



Frederick Nicholas Slingsby
MM, C.Eng, FRAeS
1894-1973
Fellow

MR. F. N. SLINGSBY, who died in May aged 78 was for over 40 years a household name in British gliding as a designer, manufacturer and test pilot. There must be few glider pilots in this country who have not been trained on his Cadets or Sedberghs, to progress to more stirring feats in Skylarks or Darts.

He served in the RFC and RAF from 1914 to 1920 and was awarded the MM. Thereafter, he was a partner in a furniture firm in Scarborough and became interested in gliding as a result of demonstrations by Kronfeld and Magersuppe. He started in glider construction by building the German Falke and subsequently developed it into the two-seat Falcon III. With the assistance of Major Jack Shaw, a factory was built in Kirbymoorside, from which came the Kirby 'Kite'—at £159. It first flew in 1935 and was followed by a long series of designs, many of which achieved great fame. During the war, some Hengist troop-carrying gliders were built but the later effort was concentrated on Cadets for the Air Training Corps.

The first new post-war design was the Gull IV which flew at the 1948 World Championships at Samedan. This design was developed into the Sky, the last of the really traditional big gliders. Then came the Skylarks, with NACA 6-series wing sections and, in 1964, the Dart.

After the death of Major Shaw, a major shareholding in Slingsby Sailplanes was taken up by the Shaw-Slingsby Trust. This body soon ceased to be viable as a consequence of a ruling by the Inland Revenue. When Dart production was coming to an end, the firm entered a somewhat unhappy period: the name was changed from Slingsby Sailplanes to Slingsby Aircraft but, apart from building replicas of First World War aircraft for films, there was little steady production. The parent group soon went bankrupt and, shortly afterwards, a fire destroyed the main shop.

A year later, the firm was bought by Vickers Ltd. who instituted production, under licence, of the German Kestrel and the Falke motor-glider. The wheel had gone the full circle, but 'Sling' lived to see the works flourishing once more, again under the name Slingsby Sailplanes.

Fred Slingsby was awarded the Paul Tissandier Diploma in 1958, the RAeS British Silver Medal for Aeronautics in 1962, the Silver Medal of the Royal Aero Club in 1964 and in 1958 was elected a Fellow of the Society, a richly deserved honour which pleased him greatly.

Until quite recently, gliders were mainly built of wood and Fred Slingsby was primarily an artist and a skilled designer in that material. He had an instinctive feel for its properties and the ability to design elegant shapes based on remarkably simple structures. The Petrel, a pre-war design, was an outstandingly graceful machine whilst the more angular Skylarks of the 1950s retained a clean and economical line. His post-war designs enjoyed considerable success in World Championships: others might have fractionally more performance but Slingsby gliders were rugged, easy to maintain, straightforward to fly and had comfortable cockpits. Pilots were able to give of their best and first places were gained by the Sky (Spain, 1952) the Eagle (two-seat class, France, 1956) and the Skylark (Germany, 1960). Several world records were gained in Skylarks and Darts and, as recently as last year, Michael Field climbed to a height of over 42 000 ft in a Skylark 4, only a few hundred feet short of the World Record climb.

The Dart was the last genuine Slingsby design to be built in significant numbers. With metal-reinforced spar booms, it marked the end of the era of wooden gliders. The original 15 m design was awarded the OSTIV Prize in 1965 for the best Standard Class design. Although high-performance soaring is now dominated by German designs made of glass fibre and epoxy resin, there are still plenty of Darts and Skylarks in service. Their performance remains very adequate and they retain their original virtues. They will continue to provide immense pleasure for many years yet.

In the heyday of the wooden glider, the Slingsby factory at Kirbymoorside was a marvellous place, permeated by the scent of cellulose dope. On one side would be the latest prototype, with Fred sketching ideas on anything that came to hand—often part of the plywood covering.

His humour was very real, but of a type difficult to reproduce on paper. Many a discussion, possibly getting a trifle too intense, was enlivened by his ability to coin the quaint phrase. He was kind and generous, usually by stealth: many a World Championship team had good cause to be grateful to him and the firm, to an extent they were unlikely to realise at the time. As tends to happen in aviation, his devotion to gliding was whole-hearted. It was a way of life, not just a means of earning a living.

The rewards for such an outlook tend to be immaterial but, in Fred's case, very real: the knowledge that he had provided thousands of people with a great deal of happiness, and a wide circle of sincere friends throughout the world.

He was a great man and he will be sorely missed by the gliding community and those privileged to enjoy his friendship.

F. G. Irving