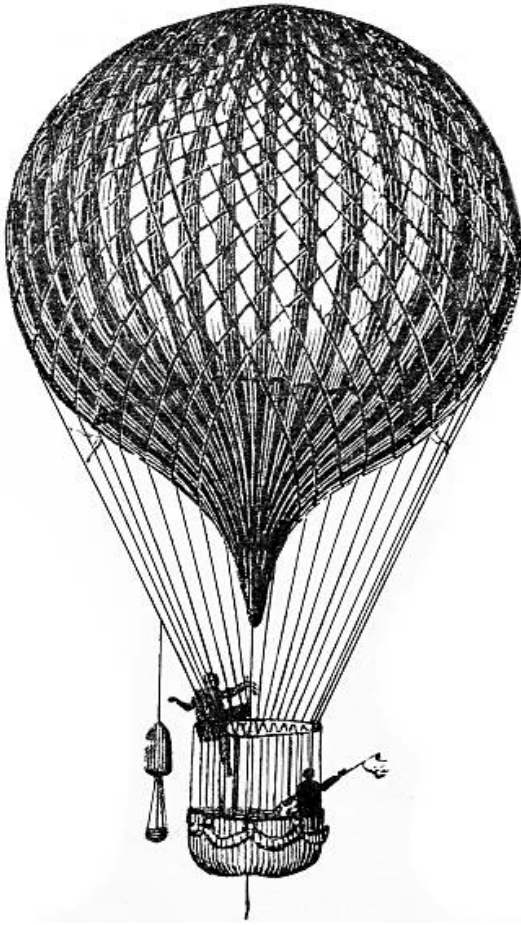


“Jump! The story of Dolly Shepherd” Talk by Tony Turner,
at General Meeting on 16 January 2024. Review by Marlene Chase



In this talk we were given a fascinating glimpse into the surprising and adventurous past of an Edwardian lady. She achieved a significant degree of fame in her early lifetime, although her name is less well-known today.

Elizabeth Shepherd, known as Dolly, was born in Potters Bar in 1886. Our speaker, Tony Turner, described how his interest in her life was sparked by coming across her book “When The Chute Went Up. The Adventures Of An Edwardian Lady Parachutist” in a charity shop.

He introduced some interesting anecdotes from her early years, including exploits and boyish dares which were often egged on by her older brother, but her main story starts when she went to Alexandra Palace in her teens to hear a Sousa concert. As she had no ticket, she offered her services as a waitress there and, through this, met the celebrated parachutist and balloonist Captain Auguste Gaudron and also Samuel Franklin Cody,

who had brought his Wild West Show “Klondike Nugget” to the UK. She helped Cody out by stepping in as a replacement in one of his spectacular stunts at the Bijou Theatre, seemingly “volunteering” from the audience. Captain Gaudron introduced her to his world of balloons and parachutes, and Tony showed us many examples of the different types being used at the time.

Soon Dolly was in front of large audiences, along with other members of Gaudron’s troupe, ascending under a balloon, holding onto a trapeze bar, and then descending by parachute. As a young female doing such a daring activity, she was particularly popular and brought good publicity.

One benefit for Dolly was of course the money. She received £2 10s per jump. She even devised her own knickerbocker costume for the jumps. On one occasion, however, when she had not intended to participate and was clad in a long skirt, she had to improvise, using a large safety pin to divide the skirt.

She made both solo jumps and dual ones. Tony mentioned several near misses and equipment failures, some extremely dramatic, such as when Dolly was dragged against a barbed wire fence and had her clothes ripped off.

The worst incident he described was during a dual jump, when the second parachute failed to open. Descending under the one useable parachute, Dolly landed underneath the other jumper and was badly injured and temporarily paralysed. Four doctors tried unsuccessfully to straighten her out, then indicated she would be in a convalescent home for the rest of her life. Dolly, however, had other ideas and eventually took to the skies again. Further descents followed and she became so famous that she even had her picture on the side of the balloon.

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This all ended when war was declared. Dolly became a driver for officers, including one who objected to having a female driver. Six months later, they were married!

Another interesting fact (and negative comment) which Tony mentioned to us was that the War Office claimed that pilots did not want parachutes and that (in 1918) no parachutes were suitable. One inventor, Calthrop, created the "Guardian Angel" parachute. Although sent to bases, no parachutes were actually issued. However, in 1918, US pilots noticed that German pilots were using parachutes. Later inventors included Leslie Irvin whose ripcord parachute has become the industry standard.

From a variety of types of balloons and early parachutes, Dolly's aerial exploits were witnessed by throngs of enthralled onlookers who flocked to see such stunts. As a neat modern conclusion to such an eventful life, Dolly managed a flight with the Red Devils display team in 1976, and when she died in 1983, aged 96, they did a fly by.

Our thanks to Tony for bringing the story of such an unusual Edwardian lady and her adventurous life to our attention.

