



LAUNCH OF R.101

AIRSHIPS, so the experts tell us, are not at all fair-weather craft when they are in the air or at the tower head. But on a few definite occasions in their career they demand an almost flat calm. Those occasions are when they are being manhandled out of or into a shed. Such occasions should, in the future, be rare.

On Tuesday, 8th inst., there seemed just a chance of good weather, and a provisional notice was issued by the Air Ministry. Immediately the roads between London and Bedford began to grow black with cars. It was a filthy night, too, with gusts of wind and showers of rain, and after dark the road was no pleasant place. During the night a wonderful change took place, and by dawn next day the sky was clear. But, alas, on the gates of the Royal Airship Works was a forbidding blackboard with a notice that R.101 would not leave her shed at 6 a.m., but that a further notice would be issued at 10 a.m. What wind there was, was blowing across the shed, and it would have been madness to attempt to move the ship.

By 10 a.m. the weather was obviously worse, and operations were washed out for the day. But the meteorologists reported an anticyclone moving in from the Atlantic, and they were almost prepared to stake their lives that at dawn on the morrow the conditions would be ideal. No doubt meteorologists mean well. Everyone was jubilant. It really seemed that the great day was at last about to dawn. But the luck had not turned yet. Somewhere about 3 a.m. next morning the staff held a conference on the latest weather report, and another postponement was reluctantly decreed. It must have been a very gloomy gathering. It seems that the expected fine weather actually arrived within 100 miles of Cardington, but had not the grace to come on for that last trifling distance.

At last, on Friday, the 11th, the much maligned meteorologists scored a bullseye. They foresaw a good chance at 6 a.m. next day, and so the walking party was warned. This party consisted of 200 employees of the Royal Airship Works, 150 R.A.F. airmen from the neighbouring aerodrome of Henlow, and 50 civilians from Bedford town, 400 in all. Elaborate arrangements had been made to rouse the Bedford men at any hour of the night and get them out to Cardington

in haste. Henlow, of course, is in direct telephonic communication with the R.A.W.

The morning of Saturday, 12th, was not quite ideal after all, for there was a slight wind blowing across the shed, but it was decided none the less to proceed with the operation. During the press visit on the 2nd inst., the ship was floating some seven tons light in her shed, and was held down to the floor by weights. Now she was ballasted up to a state of equilibrium. Two white lines had been painted down the floor of the shed to guide the party which had charge of the control car. Other parties were disposed along the hull so as to control movement at any point and in any direction. No doubt the party had been drilled in some way, and disciplined men can always do wonders under good N.C.O.'s; but there is no mock-up of R.101 on which to practise. None of the party can have taken part in walking an airship since R.33 was flown at Cardington before the Dominion Premiers, and not very many of the 400 can have been at that exhibition. In any case, the bulk of R.101 is twice that of R.33, so that in every way this walking out was a totally new experience. Everything went off like clockwork.

Maj. G. H. Scott took command, and he must have felt proud to have an airship under his control once more. He has seen this ship born, and watched it in its swaddling clothes. He has said openly to critics that he believes R.101 is a thoroughly sound ship, and that he would fly her with confidence when the time came. The time had nearly come; the first step, at least, was about to be taken. The foreman of the walking party reported "All clear, Sir," and then through Maj. Scott's megaphone came the momentous order "Walk the ship ahead." Now for it! Would she clear the shed safely? The party started to walk, and the ship, weighing just the same as the air, obediently came with them. The nose projected out of the shed. Those two dark sheds have for long looked a disfigurement on the great Bedfordshire plain, though their size has lent them dignity and to some extent redeemed their ugliness. But there has always been romance about shed No. 1, for everyone knew that it contained the mysterious airship which was so much discussed. Now the doors were open, and the silver nose of the fledgling appeared through the crack in the gloomy shell. Then the force of the cross wind was felt to some extent, but the walking party kept good control. In a few minutes came the report "All clear, Sir," and the critical moment had passed. The