



WOOLF BARNATO 1895 – 1948

Family Origins

On 27th September 1895 Woolf Barnato was born at Spencer house in St James Place, London. This great Palladian house was built in 1752 for Lord Spencer. How did a baby whose family were from East London arrive at such a prestigious address in just two generations?

Woolf's grandfather, Isaac Isaacs, was a second hand clothes dealer (a clobberer) in Petticoat Lane. His two sons, Harry and Barnett helped in the business as well as earning extra money by street trading, mostly apples, and juggling. The local community was organising an entertainment and Barnett decided to play Othello, a strange choice for a slim, blonde boy who wore pince-nez spectacles. The audience thought he was "playing for laughs" and began to jeer in hilarious delight so Barnett left the stage in tears. At the end, when the performers took their bows, Barnett refused to come on until the audience began chanting 'Barnett too'. From then on the two boys were known as the 'Barnett Too Brothers' which eventually became Barnato, the surname they adopted.

Diamonds

In 1867 diamonds were discovered on the Orange River in South Africa. Harry went there in 1871 followed two years later by Barney with capital of £50 and 40 boxes of cheap cigars given to him by his uncle. Arriving at the port of entry he then had a journey of 300 miles to make to the diamond fields. He paid a cattle drover £3 walking all the way and helping with the cows, sleeping under a wagon at night. Reaching Kimberley he found that Harry was sleeping rough in a tent, his letters home about making a fortune had been all lies.

Barney set about trading, finally acquiring the postman's pony which knew its own way around the various mining claims. The practice was to sieve the soil for diamonds but when the "blue earth" was reached the claim was abandoned. Barney started to buy these abandoned claims and, with the few diamonds he found, buying more. When he had sufficient, he brought in machinery to mine the "blue earth" his first mine being named The Primrose Diamond Mine.

In the next twenty years he made a vast fortune from diamonds, gold mining and becoming an international financier. His company Barnato Bros (45%) was amalgamated with Anglo American (45%) and Johannesburg Consolidated

WOOLF BARNATO

Investments (10%) to form De Beers. He became a Life Governor of De Beers, a Member of the Cape Assembly for Kimberley and a Lieutenant of the City of London.

He took his three nephews Jack, Woolf and Solly Joel into the business and this may have led to his death.

Suicide or Murder

In 1897 Barney, his wife and three children, including Woolf aged 1 year, were returning to England for a holiday and rest on the SS Scot. Solly Joel was also on board. Approximately one day south of Madeira, Barney fell (or was pushed?) overboard and drowned. He was on deck with nephew Solly at the time and there was talk of a struggle. Did Solly push him or was he trying to stop him? Did Solly have a motive to commit murder?

Barney's will, after provision for his wife and children, stated that the company should pass to his surviving nephews. Jack Joel was accused of illicit diamond buying, a very serious charge in South Africa, and fled to England to escape trial.

Woolf Joel was shot and killed by a blackmailer having set up an ambush with the police. With Barney already dead, Solly was in control of the company.

Litigation

After the 1914-1918 war, Woolf Barnato's father-in-law from his first marriage, with the consent of various relatives, agreed to investigate the affairs of the company in return for 20% of any money recovered. Herbert Falk (originally Von Falk) was a stockbroker with J S Balche in New York but he resigned from the firm to carry out his investigation.

Solly Joel tried to be as obstructive as possible and Herbert Falk frequently found that important documents were missing. After many years Solly was instructed by the court to hand over the books. It was found that he had been stealing from Barney and the company over a long period. The court case against Solly began but, on the afternoon of the first day, a settlement of £960,000 was agreed. Friends of Woolf Barnato pointed out that the recipients of the settlement had been losing interest on the money stolen. Solly agreed to pay interest calculated over a period of 30 years.

Growing up

After Barney's death, Woolf was brought up by his mother being educated at Charterhouse School and Cambridge University. When war broke out he joined the Royal Field Artillery serving in France and the Middle East rising from the ranks to finish the war as Captain. In 1915 he was given leave to marry Dorothy Maitland Falk, the daughter of Herbert Von Falk a New York stockbroker. There were two daughters by this marriage, Virginia and Diana, but it ended in divorce.

Motor Racing and Speed Records

Woolf Barnato was a talented 'all round' sportsman playing cricket for Surrey, becoming a scratch golfer, a useful tennis player and he excelled at motor racing. He is best known for being one of the 'Bentley Boys' but his first competitive drive with Bentley was not until 1925. He drove several other makes before then, many of which no longer exist.

WOOLF BARNATO

1921	8 Litre Locomobile, Calthorpe, Austro-Daimler.
1922	Talbot (Malcolm Campbell's car) Ansaldo, 1.5 litre Enfield Alldays
1923	Wolseley "Moth", Bertelli
1924	8 Litre Hispano Suiza
1925	Hispano-Suiza, Bugatti

Cesare Bertelli was the chief engineer for Enfield Alldays. The Bertelli cars were built in Lingfield but we do not know if this was at Ardenrun Place or elsewhere. Enfield Alldays became part of Aston Martin.

In 1925 Bentley Motors were in danger of bankruptcy. Following a meeting with W O Bentley, Woolf Barnato agreed to provide finance and eventually became chairman of the company. However this did not give him preference over other drivers as W O Bentley described him as 'the best driver we ever had and, I consider the best British driver of his day'.

From 1925 to 1928 with various co-drivers he set 28 speed records for distances ranging from 50 kilometres or 30 miles to 3000 kilometres or 2000 miles. Some of the records were timed from 1 hour to 24 hours. Most of these record attempts took place at Autodrome de Montlhery, south of Paris. However, his greatest achievement was winning the Le Mans 24 hour race in three consecutive years 1928, 1929 and 1930. His co-drivers were Bernard Rubin (1928), H R S Birkin(1929) and Glen Kidston.

The Great Train Race

Between the two wars, the fashionable way to travel to the Mediterranean was on the Blue Train which ran from Calais to Cannes. Whilst on a sailing holiday, Woolf Barnato made a wager that, driving his Bentley and crossing the channel by car ferry he could be in London before the train reached Calais. Both car and train left Cannes at 17.45 in the evening and, by careful planning and skilful but safe driving, Woolf and his co-driver Dale Bourne arrived at the Conservative Club in St James Street, London 8 minutes before the train reached Calais. Passengers on the train arrived in London four hours later.

No More Racing

He gave up racing in 1930 after winning Le Mans for the third time. With the worldwide financial slump Bentley Motors were in serious financial trouble and in 1931 they were taken over by Rolls Royce.

Ardenrun Place

Ardenrun Place was designed by Ernest Newton and built for the industrialist H H Konig. It was described 'a pleasant specimen of a country house. It makes no pretence of being older than it is. It looks well already and, given proper upkeep, should look better as the years go on.'

Woolf Barnato purchased the house in 1921 with 1,000 acres of surrounding land. There was a private golf course, a home farm, a stable block and garaging for many cars. It was all maintained under the supervision of the head chauffeur Cyril de Heaume. In the basement was a 'mock tudor' public house known as the Ardenrun Arms. On the lower lawns were cricket practice nets.

WOOLF BARNATO

The property was reached down a long drive from Tandridge Lane, the straight to Moat Farm being approximately half a mile long. This is where the 'Bentley Boys' used to race their cars. On one occasion Bugatti, who was a great friend of Woolf Barnato, brought several of his cars to Ardenrun Place and the guests raced against the clock from the house to Tandridge Lane and back.

In 1930 the Surrey Cricket team came on a visit, including Jack Hobbs and Percy Fender. It is said that they played on the cricket pitch at Blindley Heath but the writer has been unable to prove this. Apparently Woolf Barnato's gardener used to look after the pitch.

The Australian touring team including Don Bradman also came and Diana Barnato Walker, Woolf's daughter, has an autograph book with the signatures of both teams.

On 21st January 1933 tragedy occurred. Fire broke out on the upstairs landing by the nursery and, by the time the fire brigade arrived, the house was ablaze. By the morning it was a roofless ruin. The house was never rebuilt and Woolf Barnato moved to his flat in Grosvenor Square purchasing the adjoining flat to give extra space.

He decided to build a new house at Englefield Green, West Surrey on the edge of Windsor Great Park. The chosen architect was Robert Lutyens who designed a long, low, white ranch style property with 25 bedrooms, most en suite, a swimming pool, a squash court and 20 acres of garden. The house took seven years to complete and was named 'Ridgemoor House'.

The War Years and after

When war came he joined the RAF but at 44 was too old to fly. He was commissioned with the rank of Wing Commander and was responsible for the defence of airfields in Southern England. He was also involved in the Ministry of Aircraft Production.

Ridgemoor House was considered, being painted white, a tempting and conspicuous target for enemy aircraft. The whole house was repainted in camouflage colours.

In July 1948 Woolf Barnato went into hospital for a minor abdominal operation that he had been postponing for many years. The operation was successful but four days later he died from a thrombosis. The funeral was at Englefield Green and, laden with a mass of flowers, a magnificent Bentley Le Mans Speed Six was driven to the graveside. A fitting tribute!

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Sources:

First President by John Binns

Spreading My Wings by Diana Barnato-Walker – ISBN 85260 473 5

W O Bentley Memorial Foundation

Bentley Drivers Club Limited

Mr Nick Withers

Captain Woolf Barnato - life

Early life

The youngest son of Fanny Bees and Barney Barnato, who had made a fortune as a "Randlord" in South African diamond and gold mining, he was a relative of the Joel family of entrepreneurs.

Born at Spencer House, 27 St James Place, London, he had a sister Leah Primrose (died 1933) and brother Isaac "Jack" Henry (died 1918 of bronchial pneumonia). The family divided their time between London, Brighton, Colwyn Bay and South Africa.

In 1897 aged two, his father died near Madeira during a sea crossing from South Africa to London. The official verdict was suicide ('death by drowning while temporarily insane'). Woolf hence inherited his fathers fortune at the time, but with the monies placed in trust, he only inherited his first instalment of £250,000, in 1914 aged 19. In addition, Woolf also benefited from a further inheritance after the murder of Woolf Barnato Joel in Johannesburg in 1898.

Barnato was educated at Charterhouse School and Trinity College, Cambridge.

Sports

Barnato's attitude to a new sport that took his interests, was to immerse himself in the learning process, practising endlessly and taking lessons only from the very best instructors he could find. His desire to excel at whatever he attempted was considerable.

He collected prizes (including the 1925 Duke of York Trophy) for motor boat racing, using his Bentley-powered boat 'Ardenrun V', a good amateur boxer and a keen shot. He bred horses whilst at his house Ardenrun, and hunted with the Old Surrey and Burstow Foxhounds. A strong swimmer, he played tennis to 'country house level'. He also took lessons at Coombe Hill Golf Club, Kingston, Surrey, with the club professional Archie Compston, a friend of King Edward VIII.

Career

Barnato served as an officer in the Royal Field Artillery, British Army in World War I. Serving in France, Egypt and Palestine, he attained the rank of Captain in the latter stages of the war.

Having claimed a share of the business's profits from 1897 to 1916, in 1917 he broke of his business arrangements with the Joels. After a long legal dispute in South Africa, Woolf settled for £900,000 plus £50,000 in costs. He then sued his family for the £50,000, as well as £23,883 for disbursements.

Following settlement of the case, Barnato played first-class cricket, appearing as wicket-keeper with Surrey County Cricket Club from 1928 to 1930.

W.O. Bentley Ltd

Main article: [Bentley](#)



1929 "[Blower](#)" Bentley.

Barnato acquired his first Bentley (a 3-litre) in 1925, just 12 months before he also acquired the business itself. With this car he won numerous [Brooklands](#) races. He was a member of a social set of wealthy British motorists known as the "[Bentley Boys](#)" who favoured the cars of [W. O. Bentley](#). Many were independently wealthy, often with a background in military service. Barnato was [nicknamed](#) "**Babe**", in ironic deference to his [heavyweight boxer's](#) stature.

Inspired by the 1924 Le Mans win by [John Duff](#) and [Frank Clement](#), Barnato agreed to finance Bentley's business. Barnato had incorporated *Baromans Ltd* in 1922, which effectively existed as his finance and investment vehicle. Via Baromans, Barnato initially invested in excess of £100,000, saving the company and its workforce. A subsequent agreed wind-up of the original Bentley company was agreed, with all existing creditors paid off for £75,000, but with existing shares devalued from £1.00 each to just 1 shilling, or 5% of their original value. Barnato held 149,500 of the new shares, meaning that he controlled the company, and became chairman. Barnato injected further cash into the business: £35,000 as a debenture in July 1927; £40,000 in 1928; £25,000 in 1929.

With renewed financial input, W. O. Bentley was able to design another generation of cars, the six-cylinder [6½ Litre](#). However, the [supercharged 4½ Litre](#) (the famous "[Blower](#)" Bentley), which Barnato pushed through against Bentley's wishes, had poor durability and failed on the track.

The [Wall Street Crash](#) of 1929 affected the Bentley business greatly, with the [Great Depression](#) reducing demand for the company's expensive products. In July 1931 two mortgage payments on the firm that were guaranteed by Barnato fell due, and accepting the inevitable, he advised the lenders that he was "unable to meet these debts." On 10 July, on the application of the mortgagee, the court appointed a Receiver to Bentley Motors Limited.^[1] After a period where it appeared that [Napier](#) was going to acquire the business, the firm passed into the hands of [Rolls-Royce](#) in November 1931 for the sum of £125,000 after a sealed bid auction.

Barnato received around £42,000 in return for his shares in the business, having bought a sizeable stake in Rolls-Royce not long before Bentley Motors was liquidated. By 1934 he was again on the board of Bentley Motors (1931) Ltd.

Motor racing

Having acquired his first Bentley in 1925, Barnato won numerous Brooklands races with this car. Barnato later won the Brooklands Six Hour Race and Double Twelve Race in 1930. Barnato was Duff's co-driver when he set the world 24 hour record at 95.03 miles per hour (152.94 km/h) at Autodrome de Montlhéry. He was regarded by W.O. Bentley as:

“ The best driver we ever had and, I consider, the best British driver of his day. One who never made a mistake and always obeyed orders ”

Le Mans

As a driver, Barnato won the 24 Hours of Le Mans race three times:

- 1928 — with Bernard Rubín in a Bentley 4½ Litre
- 1929 — with Sir Henry "Tim" Birkin in a Bentley Speed Six ("Old Number One")
- 1930 — with Glen Kidston in a Bentley Speed Six ("Old Number One")

As these were the only years in which he entered the race, Barnato is the only Le Mans driver with a perfect wins-to-starts ratio. Bentley, under his chairmanship, also won the race in 1927, with Dr. J. Dudley "Benjy" Benjafield and S. C. H. "Sammy" Davis in a Bentley 3 Litre.

The Blue Train Races

Main article: Blue Train Races

In March 1930 at the Carlton Hotel, Cannes, during the Blue Train Races, Woolf Barnato raised the stakes, on Rover and its Rover Light Six. Having raced and beaten Le Train Bleu for the first time, Barnato claimed that he could not only beat the Blue Train from Cannes to Calais, but could reach London in his 6½ Litre Bentley Speed Six before the train even reached Calais, on a bet of 100 Pound Sterling.

He set off from the bar of the Carlton Hotel at just before 6pm on 13 March, accompanied by his friend Dale Bourne as unofficial co-driver. They stopped for fuel at Aix-en-Provence, Lyon, Auxerre and Paris. He arrived at the docks in Boulogne at 10:30 am on 14 March, in time for the 11:30 sailing to Folkestone. Barnato reached Dale Bourne's club (the Conservative) in St James's, London, at around 3:30 pm, having covered the 830 miles (1,340 km) in 22½ hrs, at an average speed of 43.43 miles per hour (69.89 km/h).

Barnato drove an H. J. Mulliner-bodied formal saloon in the race; the streamlined fastback "Sportsman Coupé" by Gurney Nutting which he took delivery of on 21 May 1930 also became known as the Blue Train Bentley and is regularly mistaken for or erroneously referred to as being the car that raced the Blue Train, while in fact Barnato named it in memory of his race.^{[2][3]} Further confusion is caused by the well-known painting by Terence Cuneo which depicts the Gurney Nutting car. Both vehicles are still in existence.

Later life

From 1940 to 1945, Barnato was a Wing-Commander with the Royal Air Force, responsible for the protection of aircraft factories against Nazi Luftwaffe bombing raids. He continued various low-key business opportunities out of his office on Park Lane.

Personal life

Barnato was married three times:

- Dorothy Maitland Falk: 1915–1933, two daughters Virginia and Diana
- Jacqueline Claridge Quealy: 1933–1947. The daughter of a wealthy American colliery owner, the couple had two sons Michael Jay, and Peter Woolf (1934–1959; died of cancer Feb 1959, San Francisco)
- Joan Isachsen: December 1947-his death. Norwegian heiress

Barnato's daughter Diana Barnato Walker MBE learned to fly at the Brooklands Flying Club in 1938 at age 20. She went on to ferry Spitfires, Hurricanes and Wellingtons with the Air Transport Auxiliary during World War II.

Residences

Barnato lived for most of the time in London, at his house at 39 Elsworthy Road, Hampstead whilst married to Dorothy Maitland and, after his divorce, at his flat at 50 Grosvenor Square in Mayfair, on the south east corner of the square. Other Bentley Boys also had flats in the same block and, such was the number of Bentley cars parked outside, the location was known to taxi drivers as 'Bentley's Corner'.

He also owned Ardenrun Hall, a country house situated near Lingfield, Surrey. Originally built in 1906–1909 by Ernest Newton for the Konig family, the house was the scene of many lavish motor racing-themed parties for Barnato and his friends, but was destroyed by fire on 14 March 1933. He also owned the near by Nuthill Farm in Redhill, which was used by his ex-wife Dorothy and his daughters Diana and Virginia at weekends.

After the loss of Ardenrun, in 1938 he built a large castellated home named Ridgemean in Englefield Green, Surrey, at a cost of more than £100,000. Designed by Robert Lutyens, son of Sir Edwin Lutyens, Ridgemean featured innovations such as central heating, a 'talkie' cinema and a drive lit by secret light rays. It boasted 25 bedrooms, a heated swimming pool and was set in 25 acres of land overlooking the River Thames at Runnymede. Upon Barnato's death in 1948, his wife Joan sold the house for £25,000 and it became a nursing home, which it remains to this day.

During his final marriage to Joan Isachsen, he purchased an 8 acre plot named Perot's Island, in Bermuda, "as an investment after my death".

Death

Barnato died at the London Clinic, Devonshire Place, on 27 July 1948, aged just 53, as a result of a thrombosis after an operation for cancer.

His funeral cortege was led by his Bentley 'Old Number One', which was covered with flowers and wreaths. He is buried at St Jude's Church in Englefield Green, Surrey, (grave 286, plot 25) next to his son-in-law Derek Walker (who had married his daughter Diana in 1944 and was killed in an aircraft crash in 1945). Estimates of his wealth at the time of his death were between £1.5 and 5m.


Diana Barnato Walker

'Atagirl' who delivered hundreds of planes during the war and was the first British woman to break the sound barrier.



Diana Barnato in a taxi-Anson: by the age of 22 she had delivered 240 Spitfires and other aircraft, unarmed and without instruments

6:40PM BST 04 May 2008

 [Comment](#)

Diana Barnato Walker, who died on April 28 aged 90, occupied an almost legendary position in the world of aviation: as well as being one of a handful of "Atagirls", women who served during the war as ATA (Air Transport Auxiliary) pilots delivering newly-built and battle-ready aircraft to airfields all over southern England, in 1963 she became the first British woman to break the sound barrier.

The diminutive socialite granddaughter of a South African diamond millionaire, before the war Diana Barnato was well known in London for her high spirits and for late nights spent at the Embassy or 400 Club in London. She was also known for the Bentley which she was given for her 21st birthday - a gift from her doting father, the motor-racing champion Woolf "Babe" Barnato.

In 1938, looking for new excitement, she decided to try her hand at flying and gained her licence after only six hours' training. Three years later, she abandoned her affluent lifestyle to rough it in the ATA. By the age of 22 she had delivered 240 Spitfires and many other aircraft and narrowly survived several brushes with death.

It was said that the Atagirls tended to come in two models - cropped hair and sensible shoes, or "powder puff". That Diana Barnato Walker was one of the latter variety was clear from her autobiography, *Spreading My Wings* (1994), in which she described an occasion when, delivering a Spitfire, she decided to try some aerobatics but got stuck upside down: "While I was wondering what to do next, from out of my top overall pocket fell my beautifully engraved silver powder compact. It wheeled round and round the bubble canopy like a drunken sailor on a wall of death, then sent all the face powder over everything."

When she eventually arrived at her destination a "very tall and handsome" RAF flight lieutenant hopped on to the wing to meet her: "One glance was enough. His mouth dropped open. 'I was told,' he gasped, 'that a very very pretty girl was bringing us a new aircraft. All I can see is some ghastly clown!'"

On another occasion, "skimming happily along in a Spitfire", she suddenly found herself in thick cloud, "but I couldn't bale out! My skirt would have ridden up with the parachute straps and anyone who happened to be below would have seen my knickers!" Instead, to the astonishment of those on the ground, she managed to nurse her aircraft down, breaking through the cloud at tree-top height and banking sharply to avoid a patch of woodland, to make a perfect landing in heavy rain on the tiny grass airstrip of what turned out to be the Navigation and Blind Flying Establishment at RAF Windrush.

The moment she got out of the cockpit on to the wing of the aircraft after this escapade, she felt sure she was going to faint. An RAF man was approaching and, not wanting him to think that anything was amiss, she knelt down on the wing and scabbled in her cockpit pretending to look for her maps. At which point he said: "I say, Miss, you must be good on instruments."

In fact, though, Diana Barnato had brought the aircraft down with no instruments. The ATA expected its pilots to fly in all weathers without navigational aids. As a result of this, and the fact that they flew unarmed and without radios, service in the ATA was one of the most dangerous activities available to either sex in the whole war. Out of the 108 female pilots recruited during the war, 16 were to perish in the air - including Amy Johnson, the first woman to fly solo from England to Australia, who died ferrying an Oxford aircraft in 1941.

On several occasions Diana Barnato came within seconds of following her into oblivion. She attributed her survival to her "guardian angel" and a man who had accosted her as she was about to take off on her first solo flight at Brooklands, whose hands and face were horribly burned. "In those days girls like me didn't see horrors," she recalled, "so it was a nasty fright. He looked at me and said, 'Don't fly, Miss Barnato. Look what it's done to me.' After that I was a very careful pilot."

Diana Barnato was born on January 15 1918 into a hugely gifted and enterprising Jewish family. Her grandfather, Barney Barnato, began as a trader and juggler in the Mile End Road, saved £50 and hitched his way to Johannesburg, where he became co-founder of the De Beers mining group.

Her father, Woolf, inherited his father's millions aged two, after Barney Barnato mysteriously fell or jumped over the side of a ship taking him to England in 1897. Woolf Barnato went on to win the Le Mans 24-hour race in three consecutive years from 1928 to 1930, was also a "plus" handicap golfer, a first-class shot, a county-level tennis player, a top

horseman and a champion swimmer and skier. Among other accomplishments he was said to be able to drink two bottles of champagne with no visible effect.

During the 1920s and 1930s his house near Lingfield, Surrey (described as being "more like the Savoy than a home"), became the venue for wild all-night parties. At one of these, Brooklands-style racing pits were constructed along the quarter-mile gravel drive. Guests in powerful cars, with beautiful girls aboard, tore into the "pits" for champagne, served by waiters dressed as racers, with linen helmets and goggles, before speeding up to the house.

Diana and her sister Virginia were the daughters of Barnato's American-born first wife. The marriage foundered when Diana was four, after her father embarked on an affair with an actress. Both parents remarried but they remained on good terms.

The two girls were brought up by their mother and an army of nannies and governesses in a large house on Primrose Hill, but often went to stay with their father, who indulged them by allowing them to stay up late for dinner. Once Diana was placed next to Dudley "Benjy" Benjafield, the 1927 winner of Le Mans with SCH "Sammy" Davis. Noticing that her neighbour was nodding off into his soup, Diana politely tapped his bald head with her spoon. Later he presented her with a fine cashmere scarf for "saving" him from drowning.

After leaving Queen's College, Harley Street, in 1936 Diana came out as a debutante and did the Season. But she quickly tired of being chaperoned and decided that the only way to escape the benign oversight of mother, nannies and governesses was to learn to fly.

This ambition took her to Brooklands where, in 1938, she spent her pocket money on a few hours' flying instruction in a Tiger Moth, going solo after six hours. On the day of the test she wore her stepmother's leopard skin coat because she had no other outfit. At the outbreak of hostilities in September 1939, she volunteered as a Red Cross nurse but soon determined to apply for a job as a ferry pilot and was accepted into the ATA training programme.

The Atagirls were objects of fascination for the combat pilots and romance flourished, despite a punishing work schedule. In 1942 Diana Barnato fell in love with a dashing Battle of Britain fighter ace, Squadron Leader Humphrey Gilbert.

Three weeks after meeting, they were engaged. Three days after that, circling over his base at Debden in a Tiger Moth, she was surprised that there was no sign of his blue-nosed Spitfire. After a series of frantic telephone calls, she was told that he had been killed the previous day.

In 1944 she married Derek Walker, another decorated pilot. They took an unauthorised honeymoon trip to Brussels, each piloting their own Spitfire, as a consequence of which Walker was docked three months' pay.

Four months after the end of the war he too was killed, flying to a job interview in a Mustang. Unlike most of her fellow Atagirls, who found it impossible to forge a career in commercial aviation after the war, Diana Barnato Walker obtained a commercial licence and was appointed Corps Pilot for the Women's Junior Air Corps.

One evening in 1963 in the mess at RAF Middleton St George, the Wing Commander Flying, John Severgne, idly suggested that Diana might like to fly one of the RAF's new supersonic Lightnings. She jumped at the chance and on August 26 1963, following clearance from the

Ministry of Defence, she took off and reached a speed of Mach 1.65 (1,262 mph), making her the first British woman to break the sound barrier.

Diana Barnato Walker continued flying for a few more years with the WJAC. She also became MFH of the Old Surrey and Burstow Hounds, commodore of the ATA Association and took up sheep farming in Surrey.

In 1994, following the publication of her memoirs, she was ceremonially presented with a £5 note in settlement of a wager with Wing-Commander Percy "Laddy" Lucas, the Second World War fighter ace who had bet her that she would never write her autobiography.

Diana Barnato Walker was appointed MBE in 1965.

For 30-odd years she kept up a relationship with the American-born racing driver, Whitney Straight. They had a son, though Diana never asked Straight to leave his wife.

"I was perfectly content," she explained. "I had my own identity." Whitney Straight died in 1979.

M&S store given Grade II listing

Marks and Spencer's shop in London's Oxford Street has been granted Grade II listed status because of its "impressive" classical facade.

The Pantheon store was designed specifically for the retailer in 1938.

The interior originally included walnut counters, teak doors and ornate ceilings but these were lost when the building was bombed during the Blitz.

But its exterior, which English Heritage said was a "fantastic" part of Oxford Street's history, survived.

The building was designed in part by architect Robert Lutyens and its prominent location in the West End was a mark of the retailer's expansion during the 1920s and '30s.

It was one of only two M&S shops to feature highly-polished black "ebony" granite slabs instead of artificial stone. The other was in Leeds.

The building provided "a beautiful focal point for the lower end of Oxford Street", culture minister Barbara Follett said.

A spokesman for Marks and Spencer said the company was "delighted" and "proud" to receive Grade II listed status.

"It is fitting that the store's classic facade is preserved during our 125th birthday celebrations," he added.



The shop opened in 1938 but suffered extensive interior wartime damage

