FÉDÉRATION AÉRONAUTIQUE INTERNATIONALE
Ballooning Commission

Hall of Fame

John Mackenzie Bacon

INDUCTED 2013

1846 – 1904.

Born 19 June 1846, Lambourn Woodlands, Berkshire England.
Rev John Bacon spent 10 years at Cambridge University (1865-1875), whilst there witnessed a balloon ascent – and vowed to make one at sometime. For 12 years (1876 to 1889), he was a Vicar in rural Berkshire.
In 1889 he gave up his clerical work to devote his time to Science, Astronomy, Photography and Aeronautics.

On 20 Aug 1888 he took his first balloon flight with Captain Dale of the Crystal Palace Company cheered on by 20,000 people at a temperance demonstration *"the most noteworthy feature of which seemed to be the very large number of intoxicated people taking part."*

In his amusing account he describes the flight over London landing in Hatfield; "*Just westwards of Blackfriars Bridge we shot across the Thames, and sailed above the chimney pots of Ludgate Hill close over St Paul's, whose cross was dwarfed to the humble level of the streets. There was no haze nor trace of smoke that lovely summer evening, and every detail of the great capital lay mapped out below us ... In two respects the appearance of the streets was remarkable. They were not nearly so closely crowded as to passengers they seem to be, and the traffic what there was seemed to scarcely moving. But one could grasp as never before what were the lungs of London and what her arteries. For Oxford Street had lost its title to the name; it was the Oxford highway now. The Northern tramways were the ways towards York and Cambridge, and Piccadilly was the Bath Road. And there were those great arteries that carry England's life-blood to and from her heart. We struck them now, three at once, over Euston, St Pancras, and King's Cross, along which latter line one of the company's splendid trains, going north, was trumpeting.*

At length we were out over open country...rich pastures everywhere, chequered with the last of a late hay harvest; on all sides, country houses with extensive parks. We could trace the plan of their lawns and gardens as we passed over. From one of these the barking of a dog came up with strange distinctness.

After some skilful manoeuvring we landed in a field ...then shouts were heard, and in a moment several rustics burst through the hedge and made for us, some in their shirt sleeves, one with a pitchfork, all intensely excited. Their leader, a man upwards of sixty, was simply beside himself. He had run as fast as the youngest, and was still out of breath to the point of collapse. Still with his hand to his chest he rattled on in broken sobs, "Who ever knowed a thing like this! To think of my living to see this happen on my farm! Lor, what a sight you was to be sure!" But our Captain had an eye for business, and cut in, "Look here; you've a horse and cart somewhere, and I must have it. What will you want?" "Ah! you may well ask. I'm broken-winded now for life, and you'll have to pay for that; then there's my hayrick getting wet, that'll be another five shillings"; and so on."

His other interests included microscopy, photography, astronomy, he conducted experiments on magnetism, and he and his 12-year-old son installed electric lights in the house. After his wife, Gertrude, died in 1894 he took his two children on a cycle tour of Belgium then in 1896 they travelled to Norway to view the total eclipse of the sun. They repeated their observations seventeen months later in India and in 1900 in Wadesborough, USA.

Ballooning was still his passion and he turned this hobby to practical use conducting many scientific experiments on acoustical phenomena. It was a rather dangerous pastime; they descended on telegraph wires, were nearly blown over a cliff into the sea at Hastings and in an 1899 flight to observe the Leonid meteor shower, the balloon was unable to descend. As dawn broke the balloon rose higher, drifting over the Bristol Channel, finally crash landing in Wales after a ten hour flight just 1½ miles short of the Atlantic ocean.

Bacon financed his ballooning with lecture tours and writing articles for the press. In 1901 he published "By Land and Sky" and in 1902 "The Dominion of the Air". He devised balloon versus cycle races with the aim of illustrating how balloons could be used in warfare as a means of escape (the siege of Mafeking had occurred in South Africa).

In November 1902 he was the first to cross from the Isle of Man to Dumfries, Scotland (a distance of 85 miles), he then demonstrated to the navy how underwater objects were more visible from a height.

Between 1900 and 1904 his aerial photograph were entered at the Royal Photographic Society Exhibitions in London

Perhaps John Bacon's most significant advancement to the science of ballooning was his idea of using a burner to create warm air for a hot air balloon. He experimented with a small balloon of 2,000cu.ft made of cotton, using his patented burner it filled in 38 seconds. In 1903 he experimented with a balloon of 7,000cu ft. 50ft in diameter and 70ft high, it weighed nearly 300lbs. *"In quarter of an hour"* he reported *"it was standing upright, and in twenty-five minutes it was fully inflated and fidgeting to be off and away"*. Unfortunately he was unable to complete his experiments in the production of hot air, for, on the 25 December 1904, he died aged 59.

Books written by J M Bacon - BY LAND AND SKY (1900)
The DOMINION OF THE AIR - The story of aerial navigation (1902)

References: British Balloon Museum & Library archives, G Bacon, Record of an Aeronaut, pub 1907. http://www.myers.orconhosting.net.nz/jmbacon.html