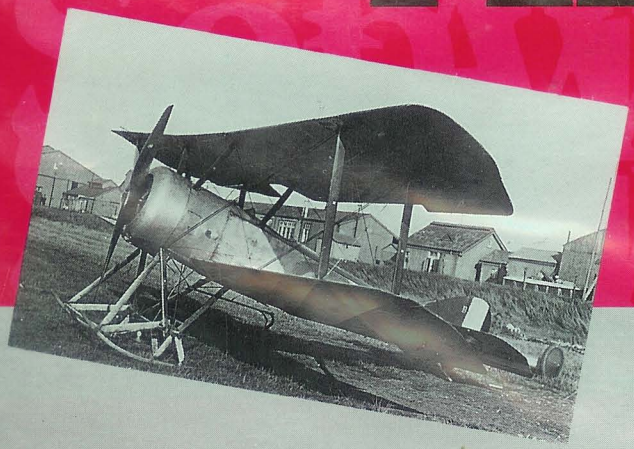
CROWOOD AVIATION SERIES

Sopwith Aircraft



Mick Davis

had been covered. The seaplane was salvaged and returned to Kingston for reconstruction. It re-emerged as a landplane on 4 October, but crashed soon after and, after being rebuilt once again as a seaplane, was sold to the Admiralty. It received the number 151 in the Naval Wing, after acceptance on 12 May 1914. After participation in the Naval Review at Spithead on 18 July, it was allocated to Yarmouth, but was damaged en route in a forced landing on the 30th. It was deleted on 19 August.

The Tabloid

The classic Sopwith design of 1913 was the Type St.B. The meaning of those abbreviations is still open to interpretation, but the type is well known as the Tabloid. The prime mover in its design was, undoubtedly, Harry Hawker and the reason for it was a quest for a nimble machine with a high speed. It is almost certain that Sopwith and Sigrist also had a part to play.

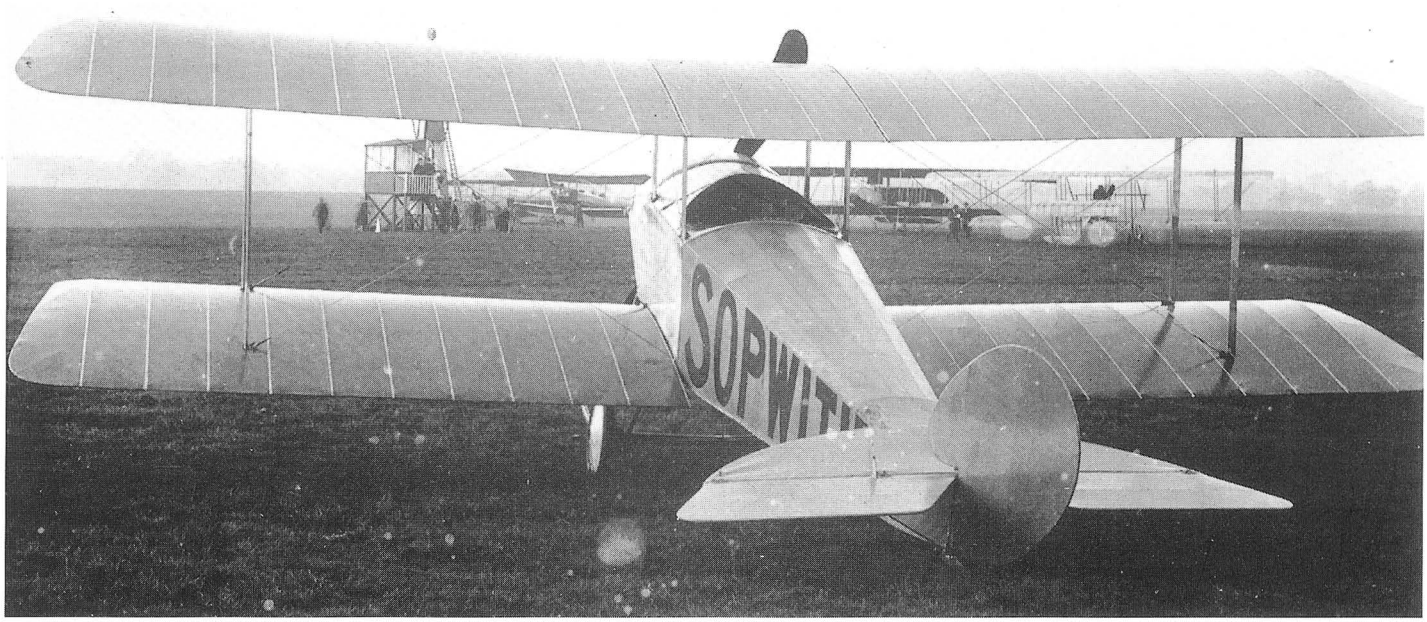
The components of the St.B emerged from Kingston on 27 November 1913 and were taken to Brooklands for assembly, which took place that same day, as did the first flight. Hawker was at the controls and the pace of events would suggest his faith in the machine.

It was a compact, side-by-side two seater with wing warping of its staggered mainplanes for lateral control. In tests at Farnborough, on 29 November, Hawker achieved 92mph (148km) with passenger and full fuel load. That was better than the Royal Aircraft Factory's B.S.1/S.E.2, despite the extra crew member and was achieved with only an 80hp Gnome rotary engine. Such a performance could not be ignored and it took less than three weeks for the Military Wing to order nine such machines, for use as high-speed scouts. The compactness of the design had encouraged C.G. Grey, in *The Aeroplane*, to use the description 'tabloid'. That name stuck with the type, and it became known as the Tabloid. Its manufacturer was proclaimed, as with the Circuit of Britain seaplane, by the name SOPWITH painted on the rear fuselage.

Whether for publicity purposes or in the hope of further orders, Hawker went to Australia with the St.B in January 1914 and performed in a series of flying exhibitions in front of thousands of his fellow countrymen. The rear fuselage of the aeroplane was, upon its return from that tour, stripped of its fabric and the original undercarriage was replaced by a simpler one that relied on inverted V struts to carry the axle. A cut-out had been made in the trailing edge of the centre section, presumably to improve the pilot's field of vision, and the wings rerigged to reduce the dihedral of the upper mainplanes.

While Hawker was abroad, the decision was made to enter the 1914 Schneider Cup competition, which was for seaplanes and tested the speed and seaworthiness of its entrants. The Frenchman, Maurice Prévost, who had won in 1913 at Monaco on a Deperdussin, then held the trophy, having covered the specified number of laps at an average speed of 61mph (98km/h). T.O.M. Sopwith decided to enter a floatplane version of the St.B that was to be powered by a 100hp Gnome and known as the HS. The fitting of the more powerful engine necessitated revision of the forward fuselage contours and the balanced rudder was replaced by one of half-round shape that had a triangular fin fitted in front. Wing warping was again used, rather than ailerons. Originally a single central float was envisaged, with another at each wing-tip. That undercarriage was tested but proved a failure and a more traditional pair of main floats was added. A close-mounted tail float was tried, but was replaced by one supported on longer struts. This machine was also prominently marked with the manufacturer's name and it seems likely that this was green or red, not black as may be surmised from a cursory study of photographs.

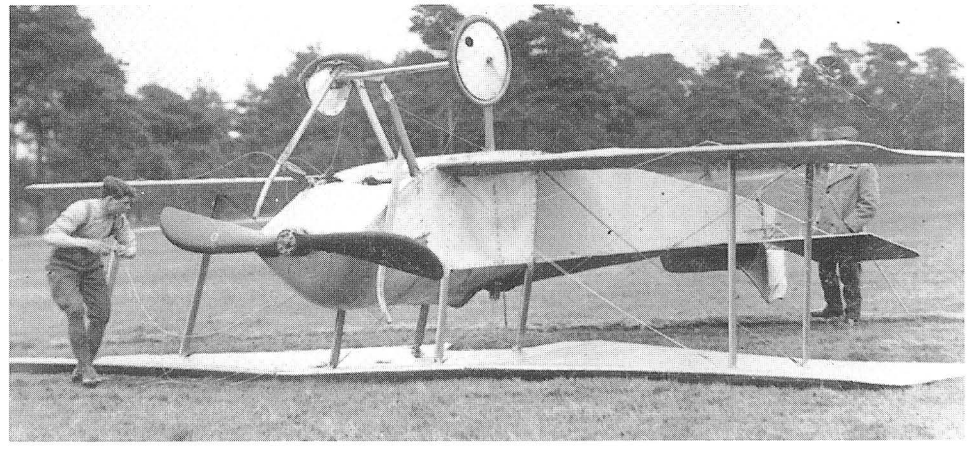
Howard Pixton was selected, in Hawker's absence, as pilot and on 20 April he won at Monaco. The Sopwith had averaged almost 87mph (140km/h) and that was with the Gnome misfiring on one



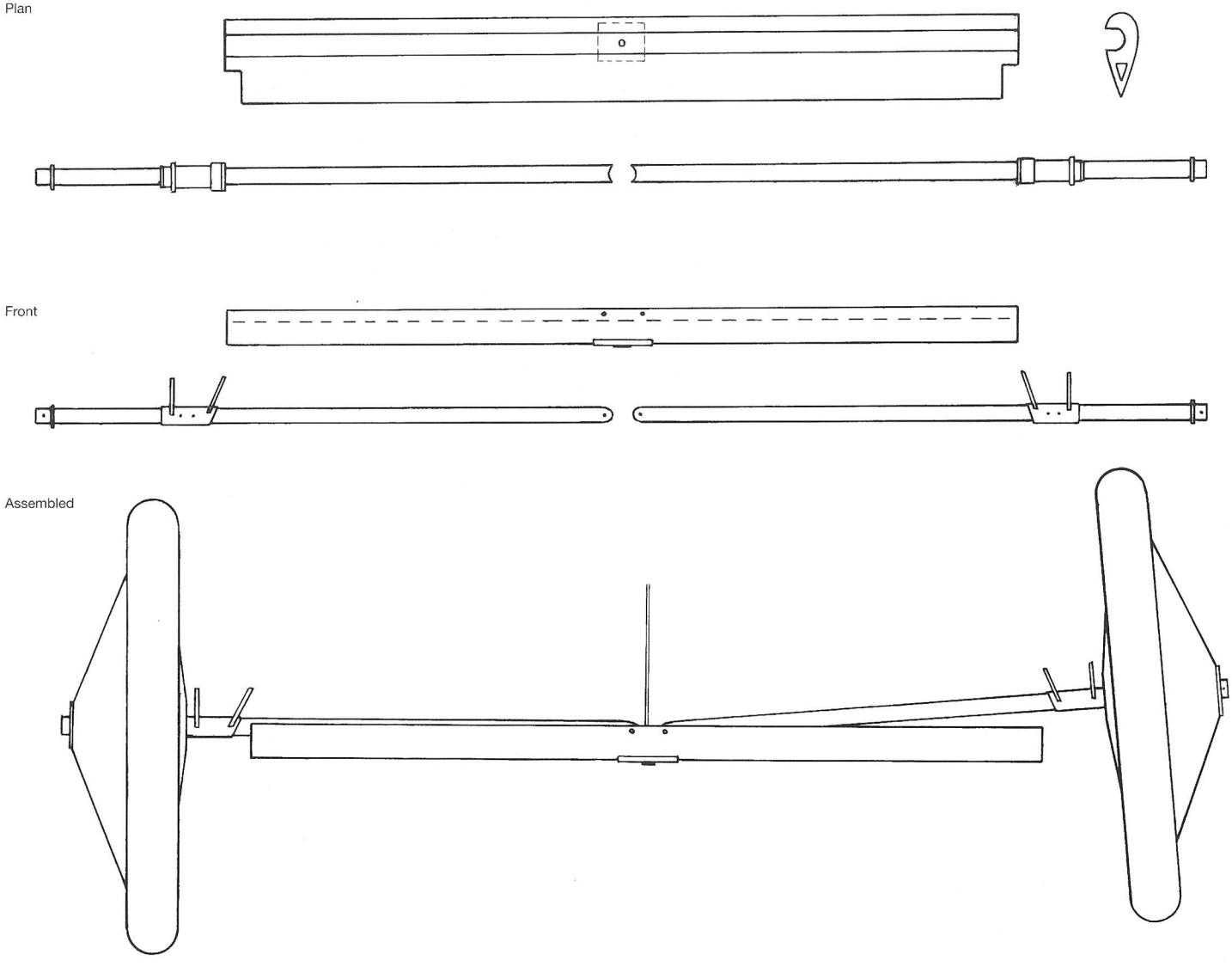
The prototype Tabloid was a very neat and compact machine, features that are evident in this rear view that was taken at Brooklands. As with the Circuit of Britain seaplane, the company name was prominently marked on the fuselage. JMB/GSL

cylinder for almost half of the twenty-eight laps. The success of the Sopwith Company was thus established internationally.

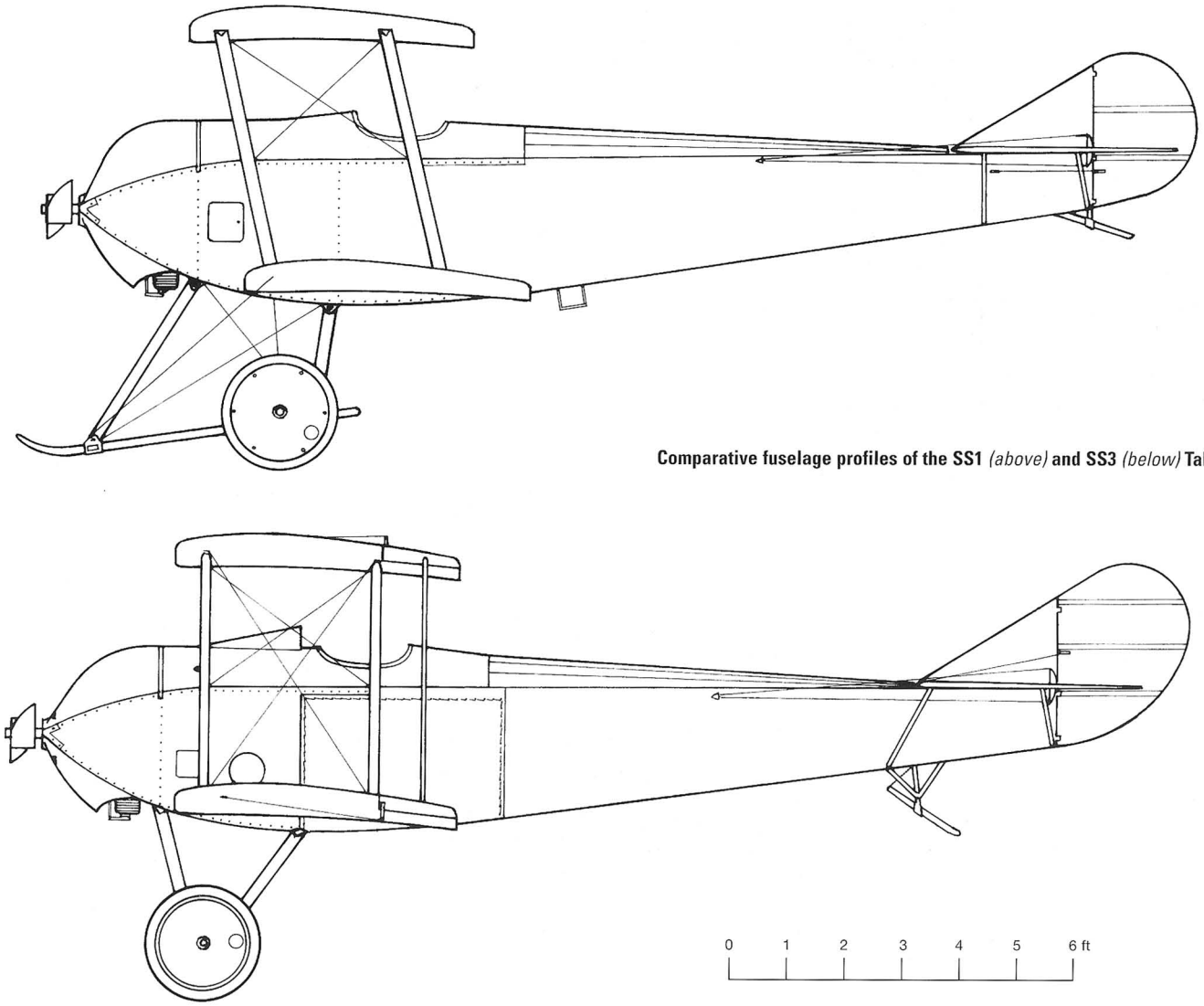
The machines on order for the Military Wing were designated SS. Again there is confusion concerning the abbreviations, one of which must have signified Scout (Sopwith Scout?) – the intended function of the type in the RFC. Unlike the St.B, the SS was a single-seater, but it did continue the use of the 80hp Gnome. Externally, there was little to differentiate the production machines from the prototype, except for the introduction of the split-axle arrangement that gave independent suspension to each wheel. This undercarriage refinement was to be a feature of subsequent Sopwith landplanes and was patented in 1916.



To the RFC the Tabloid was the Sopwith SS. The Military Wing received the first examples, in which a fin and rudder replaced the vertical tail surface of the original. The second SS was overturned on its delivery to Farnborough on 6 May 1914. The damage was not severe and it was returned to flying condition within three weeks. JMB/GSL



Sopwith split undercarriage.



Comparative fuselage profiles of the SS1 *(above)* **and SS3** *(below)* **Tabloids.**

use the ship's fo'c'sle to fly the aeroplanes off, but this was never put into practice. In fact, it seems that none did any flying and they were returned to the UK for deletion. 1205 and 1206 went to 1 Sqn RNAS at the beginning of January 1915, but were only in France for a month. They returned to Dover and were packed for shipment to the Aegean, where they joined 3 Sqn, later 3 Wing, RNAS for operations against the Turks. An overwing Lewis gun was fitted to each machine, but they were not popular with the pilots. As a consequence, both were returned to the UK in October and deleted. 1209 replaced them, arriving at the end of the month, but it too was found wanting and was sent home to a similar fate in December.

1209 and the final three machines of the batch had been delivered to Eastchurch for 2 Sqn RNAS, were they were used for a variety of patrol work. 1212, which, like 1211, had transferred to 4 Wing, was crashed on an anti-Zeppelin patrol on the night of 10 August, killing FSL R. Lord. 1210 lasted longest, being used by several of the development flights that operated from Eastchurch. It was finally deleted on 1 July 1916.

Yarmouth had received the remaining two machines, 1207 and 1208, on 16 March 1915. Both were not accepted immediately, but were returned to Yarmouth after repair by Sopwith's. Bomb carriers were fitted, possibly for anti-airship operations. The pair lasted for almost a year at that base, but performed no significant act of war. 1208 was deleted on 17 March 1916 and 1207 a calendar month later.

A further Tabloid type may have been intended for the RNAS. The serial number 160 was allocated for a single-seater Sopwith biplane to be powered by an 80hp Gnome. The order had been placed by July 1914 but delivery had still not been made by that December.

Despite the success achieved by Marix, the type never became popular in either service and yet it was, for its time, quite a good aeroplane. Sir Walter Raleigh, in the first volume of *The War in the Air*, suggested that the Tabloid's lack of acceptance could be attributed to its pilots, who were (by and large) not prepared, or not trained, to use it to its potential.

The Tabloid design did not, however, disappear in 1916. It would seem that a single example had been bought by Vladimir Lebedev and delivered, engineless, to Russia