The first attempted aircraft crossing of the Irish Sea
During the early years of aviation, flying over sea was a formidable challenge. Engines were unreliable, and navigational aids, now taken for granted, were non-existent. Louis Bleriot paved the way with his successful crossing of the English Channel in 1909. Although less well known, the longer Irish Sea crossing presented more dangers. The first to attempt this crossing was Robert Loraine, an actor who was born on the Wirral in 1876. He’d made a small fortune touring the USA in George Bernard Shaw’s play *Man and Superman*, which helped him fund his passion for flying.

Following flying training in France, Loraine attended aviation meetings in the UK. At a meeting in Blackpool during August 1910, he decided that he would attempt to cross the Irish Sea. His plan was simple – follow the coast towards north Wales, and then head west to Holyhead, from where he would start his sea crossing. He flew for 90 minutes and due to technical difficulties with his single-engined Farman biplane, landed at Rhos on Sea for repairs – incidentally the first aircraft to land in North Wales. His mechanic, who was following by car, eventually caught up, and tended to his problems. The journey continued; flying at 4,000 feet, Loraine headed for Anglesey. However, instead of following the coast, or even simpler, following the mainline railway to Holyhead, he decided to cut across towards Point Lynas. Unfortunately, he wandered off course and became lost over open sea. The pilot claims to have fallen asleep, but eventually he regained sight of the Anglesey coast. By this time his fuel supply was low, and ran out as he was heading towards Llanfairynghornwy. Without power, he landed heavily in a field near Bryn Coelcerth farm, and damaged the biplane. The sight of an aircraft, even at this remote corner of the island, drew a huge crowd.

Following extensive repairs, an attempted take off resulted in another accident. This time a temporary hanger was built near Mynachdy in order to once again rebuild the aircraft. It took nearly a month to complete the repairs, by which time Loraine and his crew had had enough of the remote location and the alleged ‘inhospitable’ local population. Another attempted take off resulted in further damage, and the decision was taken to dismantle the aircraft and transport it by road to Holyhead, where the terrain was more suitable. Eventually, on September 11th 1910, the Farman biplane had been rebuilt. At 11:00 a.m., and aided by favourable weather conditions, Loraine
climbed aboard and set off. During his historic flight his engine cut out five times due to blockages in the fuel supply; luckily he was able to restart it each time. Having passed the Kish lightship, and approaching Howth Head, north of Dublin, Loraine began to lose control of his biplane. Two of the control wires had broken, and sadly, only a hundred or so yards from land, his aircraft plunged into the sea. He managed to escape the wreckage, and swam the final part of his journey.

His flight may have ended in near disaster, but Loraine had succeeded in setting a new record for oversea flying. Following this adventure, he joined the Royal Flying Corps in 1914. During the Great War he was severely injured by enemy fire, and was eventually passed unfit for service in 1918. He was awarded the Military Cross and Distinguished Service Order. Having recovered from his injuries, he returned to acting, and appeared on stage and in feature films. He died in London in 1935.

The first person to successfully fly to Ireland was Denys Corbett Wilson, who on the 22nd of April 1912, crossed St. George’s Channel from Fishguard to Wexford. This was followed shortly afterward by Vivian Hewitt, who on the 26th of April 1912, successfully crossed the Irish Sea from Holyhead to Dublin.

Adapted from ‘Early Aviation in North Wales’ by Roy Sloan, Gwasg Cerreg Galch, 2001.

Key to map

1. Robert Loraine left Blackpool on the 10th of August 1910 on his attempt to be the first to cross the Irish Sea by aircraft.

2. He landed at Rhos on Sea to attend to some mechanical problems with his Farman Biplane. On the second leg of his journey, he got lost at sea whilst attempting to fly to Holyhead and crash landed at Llanfairynghornwy.

3. In order to carry out repairs to the Farman single-engined biplane, a hanger was built on fields belonging to Mynachdy Farm.

4. Despite extensive repairs, Loraine was unable to take off from Llanfairynghornwy, and the aircraft was dismantled and transported by road to Holyhead.

5. He took off from Holyhead at 11:00 a.m. on the 11th of September 1910.

6. During the crossing his engine was cutting out due to debris blocking the fuel lines. Fortunately he was able to restart his engine each time.

7. Only a few hundred yards from the Irish coast, he lost control of his biplane, and ditched into the sea. He swam the final part of his journey, and his aircraft was recovered by an Irish dredger. The brave pilot returned to Holyhead on the mail boat on the evening of his flight.

Thanks to Roy Sloan for loaning the compass and for the information.
Did you know...

The first attempted air crossing of the Irish Sea took place nearly a century before Loraine’s flight. In 1812 James Sadler flew his balloon from Dublin towards Anglesey, but was unfortunately blown off course, and ditched in the Irish Sea near the Isle of Man. The feat was accomplished by his son, Windham Sadler, who in 1817 successfully flew his balloon from Dublin to Holyhead.