



Like father like son

This month we talk to **Toby Willcox**, aircraft engineer and microlight and light aircraft pilot...

Welcome Toby, could you tell us something of your working life?

I grew up initially in Filton, Bristol and then moved to Frampton Cotterell, so dad had a garden big enough to rig an aircraft. I went to The Ridings High School, but when I started my A-levels I quickly realised it wasn't for me. The only way to jump ship with my parents' approval was an apprenticeship, especially in aviation, so I joined Filton College / Aviation Services at Filton Airfield for an aviation engineering apprenticeship leading to a 'Section L' licence without type rating (LWTR).

The course initially comprised one day a week at Filton College doing various BTECs, one day in the Aviation Services Technical training department doing City and Guilds, and three days a week in the Airbus workshop making various components, machining and welding. The course then went on to three days a week in the hangars on the Airbus A300 freighter conversions. For the third year college ended, so time was spent in the hangar. It was meant to be a four-year long apprenticeship, but Aviation Services went bankrupt so a few of us did the fourth year theory work and exams in an accelerated course (four weeks) for airframes. I then went on to do the CAA oral exam and obtained a restricted Part 66.

The big jets were not my cup of tea, so I went to Eurojets at Staverton working on twins and single pistons and a DH Dove. When that company moved to Birmingham, I took up an offer from Roger Targett and moved to Targett Aviation at Nympsfield, where I am currently.

We carry out maintenance on a small number of gliders, but the bulk of our work is the repair of LAA and BMAA types such as Eurostar, C42, RV, Dynamic etc. For example, at time of writing we have an Aquila for annual, Starduster Too for repair, RV-7A for repair, RV-7A for repair

Above Toby Willcox in the rear seat of Pete Watts' retractable Jurca Sirocco, G-CEAO, one of his favourite aircraft.

and conversion to a taildragger, a Topsy Nipper for a little spruce up, with a Venture, Eurostar, Dynamic, Jabiru J400 and Europa waiting to come in. We also maintain a few CofA types.

What started your interest in aviation?

I was fortunate to be born into it. While still at school, dad used to hitchhike to Bidford Gliding Club where he would drive the winch all day to get free launches. From flying gliders, he headed to the RAF where he flew Chipmunks, Jet Provosts, Gnats and Hunters.

When he came out he moved to Bristol and flew GA but couldn't afford to do a lot, then one day passing Filton Airfield he saw a small blue aeroplane taxi out – it was the MW4 about to make its second flight. Two years later he met Mike Whittaker, which led to him building an MW5 G-MNXY, MW7 G-BOKI and MW6T G-MZOK.

As a youngster I sat in fields for hours watching dad and Eddie Clapham's shenanigans and wanted to be as good as either of them when I grew up, which has driven me to fly as much as I can to try and achieve that.

In what, where and when was your first flight?

At the age of six dad took me for a flight in Eddie's MW6T, G-MNMW. We didn't get a two-seat aircraft of our own until I was about 16, but I flew regularly – and I became adept at bumming rides. The MW6 was built by Mike, Eddy and Steve Slade, all of whom have greatly helped me along the way.

Where did you learn to fly?

I flew our MW6 regularly with dad, so by the time we could afford lessons I was quite proficient. I did my PPL at Kemble Flying Club with Dave Young and John Melville in an AX3, G-MYGD.

Later, I went to the Cotswold Aero Club with Phil Mathews, for an NPPL SSEA rating in PA-18 G-OVON, and



retractable undercarriage and variable pitch propeller Differences training in a PA-32R G-VONS. More recently I have done my EASA Aerobatics rating in a Citabria with Dave Jelly at Freedom Aviation at Kemble.

Did you find converting to tailwheel aeroplanes difficult?

I have to confess I didn't really think about 'converting' as such. I was young and questionably stupid, I guess. My friend wanted to hear and see his 912 Rans taildragger fly from the ground as he never had so I jumped in and flew it, I found it quite straightforward. The next taildragger I flew was an Avid MK4 – and that needed a bit more footwork!

It is a bugbear of mine when I hear people say that they would like to give tailwheel a go but have been put off by people telling their horror stories. It shouldn't be the case, if you are doing a three-point landing, the only thing in the whole flight that differs is that you push the stick forward on take-off once rolling, the rest is the same.

The only thing with a taildragger is you have to use all the skills you were taught in training all the time, which can make it feel frantic at first, but like anything else, it eases with practice. Think about when learning to fly, when you had to start using the radio at the same time!

Someone I know recently told me he was put off tailwheel aircraft. Being a bit grumpy at the time I roasted him for listening, he went and did his conversion and absolutely loves it now.

Top Another of Toby and his dad's favourites, the Skyranger, which is a 'go anywhere' aircraft that will operate out of little more than 100m.

Above left Toby and his dad have a long history with Mike Whittaker's MW series, his dad having built three, including MW7, G-BOKI.

Above right With Eddie Clapham and Turbulent G-ASFX, which Eddie and Bill Dobie built and flew for over 50 years before Bill retired from flying and sold his share to Toby.

How did you hear about the PFA/LAA

I grew up with the PFA as dad built the MWs and have been a member in my own right since 2009, when I bought my Minimax G-BYJE.

How many aircraft have you built/owned?

I built two Skyrangers with dad, but at work I have rebuilt too many other types to remember. I have the Minimax, which for the money is a cracking aeroplane, but like my Quantum 912 flexwing it is unused due to lack of free time.

I recently got to fulfil a childhood dream and took on a half-share of Eddie Clapham and Bill Dobie's Turbulent G-ASFX. I have known the aircraft all my life and was thrilled when my gentle pestering convinced Eddie to convince Bill to sell his half. I see myself as the current custodian of a piece of history – I shall keep it for as long as I can get into it.

I am also slowly rebuilding an RV-9A that I bought as salvage and I am converting it to a taildragger. And I also own most of the bits of a Chaser flexwing.

Other aircraft I am fortunate to be able to fly are a Jurca Sirocco, Acrosport 2, Chipmunk, PA18-95, Rans S6S, Thruster T300, and a Skyranger.

How has the LAA helped you?

Massively. I call / email the office almost daily and, although at times they are incredibly busy, they are always helpful.



How many hours and types do you have in your logbook?

I have 1,468 hours and 74 types logged P1, not including variants of the same type. That's made up of 38 microlights, 10 of which are flexwings, and 26 light aircraft. I have also been fortunate to have been flown in other interesting types such as the Aeronca C3.

Do you have a favourite and not so keen on type flown?

It's hard to single one out a single type, but the Turbulent provides so much fun and the controls are a delight.

On a hard runway with no wind, it is anyone's guess what will happen below 15mph as the rudder fades and the tailwheel casters. Being a bit of a tight cockpit, the brakes are fun to find, and as the mains are well back, if you brake too hard, you'll need a new prop! It makes me laugh when it all happens, which is part of the fun for me. However, the low power / low weight means you do have to respect it.

The Jurca Sirocco is another real favourite. Again, fabulous controls and impeccable manners as long as you respect it. Although the stall speed is high it's not a terrifying experience, but it does tend to fly or fall.

Practice forced landings are fun as the descent rate dirty is impressive, and you have to carry a lot of speed as the one thing it does not like is fast high angle of attack changes. On take-off it just follows the prop and if you do powered approaches it will nearly always three point and run straight.

I have only got it wrong once and caused it to drop the wing due to my poor speed management over the threshold – typically, in front of lots of people at the Henstridge LAA meet! It is easily recovered with power and unloading the elevator.

The real old faithful is the S kyranger Swift. You can take it anywhere and land anywhere – France, Scillies, Lundy or your mate's back garden if it's little over 100m. It is a fantastic workhorse.

Recently I flew a Topsy Nipper and a Flitzer – they are real smile makers. And finally, of course, MWs. They made everything I do today happen and taught me so much.

Worst? I'm not going there as I do not want to knock someone's pride and joy. However, I have come across aircraft that have a terrible reputation, but I seem to like them! The Tiger Cub springs to mind, I was warned not to fly it but I did. It was great fun and, without a doubt, quirky.

What is your best aviation moment?

I actually have three stand-out moments in my flying life. Completing the first flight of the Stroud school Build a Plane Rans S6 and flying it in to RIAT 2014 is one. The RIAT flight made it for me as the controller informed us we would be backtracked upon landing. I briefed my passenger that I would be landing slow on the piano keys, which we did, and stopped by the numbers. The controller came back and said, "Well done G-AP that is by far the shortest landing Fairford has ever seen".

Completing the post-repair check flight on the Fieseler Storch replica G-BZOB, flying down the Cotswold escarpment looking at people stopping and pointing, was a second.

But the saddest, yet most worthwhile, thing I have ever





done was the fly past of the hospice where a good friend, Jim Taylor, was for his last few days. He had asked if the lads from Over Farm would do a fly-by in the two Skyranglers he'd built, however he didn't expect to see his current Eurofox, G-CHID. I made sure he saw me as I knew it would be the last time. I will never forget seeing his frail arm wave. When I landed he rang to thank me, and that was the last time I spoke to him.

Do you have any aviation heroes?

I have the greatest respect for Mike Whittaker for designing aircraft that made it possible for people like my dad to build, and to give me the path into aviation.

Eddie Clapham for all the time he gave us as the Inspector to help dad, and all the flights I had as a child in his aeroplanes. Plus, all his achievements that have helped a lot of what we have today. Nigel Beale for providing the microlight community with Rotax engines through the tough times, and then the 912 which changed everything.

Also, the late Tim Cox for all his help and support over the years and his workmanship. And of course, my parents. Neil Williams, no explanation needed. Steve Jones, as the most memorable display I have ever seen was at Goodwood when he was in a Spitfire glued to the wing tip of a Mustang. For aircraft of different performances it was a fantastic sight.

Above Toby is very much an all-rounder, everything from high-performance light aircraft to SSDRs, such as his self-built Minimax, G-BYJE.

Left top G-BZOB, a Slepcev replica Storch that Toby enjoyed making the post repair check flight on.

Left Flexwings also have a place in Toby's heart, this his Pegasus Quantum 15-912, G-BYFF.

Have you had any I learned flying from that type moments?

I confess to a few, and if social media had existed everyone would know about them, but staying calm and fighting the panic instinct got me out of them, hopefully never to revisit.

One flight that still makes my hair stand on edge is when we were heading northwards with the intention of going via Ince to Eshott. Passing the hills to the east of Welshpool and under total lowering cloud cover, we ended up in a bowl, circling. Up to that point I was happy thinking we'd follow a valley out, but this closed in, leaving us trapped. With little chance of landing it was looking bad. Then we saw a little light patch, taking it we burst out into beautiful weather and diverted to Welshpool, who were excellent. The entire time I had dad beside me (rightly unhappy for allowing me to do this) and the thought of what could of happened still haunts me. Lesson learned, turn back, stupidity does not always win – and Mother Nature is beyond your control, no matter how good you think you are.

Do you have any non-aviation hobbies and interests?

Not unless it's raining or windy! I might ride my push bike and most recently I did a track day at Donnington Park, of which I would like to do more. I have built RC aircraft on and off for most of my life and have an impressive collection, but don't get to fly them as often as I would like.

What's on your aircraft or vehicles wish list?

A Bucker Jungmeister but my girlfriend, who also flies, always points out it's a single seater, so it's now a Jungmann. And on four wheels it's a Ford GT40.

What aviation books would you recommend

I confess to reading very little other than aircraft manuals, but I have read Neil Williams' *Aerobatics* and Alex Henshaw's *Flight of the Mew Gull*.

Finally, what advice would you offer pilots?

If you think you want to, do it no matter what, tailwheel conversion, aerobatics, short field coaching, just do it.

We already know life is short, but this pandemic has proven that time can be shorter, even with perfect health. ■

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