

**The R101 Airship Disaster – Honouring of the Dead and the Lying in State
at the time of the Laying of the Foundation Stone of the
Chingford Masonic Hall on Saturday 11th October 1930**

On the occasion of the Laying of the Foundation Stone of the Chingford Masonic Hall on Saturday 11th October, 1930, there was a very sombre mood in the air at the loss of the Airship R101 which crashed on 5th October 1930 in France, during its maiden overseas voyage, killing 48 people. “The Provincial Grand Master, R.W. Bro. Brig-Gen R. Beale Colvin, on arriving at the site referred to the disaster to *R101*, the victims of which were at that time being laid to rest at Cardington; and the Brethren stood to order in respect to their memory” - [The Freemason 25th October 1930]



In the “Times” on Saturday 11th October 1930, the paper had attributed a whole page to “Honouring the dead of the R101: The Lying-in-State”, with many photographs.

Photograph left: the scene at Westminster Hall as the coffins of the 48 victims being draped with the Union Jack and the procession of crowds paying their last respects.

On Friday 10th October 1930, London paid its homage to the dead of the R101 as thousands passed through Westminster Hall, where the coffins of the 48 Victims, each covered with the Union Jack, lay surrounded with flowers. St. Pauls

Cathedral was not large enough to accommodate the crowds who wished to attend the memorial service in the morning. There was an all day procession from 8 o'clock until midnight, with a continuous procession through Westminster Hall. There was a long queue of people extending from Westminster down Millbank.

The flag of the R101, which escaped destruction in the fire that followed the crash of the airship, was placed on the altar of St. Paul's Cathedral for the memorial service.

Of the dignitaries in attendance for the memorial service, was the Prince of Wales (later Edward VIII) who represented the King (George V), The Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald and General Davies the American Ambassador. Among the many representatives of foreign powers at the St. Paul's service were General Balbo Italian Minister for Air, and M.Laurent Bynac the French Minister for Air.



The building of the R101 began in 1926 at the Royal Airship Works at Cardington in Bedfordshire. Due to a failed attempt to create hydrogen-powered engines and several other new design concepts, the project's completion was delayed from 1927 to 1929.

During its flight at the Hendon Air show in 1930, it almost plunged to the ground, as well as repeatedly going into a dive during the return flight. Its gas bags also developed numerous leaks. The gas bag valves were of a novel design and placement, they showed a tendency to open slightly as the ship rolled thus causing a continual leakage of lifting gas and leading to constant decrease lift in flight. Despite this, it was given a Certificate of Airworthiness.

Engineers lengthened the frame, added another gas bag, reversed propellers, and replaced the outer cover.

After that, the ship was 777 feet long with a total volume of 5.5 million cubic feet and a useful lift of just under 50 tons.

She was the largest flying aircraft ever built, surpassing the LZ 127 *Graf Zeppelin* which was of similar length but carried only 3.7 million cubic feet of lifting gas, but the *Hindenberg*, exceeded this five years later, at a length of 804 feet and volume 7 million cubic feet.

The passenger accommodation was spread over two decks and included 50 passenger cabins for one, two or four people, a dining room for 60 people, promenade decks with windows down the sides of the ship and even an asbestos-lined smoking room for 24 people. Most of the passenger space was on the upper deck with space for the crew, kitchens and washrooms, and the smoking cabin on the lower deck.

The R101 was fitted with five heavy diesel engines. They were designed by combining two four cylinder railway transport units into the 8 cylinder Beardmore Mk1 Tornado engine. The engines were intended to have reversing propellers, but they failed. At one point during the development, one engine was to be aimed astern and used only at the start and finish of the flights, a decision that astonished the engineers on the R100 team. This was later changed when two engines were made reversible.

With the Air Ministry putting pressure on the engineers to finish the project, the final trial flight of the R101 was originally scheduled for the 26th September 1930, but an unfavourable wind delayed it until 1st October. The R101 slipped her mast at 4.30 p.m. with the plan to fly a 24 hour endurance flight to complete the engine and other trials. The ship left Cardington and headed south to London, then turned east following the Thames and out across Essex.

She spent the night out over the North Sea. Due to an early failure of an engine cooler in the forward starboard engine it was impossible for the ship to make a full speed trial, and during the flight the conditions were noted as "perfect" and that all other items in the ship behaved perfectly. Even though there was not time to make formal reports, it was noted that the ship handled and appeared to be much better in the air than previously.

It was with this that it was agreed to curtail the flight and head for home at Cardington. The ship returned to the mast at 09.20 a.m. on Thursday 2nd October, although only being in the air for just 17 hours in smooth flying conditions.

Eventually the R101 departed on 4th October 1930 at 6.24 p.m. for its intended flight to Karachi (then part of British India) via a refuelling stop at Ismailia in Egypt under the command of Flight Lieutenant Carmichael Irwin. The passenger list included, Brigadier-General Lord Thompson, Secretary of State for Air, Sir Sefton Brancker, Director of Civil Aviation, and Squadron Leader William Palstra, RAAF air liaison officer to the British Air Ministry. The airship had to drop 5 tons of water ballast to lift off.

Over France, the R101 encountered gusting winds that tore back the outer covering, exposing and rupturing the first gas bag, causing the R101 to crash into a hillside near Beauvais, north of Paris, at only 13 mph. The crash ignited the leaking hydrogen and fire quickly engulfed the entire airship.

Forty six of the fifty-four passengers and crew were killed instantaneously, two men who survived the crash later died at the hospital, bring the total fatalities to forty eight. At the following court of enquiry, there was evidence that there had been a failure of the outer cover of the upper nose. This, it was postulated, led to the destruction of a gas bag, loss of the flammable hydrogen lifting gas, and caused the nose to drop. The exact source of ignition was never determined.

R101 was the end of British attempts to create lighter-than-air aircraft.

Its competitor R100 despite a more successful development programme, and a safe transatlantic trial flight, was mothballed immediately after the R101 crashed and sold for scrap in 1931.

Full state honours were given to the victims as special trains were laid on to transport them from the crash site to the channel. They were later loaded on to H.M.S. Tempest at Boulogne and then carried to Dover where a special train took the bodies to Victoria Station. From there they were carried in state to Westminster Hall at the Palace of Westminster where they were to be laid in state.

From here the mourning public waited many hours to file past the coffins to show respect. A memorial service was held at St. Pauls Cathedral on Saturday 11th October, after which the coffins were taken by train to Bedford, then they were walked two miles to Cardington

Village, where a space had been prepared in the Village Churchyard. All 48 bodies were finally laid to rest in a special grave.

A final small service was undertaken with distinguished guests including Dr Hugo Eckener (*Airship Pioneer and Commander of the Graf Zeppelin*) and Hans Von Schiller (*Skipper of the Graf Zeppelin*), followed by a flypast by the RAF flight.



In 1931 a memorial tomb was completed and inscribed with the names of the victims. This memorial still dominates the tiny churchyard to this day.

Picture left: The memorial to the victims of the R101 Disaster

Acknowledgement

- [1] "The Times - 10th October 1930"
- [2] The Freeman - 25th October 1930