

MEET THE MEMBERS



MILES AHEAD

This month we talk to longtime LAA member, former BA Engineer and stalwart LAA Inspector, Rex Coates

Welcome Rex, can you tell us something about your career? I'm now retired from British Airways, after being with them for 42 years. The first sixteen years were spent in engine overhaul, and the rest in line maintenance, which involved being stationed in many different countries and regions.

I came into contact with the ULAA/PFA/LAA via the Air Registration Board (ARB), through a chap called 'Paul' Whicher, who helped me and Alan Chalkley get Piper Cub, G-ASPS, onto a Permit. It was the first production Piper to do so and allowed due to the high standard of rebuild we achieved.

My first ever PFA Rally was in June 1967, flying in Jodel G-ATGE. From memory, there were more French RSA aeroplanes present than British types on that occasion!

What started your interest in aviation?

I seemed to be born with the aviation bug. My first experiences of 'aviation' was trying to avoid bombs, as we dived into Anderson air raid shelters! The Germans were trying to bomb the airfield at Cheadle Hume near Woodford, which was about four miles away. I can still remember peering out and seeing the searchlights over the night sky.

(Above) Rex today, still inspecting LAA members' aircraft and as enthusiastic about aviation as he ever was.

(Photo: courtesy of Rex Coates)

I joined the local ATC at twelve years of age and, with my twin brother, we watched the local airfield from a bridge and could see Bristol Beaufighters being built.

In what, where and when was your first flight?

It was on 28 May 1951 in a Vickers Wellington bomber, for half an hour. I recall how the wingtips flexed upwards before getting airborne. While there, we saw three aircraft flying without propellers – they were Gloster Meteor 4s – and it was very exciting.

Who did you do your apprenticeship with?

I started work at fourteen on a non-indentured apprenticeship – you worked and went to night school. That lasted three years and I then joined the RAF (1954-1959) and was sent to St Athan. I learnt a lot about being a General Engineer, which proved very useful around the world for the rest of my career.

For the whole of my service life after St Athan I was stationed at Thorney Island.

While there, a few incidents took place. Neville Duke had had a crash in a Hunter and I was ordered to stand guard all night over the wreck. And an Indian mechanic who happened to have a PPL decided to steal a Vickers Varsity one evening. He flew all the way to Bordeaux before crashing it!

Which airlines did you work for and where did that take you?

Firstly, BEA from 1959-1978, on engine overhaul, then BOAC and finally BA. The engines evolved from Centaurs, for strip and rebuilds, to Rolls-Royce Dart, Tyne, Avon, Spey and RB211, involving all marques.

While stationed with BEA at Heathrow, with some of the apprentices, I restored a Miles M18, including the engine, over a period of two-and-a-half years. An ex-Squadron Leader offered me his Miles M18, which was in a dilapidated state. I had to find the funds and somewhere to restore it, which at first was in various areas of our house, with the wings in the small bedroom, the fuselage in the extension, the engine in the garage and the tailplane on top of the wardrobe, but after a time this proved impractical!

At first, progress was slow, as I had to draw up my own plans because many were



(Above) Miles M18, G-AHKY, was restored by Rex and BEA apprentices at Heathrow. It'd previously won the Goodyear Trophy in 1956 and the King's Cup in 1961. It currently resides in the Scottish National Museum of Flight at East Fortune. (Photo: courtesy of Rex Coates)

missing and I had none to refer to. I made a wooden framework and covered it in fabric to work under, but after a number of setbacks I was allowed to use Bay 13 at the BEA Maintenance Hangars.

Once I was at Heathrow, work was slow at first, but I suggested to the BEA Apprentice School that the project became part of its training. This was approved, so things started moving well after that and it was a very enjoyable project.

The test flight was out of Heathrow using Runway 28R. The engine was repaired after a CAA test pilot had oversped it. I owned the M18 for two years and it eventually went to Willie Roberts as part of the Strathallan Collection.

How did your job change over the years?

From 1978-2002 I was an Overseas Engineer (OSE), based in various countries worldwide. One of those was Bangladesh, where the locals got rather rebellious and over-excited, brandishing burning torches. We airport engineers (from other countries too) were told to stay in our hotel for a week, but one Saudi chap decided he wasn't prepared to do so for that long so he got into his car and headed for the airport to get away. Unfortunately for him, he was stopped and taken from his car – he was never seen again. Sometimes you have to do what you're told.

My job was quite varied. One instance was when I'd just returned from 'flying spanner' duties for BA at Zurich and reported back to Heathrow, and I was told, "Rex, we have a Lockheed TriStar unserviceable in Israel – you've engine overhaul experience, go to Bengurion Airport, and de-blade the number

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three engine (this means blanking off the fan on an RB211). Then borescope number one and two engines, carry out some engine runs and release the aircraft to fly."

I wanted to fly back with the aircraft but, no, I was ordered rest after 22 hours of duty time – all part of an OSE's day.

At one stage, from 1982 to the mid-eighties, I was co-opted back to RAF Engineering, to help with getting TriStar 500s back and forth to the Falklands. One TriStar could take the load of four Hercules.

You must've seen a great improvement in jet engines over the years...

Yes, the progression of the jet engine and its improved fuel consumption has been remarkable. They have so much power now, with incredible fuel burn and much less noise too. The difference between a RR Avon and a RB211 or a newer Trent is staggering.

Where did you do your flight training?

I started in a Piper Colt, G-ARNL, with John Lake out of Eastleigh. I remember the date as 29 October 1964. I was living at Yateley, near Blackbushe, which had recently been bought by Air Vice Marshall Don Bennett, but it wasn't licensed so was only operated under the '28-day rule'. I drove to Eastleigh and gained my PPL with Three Counties Aero Club.

How long have you been in the LAA?

I think from about 1962, I joined when I was helping Alan Chalkley with his Cub.

How has the Association helped you?

Without the Association, in all its guises over the years, light aviation as we know it today wouldn't exist. LAA Engineering and its Inspectors does a great job. It'd very expensive if not impossible (certainly now) to use the CAA route to gain a Permit. I do think our Chief Engineer, Chief Inspector and staff really deserve our appreciation.

I also helped at many of the early Sywell rallies, which I very much enjoyed. They help bring us all together every year.

One of the great things about the LAA is that most folks involved in building an aircraft are happy to pass on their experience to newcomers. Building an aircraft is educational and very rewarding, it doesn't matter if it's a shiny new modern type or a classic fabric machine. I'd also very much recommend you use the LAA educational courses that are held at Turweston as they provide great insight and give much confidence when starting out or picking up again after a few years.

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What aircraft have you flown and owned?

All told, I've flown 105 types, and I've owned a Miles M17 Monarch, G-AFLW; Miles M18, G-AHKY; Miles Messenger, G-AKBO; Nord 1203, G-AHXJ; Morane 733, F-BKOZ (kept in Paris); and an Aeronca Defender, G-ATUV.

How did you come to own the Miles Monarch, G-AFLW?

I saw a Miles M17, G-AFJU, at a Blackbushe aviation meeting and thought it looked very good. I was told that another Miles M17 was for sale at Staverton, so a friend drove me up to view it. Standing next to it was a Miles Monarch, G-AFLW. I was told that it was to be that year's star attraction on the upcoming Guy Fawkes bonfire! However, the owner wouldn't sell it to me until I'd proved that I could fly it! I did buy it and restored it. The good news is that G-AFJU is now also being restored.



Do you have a favourite and a worst type out of those you've flown?

I've never been overly concerned with anything I've flown. All aircraft are different, as a lot depends on the power-to-weight ratio and their dynamics.

Have you built and restored any aeroplanes?

Yes, as mentioned earlier I was involved in restoring the Miles aircraft. I also part built a Vari-Viggen – I went to Mojave and met Burt Rutan. I also started a Starduster 2 and sold it on. I'm licenced in CA, A-B-C and can certify many types of aircraft, both LAA and CAA

(Left) Rex's Miles Monarch, G-AFLW, featured on the cover of the Association's magazine, then called *Popular Flying*, in November/December 1970.

(Photo: LAA Archive)



(Above) A young Rex (kneeling) by Miles Messenger, G-AIEK, with its owner, Jim Buckingham (in the flying jacket). The other lads are from Rolls-Royce Filton and helped with the Messenger's restoration. (Photo: courtesy of Rex Coates)



(Left) For a number of years, Rex owned and operated this Morane 733 from Le Plessis-Belleville Airport near Paris. (Photo: courtesy of Rex Coates)



(Left) Another of Rex's projects is an Aeronca Defender, G-BTUV. (Photo: courtesy of Rex Coates)

Do you have a best aviation moment?

Any time in the air is wonderful. Being able to fly and having the freedom of flight is great. It isn't as free as it once was, due to increasing regulation, but when aloft you can't beat that feeling of being part of an aircraft.

I believe you were very active in the re-opening of Blackbushe Airport?

I moved to Yateley not knowing that Blackbushe was even there! Air Vice Marshall Don Bennett held a meeting in Yateley regarding the future of the airfield and I became one of the committee – I think I may be the only survivor now. I didn't even know where to find the aerodrome and was very surprised to find it was only about half a mile away from my home!

Initially, it was operated under the '28-day rule', as there was great opposition from the local council, which had actually dug a ditch across the main runway in an attempt to stop Blackbushe operating. However, that resulted in motorcyclists crashing into the trench. Eventually, the council built an earth mound across the runway, which is still evident today.

I became Chairman of the club, helping to organise many successful events, but left the area in 1972, for work. We managed to open all the runways, but now only one is operational.

Do you have any aviation heroes?

I've generally found heroes to be very modest. I've met a few, including Douglas Bader and Group Captain Johnny Kent. The latter I checked out on a Victor Airtourer when he retired and came back into light aviation.

Have you had any 'hairy' moments?

Oh dear, too many to write about – would you like a book?! A couple that come to mind was when Alan Chalkley and myself attended the RAF Lakenheath airshow in his Cub. We were flying along on our way home, with the windows and doors down, when two North American F100's asked for a fly by. They got very close and the turbulence sucked all of our maps and stuff out of the aeroplane and tuned us upside down! Luckily, we managed to get out of that one...

Another took place at Old Warden, when I was flying the Monarch, with a couple of passengers, off the short runway. Because of the hump I couldn't see all of the runway in front of me, so it was decided that another chap would wave a hanky when all was clear. That he did, but just as I got to take-off speed, a Chilton came into land right across me.

Remembering something similar had taken place in a book I'd read, when a USAF B-24 Liberator Captain had done

the same, I pulled back on the stick and just cleared the Chilton. I put full flap down and we lifted off over and through the trees and firebreak at the end. The next day, Desmond Penrose rang to say what an idiot I'd been taking off when he was landing, but when I explained the procedure we'd arranged, he congratulated me on a great piece of flying!

Do you have non-aviation hobbies or interests?

Are there any others? My little garden in London keeps me busy and being an LAA Inspector means that I'm very active – at the moment, I'm helping to recover a Piper Super Cub.

Any aviation books you would recommend?

None particularly but keeping up with airworthiness requirements and modern technologies is enough. I've read lots of books which have helped save my life – as shown by the Old Warden incident, where the tip came from a book about flying Liberators over the 'hump' in India.

Any advice for fellow pilots?

Ensure that you're totally legal when flying. And beware of 'Aces' – it's often in their head and not in their piloting skills. ■

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