

Future Today

How the world learned to fly

It was a bright and sunny morning, still a bit windy. The first lovely day after a period of storms and rain. Lady Manville was clutching her most fashionable hat, struggling to prevent it being blown away by the gusts of wind. She wasn't too happy to be stood above the cliffs of Dover so early, but her husband had urged her to come with him. He had told her she would witness an event that would change the world. She had no idea what was about to happen on this Sunday, July 25th, 1909.

Only a few other couples were with the Manvilles this morning, each of them staring across the Channel towards France. Nothing was to be seen. Then the first men pointed out something over the water. At first Lady Manville couldn't see anything. But as the crowd got more and more excited she saw something black, resembling a big insect, in the air. Then she heard a sonorous noise that became louder each second. A few minutes later she saw something she had never seen before; a flying machine with a man on board. She couldn't believe her eyes. Her husband turned towards her with a fascinated look in his eyes and said: "Darling – that's the future. That's the way we will travel soon!"

The flying machine was now very close overhead and she was not sure what to think. Of course, it was fascinating to see a flying machine crossing the English Channel but it seemed so fragile as it swayed in the air, buffeted by the wind. After a turn the flying machine was about to land. She saw it coming down on the green and then a loud cracking noise was heard as the undercarriage of the contraption crashed and ground to an abrupt halt, almost throwing the

man on board out of his cockpit. Now she was sure: This would never be an appropriate way to travel – not in 100 years – it was much too dangerous and inelegant!

What Lady Manville had witnessed that morning was the first flight across the English Channel, carried out by Louis Blériot. The distance of only 35 kilometres took him 35 minutes. He flew with an average speed of 57 kilometres per hour. While Lady Manville was certain that no one would ever use a flying machine 107 years later, in 2016, 3.7 billion passengers worldwide were carried by airlines and the Concorde, the fastest passenger jet so far, exceeded a speed of 1,700 kilometres per hour more than 40 years ago.

Almost exactly 60 years later. The son of the Manvilles, who was born two years after Blériot's pioneering flight, sat in front of his TV set. He was as excited as his father had been 60 years before. The newspapers were reporting that a once in a lifetime event was about to occur. It was late in the evening. Normally Lord Manville would have gone to bed long before, but this was something special. In his mother's time, only a few people had witnessed the ambitious venture of a French engineer. Now millions of people were watching round the world. He poured himself a whisky on the rocks and curled up in his armchair, waiting for events to unfold.

A few minutes before 3 a.m. GMT the moment the millions round the world were waiting for arrived: A blurred picture in black and white appeared on the screen and a distorted voice said "That's one small step for man ... one ... giant leap for mankind."

Then he saw Neil Armstrong in his huge white space suit stepping from the ladder of the lunar module "Eagle" on the surface of the moon. It was fascinating seeing the first man walking on moon – something men had dreamed of for centuries but could never hope to realise. Now it had become real. Apollo 11 had brought the first two men, Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin to the moon.

He walked to the bedroom and woke his wife Ethel. She had been sleeping for hours but he could not wait until breakfast to tell her this fantastic news. It was a great technological breakthrough he told her and in his enthusiasm he talked also about other great pioneers in history – Magellan, Livingstone, Cook, Lindbergh. Ethel was tired and slightly angry. All of these men were pioneers and flying to the moon was a great achievement indeed, but a very dangerous endeavour too. Why should men fly to the moon? What was the practical use of crewed spaceflights? She told her husband that in her mind these were only technological experiments with no reference to real life.

Now, almost half a century later a private space industry is planning commercial space trips for individuals. Tests are underway and the first flights are scheduled for 2018.

Technological experiment has turned into commercial use. Thousands of people are interested in space tourism, hundreds have already made reservations.

What history tells us is, that every technological leap has its own event when visions first become reality. Then, after years of testing and gaining experience, the initial idea advances from experiment to everyday use. For all innovations and visions the old saying of the Chinese philosopher Laotse is true: "Even a journey of a thousand miles starts with the first step".

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Beat H. Haering

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