

THE FLYING FLEA IN KENT

By John Viner

Between 1935 and 1936 Kent was invaded by a strange variety of flea. The plague – not a zoological one – began in France where inventor, Henri Mignet, introduced his miniature aircraft, the 'Pou de Ciel'. Built in Britain by backgarden aviators and aspiring Icarii under the name 'Flying Flea', this little aeroplane brought aviation to the common man for the first time and, like its insect namesake, it seemed to get everywhere.

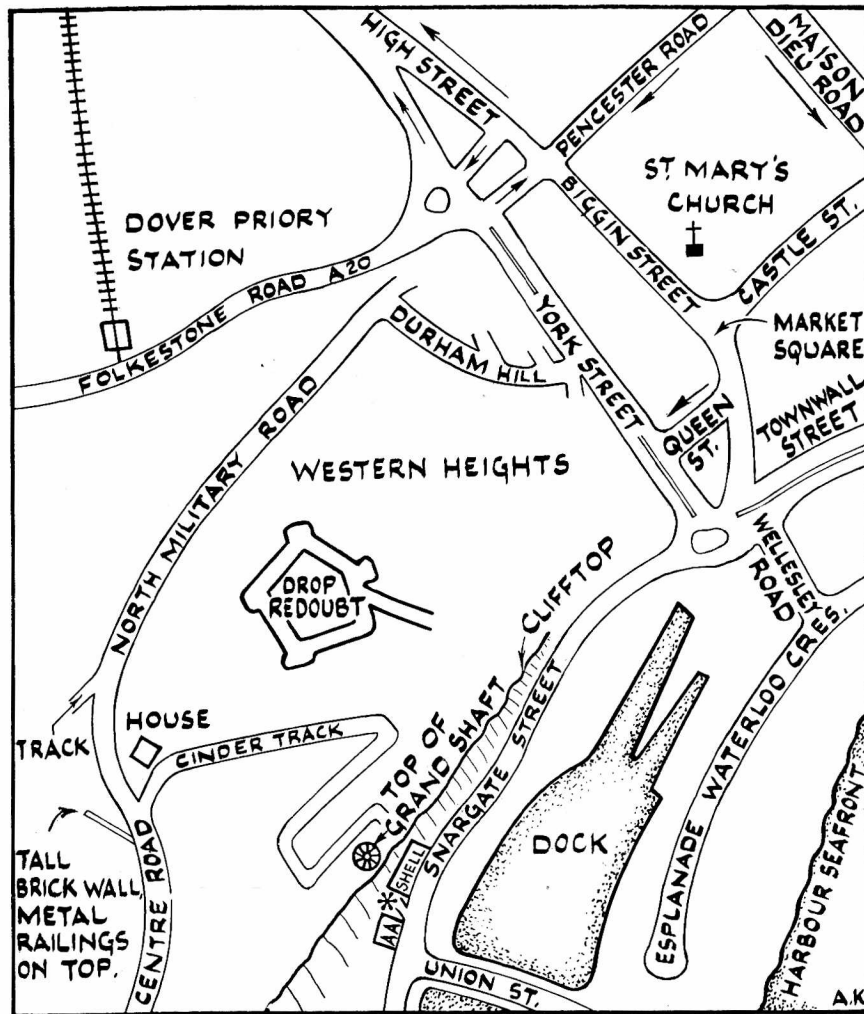
Mr Alan Fisher, then a lad of eleven, had what became quite a common introduction to the Flying Flea when one literally descended out of the blue near his home at Underdown House, Chartham:

"On a fine evening in June 1936 we were all awakened by a very low flying aircraft. The engine was very loud and not unlike a motor cycle. It droned away and eventually landed in a field on the edge of Penny Pot Woods in the parish of Chartham. My mother and father walked up there and found it. The pilot was looking for Ruthven (pronounced Riven) Pomfret (from nearby Mystole House). He spent the night there.

When daylight came I ran all the way – over a mile – to see this peculiar craft. On the fuselage were the words 'Cantilever Pou H.M.14'. It was undamaged, although the 'landing strip' was not of the highest quality. I sat in it and marvelled. There was just a fuel gauge, a RPM/ASI gauge and a very basic compass. The pilot asked where Southend lay and we pointed out the direction. After a hairy first attempt he became airborne, circled us once, and set off for Southend."

What Mr Fisher had met was a British development of Mignet's basic design. The Pou was an unconventional aircraft without ailerons or elevators and even without horizontal tail surfaces. The wings were mounted in tandem and control was by pivoting the upper, forward wing and turning the rudder – both these being operated by the control stick. Mignet published his design in a best selling book 'Le Sport de l'air' and, although not a pilot, flew his Pou all around France on demonstrations. "Anyone who can build a packing case", he declared, "can build my aeroplane." Hundreds took him at his word and embarked on the construction of a Pou. Working from plans a Huddersfield man built one for only £20 plus the cost of a second hand motorcycle engine. Machines could be built from kits which varied in price from £85 to £150 including engine, or the complete machine could be bought 'ready to fly away' for £165 for the basic Pou or £198 for the improved Abbott-Baynes Cantilever Pou.

Among the builders of Poux was E.G. Perman Ltd., a printing house. Under the enthusiastic leadership of F.W. Broughton they built machines at Heston, in



* - ENTRANCE TO BOTTOM OF GRAND SHAFT
BETWEEN SHELL PREMISES & AA PREMISES .

Sketch map of the location of the Grand Shaft

(Anne King)

ABBOTT-BAYNES AIRCRAFT

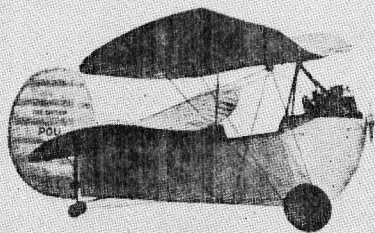
Manufacturers of the
Improved British

'POU'

(Flying Flea)

with Carden 4 cyl. engine

The first Flying Flea to fly in England.



THIS machine has now been entirely re-designed. The 2 cylinder engine has been changed to a 4 cylinder for greater power and safety, the span has been slightly increased, the fuselage re-designed, and many detail improvements have been made. The 'POU,' to this design, is a really practical and useful aircraft and as such has endless uses all over the world both for business and pleasure purposes. The poor take-off and climb of previous types has been entirely overcome and the machine now has a really practical performance. Take-off run 100 yds. ● Angle of climb 1 in 12 ● Landing Run 20 yds. ● Speed 70 m.p.h.

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Advertisement from Aero and Airways, December 1935

Middlesex where Flt. Lt. Clouston, an R.A.F. test pilot, 'moonlighted', test flying them at £5 per flight. Following a forced landing in a Heston garden and an abrupt contact with an outside privy — fortunately unoccupied — Clouston sought to test fly the Fleas away from sources of publicity which could damage his R.A.F. career, so the firm removed its airborne activities to Gravesend Aerodrome whence Clouston test flew them at weekends. His first Gravesend Flea test was rather less than successful:

"I spent an entire day taking them off, stalling, and dropping into adjoining fields. After each effort an enthusiastic bunch of onlookers raced across to help me lift the Flea back over the aerodrome fence for another attempt. We finally discovered what was wrong. The tall grass was nibbling at the tips of the small wooden propellers and reducing the thrust."

While Clouston was flying Fleas for a manufacturer, Mignet was selling his idea to the man in the street to whom do-it-yourself aviation had been a dream since the early birdmen strapped wings to their backs and plunged to their deaths from cliffs and towers. On August 13th 1935 he flew his Pou from St Inglevert in France to Lypnne, crossing the Channel in 52 minutes. Pathe News recorded the scene at Lypnne; Mignet made a special low pass for their benefit but he flew too low for the car-roof mounted cameras and had to make a second run, slightly higher. Mignet, with Mme Mignet who had preceded him by sea, remained in Britain for some time, demonstrating his machine which had the



Edouard Bret receiving the International Flying Flea Race Challenge Trophy at Ramsgate, 3rd August 1936. (Miss D. Potter)

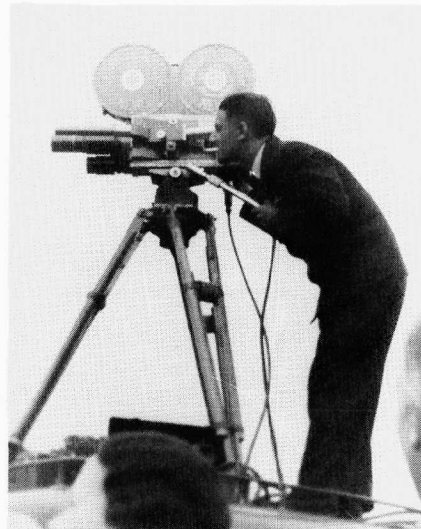
Archivist of the Kent Aviation Historical Research Society, spotted an advertisement in the Kent Messenger for a Flea for sale at Horton Kirby, the sale being in aid of church funds. The machine in question had been built by a Mr W. Millon but had never flown since it has been caught by the ban. Mr Millon had kept it stored and was now selling it for £75. Air Britain purchased the Flea and it made its debut at Rochester Air Display later that month where it was taxied and even 'hopped'. It sported the registration letters G-AEOF for authenticity. These had originally been allocated to a Short Scion but were never taken up. Charles Fagg of Kingston adapted one of his farm trailers to carry the flea from his farm where it was stored to various displays. In 1966 Ralph Mitchell moved to Holland and the Flea was loaned to the Newark Air Museum, there being no such suitable place in Kent. It is now in the Aviodome at Schipol where it has recently been completely restored by the R.Neth.A.F.

So ends the story of the Flying Flea in Kent. Mignet remained undaunted and continued to improve and produce his Pou designs in France, America, Japan, Argentina and Brazil until his death in France in the 1950s. The H.M.14, whilst not entirely successful, had pioneered the road for all the micro-light aircraft which were to follow.

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One of the Cantilever Poux passing Ramsgate during the Race. (Mr E.D. West)



Gaumont British News at the Flying Flea Race. (Miss D. Potter)

mile circuit between the Airport, the St Peter's destructor chimney, and RAF Manston.

Three Britons and three Frenchmen competed for the trophy and the handsome cash prizes. Arthur Clouston had borrowed a Perman Flea and installed a 60hp Bristol aero-engine. He was handicapped to take off last, well after M. Robineau's grossly underpowered 17hp machine which left first. He may well have been an easy winner had not an oil line burst and necessitated a forced landing and his withdrawal. The race was a close run between Robineau, Edouard Brett and Stephen Appleby who jockeyed for the placings. After a gruelling four laps Brett swept to victory with an average speed of 56.75 mph with second place going to Appleby who was the first English Flea devotee, in his veteran G-ADMH. Robineau was third. Brett won the Challenge Trophy and £100 cash, Appleby and Robineau received cups and £60 and £40 respectively. The other positions were Ocroft (G-AEJD) 4th, Colli ('EJC) 5th, and Lane 6th.

The race was the Flying Flea's swansong, for the crashes continued and, following wind tunnel tests at Farnborough on Malling Aviation's G-AEFV, the design was declared unstable and the Air Ministry imposed an immediate ban on all British machines. The last Pou flew in Britain in June 1937.

Many Poux were still incomplete or unflown when the ban was imposed. Perhaps the best known Kentish Flea was one of these. In June 1964 Ralph Mitchell, Secretary of the Kent Branch of Air Britain, and David Collyer, now



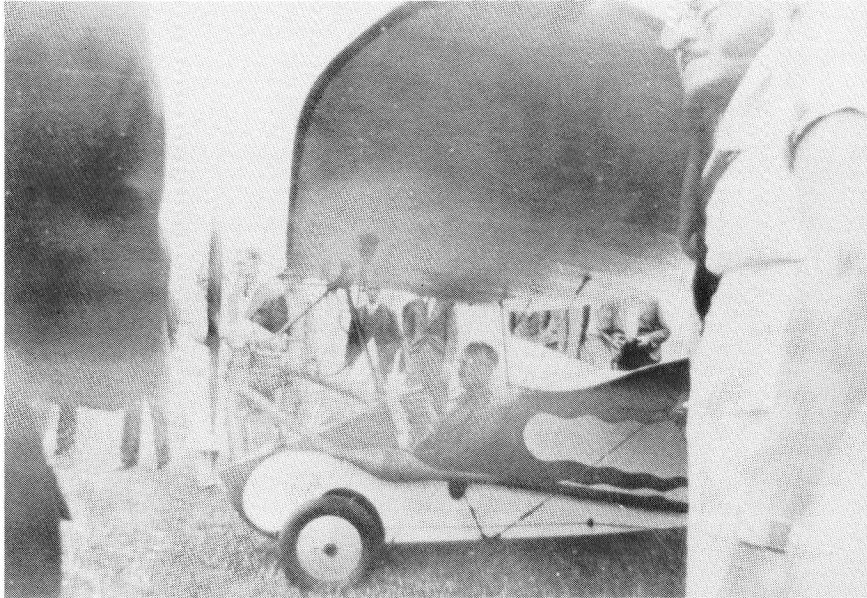
Mignet taking off from Lympne 1935

(Mr C.F. Bignell)

enthusiastic support and approval of the Air League. A number of home-built machines passed through Lympne, among them that of the Canadian, R.G. Doig who lived at Sidcup and operated his Pou, G-ADPW, from the airfield at Lympne. 'DPW was later flown from Campbell-Black's Flying Circus. Later, in 1937, Mignet returned to Lympne for an international air meeting in his HM18 'Cabin Pou', a development of the HM14 and an altogether superior machine. Mr L. Chowns, who had ridden his bicycle to Lympne for the occasion, remembered it:

"I went into the air park to look at this aircraft, which was a 'special' model. The cockpit was entirely enclosed and had its instruments mounted on a polished hardwood dashboard complete with a photograph of a lady (presumably Mme Mignet— fixed behind a frameless glass. The joy stick was suspended from the cabin roof . . . the whole machine was in beautiful condition . . . an ordinary Flea was also there and looked amateurish by comparison."

As Flying Flea Mania gripped the country tighter, more and more of the machines appeared in the skies of Kent. J.E.W. Wheatly's Perman built Flea, G-ADOV, flew from Lympne, R.L. Baker's homebuilt 'DVW was test flown at Westerham during 1936, L. Chambers' 'DXF, built at Princes Risboro, was flown from Ramsgate, H.J. Tuckett's 'EJO, built at Chelmsford, flew from R.A.F. Hawkinge and the Flea, G-AERJ, built by W.B. Millichamp at Belton, Suffolk, flew from Sheppey. The Sheppey Flea was purchased by local schoolmaster, Vivien Stoudley of Sheerness and run by him, together with a Kronfield Drone ('the motorcycle of the air'), to teach local boys to fly from a field at the rear of Marshland's Farm, near Eastchurch. The young pilots enjoyed a hectic time of 'circuits and bumps'. As Mr Clarence Wood, one of Stoudley's old pupils said: "the Flea was a bit hairy — when the wing dropped you gave it opposite stick, lit a cigarette and hoped for the best!" R.A.F. Eastchurch were not pleased to have a Flea bumbling around near their circuit but their concern was short lived



Mignet at Lympne, 13th August 1935

(Mr C.F. Bignell)

as the machine fell under the ban imposed on Fleas in 1937, after which it became the target of some irate cattle which destroyed it, leaving only the main-plane to survive until after the Second World War, as part of a newsagent's fence at Halfway.

While most Poux to fly in Kent were built elsewhere a few were constructed in the county. One of the early Fleas to fly in Britain (the first flew in July 1935) was built by Mr R.R. Little at Canterbury. His aeroplane, registered G-ADZS, was flown from a field at Herne and from Bekesbourne Aerodrome. It had a 35hp ABC Scorpion engine, yet despite many Poux having far smaller engines, was described by Sqdn. Ldr. B. Hitchings who saw it fly at Herne as 'grossly under-powered':

"I never did see it fly properly. Later I heard that it had crashed into some trees shortly after take-off, but the pilot was not seriously injured."

Also flown from Bekesbourne was the Flea, G-AEBR, built in Canterbury by A.S. Bacon and H. Sowerbutts and the machine belonging to Mr E.H. Chambers which he towed there behind his car before moving on to Ramsgate. One of these machines was loaned to the grocers, Vye and Sons, of St Margaret's Street, Canterbury, to hang in their shop during a promotion of French goods.



Mr Stephen Appleby in his Pou G-ADMH

The aviation press of the period was obsessed with pou building. The week after 'Flight' published an article called 'The Pou gets into its stride' a Mr Boddy wrote a sceptical article asking 'Has the Pou a Future?' The activities of the little machines left the casual observer in no doubt. They appeared everywhere, from West Malling to Rochester and from Horton Kirby to Ramsgate. At Rochester the occasional visiting Pou caused great amusement to the workers servicing the giant H.P.42 airliners and Gravesend continued to host many of the machines, among them Mr Phillips' G-AEDF which he towed behind his Riley 9 Tourer and a visit by Mignet himself. In 1936 the Aero 8 Flying Club attempted to fly a Pou from Gravesend to France. G-AEFW took off as planned but got no further than the outskirts of the town where it crashed. This was not an isolated crash. A shadow had appeared on the Pou's horizon and it was lengthening. In April 1936 the first fatal accident occurred at Renfrew and in May the Air League's Ft. Lt. Colwell was killed at Penshurst when the machine he was testing, Ralph Doig's G-AEEW, went into an uncontrollable dive. That month there was an exactly similar crash at Digby in Lincolnshire.

The crashes were to continue on both sides of the Channel, but did not prevent the operators of the newly opened Ramsgate Municipal Airport from organising the greatest British Flying Flea event ever held, more significant than even the great Rally held at Southend in 1935. This was the First International Flying Flea Trophy Race. The race was held on August Bank Holiday, 1936, and followed a full supporting display in the best traditions of small town air shows. A disappointingly small number of Fleas attended but the spectators were thrilled to see Mignet himself demonstrating the H.M.18. Of eight Poux entered six managed to take off for the race which was to be flown over four laps of a seven