

Re:trace

MILL HILL

PLANE CRASH KILLS 28



On October 17th 1950 a British European Airways Dakota crashed into trees on Highwood Hill near the Rising Sun in Mill Hill, killing all but one of its 29 passengers.

Flight attendant James McKissick was the only survivor on the plane headed for Renfrew. The dead included 5 married couples and an 18 month old baby.

The aircraft was attempting to return to RAF Northolt after suffering an engine failure a few minutes after take-off. In the inquest, the court found that the co-pilot, whose licence had lapsed five days previously, had a training record which made it inadvisable that he should have been allowed to handle an aircraft in difficult weather conditions.

The Hendon & Finchley Times and Guardian that week reported 'all eyes turned towards the overcast sky. Its noise was so strange that many people

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ran to their doors... Then out of the low clouds the giant plane appeared over Highwood Hill. One propeller was stopped, the machine was losing height rapidly. Housewives dived for shelter.

Mrs Katherine Pateman of Highwood Ash Cottage told our reporter, "I had just got in from shopping in Mill Hill Broadway and was emptying my shopping basket on the table in the kitchen. I heard a great roar and then a terrific crash as the plane hit the roof of my house. The kitchen ceiling collapsed around me and I ran into the dining room and flung myself under the table as the demolished chimney stack clattered down into the grate."

The News Chronicle the following day reported that, 'In Highwood Ash, Mrs Gunn was sitting in the front room of her half-timbered Tudor home. "Suddenly", she said, "there was a terrific roar. I ducked. The house rocked. I ran to the back door." Scything the tops of beach trees, ravelling up telephone wire with one of its wings, the plane twirled down, crashed and crumpled on Mrs Gunn's lawn.'



THE SCENE OF THE CRASH ON HIGHWOOD HILL. LOOKING TOWARDS TOTTERIDGE COMMON, IN OCTOBER 1950 AND TODAY.



Thanks to British Pathé for the images.

The Finchley local paper continued, 'There was a moment of dazed stillness in this part of Mill Hill and then from all the surrounding houses and streets people began to run towards Highwood Ash. There was nothing they could do. The wreckage was a blazing inferno.'

The Hendon & Finchley Times and Guardian the following week championed the "local heroes" of the disaster: Highwood Ash gardener Mr Tickner and an Australian woman - Nurse Pickering - who was caring for Lady Sellers who lived next door. Mrs Gunn recalled, "When the plane crashed Mr Tickner was in the garden and Nurse Pickering was next door. Without any thought for their own safety, they ran towards the wreckage. Together they tried to extricate the pilot. At that moment the petrol tanks exploded and the wreckage was engulfed in flames."

Posting on freelanceunbound.com, John Henley said, "I recall the crash only too well. I was a pupil at Belmont school and in the playground when the Dakota flew overhead. It was obviously far too low and it was just a matter of moments before I heard the explosion as the plane crashed. Of course, with the curiosity of the young, and as we were shortly leaving school for the day, I headed up to the crash site and recall bodies wrapped in Union Jacks lined up near the aforementioned brick wall. I stayed around for longer than I should have, with the result that my parents went spare, wondering where I was, and I was summoned to the headmaster's study for a serious ticking off the following day. I was 10 at the time, and some events in one's life remain engrained for ever."

Clifford Heathcote said: "My uncle,

Stanley Brown, was the pilot. Uncle Stan had been a Spitfire pilot in the war, but died in the first of two BEA crashes in the London area in the space of a month. The most awful part of the episode was that my aunt saw the plane go over and recognized that it was having engine trouble. I often wondered what became of the one survivor."

No plaque remembers the tragedy that took place on this now busy road more than 80 years ago, but the rebuilt wall of the garden of Highwood Ash, opposite Highwood House, is a visible scar for those who know.

If you have more information about this crash, please get in touch: editor@remagazines.co.uk and for more of the local coverage of the time visit www.remagazines.co.uk