

# AN ENGINEER'S TALE

This month we talk to Lou Rex, former chairman of Sherburn Aero Club, and builder of steam engines and an absolutely superb Jodel D140E Mousquataire

**W**elcome Lou. Can you tell us something about your current day job and past career?

I'm retired now but my working life started when I joined the Army in 1958 as a boy apprentice at Chepstow in Monmouthshire, there to learn the trade of engine fitter plant. I spent three years there, passing out at the age of 18 into the men's service.

One year later, following the aftermath of Hurricane Hatti, I was in British Honduras attempting to rebuild the airport camp and assisting the local community.

Next I saw service abroad in Germany (12 years), then on to Singapore, and building the 5,000ft airfield at Loeng Nok Tha in the North East of Thailand (three years). My remaining service was in the UK and Ireland.

I also had the pleasure of going back to Chepstow as permanent staff to teach the trade before becoming the sergeant major of the Royal School of Military Engineering in Wainscott, near Rochester in Kent with 237 permanent staff and a student population that fluctuated between 1500 to 2000 students.

I received a New Year's Military Honour in 1966, and got married in October of that same year to Margaret. After leaving the service I worked for Keller, designing and building drilling rigs for various duties. My last 'big job' was the Pergau Hydro Electric Scheme in Malaysia in 1992 but I was also involved in Docklands and Heathrow St Pancras Expressway.

Margaret and I have three sons, all of whom have followed me into engineering one is MD of a drilling equipment manufacturer, another is a Formula 1 engine design engineer with the Mercedes AMG at Brixworth in Northamptonshire, and the third, John, shares another passion of mine, steam engines, and runs 'John Rex Model Engineers' building models ranging from 1/3 to 1/2 scale and providing boilers and model engineering services. He also helped me build my Jodel, G-JRME.

In recent years, I was on the Board of Directors serving as Engineering Director, and eventually elected as Chairman of Sherburn Aero Club. It was well worth the time and effort to be able to give something back to the hobby of flying we all love.



(Above) Trisha Fenton and Lou Rex in front of her late husband's Stampe. It is very near completion.

#### What inspired you to become an engineer?

My father was an engineer by profession, having worked all over the Middle East. His last job was CE to Drilllexco in Saudi Arabia. He too was a model engineer in his spare time, his main interest being five-inch gauge steam locomotives. I got interested in his hobby, which is why I took up engineering. Earlier than that though it was Keil Kraft aeroplanes and gliders. Like many kids back then, I always seem to have all kinds of interests. I once made a canoe with my friend and to seal the material we painted it on the outside with a can of paint I found in father's shed. When we tried it out the paint came through the weave onto our pants. Mother nearly wept because I had ruined a good pair of trousers, but father laughed and said, "You have learned a good lesson - ask, don't blunder on". It has stood me in good stead.

#### In what, where and when was your first flight?

My first light aeroplane flight was with my brother-in-law David Hodgson, in his Rallye ST 150 G-PIGGS based at Wombledon. We went out over to the east coast and back - I can still see it clearly in my mind, I was really impressed.

Prior to that, when I was in the forces, I

spent more than 120 hours' front seat in Bell 47G, Sioux and Scout Mk1 helicopters, great experience but it was the Rallye that did the trick.

#### Do you have other non-aviation hobbies or interests?

Yes, I enjoy all facets of engineering. I have made a 1/3 scale Burrell Traction Engine, followed by a 1/3 scale Foden steam lorry, which I scaled down from full size and redesigned the valve gear. Now produced in 1/2 scale - it is 10ft long and weighs 1.5 tons, you can purchase one from John. I have also made a total of five live steam locomotives, all five-inch gauge.

I also get involved with the National Model Engineering and Modelling Exhibition, which is held at Doncaster in May. It is considered to be one of the top model shows.

Another activity that gives me a buzz is building and flying radio-control model helicopters. They are up to 1.8m from blade to tail and can travel at up to 60mph.

#### How did you hear about the LAA?

I had read *Pilot* magazine on and off for many years, and when I was looking for an aeroplane to buy, in March 1996 I read a Peter Underhill



review on the Jodel D140E. In those days, a C150 or PA28 was selling for silly money, and if I wanted to do serious touring they were not a viable proposition. David also read the article and suggested I built one, and so I contacted the PFA. I was given their phone number and had a chat with Francis; if the plans were available he agreed that he would put it through to the CAA as a four-seater; that's another story.

I have been a member of the (PFA) LAA since 1998 when we applied for approval to build the first four-seater from plans.

#### How has the LAA helped you?

The LAA has allowed me, with their support, to build, maintain and fly my aircraft with no EASA interference or exorbitant price increases. At the end of the day all we want is to fly and enjoy the moment.

Autopilot, Brake, Undercarriage and Electrical mods for my Jodel were simplification itself; read what is requested, submit the correct information and everything should go smoothly.

#### Have you been involved in any other builds since finishing the Jodel?

We, that is Adrian White, Phil Craven, Steve Wicks, Stuart McFarlane and I are completing a Stampe SV4C. The aeroplane suffered

*(Above) Lou at the controls of the Jodel.*

*(Right) Lou's superb Jodel D140 coming in to land at his home airfield of Sherburn.*

*(Below right) This picture of the Jodel wing during construction speaks volumes for Lou and John's craftsmanship.*

engine failure in 2004 near Sheffield and was purchased by the late David Fenton. We decided it would be a fitting tribute in his memory to assemble, rig and finish the restoration project he started, for Tricia his wife.

We are still working closely with Francis to overcome some of the detail required but it isn't far off flying again.

#### How many types of aircraft you have flown?

Only eight types, including the usual Cessna 150 and 172, but I very much enjoyed flying in the based Miles Messenger with the owner out of Sherburn. I don't have any that I didn't enjoy, but the Jodel is my clear favourite. I'm very proud of the aeroplane and the finish we achieved with it.

I have about 400 hours in all.

#### What have been your best aviation moments?

The first flight of an aeroplane you have built yourself takes some beating! Also my longest flight to date, which was from Sherburn to Vichy, in France, for the RSA Rally. Unbeknown to us we won the cup for Best Homebuilt; it was presented to us later that year at the LAA Rally at Sywell by the RSA President. I have also won the Air Squadron Trophy for Best Plans-Built and the Wilkinson Sword, for Best Jodel, at our own Rally too.

#### Do you have any aviation heroes?

Yes, Brian Trubshaw. I met him once at Filton when a group of instructors from the Army Apprentices College in Chepstow were invited to a day at the factory, eventually going on board Concorde 002. What an achievement to test fly that aeroplane, no computer simulation to ensure everything will go ok.

#### Any advice for fellow pilots?

Always use your checklist for pre-flight. What! You haven't got one. Get one and, if interrupted doing your pre-flight, start again. I know a lot of people out there will say why do I need a checklist? Spend some time at an airfield and you will soon see why, taxiing with tie downs and pitot covers still attached, and even tow bars left in place. Most of all, enjoy it. ■

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