



### Claude Friese-Greene (1898-1943)

*Claude Friese-Greene was a cinematographer who flew early sorties for Aerofilms Ltd to make films. Described as the company's technical manager, he is pictured sitting in AIRCO DH9B K-109 carrying a camera (detail below), posing with Francis Wills and Jerry Shaw in July 1919 as though about to fly off on a mission.*

***“Good heavens! It's Paris!”***



Claude Friese-Greene posing with cine camera on the 11<sup>th</sup> July 1919.  
AFL03/Aerofilms/C12930 © English Heritage.Aerofilms Collection.

Claude was born in Fulham on the 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1898, son of William and Edith Friese- Greene, the first of five children (1911 England Census). His father William was an inventive cinematographer who, by 1905, had a working system that could create the impression of colour in moving film. This technical background and the financial difficulties that beset the family as William tried to

take advantage of his innovation (Carpenter, 2004), set the tone for Claude's early years and his future professional life.

Bankrupt in 1910 and absent from the family home in Hove, Sussex, for the 1911 Census (1911 England Census) because he was in America testifying in the Edison monopoly case (Carpenter, 2004), William returned to England and in 1912 had the fourteen year-old Claude assisting with his development of his two-colour film process. The family was in poverty at the outbreak of the First World War and Claude joined the 1/14 Lancers (London Scottish) on the 21<sup>st</sup> October 1915, aged sixteen (BBC History 2007; War Office, WO 339/135065).

Claude experienced eight months with the British Expeditionary Force in France, with five months in the line as a Lewis Gunner. He was injured by a gun-shot to his right foot (War Office, WO 339/135065). Back in England, he married twenty-three year-old Chrissie Barnes on the 7<sup>th</sup> October 1917 (London, England: Marriages and Banns 1754-1921), with whom he went on to have two children. Shortly after the wedding and back in France, in November Claude applied to be admitted to an Officer Cadet Unit, stating his aim of joining the Royal Flying Corp as a pilot. The application was successful and Claude shipped back to England again in early January 1918, being found fit for training in Egypt at an Air Board later that month (War Office, WO 339/135065). Between July 1918 and January 1919 he completed his training at different stations although he appears to have spent most of December 1918 in hospital in Cairo (Air Ministry, AIR 76/193). He had been granted a temporary commission from Flight Cadet to Second Lieutenant on the 22<sup>nd</sup> October 1918 (*Flight*, 1919:254). Following his return to England in March 1919, he was transferred to the unemployed list as of the 17<sup>th</sup> April 1919 (Air Ministry, AIR 76/193; *London Gazette*, 1919:5047).

A number of developments must have occurred after the end of the Great War and leading into Spring 1919 as Aerofilms Ltd was pulled together by Francis Wills. It is not known, however, how Wills came into contact with Claude. Wills described Aerofilms Ltd enterprises with Claude, “In film production we engaged fleets of aircraft, parachutists, yachts, complete trains and a station. Provided aerial thrillers for weekly serial films then in vogue when the daring Eddie Polo was the star and we had to find for him a substitute for every stunt.” (Wills, 1938).

“Advertorials” in contemporary trade magazines (Blom Archive Collection) throw some light on Aerofilms Ltd’s business intentions at this time, closely reflecting the Articles of the company’s Memorandum of Association of the 9<sup>th</sup> May 1919 (Board of Trade, BT31/33802/154995). Likely to have been written by Claude given their enthusiastic tone - evangelising cinematography - they include promotional descriptions of the firm’s capabilities,

“Aerofilms Limited, make it possible for producers to introduce aerial incidents into film productions. Their sole job in life is to supply aeroplanes, aerodromes, pilots, cameramen, and cameras solely for aerial cinematography, in which there is so much practically unlimited scope for rousing public interest, excitement, and quite a new line from the photographic point of view...It is interesting to note that Aerofilms Limited, have under construction an immense studio for the purpose of taking aerial interiors for trick work, etc.” (Blom Archive Collection).

As well as claiming that they could arrange special stunts including dog-fights, and would even be prepared to set fire to an aircraft in flight (with the pilot parachuting to safety), these articles are striking for their emphasis on cinematography – rather than the stills photography for which Aerofilms Ltd is known. Combined with the Memorandum of Association which also describes

the firm's principal objectives in moving film, these imply that Claude had a strong influence during the time that the company was being formed. There is no evidence, however, that the "immense studio" mentioned was actually built. Claude's description of a flight over the Channel made in December 1919, presumably for Aerofilms Ltd's intended film "From London to Paris by Air", is suggestive of a limited grasp of the technical problems that the young science of air photography was grappling with. The decision to proceed on one of the shortest days of the year, and in very poor weather conditions, demonstrates a disregard for the capabilities of the equipment of the day,

"During the week before Christmas, Aerofilms Limited made the trip across to France in order to film the route from the air....Low clouds made the take off rather bumpy. Still, it is filmed, looking back over the tail. Gradually Hounslow and the big white letters "Customs" on the tops of the sheds pass out of sight.... France is sighted just as a miserable drizzling rain begins, which stings the face of the camera man like a thousand pin-pricks. ...It is now 2.15 p.m. Right ahead appears a great circle of smoky mist. 2.16! The mist begins to look like a town. 2.17? No? What the ...? 2.18! Good heavens! It's Paris! A fairly low flight round the big city enables a film to be taken. Then, for the first time, the engine is shut off. At 2.20 we land at Le Bourget. London-Paris in 1 hour and 50 minutes, and a fine picture version of the route secured into the bargain for everyone to see some day!" (Blom Archive Collection).

Only one piece of Claude's work known to have been made with Aerofilms Ltd survives: a ten minute fragment of "Across England in an Aeroplane" (an aerial precursor to Claude's "Open Road" of 1924-6), shot in 1920 (Friese-Greene, 1920a). This silent film features AIRCO DH9B G-EAQN, a three-seater built in January 1920 and carrying Aircraft Transport and Travel Co livery. Perhaps Jerry Shaw or one of the other on-hire pilots known to Aerofilms Ltd and jobbing for this small civil aviation firm (which tried to make commercially-viable cross-

Channel flights) had been chartered along with the aircraft for the job. Film titles starring Eddie Polo – the star mentioned by Francis Wills – that came out at this time include *King of the Circus* and *The Vanishing Dagger* of 1920 and *Do or Die* and *The Secret Four* of 1921 (Internet Movie Database 1990-2012). In addition to sequences for serialised movies and short items destined for newsreel such as footage of the R33 flying over the 1921 Derby (*Flight*, 1921:392), Claude made a group of films of Cornish scenes in 1920 that included aerial footage for his “Beauty of Britain” project; “Coves and Caves” used aerial views of Trevoise Head and “Portals of the Atlantic” followed the coastline from Newquay to Pentire from the air (Friese-Greene, 1920b, c).

Claude’s parents both died in mid-1921 and it may be that this prompted Claude to put an end to his relationship with Aerofilms Ltd. At this time he went out on his own account to develop further his father’s colour film processes, filing a patent for “Improvements connected with Colour Cinematography” (BBC History, 2007). Unfortunately his work during the first half of the 1920s met with disappointment and he devoted the rest of his career to photography for other directors on some 56 films (British Film Institute, 2003-2012). He is now perhaps best known for his film “Open Road” following its conservation by the British Film Institute and re-presentation by the BBC in 2006. He died in Islington in 1943 (England and Wales, Death Index).

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