EVERY farmer is familiar with the name of Harry Ferguson as the inventor of the ‘3-point-linkage’ and ‘Depth Control System’ found in the sturdy and economical little grey Ferguson tractors which were used on most farms up to fifty years ago. Ferguson’s inventive genius revolutionised farming and his inventions in tractor design were adopted by tractor manufacturers all over the world. Today, more than 85 percent of all tractors worldwide incorporate his brilliant designs.

But there’s another side to Harry Ferguson and this month, December, is the centenary of his first flight in an aeroplane which he designed and built himself.

Harry Ferguson was a farmer’s son, born one of eleven children, on 4 November 1884, in the small village of Growell in County Down. He showed an interest in all things mechanical and displayed an apparent inventive streak from a very early age. As a young man, Harry worked for his elder brother who owned a garage. When he was fettling and fixing engines he competed in the famous Irish motorcycle road races.

Harry was also fascinated by aircraft, which were then in their infancy, reading everything he could lay his hands on about aircraft design and development. He travelled to aviation events in the UK and Europe to inspect and take measurements from competing aircraft. By now, in his early twenties, Harry Ferguson was determined that he would design and build his own aircraft.

Construction took place throughout 1909 of a wood and fabric monoplane of 32ft span and 26ft in length, with power provided by an eight-cylinder, air-cooled 35hp JAP engine.

The aircraft was towed, wings detached, through the streets of Belfast to Hillsborough Park, where initial attempts were thwarted by propeller problems. On the 31 December 1909 however, Ferguson became the first person to fly an aeroplane in Ireland, and the first Briton to build and fly his own aeroplane, when he successfully flew his machine 130 yards. This year marks the centenary of that great event.

In 1911, Ferguson started his own motor business in Belfast, his brother not wishing to be involved with Harry’s aerial activities. He designed improved carburettors and introduced two basic improvements in this technology which he patented in 1917. He then turned his attention to the development of farm machinery, inventing the first “wheelless” plough, known as the “Belfast Plough”. By 1949, Ferguson tractors held 78 percent of the tractor market in Britain.

Ferguson also had a passion for cars and developed the Ferguson Formula Four Wheel Drive System shortly after WW2 in an attempt to improve road safety. In 1950, Ferguson designed the “B5” Ferguson car which is reckoned to be 40 years ahead of its time with features such as four-wheel drive, disc brakes, anti-ski braking system, electric windows, and a hatchback design, which anticipated the modern car.

To prove the safety value of his four-wheel drive and his anti-ski braking system, Ferguson designed a Formula-1 racing car, known as the “P99”, which incorporated these features and became the world’s first Formula-1 winning four-wheel drive car, when driven to victory by Sterling Moss at the Oulton Park Good Cup in 1961. Ferguson had hoped that the prestige of a Formula-1 victory would result in the wide-spread adoption of his safety devices.

Sadly, Harry Ferguson had passed away on 25 October, 1960, before his car achieved
Pat White is an arable farmer in County Tipperary, Ireland, and did not want the centenary of Harry Ferguson’s achievement to slip by unnoticed. So when he bought a Wag-Aero Cuby to keep his Vans RV4 company on his farm strip, he decided he would paint it to honour this Irish legend. The Cuby is finished in Massey Ferguson colours and sports pictures of the great man’s aerial achievements on the rudder.

Harry Ferguson was an exceptionally brilliant engineer and inventor with a passion for doing good. He was a man who placed Irish inventive genius on the world stage. His greatest motivation was the goal of alleviating hunger by developing advanced agricultural machinery which would increase food production. Another great Irishman – Dean Jonathan Swift – observed that a man who can makes two blades of grass grow where only one grew before, does more good than the whole race of politicians! Harry Ferguson rightly deserves to be remembered.

Ferguson Family Museum
www.ferguson-museum.co.uk