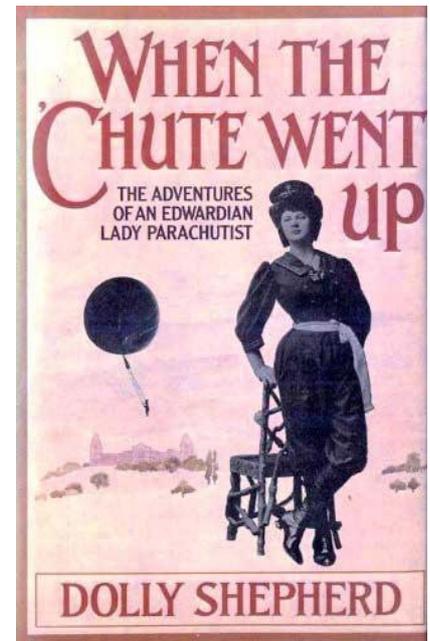




DOLLY SHEPHERD EDWARDIAN LADY PARACHUTIST



The Milton Keynes Branch of Air-Britain
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Memorial at Alexandra Palace to Dolly Shepherd, (1886 – 1983) the Edwardian Lady Pioneer Parachutist who featured in the January 2014 Newsletter; no doubt Ally Pally's most distinguished ex-waitress. In 1902, aged 16, she left to Join Colonel Bill Cody and became a famous parachutist a year later with Auguste Gaudron.

*Credit: The AEG September 2013 newsletter
(Excuse inexplicable changes in font)*

The first proper descent by parachute was from a balloon in 1785 in a parachute designed by Jean Pierre Blanchard. The parachutist was, in the best traditions of aviation experiments, a dog. But the man who made parachuting a popular spectacle was André Garnerin. His 23 ft diameter canvas umbrella carried a basket in which Garnerin stood. On 22 October 1797, he dropped from a hydrogen balloon at 3000 ft over Paris.

It worked – but not well. The parachute oscillated wildly and Garnerin was thoroughly airsick as he swung from side to side. But he landed safely and his wife Jeanne-Genevieve was encouraged to become the first woman to make a parachute descent in 1797. Garnerin went on to make exhibition descents all over Europe until his death, from non-parachuting causes

The most famous Edwardian parachutist was Dolly Shepherd. In 1903 she was working as a 16 year-old waitress at Alexandra Palace when she overheard two customers discussing the need to find a replacement for someone to have an apple shot off her head. She promptly volunteered to do the job and spent a year with Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West Show.

One day in 1904 Cody took her to see another showman: Auguste Gaudron and his aerial workshop. As a result Cody lost his target because Dolly became a trainee parachutist with Gaudron. The training was limited, little more than 30 minutes instruction. But Dolly took it seriously and designed her own costume, a navy blue suit with gold trimmings.



Her first jump was a full performance watched by a crowd of thousands. Hanging below a small gas balloon was her parachute and, on separate cords, a trapeze bar. When the balloon was properly inflated it was released and Dolly had to run forward to be underneath it as she was lifted off the ground, sitting prettily on the trapeze bar and waving a silken Union Jack.

She checked her height on an aneroid barometer strapped to her wrist. At the right altitude, it varied with the wind speed, and thus her distance from the crowd she pulled a ripcord to begin the balloon's deflation and jumped off the trapeze so that the parachute would open.

She was a great success and performed at shows across the country, though not without problems. On one flight the release failed and the balloon went on rising to 15,000 feet. She had to endure lack of oxygen and severe cold until finally sinking to earth some 3½ hours later.

Her greatest trial came in July 1908 at the Longton Park Fête in Staffordshire. She was scheduled to do a double jump with a new performer, Louie May. Her balloon was rigged to take the two parachutes, one on each side to balance the balloon. It was 8 pm before everything was ready. Finally the patient crowd saw the balloon lift off.

The planned jumping height was 4,000 feet. But there was no release. The balloon drifted out of sight in the evening sky, the frustrated spectators wandered home and the concerned Gaudron set off in pursuit of his girls.

At the anticipated moment Louie's release had failed. Dolly used the rope connecting the trapezes to pull them together so that she could try the release - without success. She was concerned that a repeat of her flight to a freezing 15,000' and a landing in the dark would be too much for a first-time jumper. They went into cloud.

Emerging at 11,000', Dolly decided to take action. It was unthinkable to jump herself and abandon Louie so she pulled her across the gap again and, very carefully, unfastened Louie's harness whilst they clung tightly to the trapeze.

With Louie wrapped around her, Dolly pulled her release and they fell. The parachute did not open properly in the thin air and it fluttered ominously as they plummeted down through the clouds. Then, with a jerk, the chute opened properly and the speed of their fall lessened - although it was still too fast for a normal landing. They were over open country, but coming down perilously close to a road and to land on the hard surface could have been fatal. In the end, they fell onto a field, just six feet from the road and close to a scythe left lying on the ground. They were 14 miles from Longton.

The incident generated a storm of publicity with the usual distortion of the facts, Louie apparently 'leapt several yards' to reach Dolly, and maximum licence in the fanciful illustrations, as below:

A back specialist was brought from London to examine Dolly and concluded that she would never walk again. He began arrangements for a transfer to a hospital for incurables. But the local doctor had other ideas and used mild electrical therapy to get her legs moving again. Within a few weeks, Dolly was walking and soon after, incredibly, parachuting again.

She flew and jumped successfully for the next four years. Then, one day in 1912, during a solo ascent, she apparently heard a voice telling her to stop or she would be killed. She stopped.

During WWI she served in France as a volunteer ambulance driver and occasionally chauffeured officers. She married one and became Mrs Sedgwick. But that's not quite all there is to be told. Whilst Dolly was recovering her mother had



secretly jumped in her place. And Dolly's daughter later became the third generation of female parachutists in this remarkable family.

Dolly's mid-air rescue is recognised as a first by the Guinness Book of Records. In 1976 she was invited to join the Parachute Regiment's Red Devils to watch their sky-diving act.

She died in 1983, just short of her 97th birthday. But she did leave us her autobiography, *'When the Chute Went Up'*, which is available on Amazon. Apparently it's a cracking read.