

R38 Airship Crash

On its acceptance trial before going to America to where it had been sold for £2,000,000 and with the American Representatives on board, the R 38 crashed on the 24th August.1921 into the Humber just off Sammy's Point - entrance to the River Hull, where the "Deep" a modern aquarium, now stands - with the loss of 44 lives out of 49 on board, including crew and other officials. One American and four British survived. The R 38 was built at Cardington, Bedfordshire, by Short Brothers, the famous Flying Boat and Seaplane builders (the two Airship Sheds still stand). It had made its first flight on the 23rd June 1921 and on the 17th July it was flown to Howden. On the 23rd of August it was flown out over the North Sea for tests and was returning the next day in the late afternoon over the Humber just offshore at the Hull side, maybe to show the residents the great ship for it was at that time the largest airship ever built, its length was 695 feet, 85.5 feet in diameter, with a speed of 70 mph driven by 6 Sunbeam CossackV12 engines of 350 hp each. As it approached Sammy's Point, officially it made some violent turns for test purposes (though maybe showing off to the Hull residence who were admiring it) which broke it in half at 2500 feet above the river. At approximately 5.30pm, the rear section (in which the survivors were) came down slowly and there was a reported explosion in the front section which set it on fire. It came down faster and fell on some of the crew who were in the water having jumped out first.

As a youth it was still the talk of the older generation and I heard a number of stories from those who saw it happen for it could be seen for many a mile either side of the river. My father, then 15 was with his younger brother stooking wheat in a field near the Humber and was admiring this flying wonder when it broke in half and with the front half on fire fell into the river. My Mother then 13 who lived in Hull was near the Pier with her sister and saw it on fire still in the sky with the occupants jumping out into the river. Possibly the nearest man at this side of the river to see it was Alf Blanshard who lived and worked for his father at Neatgangs Farm in Neatgangs Lane and was working near the river, which was straight across from it, that evening. Ernest (Ginger) Dent whose family lived at the farm at Goxhill Haven acquired a coggy boat, most likely from Arthur Wright next door who owned a sloop, took his younger brothers and friends of the Birkett family who lived on a nearby farm and sculled them across the river to see it at close quarters.

A Goxhill man who saw it from the ferry was George Parker Jnr, who worked in Hull - the ferry had just left Hull Pier on its way to New Holland. Gilbert Tyson of Goxhill whose family had the Hawthorne Gardens

here and a wholesale Fruit & Vegetable business in Humber Street, Hull, told me that at the time he was in Holland and there was a photo in the Dutch Papers of the crash showing people standing on the Hull pier looking at it and there were some of their Humber Street staff in the photograph.

In the following weeks the wreckage was recovered and landed on what was known as the Riverside Quay, 300 yards or so up river from the Hull to New Holland Ferry Pier, where the Dutch produce boats the Bolton Abbey and Melrose Abbey ran daily for many decades bringing the Dutch vegetables for sale at the warehouses in Humber Street, and like the Goxhill-grown tomatoes were sold to retail shops throughout the towns in the North of England.

There is a Memorial Plaque to commemorate the accident in the Western Cemetery on Spring Bank West in Hull; I assume the crew who lost their lives are buried there.

It is always said or written that the R38 was from the airship shed at Howden, East Yorks, in actual fact it was at Spaldington a small village three-and-a-half miles north of Howden. In the late 1980s I was in the Spaldington area looking for a P-38 Lockheed Lightning aircraft crash site of a Goxhill aircraft which had crashed there in 1944 and I found time to stop off at the old airship shed site. Though the shed had been demolished many decades before, the concrete base still remained, and is possibly still there today.

When the R38 was built it was recorded on Cine Camera, and when it set off for its last flight at Howden the crew and passengers - which included some laboratory workers and Americans - can be seen coming out of the airship shed to board it. After the crash the film shows boats rescuing the survivors and bodies, recovering the wreckage from the river, and the funeral in Hull where the victims were buried at a cemetery. This Cine Camera Film was put onto the modern day Video along with many more old films from the 1920/30s of Grimsby, Cleethorpes and Hull. With introduction and narration by Austin Mitchell, it was sold in 1993 as "Bygones 2" and could be purchased from local shops in the following years.

In March 1936, a Zeppelin, the Hindenburg, largest airship ever built - 804 feet long and 135 feet in diameter - made its first flight. It was flying a passenger service to America on the 30th June '36 and on the way there it came up the Humber from Spurn until it reached Goxhill and then turned to take it over Barrow and Leeds to the Irish Sea and onto the USA. It was approximately 12.15pm and I was in the school playground at the time. Because we lived in the Marsh

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