

'Knights of the Air'



ALCOCK & BROWN

Centenary 2019



Foreword

Crayford has a long and interesting history. It is mentioned in the Domesday Book of 1086, has experienced settlements since Roman times or before, and it has been important in our nation's story. Modern Crayford really dates from the 19th century, when the quiet village at the crossing of the River Cray with its Norman church of St. Paulinus, was transformed into an industrial town.

The coming of the railway and the establishment of the Vickers factory necessitated more homes, shops and facilities in the town. Vickers, mainly known for its armaments, was also important in the development of cars and aircraft here in Crayford. It was a pioneering company with a large, local workforce.

Shortly after the First World War ended, a modified version of the Vickers Vimy aircraft (produced and tested locally) was fitted with Rolls Royce engines and shipped to Newfoundland, Canada. From there, pilot Captain John Alcock and navigator Lieutenant Arthur Whitten Brown flew across the Atlantic Ocean and landed in Ireland on 15 June 1919. These heroic aviators were subsequently VIPs when The Princesses Theatre in Crayford was re-opened a month later, and the Chairman of Vickers presented each of them with a gold watch to mark their historic flight. Alcock and Brown, now having been knighted, attributed their successful flight to the reliability of their Vickers-built aircraft.

One hundred years after their historic flight we remember them and the people of Crayford who played such an important part in their story.

Rt. Hon. Sir David Evennett
Member of Parliament for Bexleyheath and Crayford

Welcome

On starting these few words, I returned to my very first email on the subject, addressed at that time to Bexley's Cabinet Member for Arts and Leisure, and I was amazed it was dated 2009, some ten years ago. I asked for his backing and it was wonderful that he agreed with me that this was too special an event for Crayford not to celebrate it. We even joked that at least I had ten years to sort it out.

Years rolled on, and after several meetings and many ideas, a committee of people from local clubs and historical societies was formed, later joined by officers of the London Borough of Bexley. Over the last two years, an astounding amount of work has been carried out by some wonderful and knowledgeable people. I have been deeply touched by the generosity of everyone who was approached to help with this project; not one person said 'no'! So, a very large thank you to all of those amazing people.

Now that we have arrived at 2019, I hope we have done justice to this centenary celebration of a marvellous achievement by two airmen, their wonderful Vimy plane and of course the Vickers workforce of Crayford who made their flight possible.

I must thank from the bottom of my heart all those involved with this project over the last ten years and who made this centenary celebration project possible. Special thanks must go to Tiffany Tipple, David Gillham and my very patient husband, Peter.

And to Janet Hearn-Gillham, sorry that our "little" project became a "giant" one. Many special thanks.

Councillor Geraldene Lucia-Hennis
Chairman - Alcock and Brown
Centenary Project Group (Crayford)



Courtesy of the Science Museum

Introduction

John Alcock and Arthur Whitten Brown were the first to successfully fly across the Atlantic on 14/15 June 1919. They made the journey in a modified Vickers Vimy, originally built in the Vickers factory in Crayford. Test flights were made from Joyce Green airfield, Dartford. On 23 July 1919 the aviators visited Crayford to celebrate their success, at the re-opening of The Princesses Theatre, by the Duke of York (later King George VI).

To mark such an important centenary, the Alcock and Brown Centenary Project Group (Crayford), supported by the London Borough of Bexley, a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund, and generous private donations, has organised a number of special events to take place throughout 2019.

It is hoped that this booklet, along with the wonderful bench and ceramic plaques to be sited in Crayford, will serve as a lasting reminder of Alcock and Brown's remarkable achievement, and the Centenary Project undertaken

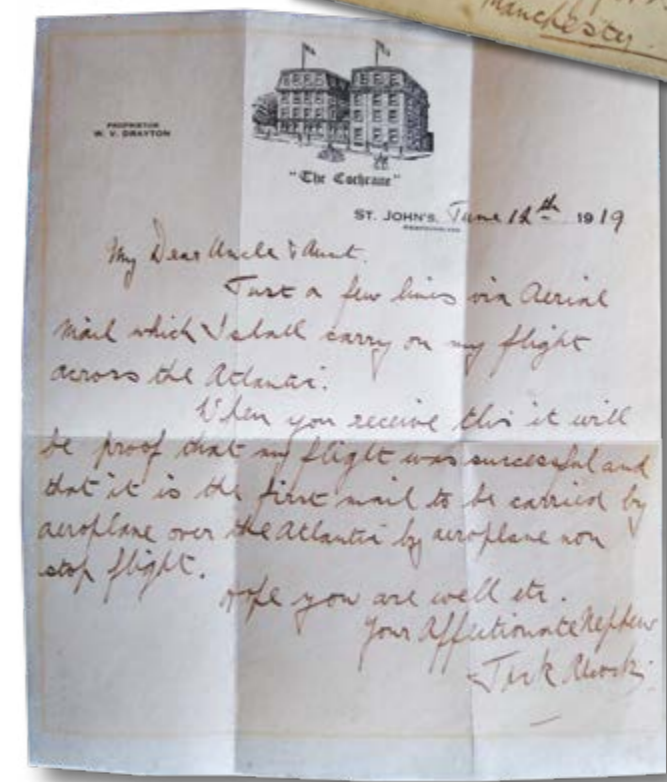
to celebrate it. We have enjoyed working with a wide range of people - younger, older, professional, non-professional, local and from further afield - in organising the various activities. For example, senior students from three local schools have put together the text for the exhibition banners, which can be found on pages 13 -18. Later this year we aim to add these, and much more of the material we have collected, to the local history website www.crayfordhistory.org.uk

Should you wish to see the Vimy (picture above) itself, then to the Science Museum is where you should go, and marvel. In 1919 Alcock and Brown were pioneers, the first men to fly across the Atlantic, and it is extraordinary to consider that only fifty years later, the first man stepped onto the moon.

Janet Hearn-Gillham
Secretary and Treasurer
Alcock and Brown Centenary
Project Group (Crayford)

First trans-Atlantic Airmail

This is one of the letters which John Alcock wrote before leaving Newfoundland; it is to his uncle and aunt. It was put inside a sealed bag with other letters that were taken to the Royal Aero Club in London for onward delivery. It thus became part of the first trans-Atlantic airmail.



Copyright The Postal Museum

A letter bill or receipt that went with the mailbag on the Alcock and Brown plane.

Courtesy V. & A. Payne

Exhibitions

Hall Place Exhibition

The exhibition at Hall Place and Gardens highlights the fantastic achievement of Alcock and Brown as the first people to fly non-stop across the Atlantic. Through objects and ephemera loaned from Brooklands Museum in Weybridge, Surrey, and the nephew of John Alcock, Tony Alcock, the adventurers' daring and often terrifying flight is brought to life. You can see a large accurate model of the Vimy aircraft that safely carried them across the Atlantic, which was manufactured in the Vickers factory that once stood just a stone's throw from Hall Place. Even a navigational star chart used by Alcock and Brown during their flight can be seen on display. Our thanks go to Brooklands Museum (all items on pages 8 and 9) and Tony Alcock (items on page 10) for kindly loaning objects to make this exhibition possible. Thanks also to Mr. and Mrs. Payne for allowing the use of digitised material to display in the exhibition.

Kirsty Macklen – Collections Manager, Hall Place

Savoy Menu

Opposite is a digitised version of the menu from the Savoy Hotel in London for a celebration meal held for Alcock and Brown on the 20 June 1919. This one is rather special as it has been signed. Thank you to Mr. and Mrs. Payne for allowing us to digitise the original menu.



Courtesy of V. & A. Payne

Large Vimy aircraft model

The large model is a replica of the Vimy flown by Alcock and Brown, made by a local model maker, Mr Noel Barker, in Weybridge where he worked at BAC/Vickers Weybridge (Brooklands). He was involved in the construction of the life size flying Vimy replica (now held in the RAF Museum collection) built in 1969 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the flight. The same plans were used to create this model which he donated to Brooklands Museum in 1995.

The life size flying model was built by the Vintage Aircraft Flying Association which was largely made up of Weybridge factory workers. Mr Barker, the maker and donor of the model on display in the exhibition, worked for Vickers in Brooklands for most of his working life. He followed up his model making interest by opening a model shop when he left the factory.

Vimy table decoration made at Vickers Crayford

The Vickers Vimy matchbox table decoration was made in the pattern shop at the Crayford Vickers factory in 1919. It was used at an Alcock and Brown celebration dinner held at the factory which was funded by Vickers and Rolls Royce.

The table decoration belonged to the donor's grandfather who worked at Vickers, Crayford. The rigging was added by the donor at a later date.

Navigational star chart

The navigational star charts were one of five carried by Brown to assist with navigation during the flight. When unrolled it is 5.7m (c1.74m) in length!

In 1919 planes were basic and the Vimy contained no navigational equipment. A pilot was reliant upon the stars in the sky to navigate. Star charts were used to plot your position and find your way to your destination.

Photo of departure from Newfoundland

The Vimy was assembled in an open field at St John's, Newfoundland. A large 'runway' was required and a wall and several trees were removed in order to give them the 475 metres (500 yards) they needed.

Postcard

The postcard shows the trans-Atlantic flight Vimy on display after being rebuilt at Brooklands in December 1919. The caption reads 'first direct trans-Atlantic flight 1919'.

Daily Sketch

This copy of the Daily Sketch shows the front page reporting on the knighthood of Alcock and Brown.

The Men

Framed Certificate

This is a Certificate of Appreciation from Manchester City to Sir John Alcock as one of the airmen of the first non-stop flight across the Atlantic. Alcock and Brown flew to the city where they were given a civic reception and presented with this certificate. It is signed by Manchester's Mayor. Pride was high as Alcock was born in Manchester in 1892.

Alcock's nephew Tony has been told that both Alcock and Brown were given "The Freedom of the City of Manchester" for being the first to fly non-stop across the Atlantic.

Britannia Trophy

The Britannia Trophy was awarded annually by the Royal Aero Club for the most meritorious performance of the year. It was first awarded in 1913, although there was a short hiatus during the First World War. Sadly, it was awarded to Sir John Alcock posthumously as he died on the 18th December 1919 in an air crash on the way to the Paris Air show.

One of the roles of the Royal Aero Club, who issued the trophy annually, was also to issue Pilot licenses. Sir John Alcock was employed by Maurice Ducroq who moved to Brooklands and became interested in flying. On 1st November 1910 Ducroq became the 23rd person to qualify for a licence; he later taught Alcock how to fly. On 26th November 1916 Alcock was the 368th person to get a pilot's licence. In three years he went from getting a pilots licence, to being part of the first duo to fly non-stop across the Atlantic.



John Alcock was born in 1892 in Manchester, England. He first became interested in flying at the age of 17. He gained his pilot's license in November 1912. He was a regular competitor in aircraft competitions. During the First World War he served as an RAF pilot.



Arthur Whitten Brown was born in 1886 in Glasgow, Scotland. He began his career as an engineer before the outbreak of the First World War when he joined the army then the Royal Flying Corps as an observer, later training to become a navigator.

Both men were captured during the First World War, Alcock while he was in Turkey and Brown while in France by the Germans.

"I liked him from the first because he is so quiet, and from the beginning he impressed me with his reliability. I had the greatest faith in him right through." **John Alcock**

After the war Alcock wanted to continue his flying career and took up the challenge of attempting to be the first person to fly directly across the Atlantic.

Alcock and Brown first met by chance at the Vickers Weybridge/Brooklands site, when the attempt was being discussed. Alcock was impressed when he first met Brown, whose ability as a navigator far exceeded his own. Brown was assigned to the attempt alongside Alcock.





Lord Northcliffe

On 1 April 1913, Lord Northcliffe, owner of The Daily Mail, offered £10,000 to the first pilot that could fly non-stop across the Atlantic. They were allowed 72 hours and had to finish in the same aircraft in which they started.

A plausible incentive may have been self-promotion, raising his newspaper's profile. However, a more likely motivation could have been to encourage technical innovation in the field of aeronautics.

A few months before he offered it, the Australian government had offered £10,000 for a race from Australia to London. Therefore with other places in the world encouraging new advancements, Northcliffe may have felt compelled to follow suit.

Due to the disruption of the First World War, the first attempt at the prize was made in April 1919 by the Short brothers; their Shamrock plane flew only 12 miles before crashing into the sea.

On 18 May 1919, the second attempt was made by Hawker and Grieve. They had to be rescued by a ship in the Atlantic. Just one hour behind was the Martinsyde Raymor but it crashed on take-off.

The Berlin Bomber and the Vickers Vimy were the final two contenders left to embark on the challenge. After mechanical difficulties concerning the Bomber, Alcock and Brown's Vimy was the only remaining aircraft to take on the feat.

The Vimy Aircraft

On 26 March 1918, the first production contract for 150 Vimy aircraft was issued. The Vimy model was designed by Rex Pierson, chief designer at Vickers.

The prototype was built at the Vickers Crayford factory and assembled and flown at Joyce Green airfield, Dartford.

Since the distance between the factory and the airfield was so great, for convenience production was moved to the Weybridge factory in Surrey which had an airfield next door. The Vimy's role was to be a heavy bomber in the First World War.

The modified Vimy that Alcock and Brown flew was powered by two Rolls-Royce Eagle 360hp engines and took off with 3900 litres of fuel.

During the interwar period, the Vimy set several records of long distance flights.

The most significant of these was the first non-stop transatlantic flight by Alcock and Brown.

One of the propellers from the Vickers Vimy was given to Arthur Whitten Brown and hung in his office at Vickers in Swansea for many years before he presented it to the RAF College Cranwell.



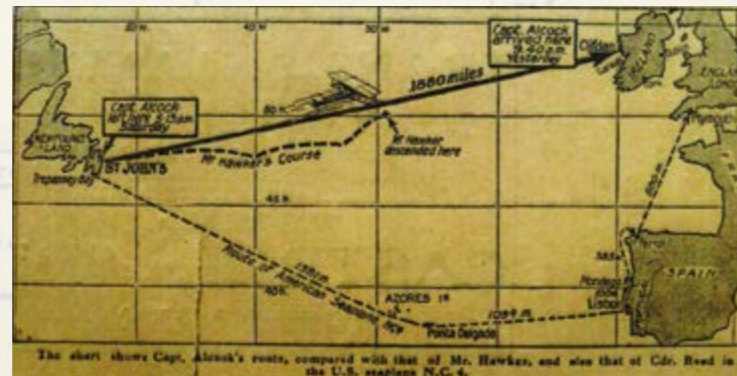
The Flight

The momentous flight took place on 14 and 15 June. Alcock and Brown waited in Newfoundland until a break in the bad weather, then took off, whilst their opponents were still carrying out checks.

With fog obscuring their vision, and Alcock battling strong gusts of wind, they noticed their generator's propeller had sheared off. They now had no electricity for the radio or their heated waistcoats. To make matters worse, a piece of the exhaust had split and fallen away from one of the engines which was making a terrible clattering noise. Even verbal communication was now impossible.

After about eight hours, they climbed to 6,000 feet where Brown was finally able to calculate their position. The added altitude led them into turbulent weather which caused the plane to stall and plummet towards the sea. At less than 100 feet above the ocean, they regained control and found they

were facing the wrong way. Once they had corrected their route, the weather turned again; it began to snow, obscuring the petrol overflow gauge, a clear view of this being essential to avoid carburettor problems. Several times, Brown had to stand up in the slip stream, and clear the gauge, while Alcock kept the aircraft steady to prevent Brown being thrown out. After 16½ hours and nearly 1900 miles, mostly flying blind, the west coast of Ireland was sighted. They landed near Clifden, nose down in a bog, but happily neither man was injured.



After the Flight

When Alcock and Brown awoke on 16 of June, everyone wanted a glimpse of the famous pair, with interviews and newspaper articles being sent around the world.

John Alcock and Arthur Whitten Brown's success was greeted positively by the public; for example, the Daily Mirror proclaimed their achievement "Britain's magnificent air triumph."

On their way home they were surprised by a welcoming band and crowds, including Claude Johnson, General Manager of Rolls-Royce. On arrival in London, Alcock handed over his bag of mail and joked "I am the first trans-Atlantic postman." Despite their weariness, the pair soon travelled to Brooklands to greet the team who had worked on their Vimy. Flags and bunting flew, and work was even suspended for the day.

The crowning celebration took place at a lunch on 20 of June at the Savoy Hotel in London, where the £10,000 Daily Mail prize cheque was presented by Winston Churchill, Secretary of State for Air. He also announced that both Alcock and Brown would be knighted the next day by King George V at Windsor Castle.



Courtesy of V. & A. Poyne

The Princesses Theatre



Bexley Local Studies and Archive Centre PCD/1480

The Princesses Theatre, situated beside the River Cray, was first opened on 26 of July 1916 by Princess Christian. It had been built by Vickers to provide entertainment for its workers but unfortunately the theatre was demolished by a fire on the 4 of December 1916.

The theatre was rebuilt and on 23 of July 1919, it was reopened by the Duke of York (later King George VI). During the evening, a short film was shown about the Alcock and Brown flight.

After the film finished the announcement was made "Ladies and gentlemen, I give you Sir John Alcock and Sir Arthur Whitten Brown!" They walked onto the stage and were greeted by Sir Trevor Dawson (Managing Director of Vickers) who

presented them with gold watches, as a symbol of their achievement.

Alcock and Brown thanked Rex Pierson (the designer of the Vickers Vimy), Sir Trevor and the Vickers workers.

It was a significant event in the history of the theatre, and of Crayford, and was celebrated in the Sidcup Times which called Alcock and Brown "Knights of the Air".



Bexley Local Studies and Archive Centre PCD/1484

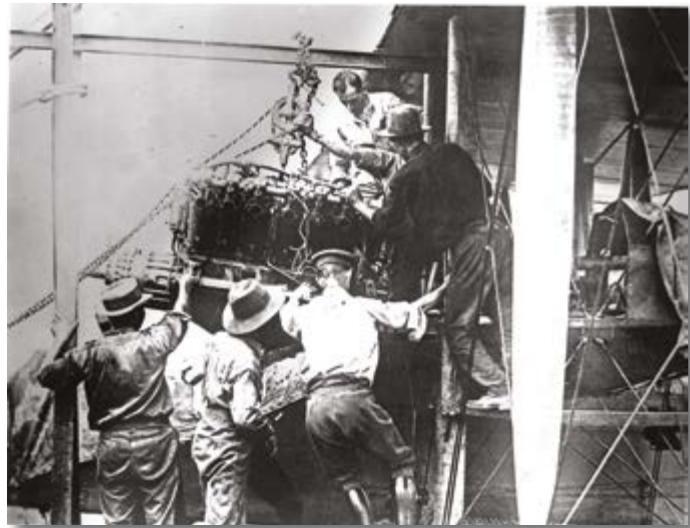
Exhibition at the Geoffrey Whitworth Theatre (29 June-6 July 2019)

The Trustees of the Geoffrey Whitworth Theatre in Crayford, kindly agreed to host an exhibition of historic photographs in their John Measures Studio during the run of 'Privates on Parade'. Thirty-six images of Alcock and Brown and their Vickers Vimy will tell the amazing story.

In the winter of 1918 Geoffrey Whitworth came to Crayford to deliver his first lecture (on European Theatre) to workers at the Vickers factory. He was invited to stay on afterwards to witness 'The Crayford Reading Circle' perform a one-act play. What he saw he found to be a revelation; as GW says in his book *The Theatre of My Heart*, "...I felt that I was understanding the fundamental quality of dramatic art in a way I had never understood it before." The seeds sown then continue to grow today with the excellent work produced at our own Geoffrey Whitworth Theatre.

David Gillham
Alcock and Brown Centenary
Project Group (Crayford)





Courtesy of Tony Alcock

Fitting one of the two Rolls-Royce Eagle VIII engines at St. Johns



Courtesy of Tony Alcock

Loading provisions just before take off



Courtesy of Tony Alcock

On the way to the Royal Aero Club, London, with the first trans-Atlantic airmail



Courtesy of Tony Alcock

Rex Pierson (designer of the Vimy), Alcock, Kathleen Kennedy, Brown, Archie Knight (Vickers)



Courtesy of Tony Alcock

After landing in a bog near Clifden, Ireland



Courtesy of Tony Alcock

Brown and Alcock shortly after arriving at Clifden



Signed front and back cover of a programme for a reception held for Alcock and Brown at Manchester



Courtesy of V. & A. Payne



Artwork in Crayford

Bronze Bench

Peter Lucia-Hennis and his wife Councillor Geraldene Lucia-Hennis, my long term friends, are very active in the London Borough of Bexley, and they contacted me regarding artwork needed to mark the Alcock and Brown Centenary.

We discussed the options, and decided a full size bronze of Alcock and Brown sitting on a bench would be a perfect celebration of these courageous pilots who navigated the first trans-Atlantic flight. There was an initial struggle to find the money to allow this to happen but a very generous donation was received from the Erith Group.

It has been my pleasure to work on an exciting and creative project and am sure it will be a long term delight that will inspire civic pride for many years to come.

Tony Stallard



Ceramic plaques

As part of the project Tony Stallard and Sandra Stallard worked with nine schools and two local community groups to produce designs, which would be turned into ceramic plaques. We are very grateful to the Learning and Enterprise College Bexley for their support in producing the eleven plaques, which will be fitted in the eleven arches on the external walls of McDonald's in Crayford, on the site of the former Vickers factory. They will be officially unveiled at the special event on 23 July 2019.



Events are subject to change,
see updates on:
www.alcockandbrownevents.co.uk
www.hallplace.org.uk

Centenary celebration events

Tuesday 16 April 2019

Official launch of celebrations and opening of the exhibition at Hall Place and Gardens

Wednesday 17 April –

Sunday 27 October

'Knights of the Air' Exhibition at Hall Place and Gardens.

Free entry to the Halcot Gallery.

Thursday 23 May

'Yesterday We Were In America'
2.30pm - Illustrated talk by David Gillham at Hall Place.

Doors open at 2.15pm. Free entry but must be pre-booked. Call 01322 621238

Saturday 15 June

Annual Rotary Event in Cray Gardens, Crayford. Duck Race + Alcock and Brown stall

Saturday 29 June - Saturday 6 July

Display of historic photos at the Geoffrey Whitworth Theatre Crayford during the run of 'Privates on Parade'.



Sunday 21 July

Free Celebration Day - a range of family fun events at Hall Place and Gardens including:

- A Guinness World Record attempt to fly the most model planes simultaneously!
- Local History Fair
- Rotary Duck Race
- Refreshment stalls
- Inflatables
- Children's rides
- Farmers Market - and lots more!

Tuesday 23 July

A historical day not to be missed in Crayford, attended by a VIP guest, who will unveil ceramic art work designed by local school children, and a specially commissioned bench.

Thursday 25 July

'Those Magnificent Men' a special two man performance.
Civic Offices, 7pm for 7.15pm start
Free entry but tickets must be pre-booked. Visit www.alcockandbrownevents.co.uk or call 07778 250512

Saturday 31 August

'Yesterday We Were In America'
2.30pm - Illustrated talk by David Gillham in the Chaucer Room, Central Library, Bexleyheath. Free entry but must be pre-booked. Call 01322 621238

Acknowledgements:

Alcock and Brown Centenary Project Group (Crayford)
Al-Murad Tiles
Group Captain A.J.H. Alcock MBE RAF retired
Barnehurst Golf Club
Bexley Brewery
Bexley Civic Society
Bexley Historical Society
Bourne Road Garage, Crayford (Mr. Andrew Mooresmith)
Bronzeshield Lifting Ltd. (Mr. William Frost)
Brooklands Museum (Mr. Andrew Lewis)
Mrs. Bonita Chamberlain
Mr. Mark Coleman
Crayford Manor House Historical Society
Crayford Town Archive
Mr. Lee Dalglish
Erith & Belvedere Local History Society
Erith Group
Geoffrey Whitworth Theatre
Hall Place and Gardens
The National Lottery Heritage Fund
Mrs. Kay Honeyford
Mrs. Kathleen Jackson
Lamorbey and Sidcup Local History Society

Learning and Enterprise College Bexley
London Ambulance Service (Mr. Andrew Beasley)
London Borough of Bexley and Officers involved in the project
McDonald's Restaurant Ltd.
Mrs. Virginia and Mr. Alan Payne
Rotary Club of Crayford
Schlüter Systems Ltd
Science Museum
Students and staff of:
Beths Grammar School
Haberdashers' Aske's Crayford Academy
Townley Grammar School
Trinity School
Bursted Wood Primary School
Haberdashers' Aske's Temple Grove
St. Joseph's Catholic Primary School
St. Paulinus CofE Junior School
Shenstone School
Bexley Moorings Project
Centrepieces
Tony Stallard (Public Artist)
Mrs. Tiffany and Mr. Shaun Tipple
Uptown Caterers

Suggested reading:

'Yesterday We Were In America' by Brendan Lynch
'Our Transatlantic Flight' by Sir John Alcock and Sir Arthur Whitten Brown



Alcock and Brown Centenary
Project Group (Crayford)



April 2019