

ROBBINS & PORTER & THE ALBURY MONOPLANE

From a talk by Michael Browne (presented at A&DHS General Meeting, April 2012 and reprinted from A&DHS Bulletin No 523)

An advertisement in the Border Morning Mail (BMM) 5 July 1911 advised the local motoring public of the opening of an "Up to date repair shop" operated by two experienced mechanics late of Dalgety's Motor Depot, Bourke Street Melbourne. The enterprising proprietors, Azor Robbins, 25, and Alex Porter 21 had come to town believing there was an opening for their services in an expanding Albury township. With over 5,800 people and 1,100 residences, it was clearly attractive to the two young mechanics. They held agencies for Austin, Daimler & Standard motors, along with supplies of petrol, oil and lubricants.

At the Albury Show in September 1911 they exhibited a chassis of a 15hp Austin motor car from the UK, demonstrating the latest improvements including high road clearance for Australian conditions. By June 1912 they had moved into new purpose built premises on Kiewa Street, next to Crawford's Stables, in a building capable of housing 40 motor cars, "the largest in the Riverina." This is now the site of the LibraryMuseum.

In November 1912 they advertised as being agents for Hupmobile cars. Advertisements ceased at the end of 1912. Perhaps the partners felt they were well enough known in the town and needed funds for another enterprise. Enter the monoplane.

Since their coming to town the talented pair of mechanics had been working part time on an engine; this is not surprising knowing their trade, but this engine had far different origins. The engine had been ordered by Boer War veteran, Laurie Marshall of Fairfield, Melbourne who had been selected in 1909 as one of the final 21 entrants in the Australian Government's £5000 prize money for an Australian designed & built aircraft to achieve controlled powered flight over a specified distance. Aviation fever had hit down under and the government saw fit to encourage development in this ever advancing field. The world was an exciting place, for around the same time Louis Bleriot had skipped across the English Channel in his monoplane and locally we had Harry Houdini performing death defying stunts at Diggers Rest in Melbourne.

Marshall had approached Aubrey Lock of the Herbert Thompson Steam Car Co and Azor Robbins of Dalgety Motor Depot to produce a 50 hp engine for his aircraft. Aubrey Lock was a 'bit of a lad' and it is reported in *The Argus*, c1903, that he was charged with driving a car at great speed, 18-19 miles per hour, over a city street. When questioned over the incident he stated that he was just letting off a bit of steam. The magistrate was not amused and found the charge proven.

This engine was a 4 cylinder air-cooled horizontal opposed design, similar to the VW beetle. At that time it was the first of its type in Australia, and at 50 hp the most powerful, that is of course if it could be got to run reliably and stay together.

The engine was not as successful as hoped and Marshall cancelled the order and purchased a JAP vee 4 engine from England. This left Lock & Robbins with an engine. What they needed was an aeroplane, so Robbins and Porter decided to build their own.

Construction began around Christmas 1912. Local hardwood timber was used for the open box-type frame with aeronautical fabric-covered wings and tailplane. The plane was set up high off the ground on a spindly undercarriage with motorcycle wheels to prevent the large propeller from connecting with the ground.

About 6 months later in May 1913, it was ready for trials and was reported in the BMM that they were practicing taxiing the monoplane most evenings on a property out at Bungowannah, west of Albury, which had a large open field protected from high winds. Alex Porter when asked

the reasoning for the taxiing had replied. "We must first learn to run before we can fly. The only difficulty is keeping the monoplane on the ground. We do not feel efficient enough to chance rising."

The Albury Banner on Friday 1 August 1913 reported:

Messrs AD Robbins & AW Porter, two clever young Albury engineers, after spending seven months upon the planning and construction of a monoplane are now in a position to say that the machine yields every prospect of answering all requirements.

For experimental purposes the inventors took the monoplane to Mr Powers' Bungowannah property eight miles from Albury, and a clear stretch of country, about 700 yards long was chosen near the homestead. For some time the lifting of the machine was not attempted, but on Sunday, in the presence of half a dozen people, the air was taken to a height varying from 15 to 20 feet. It was not sought, owing to the limited space at command, to turn the machine in the air, but satisfactory straight flights were negotiated in every direction.



On Tuesday the experiment was repeated in the presence of a Banner representative and the machine took to the air gracefully. The trial, however, was interrupted by a mechanical de-fect, but the test demonstrated the capacity of the monoplane to take to the air after a ground run of about 200 yards. The inventors, who deserve to be rewarded for their patience and industry, intend exhibiting their machine at the coming Albury Show.

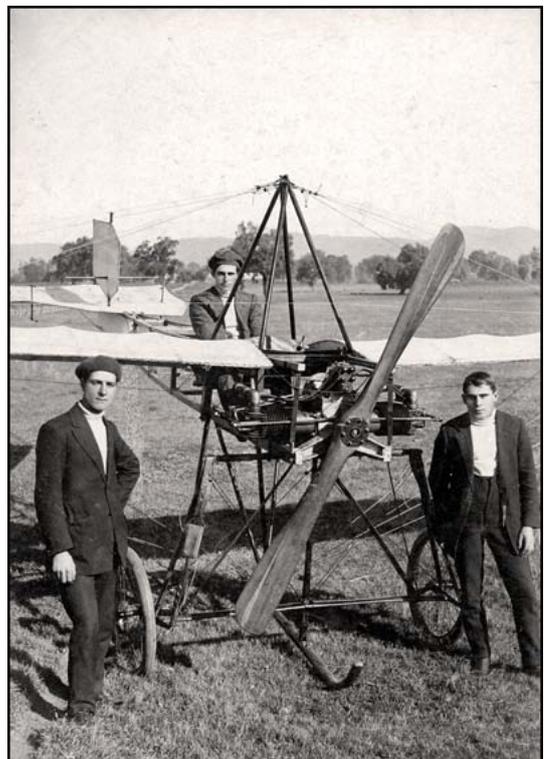
<http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/101176436/10898209>

The witnesses are not named but from further research they have been identified as Azor Robbins & Alex Porter (the designers & builders), John Hunter (photographer), Rupert Johnson (apprentice mechanic to Robbins & Porter), the BMM reporter and property workers all unknown. Rupe Johnson went on to be a well-know mechanic in Albury for many years.

Alex Porter's younger brother Vivian got to fly the plane owing to an apparent insurance restriction preventing Azor & Alex, both married, from engaging in foolhardy conduct, that is, flying.

What happened next is hazy. The business partners left the Albury area. They did not re-new the lease on their premises in Kiewa Street. The building was sold to F C Blacklock, who in March 1914 was operating his business there.

The plane's engine was returned to Melbourne and was in the Armidale workshop of Aubrey Lock until his death in 1966. It was donated to the Museum of Victoria by a friend in 1978. This was fortuitous because what is now known to be the oldest horizontal air-cooled aircraft engine in Australia is



still around over 100 years later. The design format itself is still used today in the majority of light aircraft such as the Cessna. The monoplane frame is thought to have been destroyed in a fire, but this is yet to be confirmed.

What became of the budding aeronauts? Azor Robbins left Albury and emigrated to the USA and was a successful engineer for the International Truck Co. He died in the 1940s. Alex Porter left Albury and by Christmas 1914 was sailing out of Port Phillip Bay bound for the Great War as a member of the AIF.

He was released in March 1917 in England to take a commission with the Royal Flying Corps (RFC), later to be called the RAF. He gained his pilot's licence in 1917, but was unable to join his squadron in France owing to ill health. Flying in open cockpit aircraft was hazardous to your life, not only from a stray piece of lead, but from the bitterly cold wind. He was honourably discharged and repatriated to Australia, and farmed at Sealake in Victoria until his death in 1921. Young Vivian Porter, the Albury pilot, also died young, in October 1914.

The £5000 prize money was never paid. John Duigan achieved controlled powered flight in a biplane aircraft which he and his brother built in 1910, but didn't claim the prize due to a misinterpretation of the rules. Laurie Marshall, the guy who ordered the engine, also achieved controlled powered flight in 1912 in his own biplane. He claimed the prize, but it was decided that as there were no other competitors and therefore no competition, his claim was dismissed and he spent the next 12 years paying back the debts he had run up.



Replica of the Robbins & Porter monoplane at the Albury LibraryMuseum



More photographs of Robbins & Porter can be found in a 'photo gallery' on the Albury & District Historical Society website at <http://alburyhistory.org.au/envira/robbins-porter-monoplane/>