

BEDFORDSHIRE LOCAL HISTORY ASSOCIATION

HISTORY IN BEDFORDSHIRE

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BEDFORDSHIRE LOCAL HISTORY ASSOCIATION

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Contributions are very welcome **and needed**: please telephone the editor before
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Clive Makin (Secretary), Mollie Foster (Chairman), and Alan Feasey (outgoing Treasurer)
Two views from the 2015 Conference (Stuart Antrobus). See also p 16

From the Editor

I have received very few contributions recently and to produce four issues a year and to make those issues interesting, I am in need of more material. Articles and news items are very welcome and my contact details are on page 1. Don't worry if you feel your skills are not up to it: I will polish your contribution and consult on any major changes. We need to celebrate and add to the local history of Bedfordshire and to inform other local societies of what is happening in your society, so please do get writing. If your society publishes a newsletter please include me in the e-mail distribution so that I can pick up topical items and include them in HIB.

TED MARTIN

Notes and news

BLHA Conference 2015, hosted by Clapham Historical Society. On a very wet morning on 13 June we assembled at Clapham Village Hall. At the AGM, the Committee was re-elected almost *en bloc* and Alan Feasey was thanked for his work as Treasurer for the past five years; the new Treasurer, Mike Brown, was also introduced. The Conference opened with a welcome by the Chairman, Mrs Mollie Foster, and Borough Councillor, Mrs Jane Walker.

John Woods, a local historian, gave the first talk, a very entertaining review of 'The History of Clapham and the Church'. The delegates then had the option of a visit to Felmersham for a walking tour and a history of the village or a video session in the hall. The Felmersham visit was led by Ken Shrimpton and, because of the weather, the walking tour was curtailed and much of the visit was in and about the church. However, we were able to see Felmersham bridge and the tithe barn, saved by conversion to housing, and some other notable buildings.

There followed an excellent buffet lunch with wine in the hall, after which Margaret Baddley, also a local historian, gave us a whistle-stop lecture tour of the architecture and history of the north Bedfordshire villages.

Edward Arpin's diary of life as a grave digger in Felmersham was the subject of Ken Shrimpton's talk about the redoubtable Arpin, who scribbled a diary about life and scandals in Felmersham in the late 18th and early 19th centuries on scraps of paper which were rediscovered many years later hidden in the pages of a book.

Elizabeth Skinner then told of the architecture and some of the history of Bromham Park House, which was once owned by her father and where she spent much of her early life. The future of this historic property is at present uncertain.

The 2015 conference was concluded by a short résumé of the history of Clapham and a summing-up by the Vice-President of the Association, Martin Lawrence.

This was a really excellent Conference and Clapham Historical Society are to be congratulated on the organisation, the speakers and the excellent lunch.

TED MARTIN.

BLHA Conference 2016. The 2016 Conference is to be hosted by Sharnbrook Local History Society on 18 June and the keynote speaker will be Professor Carena Lewis, who many of us know from her appearances on Channel 4's 'Time Team'.

Biggleswade Common. The Committee of Biggleswade History Society at their March meeting considered the lack of progress in their application to English Heritage for scheduled monument status for Biggleswade Common. The Committee disagreed with EH's proposal to consider the protection of specific individual features within the Common rather than treating it as an entity worthy of preservation. Their reasoning is based on EH's own publication (*An Archaeology of Town Commons in England* (2009)) which clearly indicates that Biggleswade Common is one of only a handful in the country whose archaeological features appear to have survived with little disturbance over the centuries. Some of these features have already been identified but their concern was that they simply do not know what else might lie beneath. It was felt that the Committee should seek a meeting with EH to discuss their concerns.

Alan Richardson. Carlton and Chellington Historical Society report the passing of Alan Richardson of Olney in their June newsletter. Their Chairman, Mike Pratt, writes: 'Alan presented many memorable talks . . . over the years . . . He had been suffering from cancer for some time. Alan was born in Turvey, and was a mine of information both on the history of that village and of Olney. He was a great character, and his talks always combined excellent illustrations together with encyclopaedic knowledge and earthy humour. His previous employment had been with Anglian Water, and some of us will remember his extremely well-informed and interesting talk on the history of sewage systems and also his hilarious presentation on the topic of comic postcards, to give just two contrasting examples. Many people will regret Alan's passing.'

Festival of British Archaeology, 11–26 July 2015:

Friday, 10 July at 11 am: *Hidden History an Archaeological Amble round Bedford.* A one-hour walk arranged by the Higgins suitable for all ages and abilities. Discover the wealth of archaeological heritage of Bedford town centre. £5.15, concessions £4.10, booking essential, e-mail: thehigginsbedford.org.uk or phone 01234 718618.

On **Saturday and Sunday, 11 and 12 July**, the *West Wickham dig 2, medieval period.* Volunteers will be excavating up to six test pits and processing finds in 2

field sites on the edge of the village. There will be a small display about the 2013 Big Village Dig. Website:

<http://www.westwickham.org>.

From **Saturday, 11 July until Friday, 14 August 2015** at the *Old Gaol Museum, Buckingham*, there will be a display of the community excavation project at Maids Moreton with a talk on Roman coins on 26 July with an opportunity to see and handle coins. Tel: 012808 23020, Email: buckinghamoldgaol.org.uk.

Thursday, 16 July at Wrest Park (English Heritage): *'All things Safe and Small'*, from 11am to 12 30pm. A look at their archaeology collection of small finds with Curator Charlotte Newman and Conservator Sally Johnson. Find out how they preserve and care for them. £22, light refreshments included. More information: www.english-heritage.org.uk/events or call 0370 333 1183.

Saturday, 18 July, *Festival of Cambridgeshire Archaeology and dig open day*, 12 noon–3pm. See displays of Jigsaw Cambridgeshire voluntary groups' archaeological investigations across Cambridgeshire, meet the volunteer archaeologists, and tour their training dig excavation of a possible medieval site at Covington which has a rich archaeological and historical background. At Covington, Kimbolton, Huntingdon, PE28 0RU; web: www.covington.org.uk.

Saturday, 18 July, 10am to 5pm: *Walk the Roman Road for YAC* (17-mile walk will be departing at 9am). Organiser: Cambridge Young Archaeologists Club. Join a sponsored walk along Worsted Street Roman Road, near Cambridge, starting at Wandlebury Ring, with some Roman activities and your chance to meet Roman re-enactors. Walk as far as you'd like and help raise money to support YAC! Website:

<http://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/roman-road-sponsored-walk-tickets-16559645345>
Booking details: Please sign up on the Eventbrite page or e-mail cambridgeyacs@hotmail.com. There is no entry fee, but please raise some sponsorship (£5 for an individual or £15 for a family).

Saturday, 18 July: *Wing Heritage Group – Archaeology Project 2015*, free event. Did Romans or Saxons live in your garden? There will be a display, and garden test pits will be dug around the village; perhaps some geophysics and field-walking as well! Come to Jubilee Green between 10am and 5pm. As part of the village carnival there is a public dig with the chance for people to have a go at digging, sieving or finds-washing. Website: <http://wingheritage.org>.

Monday, 20 to Friday, 24 July, Wrest Park (English Heritage): *'Awesome Archaeology'* from 11am to 5pm. Get your hands dirty as you become an archaeologist on this mini-dig. Help to excavate Wrest Park. An extra £1 will be charged on standard admission for every child, EH member and non-member to help to fund this activity. Booking not necessary. More information:

www.english-heritage.org.uk/events or call 0370 333 1183.

Saturday, 25 July, from 10am to 4pm: *Archaeology around Dunstable*, free event. Manshead Archaeological Society archaeology headquarters building will be open all day for visitors to explore at their leisure. Materials will be on display and there will be opportunities to talk to local archaeologists as well as a finds identification activity. Winfield Street, Dunstable, LU6 1LS

Saturday, 25 and Sunday, 26 July, youngsters from the Higgins's Saturday Archaeology Workshops (SAW) will be *excavating on the site of its replica Iron Age roundhouse* at Priory Country Park.

Saturday, 25 July to Sunday, 2 August: *Bedford Roman Dig*, Manton Lane, Bedford.

Carlton and Chellington History Society, Thursday, 17 September, 7.30pm: a talk by Roy Friendship-Taylor about *Piddington Villa* at the School/Village Hall in The Moor. All welcome, small charge for non-members, includes tea/coffee.

Disasters from Bedfordshire's Skies

1. The R101 Disaster, 1930

Introduction

While, fortuitously, until now, no great air disasters have occurred in Bedfordshire itself, nevertheless flights which have originated in the county have, in a number of cases, had grave results and consequences. Over the next few issues we will examine some notable examples.

The airship programme

Due to the relative success of airship technology, Great Britain decided in 1922 to launch a programme devised by the then Secretary of State for Air, Christopher Thomson, to build two huge luxury airships codenamed R100 and R101 (the 'R' standing for rigid construction). The R100 was to be built at the Airship Guarantee Company (part of Vickers Ltd) at Howden in Yorkshire while the R101 would be constructed by the Air Ministry at the Royal Airship Works in Cardington, Bedfordshire.

These vast machines (the R101 would eventually be 777ft long by 131ft wide) were designed to carry 16 tons of cargo, 100 passengers with their baggage and would be able to fly more than 3,500 miles non-stop in all weather conditions. The objective clearly was to ensure that Britain would remain in the forefront of aviation development in the world.

In 1924 the experimental programme was instigated at the two sites with money funded by the government. Both the R100 and R101 teams

began in earnest to design and build these unique airships in a more aerodynamic form than the traditional Zeppelin designs, with the renowned engineer Barnes Neville Wallis leading the former team. Construction on the R101 began in 1926 with the R100 following a year later. After completion in 1930, the R100 was flown from Howden to Cardington to be alongside her sister ship and tests were arranged to test the airworthiness of both ships. After trial flights and tests to check the outer cover ripple effect, the R100 ship was tasked with a trip to cross the Atlantic to Montreal in Canada.

It slipped its moorings from the Cardington mast at 02.48am on the morning of 29 August 1930 and after a voyage of some 78 hours and 49 minutes covering 3,364 miles, it arrived on 1 September at 05.37am. The crew were treated as heroes for this voyage.



The R101 at the Cardington mast after lengthening

However, the crossing was not as smooth as predicted with the ship encountering a large storm flying towards the Canadian coast. Perhaps foretelling the later disaster, there was a ripping of some of the outer cover. Temporary repairs were made in flight and then the cover was replaced at the mast at Montreal.

The crew enjoyed banquets and receptions in their honour. It was expected that this trip would be the start of many future crossings and commercial operations. On 13 August 1930 the R100 was required to go on a 'local' flight where it was received excitedly by all the towns it crossed over. On 16 August 1930 R100 made her return to Cardington

and, using the gulf stream, managed to knock off some 21 hours from the outward bound flight time, arriving at 11.06am after 2,995 miles and a trip of 57 hours 56 minutes.

On her return to Cardington she was then put into a holding shed for inspection and attention then switched to her sister ship, the R101.

Upon completion in October 1929, the R101 had become the largest man-made object ever to fly. Despite this, initial trials showed that the original disposable lift was not as high as had been anticipated. It was then agreed that the ship would need more disposable lift if the ship was to be a commercial success and the bracing wires holding the gas cells were let out so that the overall volume and lifting capacity could be increased.

Further trials, however, indicated that more drastic action would be required to enhance the overall lift of the airship. During the winter of 1929 to 1930 the airship was brought into the hangars and cut in half so that an extra bay for another gas bag could be inserted. This brought the R101's volume up to a huge 5½ million cubic feet with a disposable lift of 49.36 tons. Despite its size, the airship could boast a respectable top speed of 71 mph at a cruising height of 1,500ft.

Life on board

Much like our ocean cruise ships of today, the R101 was seen as a lavish floating hotel. Even by today's standards, the open promenades and public spaces would be seen as unique in the skies. Both ships were the first to adopt using the interior of the ship for passenger accommodation. The only contemporary passenger ship running a passenger service was the German Zeppelin ZL127 Graf Zeppelin. Even then the Zeppelin could only accommodate 20 passengers which were situated in a stretched forward gondola beneath the hull of the ship. With the R100 and R101, the utilisation of interior space was a first of its kind to be used to this degree. The R101 could boast two decks of space, a dining room which could seat 60 people at a time, and a smoking room which could seat 20. The promenades showed off amazing views and, compared to the noisy smelly and tiring journey in contemporary aircraft, the airships were the height of luxury, comparable to that of the greatest ocean liners.

The R101's trial flight

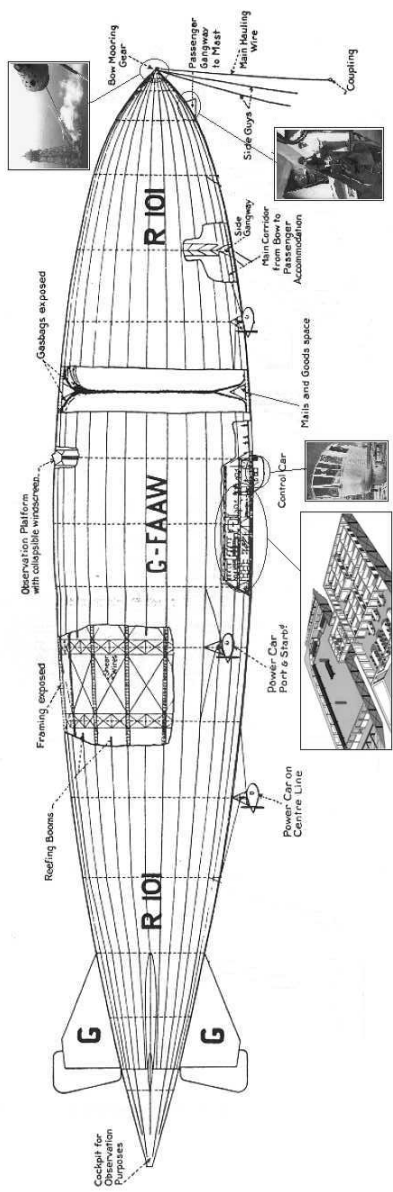
After the success of the R100 flight, the pressure was on to fly the R101 to another commercial destination, Karachi, with the then Air Minister, Lord Thompson of Cardington, due to board. The target date of 26 September 1930 to leave the shed was on course but was then delayed due to wind until the morning of 1 October. At 6.30am the R101 emerged from the shed and was secured to her mast. (Coincidentally the R100 was removed from shed 2 and moved to shed 1 where she was due to have the same extra bay installed as her sister ship. It would be the last time the outside world would see the R100.)

A permit to fly was issued for the R101 while a full report on the ship would be submitted later, a draft having been prepared. She slipped her mast at 4.30pm, the plan being to fly a 24-hour endurance flight to complete engine and other trials. It was agreed by the flying officers, Reginald Coleman and Major Herbert Scott, that, if they were satisfied during this flight, the time would be curtailed to less than 24 hours.

The ship left Cardington, headed south to London then turned east following the Thames and out across Essex. She spent the night over the North Sea. Due to the early failure of an engine cooler in the forward starboard engine it was impossible for the ship to make a full speed trial. Despite this the flight conditions were noted as 'perfect' and the ship behaved well. Those on board noted that the atmosphere was quiet and serene. While there was insufficient time to make formal reports, because the ship had handled so exceptionally well it was agreed to curtail the flight and head home to Cardington. The R101 returned to the mast at 09.20 on Thursday, 2 October, having been in the air for just over 17 hours in smooth flying conditions. In the evening the crew discussed the forthcoming flight to India and agreed they would fly at normal cruising speed, rather than at maximum output, due to the lack of trials in adverse weather conditions.

Two further days of preparation then took place and, following information that the weather conditions over Northern France were cloudy with moderate winds, it was decided to depart on Saturday, 4 October, between 4pm and 8pm.

General Plan of the R101



The R101's final flight

At 6.24pm the R101 commenced its journey to India in misty fine rain and darkness. The lights from the promenade deck and searchlights from the mooring mast illuminated the vast ship as it rose into the air. First stop was to be Egypt and as the ship was fully laden with fuel it was noted that 4 tons of ballast had to be dropped before the R101 would gain height. The ship headed west to Bedford to salute her home town before heading south-east towards London at a cruising height of 1,500ft. A wireless message sent at 8.21pm stated:

‘Over London. All well. Moderate rain. Base of low clouds 1,500ft. Wind 240 degrees [west south-west] 25mph. Course now set for Paris. Intend to proceed via Paris, Tours, Toulouse and Narbonne.’

Further messages were sent at regular intervals stating everything was fine, despite heavy rain and a strong south-easterly wind. The course was then set for Paris, with the Channel crossing taking two hours. At 11.36pm the ship reported: ‘Crossing French coast at Pointe de St Quentin. Wind 245 true. 35mph.’

It was estimated that the R101 was at a height of between 700 to 800ft, but, after First Officer Atherstone took over, the coxswain was ordered not to go below 1,000ft.

At 00.18 the R101 sent the following message:

‘To Cardington from R101.

2400GMT 15 miles SW of Abbeville speed 33 knots. Wind 243 degrees [West South-West] 35 miles per hour. Altimeter height 1,500 feet. Air temperature 51degrees Fahrenheit. Weather – intermittent rain. Cloud nimbus at 500 feet. After an excellent supper our distinguished passengers smoked a final cigar and having sighted the French coast have now gone to bed to rest after the excitement of their leave-taking. All essential services are functioning satisfactorily. Crew have settled down to watch-keeping routine.’

Further directional signals were sent at regular intervals with the last one sent and acknowledged at 01.51.

At 0.200 the watch changed and again all seemed well with the ship with all the engines performing as expected.

The R101 had now reached Beauvais and was passing to the east of the town. It was then that disaster struck. Witness reports indicated that

the ship was beginning to have difficulty with the gusting winds and began a long and steep dive. It certainly caused the engineers on board to lose balance and to cause furniture in the smoking room to slide.

The probable cause was that a rent had occurred in the upper part of the rain-soaked nose, allowing the gas bags to become exposed and damaged by the high winds over the notorious Beauvais Ridge. The loss of gas would have led to the loss of control of the ship and with the sudden gusts of wind, the nose would have been forced down.

Modern day calculations estimate that the downward angle of this dive would have been 18 degrees during a time span of 1½ minutes. The crew in the control car would have tried to correct this and in fact managed to steady the ship. However, the elevator control was 'hard up' and the nose was just 3 degrees above the horizon, thus confirming the serious loss of gas from the forward bags. The Captain rang the order to reduce or even stop the engines. The Chief Coxswain, Hunt, was said to have stated: 'We're down lads', indicating that the ship would try an emergency landing.

At this point the R101 went into a second dive and as this was at a height of just 530 feet with a ship 777 feet long the outcome was inevitable. Despite releasing the emergency ballast the ship dipped once again and the nose impacted with the ground. The official inquiry later noted that the R101's ground speed had reduced to almost that of a perfect landing and that the forward speed of the ship was just 13.8mph. The ship bounced and moved forward about 60ft before settling on the ground. Despite this, on impact a fire broke out, probably caused by the starboard engine coming into contact with escaping gas from the forward gas bags. The fire consumed the whole ship within seconds with each gasbag exploding in turn.

Of the 54 crew and passengers only 8 men were able to escape from the wreck.

Foreman Engineer J H Leech was sitting in the smoking room at the time of the impact and was saved by the bulkhead of the accommodation collapsing from above and being held by the top of the settee in the smoking room. He escaped through the side of the damaged wooden walls of the smoking room and out through the framework and cloth outer cover.

Engineers A V Bell, J H Binks, A J Cook and V Savory were in their respective engine cars which were positioned outside the main hull, and

when the ship landed were able to escape through the windows of the engine cars and run away from the ship.

Rigger W G Radcliffe survived the crash and worked his way out of the wreckage but later died in hospital from his injuries.

Wireless Operator A Disley, who was asleep in the crew's quarters, was awakened as his bunk was positioned in the same forward direction as the ship, and thus awoke when he felt the curious angle of the first dive. He felt the ship come out of the first dive and then come to an even keel. At this point Disley heard the telegraphs ring out in the ship. The electrical switchboard was close at hand and he started to get out of his bunk to cut off the electric current to the ship. There were two field switches and he recalls 'tripping' one of them. He did this as he knew that, in any aircraft crash, there may be the chance of fire. During this action the ship took its second dive and he was just about to trip the second switch when the impact was heard and the lights went out all over the ship. Seconds later, like Leech, he was fighting his way through the wreckage to the outside of the ship.

The last survivor was Rigger Church, who later died of his injuries, three days after the crash. He was interviewed and gave the following statement:

'I would consider the flight rather bumpy, but not exceptionally so. The second watch had just come on and I was walking back when the ship took up a steep diving attitude. At this moment I received an order to release the emergency forward water ballast [$\frac{1}{2}$ ton in the nose] but before I could get there the crash came.'

The R101 came to rest with the forward part of her nose in a wood of small trees and the rest of her hull in a meadow.

The wreck lay there until 1931 becoming the haunt for air accident investigators and day trippers to see the spectacle of the near perfect skeleton of the once largest airship in the world. Scrap contractors from Sheffield, who were specialists in stainless steel, were employed to salvage what they could.

Full state honours were given to the victims with special trains laid on to transport them from the crash site to the Channel. The coffins were later loaded on to HMS *Tempest* at Boulogne and then carried to Dover where a special train took the bodies to Victoria Station. From here they were carried to Westminster Hall at the Palace of Westminster where they

were laid in state. The mourning public waited many hours to file past the coffins to show respect. A memorial service was held at St Paul's Cathedral on Saturday, 11 October, after which the coffins were taken by train to Bedford, then they were walked the two miles to Cardington Village, where a space had been prepared in the village churchyard.

All 48 dead were finally laid to rest in a special grave, a small service taking place with distinguished guests and a fly-past by the RAF. In 1931 a memorial tomb was completed and inscribed with the names of the victims and still dominates the tiny churchyard to this day.

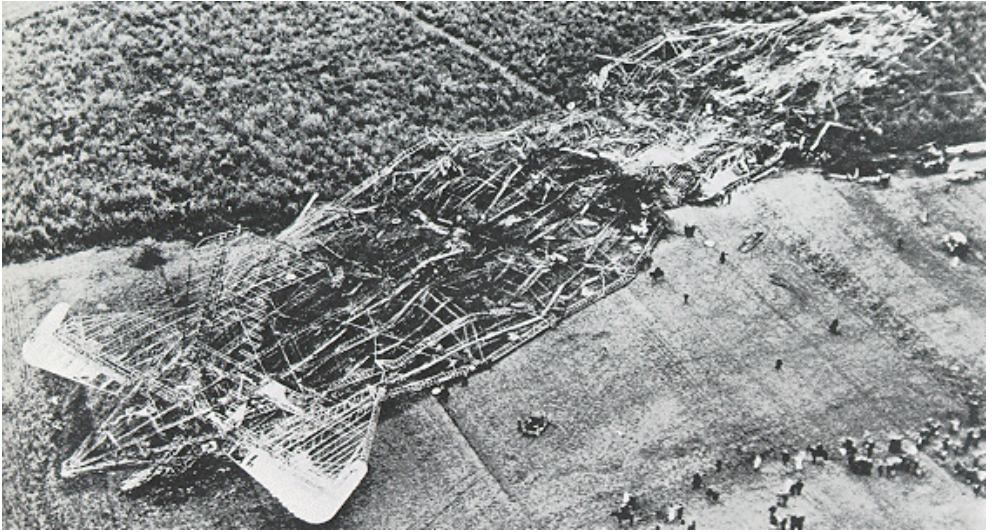
The official report into the disaster blamed the collapse of the forward gasbag, caused by a failure in the fabric covering of the envelope nose.

The disaster effectively ended Britain's airship development. The passengers on the R101 were the champions of the Imperial Airship Scheme and it died with them.

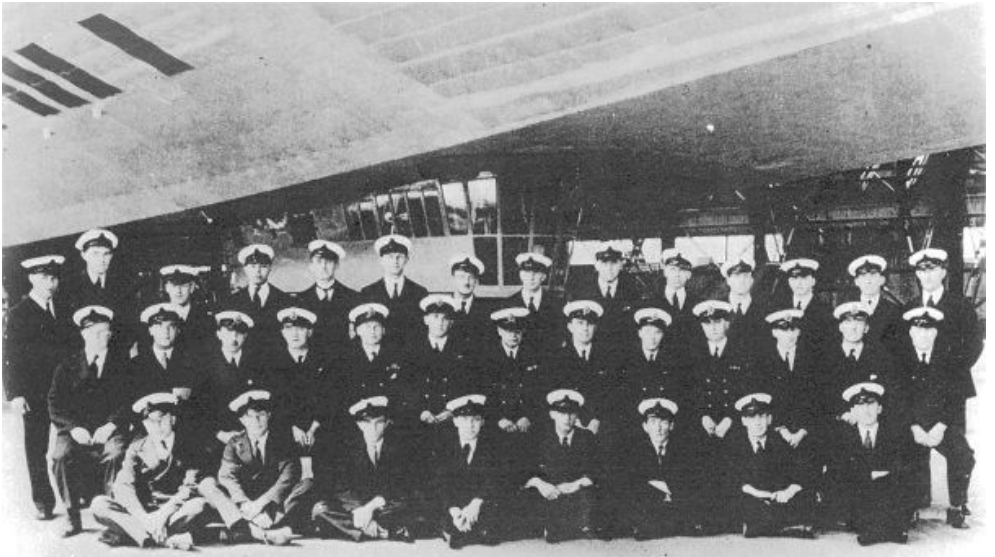
Unfortunately, the R100, the success story of the venture, was overshadowed by the R101 disaster. After long and hard deliberation, the British Government decided they could not afford to keep the project in place and many of the staff at Cardington were made redundant. The R100 was therefore sold for scrap and work began to dismantle her on 16 November 1931. The work was finished in February 1932. The interior fixtures and fittings were sold off and the framework was sold as scrap for £427.

A presence was, however, kept at Cardington and some 300 people continued to be employed there. Even though the ship was scrapped, the sheds and workshops were still kept in place for future plans.

JOHN THURSTON



The wreck of the R101 after the crash on 5 October 1930 in Beauvais



The crew of the R101 (courtesy [www.roll of honour.com](http://www.rollofhonour.com))



Conference delegates get their just desserts (Stuart Antrobus)