

The Mysterious Airship Affair

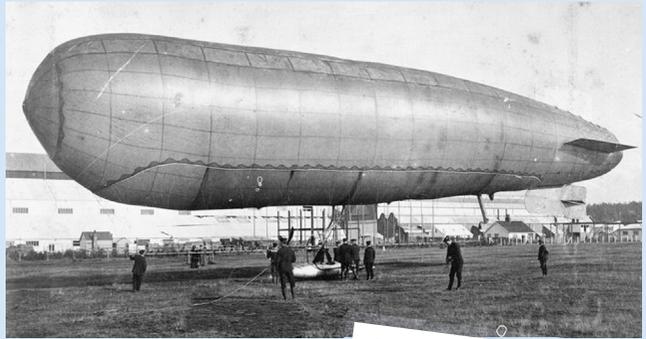
by Paul Minton

The assistant at Newport Library pulled open one of the many drawers bearing the words, 'Western Mail' and I watched as his fingers danced over the collection of boxes crammed inside until he found what he wanted. It was packed so tightly that he struggled to lever it out. However, once retrieved, he led me to Machine No. 2, where he removed a roll of film from the box, loaded it onto a spindle and carefully threaded the end of the tape through to an empty reel on another part of the unit. When he was satisfied all was correct, he turned a dial and suddenly a series of hundred year old pages races across an illuminated screen in a blur of black and white.

If you had seen Machine No. 2, you might well have recognised it as a microfiche, although at the time (and much to my wife's amusement) I thought I was looking at a 'microfish'. No matter what it was called, I was there because of something I'd stumbled across a few days earlier: hidden amongst the footnotes of an obscure book, I'd discovered a vague reference to an incident that occurred above Rogerstone during 1913.

It was in January of that year that Captain Lionel Lindsay, the Chief Constable of Glamorgan, wrote to the local press to report how he had seen a curious airship passing over Cardiff. He said it was bigger than the well-known airships made by local man, Ernest Willows and that it moved more swiftly, leaving a trail of dense smoke in its wake. Captain Lindsay asked for witnesses to come forward in a bid to solve the mystery and in response, a Rogerstone schoolteacher named Sara Hamner contacted the newspaper to recount her own experience.

Miss Hamner described how, at six o'clock in the evening, she and her sister noticed a strange dirigible flying over an area known as Fox Wood. She reported that it was an immense object, which was travelling low enough for the whirr of its machinery to be heard from the ground. She also observed the craft was equipped



with a bright searchlight and that it seemed to wobble as it flew by, which made her wonder if it might be in difficulty. Most surprisingly of all was that Miss Hamner revealed this to be her third such encounter in almost as many weeks.

By now, newspapers were receiving similar stories from across the nation and whilst some spectators may have been fooled by celestial bodies or by 'fire balloons' launched by rural tricksters, there was a growing consensus that one or more foreign airships were responsible for the incursions. This belief was echoed by Winston Church in the House of Commons, although he confessed the Government was unable to confirm the nationality of the craft.

France was named by the media as one possibility but more often than not, the finger of suspicion was pointed towards Germany. Experts suggested there were

many Zeppelins amongst its armada capable of both reaching our shores and making the return journey without having to refuel. Yet it appears equally plausible that what Captain Lindsay and Miss Hamner saw was a modified Willows airship. After all, it was around this period that the Admiralty took possession of an upgraded model with a



A clock dedicated to Airship designer Ernest Willows in Cardiff Bay

redesigned fin and rudder section and a greatly increased volume.

Whatever the explanation, it is a matter of record that within two years, German Zeppelins were indeed crossing the English Channel to conduct raids on British towns and cities. More than 5000 bombs were dropped during the campaign and 557 people lost their lives.