



FIDDLING WHILE GA BURNED. REALLY?

By Brian Hope

It seems to have become a favoured sport these days for aviation writers to lay the blame for the demise of sport and recreational flying at the door of those who have an operational interest in it or in some way regulate it. By that I mean not just the CAA, but organisations like ourselves, flying schools and even, to some extent, those of us who participate.

In one recent article by blogger John Zimmerman, we are accused of, and I quote, being out of touch with modern life. He then goes on to cite many of the usual issues that are blamed for preventing new blood coming into the sport – outdated aircraft, elitism, cost, chauvinism and lack of family facilities, lack of environmental concern and a failure to make learning to fly more easily achievable.

“blame outdated aircraft, elitism, cost, chauvinism, lack of facilities and environmental concerns”

The question then is have we truly fiddled while GA burned? Whilst it would be easy to agree with what John Zimmerman and those of his ilk say, after all most of us are quick enough to lay the blame at anybody’s door but our own for failings in something we feel passionate about, is it really fair to blame the demise of GA on those of us engaged in running and participating within it? Personally I believe that approach to be more than a little simplistic; it might make for a cleverly written piece of editorial but it also has more than a hint of not letting the facts spoil a good story. Let’s take a closer look at those facts.

I learned to fly in the 1970s, something of a heyday for GA with flying schools fully booked and aircraft sales probably in as healthy a state as aircraft sales ever get in the UK. In order to gain a PPL you had

to complete a minimum 43-hour course and pass a Class 2 Medical. If you couldn't pass the Class 2 Medical then you couldn't fly, end of story.

Today you can undertake a 25-hour NPPL course and medically your own General Practitioner can approve you fit to fly, based on your medical history. The likelihood is that soon you won't even have to do that for certain UK licences.

Having learnt to fly, if you wanted to own an aircraft, you either bought a fully-certified club type machine or one of its more sophisticated stablemates, or you invested in a set of plans and started carving a piece of wood (there were very few secondhand Permit aircraft available).

Today there are all manner of options, including kitplanes, microlights and LSA, all new concepts and certainly the later variants using modern, quieter and lower emission powerplants compared to what was available in the 70s. Most are also considerably more affordable both in terms of initial purchase and operation than similar age certified offerings.

Having bought your aircraft, or settled on what you were going to hire, how about flying cross country in it? Back in the 70s, you had to hone your map reading and basic navigational skills using a compass and stopwatch, or spend an inordinate amount of money on certified avionics. Today we can use low-cost, uncertified avionics that give us real time, full colour 3D positional information at the touch of a button. Modern electronics have also given us relatively low-cost communication equipment, particularly compared to what you paid for a 1970s comms set.

INTERNET

Need aeronautical information? In the 1970s you were lucky to even see a list of Notams at an airfield, let alone have access to them at home. Basic weather data came down the fax line. Today the internet provides, free of charge, highly detailed weather information with trends and rainfall information, Notams that can be tailored to your specific route, plus airfield data via your laptop, tablet or phone – virtually anywhere.

So, has the aviation industry really sat back fat, dumb and happy, and allowed the world to pass it by?

We have lower cost and easier training options, lower cost aircraft types in terms of purchase and operation, considerably greater aircraft choice and availability, simplified navigation, lower cost communication

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equipment, a much wider acceptance of health issues that enable pilots to enter or stay in flying far longer than traditionally they would have been able to. And we enjoy easy to understand, free of charge access to comprehensive information enables us to fly more safely.

Clearly aviation has not been slow in embracing the technological revolution, while the industry has used it wisely to make flying easier and potentially safer. Even the regulators have embraced, or at least accommodated, the changes that have followed those technological advances. And in recent years the CAA and EASA (albeit in the latter's case it remains more promise than action at the moment) have actively promoted deregulation or delegation to sporting bodies. In theory at least we should be in a better position to encourage growth than we have been since the turn of the century.

I'm not suggesting for a moment that everything in the garden is rosy; with fewer participants and reduced activity we undoubtedly have a problem. I simply contend that



“we have lower cost and easier training options, simplified navigation and easier medicals”

firstly the problem is not entirely of our making, and secondly that we have not been idle or complacent, we have developed the sport to make it easier and more affordable.

Were aviation alone with the problem of diminishing participation, then you could quite probably point an accusational finger but many sports and pastimes are similarly suffering. Recently I even read a newspaper piece that was bemoaning the fact that local youth football teams were even struggling to find new players to join them!

What is evident is that despite the advances that have been made in GA, it unfortunately has not been enough and we must continue to seek new initiatives to ensure that our sport is a viable option for those seeking challenge, excitement, comradeship and adventure.

To do that, we as an industry have to properly understand the issues confronting us, and I am not sure we really do. We think we do, every one of us has a theory or two, but there has been such a cultural shift in the First World over the last 40 years that the problem is far more complex than plucking individual causal factors out of the air.

Increased risk aversion, instant gratification, reduced attention span, liability awareness, larger mortgages, lack of hands-on training in schools, demise of parental discipline, health and safety issues, over-regulation – the list is as long as you want to make it and the probable truth is that all these and more have played a part in turning the sub-40 generations into different people with different values, abilities and aspirations than the previous generations have.

John Zimmerman may have been right if he had said we do not understand what makes that younger generation's aspirational mindset so different to ours at the same age, but being out of touch with modern life is some call when those of us who are 40-plus are a major constituent of, and players in, that modern life!

What I am more sure of is that it is not so much the fundamental art of aviating that needs to radically change; I don't believe we need aviation's version of 20/20 cricket. It is, in the main, the manner in which we present sporting aviation and enable it to the next generations of potential pilots that is important. And the major block on doing that, in my view, is the fact that there is no unified and single GA voice to set, and act upon, that agenda.

In the face of the accusation that there were too many individual factions in GA intent on serving their own interests, the General Aviation Alliance was formed in order to present a unified voice when responding to regulatory change. That has worked well, would that we had a similarly representative group to take on the challenge of promoting our sport in order to secure its very existence in the years ahead.

John Zimmerman's blog is at <http://airfactsjournal.com/2015/12/out-touch-modern-life-can-aviation-adapt/> ■