



# ALAN GRAY

## Auster pilot and mentor

This month we talk to Alan Gray, a long time supporter of introducing youngsters to aviation

Members of the Fenland Strut VP1 group. Very cheap, fun flying





Alan and wife Helen, with the Auster J2 they have flown for over 16 years



The Auster gets her overhauled C90, which greatly improved her take-off performance



Alan taking his 90 year old mother for a flight

### WHAT IS YOUR CURRENT DAY JOB/ PAST CAREER?

**M**y first job was as a power-boat mechanic, working out of Shoreham. This led me on to an engineering career that culminated in owning and running garages in Sussex. When I sold out to a large consortium in 1989, my wife, Helen, and I moved with our two daughters to Norfolk, where we still reside today. Since that time I have been lucky enough to be involved

in various enterprises ranging from providing business training for start-up companies to making history documentaries. I even tried my hand (with some success) in areas as diverse as property development and lecturing in testacy law. For several years I wrote for up to seven different aviation magazines – I doubt that we have that many GA titles today, but I don't think I am entirely responsible for that...

Although now in 'retirement', I am still asked to become involved from time-to-time with various aircraft building or restoration projects, and having been self-employed for most of my working life, I do like to keep my hand in.

### WHY AVIATION, WHAT FIRED YOUR INTEREST?

I suppose with a love of all things mechanical that had taken me through boats to motorcycles to go-karts, cars and trucks, it was inevitable that aviation would ensnare me eventually, although no-one else in my family had any involvement in GA. Perhaps it was a

naïve belief in the 'freedom of the skies' that made it so appealing to master this new challenge. Up until that time, the only flying I had done was for a couple of charity parachute descents at Thrupton. I still have two more take-offs than landings on the Islander – unlike the Auster, in which I have many more landings than take-offs...

### IN WHAT, WHERE AND WHEN WAS YOUR FIRST FLIGHT?

Running a small business and having a young family meant that I had to wait a while but one wet Sunday afternoon, under the pretext of taking the family out, we dropped in at Goodwood to see what was happening on the race track. The answer was 'not a lot' but, next to the flying school I noticed a door marked 'Enquiries' so I decided to do just that, emerging after an hour to find the family still sitting in the car looking less than amused...

It transpired that the following week there was to be an introductory seminar at Goodwood, introduced by the then CFI, Cpt John Gratton. This was to be followed by lunch



## MEET THE MEMBERS

and a trial lesson in a Tomahawk. Needless to say, I had signed up for this and later persuaded my long-suffering friend, Chris, to bring his wife, Angie, and join us. The argument from the CFI was quite compelling, explaining to those wives present how learning to fly should cost no more than a new kitchen, etc., but the trial lesson was the turning point.

After considerable further research, and liking to do things a little differently, a couple of months later Chris and I bought an old Cessna 150 (G-ATOE) and leased it to Air South at Shoreham where they kept it maintained and used it to teach other people to fly. In return, we were able to use their instructional facilities for a mere £5 per hour plus fuel, to obtain our own licenses. I was delighted to be able to obtain my ticket over the winter that year despite the weather, flying only on Sundays and the occasional Saturday afternoon.

### DO YOU HAVE OTHER NON-AVIATION HOBBIES OR INTERESTS?

I have been involved in a number of activities over the years. We had a family boat for about 30 years, mostly used on rivers and canals throughout the east of England. I used to do a little shooting and played squash regularly. Eventually I had to accept that sports injuries take longer to heal with age but I still enjoy downhill skiing at least one week each year. Helen and I are also both keen ramblers. My other interest centres on medieval ecclesiastical architecture – but most people's eyes glaze over when I mention that one...

### HOW DID YOU HEAR ABOUT THE LAA?

Back in the days when the LAA was still called the Popular Flying Association, their offices were based at Shoreham where I was then learning to fly. Hearing of my interest, a couple of members of the Southern (No.1) Strut kindly took me flying in their aircraft (I have never forgotten that kindness and try to return the favour whenever I can to other aspiring aviators). I soon joined the strut and remember sitting in the airport boardroom all those years ago, helping to draft the new constitution – I wonder whatever happened to that?

I have always been a strut member and believe that regular contact with other like-minded individuals is often essential for keeping the flame of enthusiasm burning; too many of our new pilots become disillusioned and drop out after just a few years.

### HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN A MEMBER?

About 30 years, I suppose, in the PFA/LAA although there was a period when I refused to renew my membership out of disgust at

the rent the PFA was paying to the Brighton, Hove and Worthing Joint Municipal Airport Committee Ltd. I believe they thought that unless you wrote a very large cheque, you would be unable to put their whole name on it! Seriously though, I would and do commend the organisation to anybody involved in GA, not just those flying Permit aircraft.

### HOW HAS THE LAA HELPED YOU?

I have always liked the idea of group flying and have been in at least 10 groups, representing nine different aircraft types, over the years ranging, from two to 20 members. The Southern Strut ran a group based around an old C150, while the Fenland Strut, of which I have now been a member for over 25 years, ran groups around an Evans VP1, a Luton Minor and a Flaglor Sky-Scooter, all of which I enjoyed flying and, in the case of the VP1 and the LA4a, was able to teach others to fly.

Having part-owned and maintained half-a-dozen Permit operated types, I appreciate the way in which the LAA facilitates our kind of flying and have frequently campaigned against the bureaucracy associated with CAA and EASA regulation, which I feel is often detrimental to safety through its own inflexibility.

### HOW MANY TYPES HAVE YOU FLOWN AND HOW MANY HOURS' FLYING?

Sometime before the LAA Coaching Scheme was launched, I campaigned with a well-known flying magazine for an official mentoring programme to support new, inexperienced and under-confident pilots in the GA world. I found that I had been doing this unofficially for a number of years and had been coaching people in what were later to become 'classes' requiring differences training, such as tailwheel, retractable gear, etc. as well as cross-country and international flying. As I never held a formal instructor rating, I have never logged any of this time myself but feel that in any event, the number of cycles/details flown is probably a better indicator of experience than hours in the front seat.

That said, going through my last four log books reveals that I have a little over 1,500 hours logged in my own right and have had the privilege to fly about 61 different types



Alan's wife Helen with the Jodel they enjoyed for several years

or variants; in many cases these have been test flights conducted for their owners without charge, in the spirit of LAA flying, but often providing yours truly with great enjoyment and sometimes a valuable education in humility...

### DO YOU HAVE A FAVOURITE AND LEAST FAVOURITE TYPE FLOWN?

That is always a difficult question because all aircraft are a compromise and their suitability is dependant upon what you want to do with them. This is probably why aeroplanes such as the C172 are so enduringly successful – they do most things reasonably well but are not outstanding in any particular field. However, if you can fly a C172, you can go to almost any country in the world and jump into an identical aircraft from the local flying club fleet.

Among the types that have impressed me over the years, the Pioneer 300 is a surprisingly efficient piece of kit, with a usable speed range of more than 100kt. The EV97 Eurostar comes a close second. There have been various aerobatic aircraft that I have greatly enjoyed, including things as diverse as the DH82a Tiger Moth and the Pitts S2, although for pure pleasure a short, supervised flight comes to mind almost 25 years ago in what was then Czechoslovakia when a small group of us Brits hired an Antonov AN2 for the afternoon and went circuit bashing on some small grass airfields around Roundnice. But then lake-hopping with Cubs on floats around Jack Brown's in Florida was quoted as being 'the most fun you can have with your trousers on'. It was!

Naming my least favorite type is only likely to get me into trouble but sadly, some of the worst flying characteristics have been exhibited by some of the lightest types. I think that this is often the result of designers being constrained by arbitrary limits such as the 450kg microlight type limit but this does not apply to all by any means. For example, I have found the Rans S6 range to be almost the microlight equivalent of the C172 whilst I have never liked the S10 due to its poor seating position, lack of suspension and poor low speed handling – a situation that applies, in my view, to certain of the UL versions of the Jabiru and some Murphy types. This is particularly relevant when landing in the choppy, crosswind conditions that we so often encounter in the UK and is frequently exacerbated by low wing-loadings and ineffective rudders.

### WHAT AIRCRAFT DO YOU OWN?

My current mount is the little red Auster J2 that people seem to find so endearing. I have owned a share in 'AH as part of the Bedwell Hey Flying Group for over 16 years. There are four of us in the group but only two of us fly it – a surprising situation but more common than you may think. There are only two airworthy J2s in the UK, the other being based at Temple Bruer. This marque was produced just after



A sporty arrival in the J2, with a crosswind. Keeps you on your toes!

## MEET THE MEMBERS

WWII for export to France and Belgium to aid post-war communication; hence they were fitted with an imported Continental C75 which would not have been available for a home-market model at that time. Having flown the length and breadth of the UK, Ireland and much of Europe in 'AH, I built a C90 which we put into her a couple of years ago and which provides a little better short-field performance but she is still happiest cruising at about 80kt.

### WHAT ARE YOUR BEST AVIATION MOMENTS?

Some of these I alluded to under 'Favourite Types'. In addition, whilst I greatly enjoy foreign touring and Helen and I attend as many fly-in events as we can, perhaps one of the things that I most enjoy on a regular basis is the Young Aviator Days which are run annually from Sywell aerodrome in Northamptonshire. We need more young people in aviation otherwise, in a few years, there will be nobody to fly all the great classic aircraft that we go to such lengths to maintain. This is why I applaud the YES initiatives supported by LAA.

On a personal level, everybody remembers their first solo but for me one thing stands out in particular. My first granddaughter, Chloe, was born 20 January 2003 and on 17th December that year I was able to take her flying for the first time, in a borrowed Jodel, to commemorate that first flight by the Wright brothers. We are told that with advancements in healthcare and an improving diet, about half of her generation will live to be over 100 years old. Wouldn't it be great if she could fly again on the bi-centenary of flight? I've booked the aeroplane just in case...

### ANY AVIATION HEROES – IF SO WHO AND WHY?

There are so many aren't there. Many of our boyhood heroes were war-time combat pilots but there were many who worked in the background to make their exploits possible. Names like Sir Geoffrey de Havilland and Tommy Sopwith come to mind, but perhaps one of my favourites was the late Alex Henshaw whose long-distance flying record stood for so long. I only met him briefly but have wished that I might have had the chance to ask so many questions after reading *The Flight of the Mew Gull*. Sir Francis Chichester is also up there with the best of them, although many people only

know him for his sailing exploits.

One man that I did come to know and admire was Ken Wallis, not so much for his recreation of the Wallbro Monoplane or his wartime exploits as a Wellington pilot, nor even his time flying nuclear weapons around for the USAF. It was his dogged determination to make gyroplanes acceptable to the flying world and his dedication to engineering that so impressed me. I still remember a Strut visit to his Norfolk home where I stayed on late into the night with him to make an ancient atmospheric engine run for the first time in years... These men were true innovators.

### ANY 'HAIRY' AVIATION MOMENTS?

I'm embarrassed to say that there have been plenty of those over the years! I have bent one aircraft (slightly) on take off and another (a bit more seriously) on landing but have always been fortunate enough to walk away. Sometimes the lessons are learned from the ones that you do get away with – trapped over the ocean under low cloud and looking up at the cliff-tops which disappeared from view (an IMC rating is of little help if the aircraft lacks the instruments) or making a forced landing in a ploughed field against the furrows, etc.

One that taught me a salutary lesson about agreeing formal command of an aircraft came when I was flying a C172 over the forests of Western Canada. As neither my UK nor my US license qualify me to fly Canadian-registered aircraft as P1, I had arranged to fly from the fire-fighting base at Prince George with a young local pilot so that the friends with whom I was staying could see their neighbourhood from the air and shoot some video. The landscape was wall-to-wall pine trees up the sides of mountains, punctuated only by the occasional ski-lift cables hung on pylons. Emergency landing opportunities appeared limited to the near-freezing lakes in remote valleys.

After a few rate-one turns at 1,500ft over the mountains for the photographers, my young friend became rather impatient that this Englishman did not appear to know how to do low flying. 'I have control', he said, pitching the aircraft into a tight left-hand side-slip. We lost about 500ft quite quickly and then the engine stopped! Seemingly unphased by the occurrence, our new pilot then launched into a well-rehearsed litany: "Fuel on; mags on; mixture rich; throttle set; you have control!"

I will admit to being less than prepared for the last one, but levelled the wings pointed the nose down the hill to restore flying speed and switched the fuel cock from 'port' to 'both'. The engine quickly restarted once the fuel was again covering the tank outlet but we lost another 700ft and I was faced with some rather probing questions from my passengers once back on the ground...

### DO YOU HAVE AN AIRCRAFT WISH LIST – TO FLY OR OWN?

There is a long list of aircraft that I would love to fly. I suppose most people would put a Spitfire at the top, but for me a Hurricane would be my first choice since my grandfather worked for Hawkers during WWII and commended them so strongly to me as a small boy. A Max Holste Broussard also features highly along with a PZL Wilga. I have still not flown any of the popular RV range and something with a jet engine would add a whole new dimension. I would still like to try paramotoring, while gyroplanes are yet to be ticked off the list. Probably it is the vintage classics that have most appeal as everyone is different and presents a unique challenge in its mastery.

Unfortunately I am inclined to think that, in my retirement, I could not afford to own most of the aircraft that I would so much like to fly.

### ANY ADVICE FOR FELLOW PILOTS?

There is an old homily along the lines of 'Learn from the mistakes of others as you will not otherwise live long enough to make them all yourself!' Sharing your bad experiences as well as the good ones potentially makes us all better pilots. Join groups and associations, try to socialise with other like-minded people; the sky is a lonely place when things are going wrong but you will already be an independent and self-motivated person. That fund of knowledge may be all that you need to recover the situation. We never stop learning.

On a lighter note, if you are finding that your flying has become a little jaded of late, have you thought about going somewhere new, perhaps to a fly-in or event, swapping a ride with another pilot to experience a new aircraft type or introducing a young person to aviation for the first time? There are many such things that can re-ignite enthusiasm and have a positive benefit to the GA community as a whole. ■

## Aircraft Insurance

### Are you paying too much?

- Get an instant quote online
- Spread your premiums for free
- Select the cover you want
- 24-Hour claims hotline service

# visicover

Authorised and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority

Visicover is a unique service that lets you buy and manage your aeroplane or helicopter insurance online whenever it suits you.

To find out more  
go to [Visicover.com](http://Visicover.com)

