

# MEET THE MEMBERS

This month we meet Pete White, Chairman of the Aeronca Club and an enthusiastic advocate for Young Aviators

## Current/past career?

I'm a self-employed clothing agent and represent a number of men's outdoor and equestrian clothing manufacturers, selling to wholesalers and independent retailers. Many years ago I was in electronics and worked on the first aircraft automatic landing systems. Having left that job and spent some time living in Gibraltar, I came back to UK and by a strange twist of fate, the flight I was on was announced as the first passenger carrying flight where the pilot had switched to autopilot on climb out and had not touched the controls again until after the landing into Heathrow. Good job we got it right!

## When was your first interest in aviation?

Although I have lived in Devon for many

years, I was born and raised in Essex and from a very early age I was interested in aeroplanes, although nobody else in my immediate family had any connection with aviation. I built control line scale models and in the Scouts I gained the first Air Spotter badge awarded in Essex. I then went on to join the ATC in Chelmsford where we set up an aircraft recognition group.

## What and where was you first flight?

I was ten years old and we were on holiday down in Hayling Island; my dad and I took a joy ride in a Dragon Rapide from Portsmouth. That was 55 years ago but I remember every detail about it as if it were yesterday.

## Did you do any flying as an Air Cadet?

Yes, fortunately the opportunities to fly with

the ATC were better then than they are now and I did quite a lot of glider flying. In fact on 19 July it will be 50 years to the day since I soloed a T31 glider at North Weald at the age of 16. I tried for an ATC Flying Scholarship but failed due to my eyesight, which put the mockers on my hopes for a career as aircrew in the RAF. Looking back I think I was perhaps a little hasty in not joining up anyway because a chap I met years later went in as a helicopter loadmaster but eventually became up as a navigator. He ended up doing a great deal of flying, so you don't have to go in from the start as aircrew to get to fly; I have no regrets though.

My mother was Austrian and we visited her family every couple of years. My uncles had been Luftwaffe pilots and remained keen flyers after the war. They flew power aircraft, including a Bücker Bestmann, and gliders,



so I always went flying when we were over there. After I got my glider licence I did some wonderful gliding in Austria.

At home a friend and I used to go to local airfields and scrounge rides from anybody that would take us flying. You just can't imagine that happening now but as a youngster flying had a real impact on my life, which is why I am so passionate about passing on the fun and excitement to today's youngsters.

### **When did you get your power licence?**

In 1973 my wife and I had become disenchanted with working in London and moved down to live in Devon. We spent the first three months just driving around getting to know the place and as a result I got interested in airfield history, eventually leading to a friendship with another researcher and having a number of books published about local airfields. All great fun and as with previous experiences in Essex and Austria, it was the vintage side of aviation to which I was being drawn.

I learned to fly at Bodmin on Cessnas and as many of us do, soon realised that I would need to get involved with a group if I was going to afford to fly as much as I would like. I joined the Association within a month of getting my licence and for a while had a share in a Fournier RF5 at Exeter. I also flew a lot with a friend who had a Jodel DR1050, and with Dave Stokes in his D112. My first active involvement in the PFA was helping Dave Silsbury with the Association's promotional display unit that was doing the rounds of the aviation museums back in the late '70s or early '80s when we set it up at Yeovilton.

### **How did you get involved with the Aeronca?**

Eventually I decided I wanted to start a group of my own and drew up a list of about 15 different aeroplanes I thought were worth considering, then on my travels around the country I went to see examples that were for sale. One day I was down at Eggesford and I was told of an Aeronca that had been taken in part exchange and was being sold on. I went into the hangar to look at it and G-IVOR smiled at me. It was a bit ragged around the edges but I thought yes, I think I might like that. By chance the owner had also heard that

I was looking for an aeroplane and he rang me that evening, oblivious to the fact that I already looked at his aeroplane. He was quite shocked when I started to mention some of its defects! We went flying in it the following Friday – 13 December 1990 – and the rest as they say is history. We managed to get four people interested to start a group over a period that rose to seven, then settled to six which it has been from then on.

### **What about the Aeronca Club?**

The Aeronca Club was formed in 1992 by Roger Jones, John Broad and Alan Biggs. I was roped in within a month and our first successful fly-in was at Oaksey Park later that year when we had 23 aeroplanes. After a while, circumstances led to me taking up the reins to keep the club going and I have been doing it ever since, with a great deal of help from others of course. We have about 70 members, some abroad, and hold about five or six events a year. There are about 30 Aeroncas flying in the UK, with a number under long term restoration.

### **How many hours and types do you have?**

I've a tad under 2,000 hours and have flown nearly forty types. Apart from the Aeronca my favourite would be the Currie Wot. I like Jodels too though haven't yet flown a D9 or a D140; I try to add a new type each year if I can, it keeps you on your toes I think.

I generally fly in the UK but have been to France and would dearly love to get to Austria one day to see my remaining relatives there.

### **Have you had any profound experiences?**

Well haven't we all! I think my most profound lesson was when my enthusiasm led me to agree to test-fly an aeroplane for somebody that had put a Subaru conversion in it. There were some issues with the aeroplane, the tail was vibrating and bits were coming loose in the cockpit so I decided to return to the airfield when, on the approach, the engine stopped. I hit sinking air so rather than collide with some trees I hoiked it over them knowing I would stall on the other side but deciding it was the better of two evils. I fortunately lived to fight another day.

Then there are the usual weather problems of course, I've landed in a field and taken off

again the next day, but my advice is don't keep pushing your luck because one day it will run out. And always listen to advice from others, you might just learn something.

### **Tell us a little about FOG.**

Well I had been doing Young Aviators with the LAA for a number of years but when that stopped I set up FOG – Feet Off the Ground – in association with Bodmin Airfield to keep continuation of what I believe is a wonderful initiative. I hope one day we will be back with a workable LAA Young Aviators scheme, but for now I'm keeping it warm because getting something started again once you let it die is very difficult. We generally fly disadvantaged and disabled youngsters and the local Scouts.

Leading on from the two Scouts' Camps we run each year where we teach them their aviation badges, we have recently formed a 'Kernow' (Cornish) Scout Group at Bodmin Airfield. Later this year they will have their own Scout Hut on the airfield and within the next two years we plan to extend the hut and start our own Build-a-Plane project. We already have a team of aircraft builders as mentors and the Scouts will fund most of the cost.

As we said earlier, today's kids do not have the same opportunities we had so when I'm down at Bodmin and there are youngsters helping out at the airfield, I always make a point of offering them a flight. We should try to put something back into a pastime that has given us so much pleasure; it is important that we sow that seed of interest in those who will be tomorrow's pilots and LAA members.

### **And finally, any words of wisdom you would choose to impart?**

Follow your heart. You can always find reasons not to do something but if in your heart it is what you want then do it. As a young man, a friend and I spent some time hitch-hiking around Europe, he wanted to be an actor and director and all I wanted to do was fly. He's now a well-known director and playwright and I have had a wonderful life in flying as a hobby. You can achieve what in your heart you want to achieve; it just takes belief, initiative and commitment. ■