



*The Walsh brothers with members of the Auckland Aeroplane Syndicate, family and other helpers. Vivian (with glasses) is seated at left, middle row. Leo is seated second from the right, middle row.*

MOTAT

When Vivian Walsh sputtered into the sky at Glenora Park, Papakura on February 5, 1911, he not only achieved New Zealand's first controlled, powered flight but he also created the country's first unofficial airport.

A portal to the air.

As he and his brother Leo would soon discover, an uneven grassy paddock was not the best way to become airborne – or to return to earth. It would be a very long journey indeed, but the transition process from Papakura paddock to fully-fledged International Airport had begun.

Real airports were still many years away so, in the interim, New Zealand's pioneer aviators had to improvise.

Auckland's first 'airports' were situated anywhere an aircraft could take off or land – paddocks, parks, racecourses and, naturally for an island nation, the harbour.

The Walsh brothers' first flight from Papakura in their Howard Wright Farman

biplane, *Manurewa* (Maori for 'soaring bird'), was an unqualified success – their aircraft rose 18m and travelled a distance of 365m. It was the culmination of several months' effort by many enthusiastic volunteers, including their sisters Veronica and Doreen Walsh who hand sewed the wing coverings from 50 square metres of fabric.



April 19, 1913. 'Wizard' Stone and the Bleriot monoplane airborne (just!) above the Auckland Domain.

Alexander Turnbull Library

However, when Vivian took off for his third flight a month later, the limitations of using a field as a runway became clear when part of *Manurewa's* undercarriage caught on an unseen depression in the ground. The plane somersaulted and was wrecked. Much to the spectators' surprise, Vivian escaped relatively unscathed.

Two years later, *Manurewa* was rebuilt and flown again by Australian aviator F.E. Sandford. This time, Avondale Racecourse made a more suitable airfield. Sandford managed one flight with a passenger, a Miss Lester, which ended with a forced landing in a New Lynn resident's back yard.

Sandford made a later attempt to fly *Manurewa* from Avondale to Alexandra

Park – a journey of some 10km, an extraordinary distance in those days. However, waterlogged wings meant that the attempt ended at the boundary fence. This time Sandford was left unconscious for several days.

The Auckland Domain provided the next improvised airport on April 19, 1913, when American 'Wizard' Stone actually managed to get a Bleriot monoplane into the air. The plane flew for 400m before engine problems forced him to make a rather undignified landing.

More success followed at Potter's Paddock (Alexandra Park) on January 17, 1914. At this venue, Joseph Hammond, New Zealand's first official government pilot, became the first person to fly over Auckland City. He did this in the *Britannia*,



Far left: W.S. Miller and F.E. Sandford (pilot) with the rebuilt *Manurewa* at Avondale Racecourse.

Left: January 1914. Joseph Hammond and the Bleriot monoplane *Britannia*.

Members of the New Zealand Flying School at Mission Bay with one of the Walsh brothers' flying boats. The instructor seated on the plane is the magnificently named Marmaduke Matthews.



a Bleriot monoplane donated to the New Zealand Government by the London Imperial Air Fleet Committee. Unfortunately, Hammond celebrated his success a little too enthusiastically, taking local showgirl and employee of the Royal Pantomime Company Miss Esme McLalland on a 'victory-lap' joyride. This adventure resulted in his dismissal and the return of the *Britannia* to England.

At the outbreak of World War I, private flying schools were established in Auckland and Christchurch to train pilots for the Royal Flying Corps. The Auckland initiative, known as the New Zealand Flying School, was established in 1915 by the Walsh brothers. The school's fleet of home-built and imported seaplanes was based at Mission Bay. Auckland's main

'airport' was now the Waitemata Harbour.

Pupils paid £100 each for an engineering course and flying lessons. Upon graduating, the Sub-lieutenants were qualified for active service and rebated £75 by the British Government.

As early aviator Leo White explained in his book *Wingspread*, "Flying tests were simple, all a pilot had to do on completion of dual instruction was to make turns over marks on the harbour and then volplane [glide with the engine cut off] to a good landing. Completion of this test enabled the pilot to carry a passenger right away.

"The old pusher engines, mostly 8-cylinder, V-type, water-cooled, were situated behind and above the pupil and instructor, who sat side by side in the

nose. Their only communication was by signs and a good deal of yelling. The cockpit was very bare of all those instruments which aid flying today. The panel had only a couple of indicators. The weight-on-the-seat-of-the-pants indicated a good or bad turn. Air speed indicators were not a part of the equipment. An artificial horizon for straight and level flying was provided by a taut piece of string from which a fluttering tape indicated drift!" (White, 1941, p. 45).

After the end of the war and up until 1921, New Zealand was in the extraordinary position of having 15 full-time pilots and 43 aircraft. The New Zealand Flying School turned to joyrides, mail carrying and passenger services to generate income. Surplus

planes from the war were cheap and pilots continued to use available waterways, paddocks or beaches as airfields.

New Zealand aviation pioneer George Bolt played a pivotal role in the Flying School, progressing quickly from trainee mechanic to flying instructor. On December 16, 1919, he flew the first official airmail service from Mission Bay to Dargaville in one of the school's Boeing and Westervelt floatplanes. Two years later, on October 4, 1921, with passengers Leo Walsh and Bob Johnson, Bolt also piloted the first Auckland to Wellington flight in the Vickers Supermarine Channel seaplane G-NZAI – a journey of some five hours and six minutes.

In that same year, Shorty Fowler and Bert Mercer made the first flight from Invercargill to Auckland in a DH (de Havilland) 9, sponsored by Creamoata porridge. The pair landed in a field at the foot of One Tree Hill.

In 1923, the post-war aviation boom came to an abrupt halt. The next five years would be a period of almost no development for New Zealand aviation – a combination of lack of Government support, economic difficulties and hesitance by the New Zealand public to adopt air travel as a means of transportation. New Zealand aviation had taken off before its time.



Circa 1920. A very rural Mission Bay. The Walsh Brothers' New Zealand Flying School was centred around the old Mission buildings on the beach.