



■ The Comet racer prototype E1 in flight, probably piloted by Capt. Hubert Broad, at Hatfield two weeks after it first flew. In those days prototypes were given an official number—in this case E1—for their early flying, and were registered later. For the race, the Comets wore bright colours and carried names given by their sponsors. Five machines were built: three for the race and two for later export to Portugal and France. Both pictures: *Flight International*.

recollect that on one famous occasion the pump supplied by the Ratier Company was missing and we used an ordinary bicycle pump (not mine). The Bluemel bicycle pump became standard equipment and was included in the design specification.

By now it was nearly June but neither the airframe, engines nor propellers had been approved and certified for flight by the appropriate civil aviation departments. Approvals were in fact only obtained a few days before the race started. Although we were already working long hours on the passenger aircraft the Comet was of paramount importance and even longer hours were undertaken. We worked seven days a week and sometimes for continuous periods of 36 hours for about five months. As most of the staff travelled by tram down the Edgware Road to Hendon and Cricklewood we took either the last tram at 23.30 or the first one at 05.00. No wonder I was very thin at that time.

The first Comet was completed in about six months from the issue of the first drawings and was assembled at Stag Lane but dismantled and transported to Hatfield for the test flight programme. This was carried out in September by Capt. Hubert Broad. As it was only a few weeks before the race extraordinary measures were taken to get the final touches completed.

Although there were no hard runway airfields available, the Air Ministry allowed the Royal Aero Club to use the Beck Row aerodrome at Mildenhall in Suffolk with a fairly large grass area but of course none of the landing aids and other modern facilities known today. When we arrived there was no windsock in use but we improvised a sack until an oil company produced one at the last minute. One enthusiastic member of the Club actually produced some World War I searchlights should they be needed for take-off. The Comets were being crewed by Scott and Campbell Black, Amy

and Jim Mollison, and Waller and Cathcart Jones. All three crews were very experienced. Naturally they were most anxious to fly the aircraft as much as possible before the race but were only able to do so a few days before the deadline. The only major accident I can recollect was when the aircraft being piloted by Cathcart Jones was badly damaged in landing three days before the race. We made frantic efforts to get the parts repaired. I think the present-day inspectors would be horrified at the short cuts we took.

The race was getting tremendous publicity and as there were 26 participants, about 10 of them British, Mildenhall was becoming front page news and everybody of note wanted to visit the airfield to see the aircraft. King George V and Queen Mary spent some time at the aerodrome and Edward Prince of Wales, three years before he became Edward VIII (who was always an aviation enthusiast) spent a lot of time climbing in and out of the aircraft and, as always, asked a lot of questions.

At a late date it was decided to give a banquet in honour of the competitors: it was held two days before the race at the Grosvenor House Hotel and over 500 people attended. All the pilots were there but maybe the banquet should have been given after the race, not before. However, it was an historic night.

Crowds jam the roads

The great exodus of people from London on the night before the race was remarkable. But the roads in Suffolk were very narrow and although 5,000 people were on the airfield for the take-off, many more than this were stranded in the lanes and roads on the way. They were able to see the great event on their local cinema screens the next day. Movie-tone News moved very fast in those days.

At 06.35 on October 14 1934, the starter's flag signalled the take-off and the first aircraft, christened Black Magic and piloted by

the Mollisons, took off for Australia. They had no radio, parachutes or dinghies and as all the aircraft were fully laden with petrol each take-off was a hazardous operation. But 13 aircraft took off without mishap; the rest were not ready.

By 09.00 everyone was on the way home and it was not until the evening newspapers were published that any news was expected—by that time aircraft would be landing at various points in the Middle East. Although the Mollisons were first to reach Baghdad, when they arrived in Allahabad they had serious engine trouble and did not proceed any further.

After many rumours and false reports of the aircraft, the first arrival in Melbourne was the Comet (christened Grosvenor House) piloted by Scott and Campbell Black. The journey had taken 70 hours.

The second and third aeroplanes were American but the fourth was the other Comet piloted by Waller and Cathcart Jones. These two immediately announced that they would attempt the record for the return journey to London. Several days later they arrived back at Lympne Airport in Kent having taken 61 hours for the return journey. This was a great triumph for De Havilland.

All this is still fresh in my memory and it is difficult to believe that it happened 40 years ago. Of the six Comet pilots, two are still alive—Ken Waller is a farmer and Cathcart Jones runs a nightclub in Hollywood. Anyone interested in seeing the Comet Racer should know that the Shuttleworth Memorial Trust has just found one. It is in a very decrepit state but the intention is to rebuild the machine so that in a year or so you will be able to see it exactly as it was in October 1934.

My final and happiest recollection is that, because De Havilland won the race, everybody at Stag Lane was given half a day's holiday with pay. This to most of us was more sensational than the flight itself.