

## Amy Johnson Transcript Season 4, Episode 7

Hello, and welcome to the Time Pieces History Podcast. Today, we're looking at English pilot Amy Johnson.

I'd love to know what you think of these episodes, so please come and find me on Twitter: [@GudrunLauret](https://twitter.com/GudrunLauret), or leave a comment on your audio player of choice. Alternatively, you can pop a message onto the relevant podcast page over at [gudrunlauret.com/podcast](https://gudrunlauret.com/podcast), where you'll find the shownotes, useful links and an episode transcript – no email address required to access that.

My interest in Amy Johnson probably started when my dad used to play Al Stewart's 1976 album Year of the Cat. I was obsessed with the weird cover art, and the lyrics seeped into my subconscious.

The song 'Flying Sorcery' references Amy Johnson and the Kitty Hawk plane, although sadly not Amelia Earhart – perhaps it wouldn't scan. We then watched 'The Amy Johnson Story' – a documentary about her short but eventful life – late one night, which cemented her in my mind as a tragic hero.

Amy was born in 1903 in Hull, the oldest of four girls. She attended Sheffield University, where she studied economics, before moving to London, where she began a career as a typist for a firm of solicitors, according to the Amy Johnson Arts Trust [website](#).

The site also describes her introduction to flying as something more romantic than just a hobby she took up, saying that she found herself up at an aerodrome in North London one day, and found herself mesmerised by the biplanes (much like Al Stewart's heroine).

The story goes that she wanted to join the flying club there at Stag Lane, where lessons would be cheaper than at a private school. After a five-month spell on the membership waiting list, she was finally accepted into the club.

Her first lesson at Stag Lane, in September 1928, was hardly a roaring success. She said herself that: "I was scared stiff of my instructor, who never seemed to lose his first idea that I was a born idiot." It didn't help that her helmet was ill-fitting, meaning she couldn't hear anything he said to her through the headphones.

Despite her habit of heavy landings, Amy was competent enough to be allowed to fly solo nine months later, after only 16 hours of flying. I'm not sure I'd be ready to take to the sky with only two days of practice behind me, although apparently most students only need 11 hours of training.

With financial backing from her father, Amy was able to leave her job and pursue a career in aviation. After qualifying as a pilot, she next gained a ground engineer's licence, so she was experienced in looking after her plane too. Money from her dad was added to contributions from philanthropist Lord Wakefield for her to purchase a de Havilland Gypsy Moth, which Amy named Jason.

Next, Amy decided she needed to do something to create publicity for herself, and ideally find herself a job. Pilot Bert Hinkler held the record for a solo flight from England to Australia, which took him 15 and a half days in 1928.

Although her longest flight to date was London to Hull, Amy planned to beat Hinkler's time. She plotted a shorter route that went straight over the Balkans instead of across the Mediterranean, and in 1930 she set off from Croydon Airport in Surrey, with a pistol in case of bandits, and a ransom note for them to send to her family for money, in case the gun wasn't enough of a deterrent.

A sandstorm forced a landing in Iraq, but she reached India in six days, a record breaker. Amy had several planned stops in order to refuel Jason, and she made it to all of them. Sadly, a monsoon outside of Rangoon damaged the wing and propeller of her plane, which prevented her from breaking Hinkler's record.

In 1932 she married Scottish pilot Jim Mollison, and soon after set a solo record flying from London to Cape Town. The following year the newlyweds headed off to cross the Atlantic, a trip made riskier due to the fact that they were carrying the fuel they needed and were mostly away from solid ground if they needed to land. In fact, they crashed in Connecticut, but still achieved a world record.

Between 1933 and 1939 Amy worked in journalism and had a spell as a model for fashion designer Elsa Schiaparelli, as well as designing her own travel bag. Despite their shared love of flying and record-breaking (they broke the record from Britain in India in 1934), Jim's drinking and philandering saw the end of their marriage in 1938.

Amy became president of the Women's Engineering Society in 1934, the youngest person to do so. She also reclaimed her Britain to South Africa record in 1936. The disappearance of Earhart in 1937, last recorded over the Pacific Ocean, put her off flying somewhat.

Instead, she took up gliding, probably influenced by her friendship with Fred Slingsby, who she met back home in Yorkshire. Slingsby was a founder of the Scarborough Gliding Club in around 1930, and later went on to set up his own glider manufacturing company. Amy joined the club a few years later.

However, the outbreak of the Second World War caused Amy to reflect on what she was doing, and in 1940 joined the Air Transport Auxiliary, which moved planes around the UK on behalf of the RAF.

On 5<sup>th</sup> January 1941, Amy took off in poor weather conditions from Prestwick to deliver a plane to Oxford. It's variously claimed that she ran out of fuel, got lost or visibility was reduced due ice on the windshield or fog up ahead. Whatever the reason, Amy crashed into the Thames Estuary.

Amy managed to deploy her parachute and bail out of the plane, and she was alive when she hit the water. A boat convoy spotted her, with the HMS Haslemere battling through snow and a strong tide to reach her.

The crew threw ropes to her but unable to reach them, Amy sank below the ship. A second body was then noticed in the water, so the captain, Lt Cmdr. Fletcher, dived in to the rescue, but he was soon rendered unconscious by the bitterly cold water and tragically died in hospital five days later.

The identity of the second body has never been revealed, and neither it nor Amy were recovered from the Thames. Conspiracy theories have abounded in the decades since her death, including that she was shot down in friendly fire. Another suggestion is that she was on a spying mission, or that the second body was someone she was smuggling out of the country.

And with that mystery, that's all for today. Thank you so much for listening, and please tune in next week for the stories of another two remarkable women.