The eyewitnesses

The persons who actually saw what happened included gas-fitters George Watling and Tom Collins, working on a new bungalow on Upminster's Springfield Estate. In February 1935 commercial airliners were rare and they had spotted one, flying at a height they later estimated as 5,000 feet. As it passed them, according to their statements, “suddenly, what looked like two packages fell away from it” and fluttered to the ground “like sheets of paper.” They gathered speed and struck the ground with a terrific thud a little distance away. The fitters rushed to the spot to find the bodies of two girls, laying close together, face down and with their arms about each other. One had a watch that was still going. The plane flew on.

Later that morning, Thursday 21st February, John Kirton, a pilot of Hillman Airways, was flying over the Channel coast en-route to France. Captain Kirton had boarded two girls as his only passengers. He knew them as two days previously he had flown them and other passengers from Le Bourget to Essex. There was minor air turbulence as the plane flew south. Alone in the cockpit and unable to leave his seat he turned to open the communicating door which separated the cockpit from the main cabin of his De Havilland DH84 Dragon, identification number G-ACEV. About to ask his passengers if they were comfortable, Kirton found, to his horror, that the main cabin was empty.
The deceased

The national press swiftly discovered that the victims were the Du Bois sisters, Jane and Elizabeth, daughters of Coert Du Bois, American Consul in Naples. It was reported that the only passengers on the 10am flight were the beautiful, expensively fur-coated American girls. Headlines blaring “Bright young things” and “Sisters” round of gay parties” were the reporters’ response to the tragedy. Born in San Francisco, the girls were well known to, and their bodies identified by, London’s American Embassy staff. Du Bois was 53 and he and his Bostonian wife Margaret had only two children: Jane aged 20 and Elizabeth aged 23. Jane had suffered from chronic asthma for 10 years and was pessimistic about recovery. The papers went on: “Years of living abroad in an eternal atmosphere of gaiety, a constant round of artificial excitement, with dances and parties, produced adult minds in these two girls.” They were well known in Paris and in London associated with a crowd “renowned for the hectic measure of their pleasures.” Both girls drank whisky, sometimes a good deal of it and a good deal too much, especially considering their youth.

There was mystery surrounding their sojourn in London where rooms had been booked for them at the American Women’s Club. A woman telephoned the club from the hotel where the sisters were staying in Mayfair and reported that they were indisposed and neither intended visiting the club. It is believed that one sister made the call. At the hotel the girls kept closely to their rooms and they had a good deal of alcohol to drink. On one occasion they were found crying bitterly. During their stay not a single friend was aware of their presence, as they seemed determined to keep away from everyone they knew and appeared afraid that questions might be asked which perhaps they did not want to answer.

On a previous occasion in London the younger had worn a wedding ring and a hotel employee stated “I remember the ring because she always used the name
Du Bois but she never spoke of her husband.” When a sister was involved in a car collision in which a cyclist was injured, the investigating policeman was referred to the Embassy.

The motive
A report from Naples suggested the sisters Du Bois had been close friends of two Royal Air Force officers, Flying Officer John A. C. Forbes and Flight Lieutenant Henry L. Beatty (a half brother of Earl Beatty). Both were part of the nine man crew killed in a flying-boat disaster on 15th February 1935. Four new flying-boats were being ferried to Singapore by 210 Squadron R.A.F., but had stopped off in Italy for maintenance and to allow some of the crew to recover from influenza. Two aircraft had then taken off for Malta, shortly after which a Short “Singapore” crashed into a mountainside near Messina in Sicily. During the enforced ten day stay in Naples the two officers had got to know the girls well and subsequently all four were seen together at dances, parties and outings. The night before Forbes and Beatty left for Malta they took the girls out to dinner, then said farewell as they were to leave early next day. They never saw each other again. British newspapers reported “unofficial engagements,” a suggestion refuted by the daughter of a Bedford doctor, who became engaged to Forbes in September and was planning to marry him in April 1935. Beatty’s mother only knew of the girls from a mention in a letter home. A friend allowed that it was conceivable that, if there were any sentimental attachments, they could have become grief stricken at the airmen’s fate. At this stage many of their friends vehemently discounted the flying-boat incident as the trigger for their fall. The sisters were so devoted that it was again conceivable that Elizabeth agreed to join her suffering sister in ending her life. It was also reported that, as they walked to the plane, Jane said “Darling, would not John love to be with us?”

The booking
The girls arrived at Essex Airport from Kings Cross Coach station with but a single item of luggage. One of the heavily smoking young ladies paid over four £5 notes and a £1 note to secure all available seats. The craft had no flight attendant, planes were small and no need was, at that time, seen for them. The scheduled flight had by now, to all intents and purposes, became a charter flight. The tragedy might still have been averted. A man desperately wanted to travel to Paris, having received news that his mother was gravely ill there. He telephoned the aerodrome and begged for a seat on the 10am flight, but was told that all seats had been taken. It was suggested that he go to the field on the off-chance, but he did not turn up. The airline had believed that named “friends” would be flying with them and one sister offered to ring and find out where they were. She told Kirton that she could not contact them and it was imperative they leave, though it was later established that no telephone call was made.

Elizabeth and Jane sat in the two rear seats and, to Kirton, everything seemed normal. After take off he refused them permission to smoke, but agreed to close both the intervening door and ventilation windows through which he could see into the cabin. This was allegedly against draughts. He crossed the south coast then opened the internal door. He could not see the girls, just a suitcase.

A Short “Singapore” flying-boat. Several Royal Air Force squadrons were to be equipped with them.
The deceased

The national press swiftly discovered that the victims were the Du Bois sisters, Jane and Elizabeth, daughters of Coert Du Bois, American Consul in Naples. It was reported that the only passengers on the 10am flight were the beautiful, expensively fur-coated American girls. Headlines blaring "Bright young things" and "Sisters" round of gay parties" were the reporters' response to the tragedy. Born in San Francisco, the girls were well known to, and their bodies identified by, London's American Embassy staff. Du Bois was 53 and he and his Bostonian wife Margaret had only two children: Jane aged 20 and Elizabeth aged 23. Jane had suffered from chronic asthma for 10 years and was pessimistic about recovery. The papers went on: "Years of living abroad in an eternal atmosphere of gaiety, a constant round of artificial excitement, with dances and parties, produced adult minds in these two girls." They were well known in Paris and in London associated with a crowd "renowned for the hectic measure of their pleasures." Both girls drank whisky, sometimes a good deal of it and a good deal too much, especially considering their youth.

There was mystery surrounding their sojourn in London where rooms had been booked for them at the American Women's Club. A woman telephoned the club from the hotel where the sisters were staying in Mayfair and reported that they were indisposed and neither intended visiting the club. It is believed that one sister made the call. At the hotel the girls kept closely to their rooms and they had a good deal of alcohol to drink. On one occasion they were found crying bitterly. During their stay not a single friend was aware of their presence, as they seemed determined to keep away from everyone they knew and appeared afraid that questions might be asked which perhaps they did not want to answer.

On a previous occasion in London the younger had worn a wedding ring and a hotel employee stated "I remember the ring because she always used the name
Du Bois but she never spoke of her husband." When a sister was involved in a car collision in which a cyclist was injured, the investigating policeman was referred to the Embassy.

The motive
A report from Naples suggested the sisters Du Bois had been close friends of two Royal Air Force officers, Flying Officer John A. C. Forbes and Flight Lieutenant Henry L. Beatty (a half brother of Earl Beatty). Both were part of the nine man crew killed in a flying-boat disaster on 15th February 1935. Four new flying-boats were being ferried to Singapore by 210 Squadron R.A.F, but had stopped off in Italy for maintenance and to allow some of the crew to recover from influenza. Two aircraft had then taken off for Malta, shortly after which a Short "Singapore" crashed into a mountainside near Messina in Sicily. During the enforced ten day stay in Naples the two officers had got to know the girls well and subsequently all four were seen together at dances, parties and outings. The night before Forbes and Beatty left for Malta they took the girls out to dinner, then said farewell as they were to leave early next day. They never saw each other again. British newspapers reported "unofficial engagements," a suggestion refuted by the daughter of a Bedford doctor, who became engaged to Forbes in September and was planning to marry him in April 1935. Beatty's mother only knew of the girls from a mention in a letter home. A friend allowed that it was conceivable that, if there were any sentimental attachments, they could have become grief stricken at the airmen's fate. At this stage many of their friends vehemently discounted the flying-boat incident as the trigger for their fall. The sisters were so devoted that it was again conceivable that Elizabeth agreed to join her suffering sister in ending her life. It was also reported that, as they walked to the plane, Jane said "Darling, would not John love to be with us?"

The booking
The girls arrived at Essex Airport from Kings Cross Coach station with but a single item of luggage. One of the heavily smoking young ladies paid over four £5 notes and a £1 note to secure all available seats. The craft had no flight attendant, planes were small and no need was, at that time, seen for them. The scheduled flight had by now, to all intents and purposes, became a charter flight. The tragedy might still have been averted. A man desperately wanted to travel to Paris, having received news that his mother was gravely ill there. He telephoned the aerodrome and begged for a seat on the 10am flight, but was told that all seats had been taken. It was suggested that he go to the field on the off-chance, but he did not turn up. The airline had believed that named "friends" would be flying with them and one sister offered to ring and find out where they were. She told Kirton that she could not contact them and it was imperative they leave, though it was later established that no telephone call was made.

Elizabeth and Jane sat in the two rear seats and, to Kirton, everything seemed normal. After take off he refused them permission to smoke, but agreed to close both the intervening door and ventilation windows through which he could see into the cabin. This was allegedly against draughts. He crossed the south coast then opened the internal door. He could not see the girls, just a suitcase.

A Short "Singapore" flying-boat. Several Royal Air Force squadrons were to be equipped with them.
His opinion was that it was improbable that the door could have opened accidentally, so great was the pressure of the slipstream from the propeller, and suggested that it must have needed the combined strength of the two girls to have forced it. The sisters appeared to have taken a last drink together, then (clasped hand in hand) their weight was thrown against the door, which gave slowly under their combined strength. As they plunged out one lost a shoe.

The verdict
An inquest was held on Monday 25th February 1935 in front of Coroner Lewis. Major H. Cooper the Air Ministry's investigator, concluded that the "Dragon door mechanism was not faulty. Mr. Lewis had the letters, found in the cabin, read to the jury, despite protests from the Du Bois family solicitor. Fully reproduced in contemporary newspapers, they are not a suitable part of this text, but justified the supposition that the Sicilian plane crash triggered a period of severe depression for both girls. The jury did not hesitate to bring in a verdict of "suicide whilst the balance of their minds was disturbed." They were cremated in London later that day.

Hillman Airways was a successful firm, formed for charter flights by Edward Hillman in 1931. By 1935 regular flights took place from Abridge where its blue and white livery was well known. Just a week previously a cargo of gold had been lost from the same aircraft. Resulting from the fatal incident fears were expressed that either the pilot of such aircraft would require a central locking system or that a flight attendant would have to be employed. The growing size of aircraft made these innovations come about naturally. Within a short time after the inquest there were changes in the board of Hillman Airways and their pilot John Kirton left. Despite speculation the company announced that there was no connection between the twin deaths, the previous loss of gold bullion and his resignation. Within a year the successful family airline was taken over by another company. The rapidly developing size of commercial aircraft soon brought a curtailment to the international status of Essex Airport.

Acknowledgements
My thanks are offered to police air-historian Bryn Elliott, with whom I have often corresponded about this case, and to artist Eric Barker.