



Alan Samuel Butler (1898-1987)

Alan Samuel Butler was a director of Aerofilms Ltd and a long-serving chairman of De Havilland Aircraft Company Ltd; his financial assistance in the early days of de Havilland was its salvation. He had a taste for adventure and was attracted to flying from an early age - one of the wealthy young men infected by the 1920s flying virus – and also had a keen interest in sailing.

Alan Butler was born at Henbury Hill, near Westbury-on-Trym, on the 22nd November 1898, son of Samuel and Marion Anderson Butler (née Cochran). Samuel's family had made their money through businesses involved in tar distillation, coal and coke production in Gloucester and in Bristol and he described himself as a Patent Fuel Manufacturer in the 1901 Census (1901 England Census).

Alan was educated at Durnford Preparatory School near Swanage, and Eton College before beginning his brief military career at the Royal Military College, Sandhurst and joining the Coldstream Guards. The armistice was signed just before he was drafted to France and 1919 saw him stationed on Wimbledon Common, close to Colonel G L P Henderson's flying school at Hounslow, where he learned to fly in a Mono Avro. He gained his Royal Aero Club Aviators' Certificate, No 7193, at Bristol Flying School on 20th February 1921, flying a Bristol Biplane (Great Britain, Royal Aero Club Aviators' Certificates, 1910-1950).

In 1921 he ordered a private aircraft, built to his own specification, from de Havilland, a DH37 272, RR engine, which he called Sylvia. He thought highly of the men he had dealt with at de Havilland and asked if they could do with some extra capital. His investment enabled the company to buy the Stag Lane

premises, a turning point for them. Butler became Chairman of de Havilland in 1923, a role he held until his retirement in 1970 (*The Times*, 1987).

He had business interests in Newfoundland and, in 1921, formed the Aerial Survey Company (Newfoundland) with Frederick Sidney Cotton and Victor Sydney Bennett; they carried out aerial survey work and also pioneered the first air mail service in Newfoundland. In 1923 the Aircraft Operating Company Ltd (AOC) had been founded by Alan Butler together with Harold Hemming, who were managing Director and Chairman of the Board respectively. In 1925 Alan Butler became a Director of Aerofilms Ltd when the company was taken over by AOC (*Flight*, 1929:1344).

In the 1920s and 1930s he travelled extensively. In 1924 he made an extensive tour of Europe in his plane, Sylvia 1, over a period of five to six weeks and covering a distance of approximately 4,500 miles. In the same year he visited Australia to assess the feasibility of manufacturing aircraft locally. He crossed the Atlantic several times a year by boat and in 1925 sailed from Portsmouth to St Johns, Newfoundland in his 250 ton ketch, also called Sylvia in 12 days, the shortest ever crossing in a boat of this size (*The Times*, 1925). In December 1928 he broke the World Speed Record for a two-seater light aircraft in a DH Gypsy Moth, reaching a speed of 119.84 mph with his wife Lois as his passenger (*The Times*, 1929). In the same year he financed Aerofilms Ltd's first overseas expedition and also ordered a Gloster Air Survey Bi-Plane, built to his own specification, which he flew to Bulawayo for Major Cochran-Patrick's survey of Northern Rhodesia in 1930 (*The Times*, 1930). In 1940 he joined the Airspeed board when the company became a subsidiary of de Havilland and by 1945 he had become Chairman of Airspeed. He retired from these roles in 1950.

Alan Butler married Lois Reid in 1925 - she shared his passion for aerial thrills and gained her Royal Aero Club Aviators' Certificate, No 8634, in June 1929 at de Havilland Flying School in a DH Moth. She was also a first-class international skier, taking part in the 1936 Winter Olympic Games with the Canadian team. Lois died in August 1970, following a heart attack while on holiday in Piraeus, Greece and their son, David, who was born in 1927 and became an Olympic sailor as well as a politician in Rhodesia, died in a road accident in Belgium in 1972. There was also a daughter from Lois's first marriage (deBois, 2004).

Alan Butler was a generous benefactor of de Havilland's social and educational amenities and, after his retirement in 1950, he was active in local affairs, serving as a Justice of the Peace (JP) and as president of the South Bedfordshire Conservative Association for many years. In 1974 he was awarded the Gold Medal of The Royal Aero Club, for life-long connection with the aircraft industry as chairman of de Havilland, director of the de Havilland Engine Company and de Havilland Engine Company of South America and as vice chairman of Airspeed (*The Times*, 1987).

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