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HESTON PHOENIX IN AUSTRALIA

Only one example of the Heston Phoenix was registered in Australia.

By Geoff Goodall



Heston Phoenix VH-AJM showing titles *The South Australian Centenary Flight 1936* along the fuselage trim line and *C. J. Melrose Glenelg South Australia* on the port cowling.

John Hopton Collection

Young Adelaide pilot Charles James "Jimmy" Melrose captured the imagination of the Australian public during 1934 with a series of record flights flying solo in his DH.80A Puss Moth VH-UQO named *My Hildergarde* in honour of his mother. Born into the wealthy pastoralist Melrose family, he had a fascination for flying, sailing and navigation, and gained his pilot licence at age 19 with the Royal Aero Club of South Australia at Parafield. James requested an advance from his family trust account prior to his 21st birthday in order to purchase his own aircraft VH-UQO from de Havilland Aircraft Pty Ltd at Sydney.

In early August 1934 Melrose broke the around-Australia record, then on his 21st birthday, 13 September 1934, departed from Parafield for England to take part in the MacRobertson sponsored Centenary Air Race from Mildenhall to Melbourne. His solo flight to England set a new Australia-England record of 8 days 9 hours. With race number 16, he flew solo in the air race, gaining third place in the handicap section with a time of 10 days 16 hours to Melbourne. He returned home to Adelaide to a hero's welcome. In December that year he made the first non-stop flight from Adelaide to Tasmania, followed by a record time from Tasmania to Sydney.



James Melrose with his DH.80 Puss Moth VH-UQO.

Civil Aviation Historical Society of SA

In January 1935 he sailed to England to study blind flying and navigation at Airwork Service Training at Hamble, Hampshire before purchasing a new Percival Gull Four VH-UVH which he named *Westley* after his mother's middle name. His flight home in the Gull was planned as an attempt on the England-Australia solo record. However while over the Bay of Bengal at night on 8 November 1935 he sighted Sir Charles Kingsford Smith's Lockheed Altair *Lady Southern Cross* overtaking him, also bound for Australia. When Melrose arrived at Singapore he learnt that Kingsford Smith has been posted missing, and realising he was the last person to have seen the Altair, Melrose abandoned his record attempt to return to Burma to join the air search, during which he made a forced landing on a beach in Siam. Unfortunately no trace of Kingsford Smith's aircraft was found.

Soon after reaching Australia, the Percival Gull was wrecked when low cloud and rain forced Melrose to make a precautionary landing near Goulburn NSW on 3 December 1935. He suffered cuts and severe sprains to his feet. While recuperating from his injuries at home in Adelaide, Jimmy Melrose formulated plans for an Adelaide-Melbourne air service and a floatplane service Adelaide-Kangaroo Island. To finance these plans he decided to commence with an *Adelaide to Anywhere Air Taxi* charter business using a high performance aircraft.

After looking at all British aircraft then available he placed an order for a new 5 seater *Heston Phoenix*, the first design of the recently formed Heston Aircraft Co Ltd at Heston Aerodrome, Hounslow, Middlesex. This company had been established in 1934 by Sir Norman James Watson to acquire the assets of Comper Aircraft Ltd at Heston, where the final production of 45 *Comper Swift* sport and racing aircraft had been built. Heston Aircraft Co had no interest in developing three prototype Comper single seater designs, the *Streak*, *Kite* and *Mouse*, and Nicholas Comper and his Directors resigned. This allowed Heston Aircraft Co to pursue plans to market a range of new aircraft types under Chief designer George Cornwall, previously with Saunders Roe and Hawker Aircraft. His first design was a luxury 5 seat cabin high wing monoplane, named "Phoenix" to signify its rising from the old Comper name.

The *Heston Type 1 Phoenix* touring aircraft featured hydraulic inward-folding retractable undercarriage fitting into a lower stub wing, which also acted as walkways for access to the cabin through two car type doors on both sides. The airframe was of wood construction, with ply and fabric covering, although the wing leading edges and ailerons had metal skins. A deliberate design decision for no flaps or slots to reduce costs was vindicated by a comfortable landing speed of 65 knots. The 200hp DH Gipsy Six Series 1 engine driving a fixed pitch wooden propeller produced a good performance and contemporary reports praised low noise level in the cabin and generous leg room. Advertising stated that with 5 passengers, 100 pounds of luggage and fuel for 500 miles range, the Phoenix could cruise at 125 mph.

The prototype Phoenix G-ADAD was first flown on 18 August 1935 by company test pilot Edmund Gwyn Hordern. After certification trials at RAF Martlesham Heath, Certificate of Airworthiness was issued on 1st October. The prototype became the company demonstrator and the first production aircraft was allocated to Melrose. The Australian registration sequence, which was at that time rigidly applied by Civil Aviation Branch, had reached the VH-UU series, but record breaking pilot H. F. Broadbent and Melrose had both requested personal registrations for new aircraft. No doubt influenced by their popularity, on 14 January 1936 the CAB allocated two out of sequence markings "as a special case": VH-AHB for Broadbent's new DH.85 Leopard Moth and VH-AJM for the Heston Phoenix.

In early January Melrose at home in Adelaide received a letter from Heston Aircraft advising that they would be despatching his Phoenix by sea to Australia in February and would not be available from Sydney wharves until April. However 1936 was South Australia's 100th birthday of the colony and grand celebrations were being planned. Young Melrose decided he would make a personal contribution to the Centenary celebrations by flying the new Phoenix from England to promote the occasion.

Centenary Goodwill Flight

Melrose cabled England stating that now wished to fly his Phoenix to Australia. On 16 January 1936 in Adelaide, his diary recorded his pleasure at receiving a telegram from Heston advising him that VH-AJM would be painted on his aircraft in the factory. It was completed in a light green colour, his mother's favourite colour, with lettering outlined in black, with silver wings.

He sailed from Adelaide for England on 30 January on board the Blue Funnel Line SS *Nestor* to take delivery of the Heston Phoenix. He took with him boxes SA Centenary pamphlets and publicity material that he would distribute on his flight back in the Phoenix. It was a leisurely voyage, with stops at Perth where he visited Maylands aerodrome, Durban, Cape Town and Canary Islands. He saw the sights of Durban and Cape Town from the air by hiring Moths to take solo flights, before the *Nestor* reached Liverpool on 14 March 1936. The very next day Melrose inspected his Phoenix at the factory at Heston and two days later was taken for a flight in the prototype Phoenix G-ADAD

VH-AJM made its first test flight at Heston on 24 March 1936. Melrose was living in London making preparations for the delivery flight at Australia House and the Royal Aero Club and attended functions for the opening of the South Australian Centenary. He visited Heston regularly for more flying in G-ADAD, a Monospar and his own VH-AJM. On 30 March he took friends for a local flight in VH-AJM. His diary records how pleased he was with the aircraft and its roomy cabin with five upholstered seats and carpeting. He had placed advertisements in *The Times* newspaper for passengers for the flight to Australia, but having received no responses, he prepared for another solo long distance flight.

Melrose spent several days at Heston preparing his aircraft and an uncomfortable day swinging the compass in heavy rain. He intended to depart England on 4 April, but was delayed by poor weather with strong winds. Despite a crowd of well-wishers, he decided to delay and put the Phoenix back in the hangar. Two days later when winds had dropped, he departed Heston for Lympe, Kent on the southern coast, which would be his customs departure point. While refuelling at Lympe he inadvertently struck a front window of the cabin with his shoe causing a crack, so he returned the same day to Heston for repair. Back at Lympe the aircraft received minor damaged again when a wheel fairing on the undercarriage was bent. Disappointed, he returned to Heston yet again.

Finally departing Lympe at 5.15 in the morning of 9 April 1936, he was farewelled by the Agent-General for South Australia and his uncle N. Pemberton Billing, founder of the Supermarine Aviation Company. The flight was used to promote South Australian Centenary celebrations and leaflets advertising the celebrations were carried and distributed en route. The aircraft had *The South Australian Centenary Flight 1936* painted in silver on the fuselage. The nose cowling carried *C. J. Melrose Glenelg South Australia* on the port side and on the starboard side the name *Billing*, in recognition of his uncle and also his mother's maiden name Hildergarde Westley Billing, who had financed her son's aviation ventures.

Flying via Marseilles, Naples, Athens, Baghdad, Basra, Abbadan, Karachi, Jodphur, Calcutta, Akyab, Penang, Singapore, Lombok, he slept each night in the cabin. After flying the long hop across the Timor Sea which he described as *"a pleasant crossing"*, Melrose reached Darwin on 23 April, then he continued via stops at Newcastle Waters, Alice Springs and Oodnadatta, before reaching Adelaide at 4pm on 25 April which was the Anzac Day public holiday. He was welcomed at Parafield Aerodrome by a crowd of 8,000 citizens, the Lord Mayor of Adelaide and a representative of the Premier of South Australia. Trying to meet the publicised arrival time that afternoon, he said in a radio interview *"I tried to hold the plane back a bit but it was no good. She simply would not be held. I throttled back, lowered my wheels and hung about for some time. I have a perfect aeroplane....it is one of the latest products of British aeronautical brains... it is luxuriously appointed... including a radio receiving set."*

The first charter flight for his new aircraft was at the request of the SA Premier who asked Melrose to continue to promote the SA Centenary and the planned Brisbane-Adelaide Centenary Air Race to be held in December that year. With passenger Mr. H. Plumridge from the SA Centenary Air Race Committee, Melrose departed Adelaide for Melbourne on 30 April at the start of a promotional tour visiting Sydney, Newcastle, Grafton, Brisbane, Coffs Harbour, Canberra, Launceston, Hobart and Mount Gambier before returning to Parafield on 13 May 1936. The SA Centenary was promoted at each stop and pamphlets handed out.

VH-AJM had been flown on the delivery and early Australian flights under its British CofA issued at the Heston factory. On 1st May 1936 it was formally added to the Australian Register. Several charter flights were made, taking a lady from Adelaide to Melbourne on 15 May, Melrose returning next day via a stop at Hamilton Victoria where he handed out Centenary pamphlets.

On 30 May Melrose joined several other Royal Aero Club of SA members flying from Parafield to Kingscote on Kangaroo Island SA for a casual outing. He flew the Phoenix, taking a passenger Mr. Jack Sands of the Shell Oil Company who had been an Australian Flying Corps pilot during WWI. His log book records "*Bad landing there*" because he did not see telegraph wires across the approach path and had to pull up to avoid them, followed by a heavy landing.

The untimely end

A long-distance charter request to fly from Melbourne to Darwin came from Mr. Alexander G. Campbell, a mining engineer and director of several mining companies. Campbell wanted to inspect goldmining areas around Pine Creek NT, after picking up two associates in Adelaide and another at Tennant Creek.

Melrose positioned VH-AJM from Parafield to Essendon on 30 June accompanied by his mother, who was to stay in Melbourne while he flew the charter to Darwin. The Phoenix was housed in the Hart Aircraft Company hangar and he planned to depart Melbourne on Saturday 4 July 1936 but steady rain and low cloud forced Melrose to postpone departure. The weather was little improved the following morning. James Hart of Hart Aviation Co, in whose hangar the Phoenix was parked, told the enquiry that he had phoned Melrose at his city hotel to advise him not to proceed saying the weather conditions were "abominable". Melrose had replied that he would "give it a go".

On 5th July 1936 Melrose departed Essendon Aerodrome at 8.10am with his passenger Mr. Campbell, bound for Adelaide. Melrose had told onlookers that he was determined to reach Oodnadatta by last light that day. Soon afterwards the aircraft was heard passing Melton, 20 miles west of Melbourne but abnormal engine noise and a loud cracking sound brought people on the ground outside in the rain to look for the aircraft - which was seen to fall from the cloud base with port wing broken away. The fuselage fell at the base of a large gum tree in a rock-strewn paddock alongside the Melton Creek, south of the town. The engine had torn itself from the fuselage and sections of the aircraft were scattered over 2 kilometres. Melrose and his passenger had fallen from the disintegrating cockpit and were killed instantly on impact. Melrose's wristwatch was stopped at 8.34 am.

Police were called in from Melbourne to keep crowds back and leave the accident scene undisturbed. Detectives and Air Accident Investigation Committee members inspected the scene. The 3pm bodies were removed at 3pm by a Bacchus Marsh undertaker. Later in the day Mrs. Melrose was brought to the site and was comforted by the wife of the Melton police constable. The wreckage was collected the next day and taken by truck to Essendon Airport, however many small parts had been souvenired.

Charles James Melrose received a State Funeral on Tuesday 7 July 1936 at St Paul's Cathedral, Melbourne attended by over 100,000 people. The service coincided with a memorial service held in Adelaide. Australian Prime Minister Joseph Lyons said "*Australia loses a chivalrous young knight of the air. In his brief flying career he won considerable fame.*" James Melrose was only 26 years of age.

The Accidents Investigation Committee later determined that VH-AJM had suffered a structural failure, which began in the port mainplane. The investigation believed that the existing weather conditions had not produced turbulence severe enough to cause structural failure. It was likely that the aircraft was flying in cloud and excess strain was imposed on the airframe by the pilot's manoeuvres after becoming disorientated without any visual reference.

These findings generated conjecture among the aviation community in Australia and Britain. There was a suggestion that the structure failure could be traced back to the apparently minor damage suffered by an undercarriage fairing at Lympne prior to the flight to Australia.

Mr Jack Sands of the Shell Oil Company, who had been on board the Phoenix for the flight to Kangaroo Island five weeks earlier, reported that he heard a loud cracking noise above his head during

the heavy landing. He was concerned that the wing spar may have cracked but Melrose discounted his suggestion. However Sands shared his concerns with pilot Bill Maddocks who flew the Aero Club Miles Hawk VH-UA1 to Kangaroo Island that day.

. Although only six Heston Phoenix aircraft were built, no others suffered any structural problems and four British civil Phoenix were impressed into the RAF in 1940, one surviving the war to return to private flying as G-AESV until May 1952 when it crashed in the French Alps. The prototype Phoenix had been sold to Greece, where it was destroyed on the ground during Luftwaffe bombing of Athens in April 1941.

Heston Aircraft Company continued with other designs, including the high performance Type 5 Racer G-AFOK and a series of military prototypes to Air Ministry specifications. During WWII the company was fully occupied as a sub-contractor for RAF aircraft maintenance, particularly Spitfires, Walrus and Wellingtons. It also specialised in modification of US types to British service standards including P-47 Thunderbolt, Vultee Vigilant, Fairchild Argus and Vought Sikorsky Chesapeake. Post-war the company built a non-conventional all metal prototype for an Air Ministry Air Observation Post specification, but when the Air Ministry finally decided that the specification was met by the existing Auster AOP series, the company withdrew from aircraft manufacture and changed its name to Hestair Ltd, to operate as aeronautical and general engineers.

Heston Phoenix VH-AJM c/n 1/2 VH-AJM

- 24.3.36 First flight at Heston. The first production Heston Phoenix
- 10.3.36 British Export CofA issued to C. J. Melrose, Adelaide SA
- 9.4.36 Departed England on delivery flight to Adelaide, flown solo by James Melrose
- 25.4.36 Arrived Parafield
- 1.5.36 Added to Australian Civil Register: C.J. Melrose, Adelaide SA
- 5.7.36 Crashed Melton Vic after aircraft broke up in flight, Melrose killed
- 13.7.36 Struck-off Civil Register



Phoenix VH-AJM *Billing* with owner James Melrose in the cockpit, wearing coat and tie. Ed Coates Collection

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