

Wells Aviation

Before the First World War, Reginald Fairfax Wells was a studio potter and sculptor based in Chelsea and trading as R.F.Wells & Co.. However he was also interested in designing, building and flying model aircraft. With the outbreak of war his interest moved from potting, sculpting and model aeroplanes to the production of full scale aircraft, with the intention of supporting the war effort. In April 1916 Wells incorporated his business as the Wells Aviation Co. Ltd. and adapted his Chelsea pottery for aircraft production. The company built, or had the intention of building, Sopwith 1½ Strutters and, possibly, Airco D.H.9As under licence and it also acquired a licence to build the US Benoist flying boat. For the latter purpose, it is believed, the company established premises on the Swale in Kent. But by late 1916 the company had acquired land near Cobnor Point on which it established an aerodrome for land planes together with a slipway, into the adjacent creek, to service the needs of seaplanes. Also the company appears to have constructed buildings on the site as there is more than one reference in newspapers to the 'Cobnor Works' of the Wells Aviation Co. Ltd. and, in the 'employment' pages of the same, advertisements by the company seeking to recruit fitters and engineers to work at Cobnor.

By February 1917 the company had established the Wells Aviation School of Flying at Cobnor Aerodrome. The resident instructor was an Italian national, Gino Virgilio, who was recruited from the instructing team of the Beatty School, at Hendon Aerodrome, where he had learned to fly, and obtained his Pilot's Certificate, in December 1914. The following month "*The Aeroplane*" reported activities at Cobnor as follows:

'Since the opening of the Wells School at Cobnor, Mr Virgilio, the chief pilot, has been teaching pupils on 70-hp and 80-hp Gnomes. In spite of the unfavourable conditions he has been flying regularly with his pupils, so that they might have experience of flying in rough as well as calm weather. Each time he has been up with pupils they have flown at a height of from 3000 ft. to 4000 ft. and also across country. The Officer Commanding an aerodrome some miles away paid a visit to the School recently and was taken up for a trial flight. He was very pleased with the work done and intimated his satisfaction at the way in which the work of the School was being conducted. Before leaving he gave permission for Mr Virgilio to fly with his pupils from Cobnor to the aerodrome which he commanded, so that they might benefit by further experience of cross country flying.'

Despite this glowing report, the Wells Aviation School of Flying, and Gino Virgilio's employment by it, was to be short-lived. In the classified section of "*The Aeroplane*" of 2 May 1917 the following advertisement appeared:

'Gino Virgilio is open to accept engagement testing or teaching in consequence of the recent crisis with the company.'

The crisis, to which he referred, was reported in "*The Aeroplane*" on 13 June 1917. At a Creditors' Meeting, on 30 May 1917, it was resolved to put the Wells Aviation Co. Ltd. into Voluntary Liquidation and, one must presume, the Cobnor flying school failed with it. The meeting reported that the company's assets included:

- land at Cobnor valued at £7,885, less a mortgage of £3,900 (net £3,985), and a deposit on 50 acres of £240/10/- (this may have been land proposed to be acquired for the expansion of the aerodrome); and
- buildings at Chelsea and Cobnor valued at £34,135/9/7

The precise location of Cobnor Aerodrome, and what became of it after the failure of the company, remains to be ascertained. It seems most likely that the Liquidator sold the land and it reverted to agricultural use and the buildings there were sold, dismantled and moved off site – unless, of course, all or some of these were acquired and used by the Virgilio Aircraft Co. Ltd. and/or Gino Virgilio.

The Virgilio Aircraft Co. Ltd. is more enigmatic still than Cobnor Aerodrome and its user, the Wells Aviation School of Flying. It was reported in the “*Bognor Regis Observer*” of 24 July 1918 that G.Virgilio, F.Sadler and W.O.Stride had agreed to establish and carry on at Olympia, Chichester, a business manufacturing and dealing in aerial conveyances, etc., with a share capital of 5,000 £1 shares and its directors being T.S.Adcock, F.Sadler, R.Sadler, C.R.Shippam (presumably of meat and fish paste fame), W.O.Stride and G.Virgilio (managing), with E.J.Tranchant serving as secretary. It seems safe to say that the company failed in its aspiration to be a *manufacturer* of aerial conveyances (unless its products have slipped through the net of history), as no Virgilio aircraft are known, and an advertisement in the “*Bognor Regis Observer*” on 30 March 1921 has the company then describing itself as ‘The West Sussex General Builders, Contractors, Decorators and Sanitary Engineers’ (with its office and works at Olympia, Northgate, Chichester)! The company could, perhaps, have *dealt* with aircraft – vast numbers of surplus military aircraft flooded the market in the immediate post-war years – but one hardly can imagine it being able to compete with the likes of Airdisco (the Aircraft Disposal Co. Ltd.), at not far away Croydon. Whatever, presumably the company pursued the rather more mundane line of business as general builders etc. for over eight years before, on 28th August 1926, its members resolved to put it into Voluntary Liquidation.

Whilst, perforce, the Virgilio Aircraft Co. Ltd. may have had to give up its aspirations to be a player in the post-war aviation industry, curiously when Gino Virgilio (who also seems to have used the names Virgilio Virgili and Sirio Gino) is mentioned in the local press he is described as ‘an aviator’ (although this could have been a throwback to his previous career). But did he keep up aviation interests? In 1919 Virgilio also seems to have operated a motor car repair works at Chidham, close to his home in Hambrook (a house named ‘Malabar’ in Broad Road, now Hambrook Meadows Care Home). The precise location of these works is uncertain but it being stated that they were in Chidham and Chidham having been given as the postal address of the Cobnor Works of the Wells Aviation Co. Ltd., one cannot ignore the possibility that these were one and the same and that Virgilio had acquired these from the Liquidator of the Wells company (although Major Sydney Beale acquired the Cobnor Estate in 1918 - which, presumably, included the aerodrome site and infrastructure - at auction, the Liquidator of the Wells company presumably being the vendor). However, whilst Virgilio may not have acquired them, there must be the possibility that he could have rented them from Major Beale.