

The courage and daring of four women who took to the skies at the dawn of aviation came under the spotlight at a talk given to Kyrle Probus Club on December 4.

Club member John Harley spoke for 45-minutes on "Female Aviatrices."

He said: "I think Aviatrice is the most perfect word to describe these women who were the first to become female aviators at the very beginning of the age of the aeroplane."

The bravery of the female pioneers influenced world attitude to accepting women pilots as equal, he added.

John illustrated the exploits of Harriet Quimby, who designed her own flying costume of plum-coloured, wool-backed satin to tour with exhibits in the USA and Mexico. Harriet became the first female to fly solo across the English Channel on April 16, 1912. This was just three months before tragically plunging to her death at an air show in Boston. She was barely 37.

John's second heroine was Amelia Earhart who flew a second-hand Kinner Airster biplane at 14,000 feet – the world altitude record for female pilots – in October 1922. But when aiming to be the first to fly around the equator, Amelia and flight navigator Fred Noonan's Electra plane mysteriously disappeared on July 3, 1937.

The record-breaking British Aviatrice Amy Johnson next came under John's focus. Amy was given a ticker tape parade in New York after flying with husband Jim Mollison non-stop from the UK in 1933. Sadly, Amy, then aged 37, drowned on January 5, 1941 when the plane she was ferrying crashed into the Thames Estuary during rough weather.

The story of colourful Clara Adams, who died on February 10, 1971 aged 87, ended John's talk. The vote of thanks was by Norman Duffield.

Earlier, members voted unanimously to bestow honorary life membership to long-serving Mike Eastwood, who said he was "flabbergasted."