

## Airships over Aireside

### Introduction

The Farnhill and Kildwick Local History Group archive contains a picture postcard of Aireside Mill and the Aire bridge at Cononley, kindly donated by David Gulliver.



It's pretty enough, but what's even more interesting than the picture itself is what's written on the back.



Although a lot of the message is unreadable, there is an intriguing sentence that reads:

*We have had two Air Ships passed over this week they [do] make a noise.*

The card is undated, but a chance discovery in the old log books of Kildwick School has allowed us to put an exact date to this rather surprising event:

*The children were allowed out of school for a few minutes this morning to watch two naval Air Ships pass overhead.*

The log book entry is dated March 13<sup>th</sup> 1918.

## Identifying the March 13<sup>th</sup> 1918 airships

During WW1, the Navy operated over 200 airships. However, with significant help from experts on the subject, it has proved possible to say with a fair degree of certainty which two airships these were.

At the beginning of March 1918, two new Submarine Scout Zero class airships (S.S.Z. 50 and 51) were assembled at Kingsnorth in Kent. After acceptance flights they set off on March 9<sup>th</sup>, en-route to Anglesey where they would enter service as U-boat spotters and convoy support craft.



**A Submarine Scout Zero class airship on escort duty**

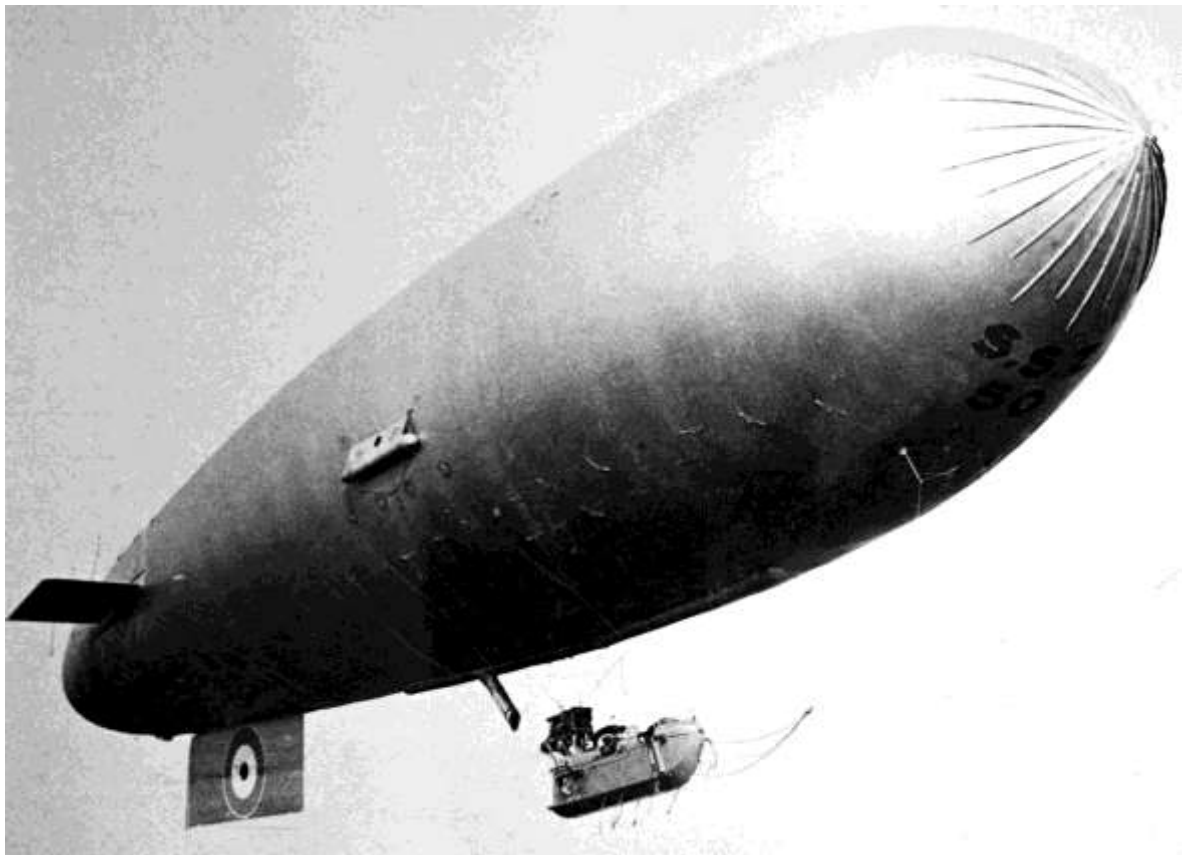
Due to a combination of bad weather and the need for airships to plot a route that kept them close to Royal Naval Air Stations (RNAS) or airship construction facilities where they could refuel or land in an emergency, this journey would take several days.

- **March 9<sup>th</sup>** – From Kingsnorth to RNAS Cranwell, Lincolnshire. S.S.Z. 51 departed Kingsnorth at 11:40am; S.S.Z. 50, twenty minutes later. The plan to overfly RNAS Pulham was changed when S.S.Z. 50 developed a technical problem; S.S.Z. 50 landed Pulham at 13:40 and S.S.Z. 51 at 14:02. Both vessels left Pulham just before 5pm and landed at Cranwell, in the dark, at 18:35.
- **March 10<sup>th</sup> / 11<sup>th</sup>** – Delayed at Cranwell due to bad weather.
- **March 12<sup>th</sup>** – From Cranwell to RNAS Howden (near Selby). Both vessels left Cranwell at 11:00am, in misty weather, and landed at Howden at around 1pm.
- **March 13<sup>th</sup>** – From Howden to Anglesey (overflying Barrow). S.S.Z. 51 departed Howden at 10:30am; S.S.Z. 50 set off 30 minutes later. Flight time to Anglesey was 4 hours 15 minutes for S.S.Z.51; 4 hours for S.S.Z. 50.

The March 13<sup>th</sup> flight would have brought both vessels over Kildwick at about noon.

### Subsequent history of S.S.Z. 50 and 51

S.S.Z. 50 remained in service for the rest of WW1 and was decommissioned in January 1919, having flown 775 miles.



**S.S.Z. 50 – in flight**

S.S.Z. 51 was lost at sea on 15<sup>th</sup> August 1918, having flown over 690 hours since it entered service.

It is thought that the water circulation system gave out and the engine seized up. There was a 20–25 knot breeze blowing at the time and the drogue failed to hold.

She was chased by the USS *Downes* which eventually caught her and made her fast. As the airship was getting heavy the destroyer lowered a boat and the crew managed to jump into it. The ship was then hauled down onto the deck but the mooring point gave-way, leaving a large hole.



**S.S.Z. 51 – about to be lost at sea**

### **An earlier visitor**

In fact S.S.Z. 50 and 51 weren't the first airships to pass over Farnhill and Kildwick. An earlier visitor is also recorded in the school log, in an entry dated October 15<sup>th</sup> 1917:

*The children were allowed out of school at quarter to twelve to watch a British airship fly over.*

This was His Majesty's Airship No. 23 (HMA 23) being delivered from Vickers Ltd. at Barrow-in-Furness to RNAS Howden. The ship left Barrow at 10.30am, and a straight-line route to Howden would have taken it just south of Skipton, and very close to Farnhill and Kildwick, flying at about 1000 feet.



### **HMA 23 – photographed in September 1917**

HMA 23 was just the second British rigid airship to fly, and certainly the biggest thing in the sky that the children of Kildwick School would ever had seen – she was 535 feet long and powered by four 250hp Rolls-Royce engines.

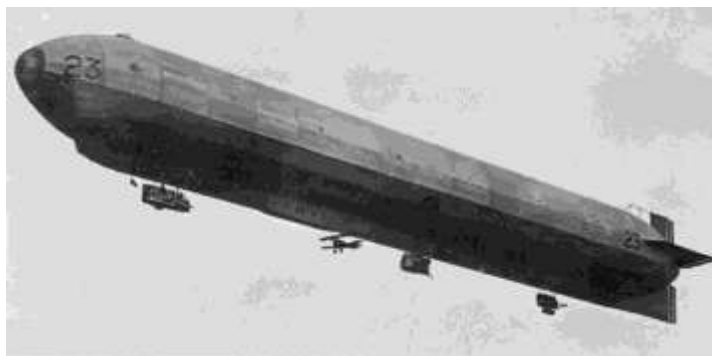
### **Subsequent history of HMA 23**

HMA 23 did not stay at Howden but flew on south to Pulham in Norfolk, on 29th October, which was its base for the rest of its career.

On 6<sup>th</sup> December 1917 it flew over central London, bringing the city to a standstill.

HMA 23 flew a total of 326 hours but was mostly used for experimental purposes, including a (then) record flight of over 40 hours in May 1918, testing armaments that included a 40mm 2-pounder and three machine guns.

In July and November 1918, experiments were performed with HMA 23 carrying a Sopwith Camel suspended underneath, which could be launched to provide air defence.



### **HMA 23 fitted with Sopwith Camel aircraft**

HMA 23 overflow the surrender of the German submarine fleet, at Harwich, in November 1918 and was then used for mooring experiments.

HMA 23 was taken apart and deleted in September 1919.

## **An interest connection between Kildwick and RNAS Howden**

There is an interesting connection between RNAS Howden and Kildwick.

In 1916, Kildwick raised over £900 to fund the construction of a YMCA Hut, to provide comfortable accommodation for servicemen at a military base. The “Kildwick Parish” hut, comprising a large meeting room, sleeping apartments, a dining hall, smoking room, a billiard room with two full-sized tables, and a kitchen, was subsequently built at RNAS Howden.

## **Hindenburg over the Aire valley – May and June 1936**

Of course the most famous airship to visit the Aire valley was the ill-fated German craft, the Hindenburg. The Hindenburg was one of the largest airships ever built and between March 1936 and May 1937 it made a number of highly publicised trans-Atlantic passenger flights.



**The Hindenburg over New York – note the Nazi insignia**

On the evening of May 22<sup>nd</sup> 1936, on a return flight from Lakehurst, New Jersey to Frankfurt, the Hindenburg passed down the Aire valley and dropped a package in the centre of Keighley. This was retrieved by two Boy Scouts and found to contain a crucifix and a bunch of carnations, along with a message.

The message was from a passenger, Father John P. Shulte who described himself as “the first flying priest”. It asked for the items to be placed on the grave of his brother in Morton cemetery: Lt. Franz Shulte had died of influenza in 1919, while a PoW in Skipton.

This appearance of the Hindenburg over Kildwick is well attested and was described by Ruth Ward, who used to live at Crag Top, in an article written for St. Andrew’s parish magazine, “The Bridge”, in March 2013. Here is an extract:

*One summer evening in the late 1930s my father rushed to tell us to come outside to see the Zeppelin which was making steady progress southwards down the valley. What a splendid sight. We learned next day it was the ill-fated German Hindenburg.*

The unexpected visit was reported in the local papers, including the Craven Herald. In its issue of May 29<sup>th</sup> 1936, it reported:

*It [the Hindenburg] was seen to full advantage in the Crosshills district, and appeared to pass directly over Kildwick railway station as it followed the course of a line to Keighley from this point.*

The Hindenburg was over the North of England again on 30<sup>th</sup> June 1936, on its way to New York, passing over Bingley just as History Group member Viv Midgley's mother-in-law was coming out of the church on her Wedding Day. This time its erratic course led some people to suggest that the flight was part passenger transport and part spying mission for the Nazis. However there is no firm evidence for this, and airships were renowned for being difficult to maintain in flight.

## Further Information

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_British\\_airships](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_British_airships)

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SSZ\\_class\\_airship](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SSZ_class_airship)

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/23-class\\_airship#23r](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/23-class_airship#23r)

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LZ\\_129\\_Hindenburg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LZ_129_Hindenburg)

<http://www.airships.net/hindenburg/flight-schedule>

Keighley in the Second World War by Ian Dewhirst; publ. 2009 by Sutton Publishing

"A Moorland Childhood" by Ruth Ward; in "The Bridge", March 2013

<http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1300&dat=19360525&id=9xoRAAAAIBAJ&sjid=S5UDAAAIAAJ&pg=4329,2641527>

[http://www.thetelegraphandargus.co.uk/news/local/keighleynews/11339428.Riddlesden\\_man\\_made\\_famous\\_by\\_crucifix\\_find\\_dies\\_aged\\_89/?ref=rss](http://www.thetelegraphandargus.co.uk/news/local/keighleynews/11339428.Riddlesden_man_made_famous_by_crucifix_find_dies_aged_89/?ref=rss)

[http://www.thetelegraphandargus.co.uk/archive/2002/11/22/8020972.Hindenburg\\_Mary\\_recalls\\_aairship\\_visit/?ref=arc](http://www.thetelegraphandargus.co.uk/archive/2002/11/22/8020972.Hindenburg_Mary_recalls_aairship_visit/?ref=arc)

[http://www.thetelegraphandargus.co.uk/tahistory/featuresnostalgiapasttimes/10339563.Mystery\\_of\\_the\\_skies/](http://www.thetelegraphandargus.co.uk/tahistory/featuresnostalgiapasttimes/10339563.Mystery_of_the_skies/)

<http://www.yorkshireeveningpost.co.uk/news/news-features/hindenburg-sails-over-the-city-skies-1-2079135>

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hindenburg\\_disaster](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hindenburg_disaster)

## Acknowledgements

Thanks for their help with this article are extended to Dr. Giles Camplin, editor of The Airship Heritage Trust Journal, and Peter 'Art' Lewry of the website <http://www.ns11.org/>, dedicated to the crew of North Sea Class airship NS11 – lost with all hands July 15<sup>th</sup> 1919.

Thanks are due to Malcolm Fife who provided details of possible airship activity over this area on March 13<sup>th</sup> 1918; and most especially to British airship historian Brian Turpin who provided the photographs and extensive details of S.S.Z. 50 and 51, and HMA 23.

This article was originally published on the Farnhill and Kildwick Local History Group website, [www.farnhill.co.uk/farnhill-history.html](http://www.farnhill.co.uk/farnhill-history.html)

