

On Sunday 3rd July 1932 some of the inhabitants of Child Okeford were disturbed and amazed by the drone of what they took to be an aircraft – they were even more amazed when they turned their heads skywards.

On the 2nd July, what the newspapers rather charmingly referred to as a ‘lighter than air machine,’ number LZ127, the Graf Zeppelin, flew to the pre-cursor of Heathrow Airport, The London Air Park at Feltham Middlesex. Leaving Friedrichshaven at 07.15 it crossed the Goodwin sands at 16.35 and moored at 18.00. The Graf Zeppelin had been launched in 1928 and made the first ever commercial passenger flight across the Atlantic in October 1928; a year later was to make a round the world trip under the leadership of her Captain Hugo Eckner and in 1931 she flew and landed near the North Pole.

Her trip to England in 1932 must have seemed tame in comparison. On arrival the crew had a very busy itinerary as after arriving the airship almost immediately set off for a trip to the Isle of Wight and then at 22.00 on a round Britain trip. She flew [airships like ‘real’ ships being denoted as female] up the east coast and over Scotland. It was intended that the plane would pass over Northern Island and then down the west coast over Wales but bad weather forced her inland and she passed over Bristol and then passed over Taunton and Yeovil. The Western Gazette noted *“The inhabitants of Yeovil as well as towns in Somerset, Dorset and Hants had a magnificent view of the Zeppelin....on Sunday [the 3rd] afternoon in the course of her journey from the Bristol Channel to Southampton....The sound of the powerful engines indicated some unusual aerial visitor and people hurried to doorways and into the streets, where particularly in the northern and eastern parts of Yeovil they were provided with a fine view of the monster.”*

Those who saw her thought that she was no higher than 500 feet. After leaving Yeovil the Zeppelin was heading in a south-easterly direction and at some time she passed over Child Okeford and Hanford where an enterprising villager luckily had his or her camera on them and captured her voyage. The photograph is now in the village archive maintained by David Pope and donated by John Davies. We are grateful to John for permission to publish it. The cottage was “Keepers” Lodge [now demolished and replaced] on the right hand side of the road coming into the village just before Hod Hill.



The 'lighter than air' ship the Graf Zeppelin passing over the tail of Hambleton Hill at Hanford.

Although the name is not visible we can identify this as the Graf Zeppelin from the navigation pod at the front of the airship. As the visit was made in 1932 there are as yet no Nazi insignia on the tail fins. A year later Hitler came to power and from then on she displayed the swastika.

The round Britain flight took just under 24 hours of continuous flight and on arrival back in London she was not yet done. For £10 another batch of passengers boarded for a short one hour flight around the capital. This flight was not without incident as holding the rope securing the airship to the ground were fifty boy scouts. When a gust of wind hit the airship they were almost lifted off. Being prepared, as boy scouts had to be, they let go of the rope. Luckily other lines held fast and the airship was not lost. On the evening of the 3rd she flew back to Friedrichshaven, a crowd of some thirty thousand people sending her on her way with a rendition of Auld Lang Syne.

Almost exactly four years later another airship passed over Child Okeford although this time there was no photographer present to record its flight. This airship was to crash at Lakehurst airfield USA on May 6th 1937. The airship concerned was of course the Hindenburg. For those who have seen the film of this disaster it is incredible to think that sixty five out of the ninety seven people on board survived the accident. At the time the Graf Zeppelin was in South America and it was not thought necessary to tell its passengers of the disaster. She flew back to Germany and apart from one flight, to be put in store, never flew again. She was broken up by Goering in 1940 and her metal used for his Luftwaffe.