

MEET THE MEMBERS



STEVE SLATER

This month we take a slightly different tack as Brian Hope talks to our CEO Steve Slater, although in truth he was a member long before taking on the role in September 2015. Steve owns an LAA Permitted Piper Cub and is co-owner and co-restorer of the *Biggles Biplane* replica 1914 BE-2c observation biplane.





(Above) Despite suffering an in-flight crankshaft failure (and successful forced landing), the elegant Topsy Trainer remains one of Steve's favourite aircraft

(Below) Steve's current mount is this Piper J3 Cub, previously owned for over 50 years by another LAA stalwart, Alan Chalkley



Could you tell us about how you became involved in sport and recreational aviation?

It is really thanks to the generosity of some past and, in some cases, still current LAA members that I first got hooked. As a snotty-nosed 14-year-old aeroplane spotter, I turned up at what is now Durham Tees Valley Airport to see if I could spend my birthday money on a pleasure flight. Instead, I was talked into taking a junior membership of the Middleton St George Aero Club and, after marning phones and washing aeroplanes, was rewarded with flights in all sorts of interesting types. Then, like so many, I couldn't afford to keep flying so stepped away from it for more than 20 years, before returning in 2003.

Again the LAA played a big role, because even before starting to fly again, I acquired a Luton Minor, G-ASML or Gasmantle. Thanks to help and guidance from many Fenland Strut members, most notably Barbara Schlusler and David Beale, we managed to get both Gasmantle and myself simultaneously airworthy in 2004.

In 2005, LAA Inspector Matt Boddington and I brought the wreck of the BE-2c replica back from the United States and commenced a full rebuild, my first real hands-on experience of such. I also flew for several years, and partially rebuilt after a forced landing, a Topsy Trainer, so I am definitely of the grubby fingernail sect.

I also got 'roped in' increasingly over the last decade in helping with clubs and struts. I was honoured to be the Chairman of the Vintage Aircraft Club for five years and as a result became involved with the old LAA National Council. I also took over from David Ogilvy of AOPA in a role in the General Aviation Awareness Council helping to protect and provide advice for flying site operators struggling with increasing planning pressures.

What has your career entailed up to this point?

I am lucky that for the best part of 25 years, I was able to work with my other passion, cars and motor sport, with a career in PR and marketing communications. I worked for car makers including Chrysler, BMW and Vauxhall, then established my own agency, Kingpin Media, working in sectors including aviation, the motor industry and tourism both in the UK and overseas. I also commentated on Formula One motor racing for the Star Sports TV channel, the equivalent of Sky Sports across Asia, and I was privileged to be a part of the team which created the Singapore Grand Prix, Formula One's first-ever night race.

With almost five months having now passed since you took on the CEO role, what have you identified as needing particular attention or improvement?

Rule one I think should be, if it ain't broke don't fix it, and while I've spent a lot of time looking at all the various aspects of the Association, there really isn't a lot to immediately fix. It serves its members remarkably well and my predecessor, Phil Hall, used his business acumen to create a very cost-effective management plan.

So saying, we can never afford to stand still. Both general aviation and the regulatory environment we fly within is changing fast, and we need to ensure we have a voice in that change. In addition, I hope members are

already seeing an improvement in the way our engineering team is handling, for example, the modifications approval process.

One area I am keen to develop is activity surrounding flying skills. The LAA Pilot Coaching Scheme is a jewel in our crown, which I don't think has had sufficient resources and profile. The LAA Wings initiative is one step to raising awareness of flying skills and development within the LAA, and as it is open to all pilots, whether LAA members or not, it can act as a great ambassador for our Association.

I also believe we need to look at how we can better involve our Struts and Member Clubs and, even more importantly, our general membership. While the old National Council was useful in many ways, its own members felt the best way to completely review the communications structure was to close it down and seek new ways to engage with grassroots members.

However, since the demise of the NC, we haven't really had a vehicle to offer member or strut feedback, and it's got to be said that many better men and women than I have struggled so far to find a solution. All I can say is, I won't give up trying!

I understand that the Board has decided to provide funds for a limited number of capital projects this year. Are you able to explain what these might be?

The LAA team has run a very tight financial ship and this has allowed us to accrue a financial surplus in recent years. Some of that, unfortunately, in the coming year or two is going to be absorbed by increases in areas such as CAA administration fees. As with so many things in life it is important to work for the best outcome but plan for the worst. For that reason, it is vital we keep some reserves in hand.

We may also elect to invest in reinforcing our engineering resources. Currently, the engineering team is being pushed to capacity handling not just Permit administration and mods, but the need to respond to an ever-wider range of regulatory challenges and consultations on future airworthiness. We must safeguard our future, but we also need to make the resources available to do so.

We're also, I hope this year, going to release some reserves to help celebrate our 70th birthday. As you'll see elsewhere in the magazine, the main focus will be the LAA Rally, plus some other keynote activities which have already been proposed by members. If anyone has an LAA 70 idea that may need a bit of support to get it off the ground, let's have a chat and see whether we can make it happen.

On a more fundamental basis, we've just had to renew our lease on the LAA HQ and as part of that, we have a contractual requirement to refurbish and refresh our facilities, which in many cases haven't seen a lick of paint in a decade. We are also planning to take advantage of developments at Turweston Airfield to take some additional space in the HQ building to create a members' meeting area and LAA shop, as well as better classroom and workshop facilities for training events.

GA has unfortunately been in decline for some years. What do you believe the industry can do to stimulate interest and promote growth?

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With 7,700 individual members, the good news is that the LAA is Britain's leading powered sport flying body. However, if we are brutally honest, the Association's main success in recent years is that our membership has fallen slower than the other similar organisations around us. That means we need to recruit new members. I think all sport aviation organisation should work together to do that because I have no doubt that once an initial contact is made and people get to experience flying for fun, some will, like us, get hooked. What all aviation organisations need to do is make that initial contact and convince folk they can afford to learn to fly. Then thereafter, we can work on convincing them that our route to affordable flying is the one they should take.

We are seeing more change in how personal aviation is regulated than at any time since the UK CAA was established nearly 45 years ago. How should we, as an association, be dealing with this change and do you see it in any way as a threat to us?

Yes, the regulatory world around us is changing rapidly. The CAA is taking an ever shrinking role and the European regulator, EASA, a greater interest in sport aviation. And ever-greater levels of autonomy are being pressed upon us, sometimes whether we need it or not! Certainly this changing environment will mean changes in the way we do things in the future, but my feeling is we should look upon this as an opportunity rather than a threat.

2016 marks 70 years since the Association came into being and nobody can deny it has come a very long way and has stayed true to its ethos. Do you believe that ethos is still wholly relevant to today's society?

Largely yes. I think the core ethos of 'affordable flying' is as strong as ever, as is our excellent social side with great people and events. Even when some gainsayers complain about 'expensive' designs such as RVs, it should be remembered that the reason they are so popular is they offer a level of performance and capability in advance of production types

costing twice as much!

It does seem that there is a move away from lengthier homebuild projects and I think we may well see more people joining us to 'buy, fly and fix' rather than embarking on new projects. So ever better-produced kits and, if we can achieve it, legislation enabling assisted-build projects, may provide the key to future success.

Where do you see the LAA in another 70 years and, more importantly, where do you think we will be in five or ten years' time?

I think we will see the arrival of some innovative new designs and power units, along with greater access to European-developed kits and aircraft, currently denied us by being outside our current airworthiness approvals. It might, however, mean a radical review of how we handle, for example, design approval or continued airworthiness. But one thing I know will not change – the LAA's commitment to working for its members and helping facilitate affordable flying for fun. ■



Steve and Matthew Boddington rebuilt the *Biggles Biplane* 1914 BE-2 replica

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