

What Happened to Robert Cocking?

BY HENRI HEGENER

The author is the doyen of Dutch aviation writers and is well known in this country, notably for the Harborough book "Fokker—the Man and the Aircraft." He is now engaged on another book, to be published in English, dealing at great length with the history of the parachute. Mr Hegener's researches have brought to light much little-known or hitherto unpublished material. The accompanying story is of particular interest in that, so far as Mr Hegener is aware, the details of Cocking's death furnished by the coroner have not previously been related in any work of aeronautical history.

Mr Hegener writes: "My greatest snag is to find photographs of the parachute jumpers and their equipment, of the hot-air and coal gas balloon era, which started in the late eighties as a revival of the days of the Garnerins, and which was continued till the First World War. Outstanding were the British aeronauts the Spencers, who did a lot of parachuting in the Far East, South Africa and other countries. I should feel greatly obliged if readers of "Flight International" who are able to help would contact me." Mr Hegener's address is Beukenlaan 24, Bennebroek, Netherlands.



ROBERT COCKING (1777-1837), the son of an Irish clergyman and by profession a water-colour painter, had witnessed the parachute descent by the Frenchman Jacques Garnerin in London on September 21, 1802. Although impressed by the performance as such, he could hardly be enthusiastic about the violent oscillations which the courageous Frenchman had to suffer. He became convinced that the apparatus as used by Garnerin was basically wrong and believed that it would be much more sensible to construct a parachute with the concave side placed uppermost. Experiments with home-made models, which he dropped from the top of the Monument near London Bridge and later on Hampstead Heath, using small hydrogen balloons, had confirmed his theories. In 1814 he read a paper on this subject at the London Institution.

The idea of the "inverted cone" parachute haunted him and he kept hoping to be able to carry out a full-size experiment. He fully realized that a rigid parachute would be a heavy affair and that it would be no simple matter to find a balloon of sufficient capacity to lift his contrivance off the ground. In 1835 he approached Frederick Gye, the manager of Vauxhall Gardens in London, where balloon ascents were frequently staged; but Gye rejected the idea. The construction of the large Vauxhall balloon—later to be known as the Nassau balloon, for its historical long-distance flight from London to Weilburg in Nassau in November 1836—brought Cocking's scheme a step nearer to its realization. But again the management of the renowned amusement park could not raise any enthusiasm. However, the aeronaut Charles Green, who had commanded the Nassau balloon on its great flight to Germany, regarded the scheme as quite feasible and declared himself prepared to undertake its execution. Gye and his associate then agreed.

According to the contract—the original of which is in the library of the Royal Aeronautical Society in London—the parachute was constructed at the expense of the management of Vauxhall Gardens. The first test would be carried out by Cocking without any remuneration, while for the next two he would receive 20 guineas each. For consequent descents he would be paid 30 guineas apiece.

In view of the unwieldy character of the apparatus, it was assembled in Vauxhall Gardens. The largest hoop measured 34ft in diameter and was made of tin tube. The smaller ones were probably of the same material, although one of the sources speaks of copper. They were interconnected by means of light spars of wood, braced by small lines and covered by 22 gores of Irish linen. The whole had a surface of 124 sq yd and was shaped as an inverted cone at 30°, with a height of about 10ft. The "cone" had been artistically decorated by an artist employed by Vauxhall Gardens. The weight, according to most sources, was 223lb, while Cocking himself turned the scale at 170lb. But in a statement before the coroner—for the experiment was to end in tragedy—there was a suggestion that the weight of the unmanned parachute amounted to more than 400lb, which in view of the light construction appears unlikely.

Monday, July 24, 1837 was the day of the daring adventure. A great multitude was present. The preparation took considerably longer than expected. Charles Green—on this flight seconded by the aeronaut Edward Spencer—had refused the responsibility of severing the connection between the parachute and the balloon, obviously with possible failure of the experiment in mind. For this reason there was a release mechanism, called the "liberating iron," which the parachutist, standing in the basket suspended

