

Eccentric Scientist Colourful Characters (6)(Grindell-Mathews

The life of Harry Grindell-Matthews reads like a fictional creation in a boy's comic - an eccentric scientist who worked in a remote laboratory in the Welsh mountains and who claimed to have invented, among other things, an electronic beam which earned him the nickname 'Death Ray'.

Born in 1880, Grindell-Matthews was educated at Bristol Merchant Venturers' College and at nineteen volunteered for the Boer War, in which he was twice wounded. He trained as a research scientist, specialising in electricity and was intrigued by the possibilities of radio telephony. It was then in its infancy, but as early as 1911, Grindell-Matthews succeeded in conversing from the ground with a pilot in a plane two miles away that was travelling at 60 mph, (a high speed for those days).

A year later at Buckingham Palace he gave King George V a 'command' demonstration of radio communication between two moving cars.

But Grindell-Matthews seems to have shared with many inventors an inability to develop his ideas commercially. As soon as he had successfully solved a particular problem, his mind would leap ahead with a fresh idea.

The First World War found him experimenting with a robot boat controlled by a light beam, using a new light-sensitive mineral, selenium. With the German U-boat menacing British shipping, the Government became interested and Grindell-Matthews demonstrated his remote-controlled boat 'Dawn' on Penn Pond in Richmond Park before a clutch of Admiralty officials and VIPs.

The boat 'Dawn' did all that her inventor claimed, and even fired a gun to order from the bank. Trials continued at Portsmouth, using a larger steamship, which was controlled by a naval searchlight up to five miles distant, but by the time the trials were completed the war was over and the government lost interest.

After the war his probing mind went off in another direction - the problem of the talking film. In 1921 Grindell-Matthews made a talkie of Sir Ernest Shackleton delivering his farewell speech before setting off for the Antarctic. But here again the inventor missed out commercially. It was not until 1927 that Hollywood was ready for the talking film, when cinema audiences were astounded to see and hear Al Jolson in 'The Jazz Singer'. By this time, though Grindell-Matthews' own patents had been allowed to lapse.

But in the meantime, he had really set the world a-buzz.

In 1924 newspapers got hold of the rumour that Grindell-Matthews had invented an invisible ray which would, as one report put it: 'Stop a motor working, kill plant life, destroy vermin, explode gunpowder, fire cartridges and light lamps.' Inevitably, invention and inventor were dubbed 'Death Ray'.

However when the Air Ministry asked for an official test, they were not impressed, stating that all the inventor had demonstrated was that he could stop at will a small motorcycle engine from some fifteen yards.

In July 1924 Grindell-Matthews left for New York, disgusted with the neglect he had suffered in Britain. The following March he returned briefly to England to announce that he had sold his death ray to the United States and was going to settle in that country. And that was the last we heard of that, or of Grindell-Matthews.

That was until Christmas Eve, 1930. It was on this portentous evening that late shoppers and early revellers in Hampstead Heath area were startled to see a beam of light shoot up to a cloud base, about 6000 feet up. The light played on the cloud and then took the shape of a rather voluptuous 'angel' with outstretched wings gliding across the sky. Traffic stopped and crowds gathered, craning their necks at the apparition. Then the angel vanished, to be replaced by the words 'A Happy Christmas'.

Grindell-Matthews was back, operating his latest invention from a couple of film location trucks. The possibilities of this 'sky projector', he claimed, were innumerable. Under favourable conditions the message could be seen 15 miles away from the projector.

But despite another demonstration, this time at Blackheath, where a huge clock, showing the correct time, glowed in the sky, once again Grindell-Matthews dropped out of the lime-light, to re-emerge five years later giving newspaper interviews from a bungalow-laboratory 1500 feet up a barren mountain in South Wales. Reporters told how the inventor of the death-ray now planned to defend London from bomber attack by firing rockets to a height of 30,000 feet. At that altitude the aerial torpedoes would release a brood of bombs suspended from parachutes by 500 feet of wire.

‘The wire will cut the planes to ribbons,’ Grindell-Matthews was quoted in one paper. ‘If that does not work, the wire will slide up when it contacts a plane and the bombs will blow the planes to pieces.’

But by the time he died, aged sixty-one, in September 1941, German bombers had repeatedly attacked London and other cities without any apparent hindrance from invisible rays or bombs suspended from sky hooks.

The saddest item in our file on him is a five-line paragraph which appeared in a national newspaper three months after his death. It reads: ‘An electrical research worker who claimed to have invented a ‘death-ray, Mr Harry Grindell-Matthews, of Clydach, Glamorgan, has left £522.’