

FREDA THOMPSON

Gypsy in a Major Moth



Judy Cannon researches the life of the first Australian woman to fly solo from England to Australia

Freda Thompson was born with a driving desire for adventure and, because she was the daughter of a successful Melbourne banker, she was able to enjoy opportunities that most others could only sigh for.

She was first smitten by the flying bug while watching a small plane winging just above the rooftops as she

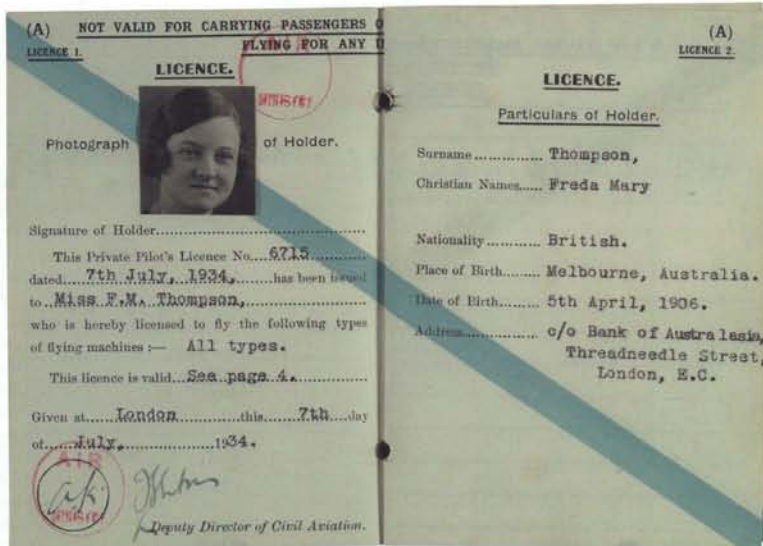
walked home from Toorak College. 'I decided there and then that was how I wanted to see the world—flying,' she told Melbourne *Sun* interviewer Kate Newman, after 50 years of doing just that. All her previous dreams of sailing a yacht around the world evaporated.

She was born in 1906 and obtained her pilot's 'A' licence in 1930, a commercial licence in 1932 and the following year became the first woman in the British Empire to obtain an instructor's licence. Trained and skilled in blind flying, night flying, aerobatics, stunts and competition flying, she won the

Unknown photographer
Miss Freda Thompson (1906–1980)
AIS photograph
Pictorial Collection

Adelaide Aerial Derby for Victoria in 1932 and over the years won 47 trophies. She was a three times winner of the Royal Victorian Aero Club open championship. In 1934, she became world-famous as the first Australian woman to fly solo from England to Australia.

The National Library of Australia (MS7936) holds her diaries, logbooks, correspondence, flight charts, schedules and manuals, pilot's



(left) Miss Freda Thompson—Private Pilot's Licence no. 6715 dated 7 July 1934
Papers of Freda Thompson MS7936/box 4/series 9/item 3; Manuscript Collection

(below) Freda Thompson at Lympe aerodrome, England, on 28 September 1934, just about to leave on her solo flight to Australia
Papers of Freda Thompson MS7936/box 1/series 13/item 1; Manuscript Collection

licences, her slide rule and medals as well as her cap and goggles. The Library also has a copy of the biography by Joan Palmer entitled *Goggles and God Help You: Pioneer Airwoman Freda Thompson OBE and Some of Her Contemporaries* (1986).

In 1919, Australian brothers Keith and Ross Smith (later Sir Keith and Sir Ross Macpherson Smith) won the Commonwealth Government's £10 000 prize for the first Australian pilots to fly from England to Australia within 30 consecutive days. They had been accompanied by mechanics J.M. Bennett and W.H. Shiers.

In the late 1920s and 1930s, a coterie of young Australian women followed in their flight path (rather than their footsteps, as it were), became addicted to flying and, in several cases, took up barnstorming—touring rural districts to put on air shows. Among them were Mrs M. Bryant of Sydney, in 1927 Australia's first woman pilot, Mrs Lores Bonney, who flew accompanied from Australia to England in 1933, and Miss May Bradford, the first woman pilot to hold both 'A' and 'B' engineer's ground licences. In 1931 Miss P. Arnott became the first woman to gain a 'B' commercial ticket and Miss Nancy Lyle was the first woman to fly across Bass Strait. And, from the other side of the world, England's Amy Johnson flew solo from England to Darwin in an attempt to break Bert Hinkler's 1928 record of 16 days.

When she realised that few women were competing in the 1934 England

to Australia air race, Melbourne's Freda Thompson decided to enter. She sailed for England to buy her own plane and chose a De Havilland Moth Major which cost £1000 and was 'beautiful, brand-spanking new and all mine'. She named it *Christopher Robin* and thought of it as 'my fast little bus'.

The plane, registration G-ACUC, had a 30-foot wingspan and was 23 feet 11 inches long with specified

flying time of 6.9 hours. It carried 66 gallons of petrol and had a Gypsy Major 118/122 horsepower engine, with a cruising speed of 90 miles per hour.

Unfortunately, by the time she had disembarked, bought her machine and applied to enter the race, Freda Thompson was too late to enrol. Instead, she decided to fly solo back to Australia, hoping to break Jean Batten's 1934 record of 14 days.

She took off from Lympe airport, Kent, on 28 September 1934 and headed for Marseilles. Her logbook states tersely: 'Very rough flight.' She met up with strong winds and stormy conditions and made a forced landing





at Marignane aerodrome at 6 pm, then went off to a hotel for the night.

She had been expected to land at Le Bourget airport and was totally unaware of the alarm she caused when she did not arrive. The French authorities were out looking for her and the *Evening News* in London ran a story that she was lost. She was not lost, she was asleep! She flew on the next day to Rome and Brindisi, heading for Athens, but she did not quite make it. She had not realised that Greek time was an hour ahead of Italian time and was overtaken by darkness at Megara, 30 miles from Athens.

She had no night flying equipment. Her log reads: 'Megara crash!! Forced landing, undercarriage, wings and airscrew damaged.' She was only slightly bruised. She landed in an olive grove, bringing down some telephone wires with her. No one saw her plane land, so after she had checked the aircraft she set off across the fields to Megara where villagers took her to the mayor. He acted as host and subsequently accompanied her to Athens to organise repairs. The crash cost her three weeks in time lost.

She flew on via Nicosia to Damascus on 21 October, and from there to Baghdad, and Bushire in what was then Persia. On 25 October she took off for Gwadar, in

Baluchistan, and on to Karachi. By 30 October she had reached Calcutta, flew on to Rangoon, en route for Singapore and then southeast to what was then the Dutch East Indies, now Indonesia.

This was when she faced perhaps her greatest challenge for, while flying over land, she was pretty certain of being able to drop the plane down safely somewhere, if in trouble. Faced with crossing 500 miles of ocean, she later admitted to being 'in a blue funk'.

'It was no fun dodging among the black clouds at a height of 2,000 ft with only water underneath, at a speed of 90 miles an hour. I had 2 hours' blind flying near Singapore, but I think nothing was worse than the sea crossing.' She in fact crossed the Timor Sea in the fastest time so far for a single-engined machine.

She landed at Darwin on 6 November at 11.30 am after a 6 am take-off from Koepang in Dutch Timor (West Timor). Her whole journey had taken 39 days; actual flying time, 19 days.

Eventually she flew back to Melbourne, after getting lost twice over the Northern Territory, which she described as 'featureless and waterless'. While over Newcastle Waters, she failed to make a turn southeast and became lost.

Freda Thompson with her plane
Papers of Freda Thompson MS7936/box
1/series 13/item 1; Manuscript Collection

Fortunately a lone horseman reported that he had seen a plane land at dusk near the overland telegraph line. A Northern Territory mounted policeman searched the line and found her 16 miles from Tennant Creek, south of Darwin.

When she subsequently flew towards Bourke, New South Wales, the local aero club met her with an escort of planes. As she flew over the last stage of her journey to Essendon, she was escorted again, this time by fellow members of the Royal Victorian Aero Club. It was at Essendon she had first learned to fly and worked on aircraft engines.

In 1937 she was awarded the George VI Coronation Medal, but the carefree days of the thirties were increasingly overshadowed by imminent war. She was appointed Commandant of the Victorian branch of the Women's Air Training Corps, forerunner of the Women's Australian Air Force, in 1940.

In an overseas talk for the Department of Information on 22 March 1941, she mentioned how a few fortunate people had learned

to fly assisted by scholarships 'but the war has altered that ... Our aim is to train women in all branches of ground work so that should the need arise, we will be ready to help the Royal Australian Air Force in the same way that the Women's Auxiliary Air Force are helping in England.' She added: 'The war has taken all the fun from flying and turned the aeroplane into a deadly weapon.'

In 1942 she drove an ambulance for the Australian Women's Army Service and the following year ferried ex-RAAF wartime planes interstate to Geelong. Subsequently she received the Elizabeth II Coronation Medal and an OBE.

In 1973 she presented a perpetual trophy for the Freda Thompson Aerial Derby, a race for women around Port Phillip Bay. Graham Mortimer of Western Australia later presented a trophy in the shape of her

Moth Major for a similar race for men and women.

A woman with an elfin smile, Freda Thompson talked nostalgically to Kate Newman about her early flying days:

Flying was so much fun in those days. We barnstormed around the country appearing at pageants, doing aerobatics, competing in races, taking people for joy rides and generally had a whale of a time ... But the world has changed so much, there's so much dissent now that I'm sure I'd be shot down before I landed in half of the countries I hopped in and out of in 1934.

She was only involved in one serious crash, when a plane flown by another pilot somersaulted at Mordialloc beach and she and the pilot were trapped in the cabin with their faces beneath the surface of the water.

Nearby residents dragged them out. The pilot had lifted the aircraft's nose when he realised women and children were ahead on the beach.

Freda Thompson died of cancer in 1980. She had flown and travelled extensively all her life. She had first flown solo in 1930 and held a pilot's licence for 50 years, running up a grand total of 3330 flying hours. Reading her papers in the National Library, we can hear the voice of someone who flew when 'flying really was flying':

In those days we just landed in paddocks, or on dirt roads wherever we wanted to go ... The planes were like kites—you could fly them anywhere and they were graceful little craft to travel in.

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(right) Freda Thompson's journey logbook, England–Australia flight, 1934 (Page opened at journey from Lympe to Marseilles)

Papers of Freda Thompson MS7936/box 1/series 2/item 4; Manuscript Collection

(below) Freda Thompson's scrapbook, c.1933–34

Papers of Freda Thompson MS7936/box 2/series 4/item 1; Manuscript Collection

OPERATING CREW.		Incidents and Observations.	
Name.	Duties.		
Freda Thompson	Pilot		

IN		Times	
Date.	Places of Departure, of intermediate landings and of arrival.	Arrival.	Departure.
28/9/34	Lympe, Denmark		10.35
	Marseilles	5.45	

VISA.	
By the Authorities	By the Customs Authorities.
H.M. CUSTOMS & EXCISE	
27 SEP 1934	
LYMPE AIR PORT	
No. of Passages	
No. of Passengers	
No. of Crew	
No. of Animals	
No. of Goods	
No. of Luggage	
No. of Mail	
No. of Documents	
No. of Passports	
No. of Visas	
No. of Tickets	
No. of Baggage	
No. of Animals	
No. of Goods	
No. of Luggage	
No. of Mail	
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No. of Visas	
No. of Tickets	

