

Mind Your (Aviation) Language....

Namer of Clouds: How an amateur meteorologist forged the language of the skies.

As pilots, we are always very cognisant of the clouds in the sky, as they affect whether or not we fly, or at least how comfortable or turbulent our flight will be. But it's not just pilots who look up to the sky: all over the world, people talk about clouds. Clouds not only affect our daily lives but we connect the clouds with our moods and emotions, good fortune or bad luck or the description of personalities. For some perhaps there is '*a dark cloud on the horizon*': for others '*every cloud has a silver lining*'. Someone may have his '*head in the clouds*' or be '*on cloud nine*'.

If we didn't know the names of clouds before learning to fly we certainly learnt them very quickly – but where do these names *cirrus*.... *stratus*....*cumulus* etc come from? Here's the story...

Born in London in 1772, Luke Howard was a shy chemist, who was also really fascinated by weather and particularly by clouds. He wanted to organise how we observe and understand those everchanging formations up in the sky and he wanted to do it in a way that was scientific. In 1803 he self-published a pamphlet that he called '*On the modification of clouds etc*'. In it, he proposed a classification system for clouds and he drew on his school-boy Latin and came up with the main categories – cirrus, stratus and cumulus. Cirrus comes from the Latin for hair or tendril. Stratus comes from the Latin for layer, and cumulus is from the Latin for a pile – like to accumulate.



Cirro-form



Cumulo-form



Strato-form



Nimbo-form

This new way of looking for clouds and this whole new language for talking about something that people had always seen but never really classified, really sparked the interest of the public, and Luke Howard became a reluctant celebrity.

Luke Howard diligently recorded his observations of London weather for many years. He witnessed the 'Aurora Borealis' – a rare sighting in England. He documented the 'great haze of 1783' - an event when the sun was hidden for weeks because of volcanic eruptions in Iceland. On 18 August 1783, Luke even witnessed the 'Great Meteor', a spectacular comet. Luke Howard saw differences and patterns and indeed began meteorology this way. Today he is frequently referred to as the 'Father of Meteorology'.



In April 2002 Luke Howard was remembered in Tottenham, UK as the Father of Meteorology when an English Heritage Blue Plaque was dedicated in his honour at his former home, number 7 Bruce Grove. The plaque was unveiled by the famous BBC weather broadcaster Michael Fish who said:

"Weather forecasters use the terms every day. We are eternally grateful that Luke Howard came up with such an easy and straightforward way of naming the clouds."