

# CHAPTER 1

## To Fly Like the Birds

It seems that humans have always looked at the skies and at birds, and wished that they could fly. However, some people have done more than wish; they have actually tried to take to the skies and fly.

In the eleventh century a monk called Eilmer, who lived in Malmesbury, England, dreamed of flying. Eilmer invented wings that he strapped to his arms and feet. Then he leapt off the highest tower of Malmesbury Abbey. Using currents of air to support him, he got about 200 metres before he fell, breaking both his legs!



Eilmer leapt from the top of Malmesbury Abbey.

**Inventor** and artist Leonardo da Vinci studied the flight of birds in Italy in the fifteenth century. He drew plans for human-powered machines that, he hoped, would let us soar like birds. However, he was distracted by uncovering new things to study and he never built the flying machines that he devised.

There were many attempts at flight over the centuries, but humans' first venture into the air was not flying the way birds do, with flapping wings as da Vinci and Eilmer had dreamed about. The first aircraft were **inflatable** balloons and gliders that didn't have engines. Instead, they floated through the sky because they were lighter than air. Later, people began to build machines which could fly even though they were heavier than air. They had fixed wings and needed engines to keep them aloft. These machines were the first aeroplanes.

At first, flying was only an **experiment** or something done for fun, but as flying machines were developed, people began to see they could be much, much more than toys. In Australia, for example, people realised that travelling by air could be very practical in the vastness of the outback. They looked at ways of using aeroplanes to reduce the barriers of distance and isolation—and as they did, they pushed the boundaries of flight.



Plans for one of da Vinci's flying machines