of letters to the editor. However, it should be noted that the papers do not publish all the letters received and will tend to publish those which either directly or indirectly support the papers stance on a particular topic. In addition to which, it is currently unclear as to whether unpublished letters are retained and for how long. One final means of analysing public reactions would also be to examine private diaries and journals, although this approach suffers from the difficulties involved in accessing and verifying the authenticity of these documents, many of which may not have been retained by families.

In order to carry this study further a detailed examination of these sources would be required and I am confident that doing so would demonstrate the power of the press to influence both government decisions and public opinion developing technologies such as the choice between aeroplanes and airships. However, this would require a great deal more time than was available for this study.

While it is unclear to what extent Lord Northcliffe succeeded in influencing the fate of the airship in; it is clear that he was highly influential and personally believed in the ability of the press to influence both the government and public opinion.

Throughout his career Northcliffe wrote more words in *The Times* and *Daily Mail* than he spoke in the House of Lords. This preference for operating outside of the government is reflected in the recollections of his personal secretary about his exclusion from the peace conference following the war. "Had [Northcliffe] taken part in the Peace Conference himself, his newspapers would have suffered; he could not have published what he heard, and he could best serve our Empire as an onlooker."³⁶⁷

³⁶⁷ Owen 1922, p.48.

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All newspaper articles in this thesis have been accessed using online databases. In the case of the Daily Mail and the Times this has been the Gale Newsvault, <http://find.galegroup.com/dvnw/>. All other papers have been accessed through the British Newspaper Archives, <http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/>. In order to find the relevant articles I carried out a page by page search of the major papers beginning the date following a known event, such as the first air raid on Britain, until a week after that date. I also used key word searches, searching for “air raid”, “airship”, or “zeppelin”.

Unless otherwise stated the author is anonymous and articles are arranged in date order.

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Appendix A

List of Members of the Aeronautical Sub-Committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence 1909-10

The Right Honourable Lord Rayleigh, O.M., F.R.S. (President)

Dr. R. T. Glazebrook, F.R.S. (Chairman).

Rear-Admiral R. IT. Bacon, C.V.O., R.N.

Mr. Horace Darwin, F.R.S.

Sir G. Greenhill, F.H.S.

Major-General Sir C. F. Hadden, K C.B.

Mr. F. W. Lanchester.

Mr. II. R. A. Mallock, F.R.S.

Mr. Mervyn O'Gorman.

Professor J. E. Petavel, F.R.S.

Dr. W. N. Shaw, F.R.S.

Capt. Murray F. Sueter. R.N.

Secretary, Mr. F. J. Selby,

Bushy House, Teddington, Middlesex.

Taken from the Report Of the ADVISORY COMMITTEE FOR AERONAUTICS FOR THE YEAR
1909-10.

Appendix B

The Defence of the Realm Act (DORA) August 1914 (4 and 5 Geo.V c.29)

As Tania Rose (1995) notes, by 28 February 1917 “there were 400 pages of consolidated regulations.” Which covered most aspects of public activity; however, only a handful of these directly affected the operation of the Press, regulations 18, 27, 27C, 51, 51A, and 56, only two of which apply to this study.

For further information see Tania Rose’s *Aspects of Political Censorship 1914-1918*, pages 107-110.

Regulation 18: Prohibited the collection of any information, military or naval, of possible use to an enemy.

Regulation 27: Prohibited the spreading of false or prejudicial reports intended to cause dissatisfaction, interfere with the prosecution of the war, prejudice the government’s relations with foreign powers or prejudice the recruitment training, discipline or administration of H.M. forces.

