



The adventurous Ruth...

This month we talk to **Ruth Kelly**, paraglider, sailor, enthusiastic pilot and so much more...

Welcome Ruth, can you tell us something about your career?

I finished full-time work in 2013, having worked in the museums and archive world for 25 years,

ending up in the British Film Institute National Film & Television Archive. People often say 'oh wow, what a cool job', and of course it was. I certainly learned a great deal from it, but it was quite stressful. I had a large team to manage and we were under constant pressure from the government to reduce costs. So, I spent as much time restructuring my department – and sadly making people redundant – as I did managing one of the world's biggest collections of archive film and TV.

But we had some notable successes too, including getting £25 million from Jeremy Hunt (when he was the Culture Secretary) to build a massive new storage facility for the master film collection, create a new database system, and buy digital film scanners and digital preservation equipment. From 2003 I was commuting to London from Christchurch where I lived with my partner William, which was two-and-a-half hours each way. I didn't have to be in the office 9-5 but it was expensive and exhausting, and that, on top of the stress of the job, led to my early retirement, although I carried on working

Above Ruth enjoying her RV-8 over the South West, part observing the landscape, part aeros.

for them as a self-employed consultant for several years, which was a good deal less painful.

Prior to the BFI I worked in other museums in London, including the Science Museum, notching up a range of interesting projects including vehicle restoration and display work, alongside yet more major projects connected with collections storage and information systems. Going back earlier still, there was a phase of my life dominated by marriage and children, mixed with an 18 month stint as a Scientific Officer at the Building Research Station, and quite a lot of archaeology, first as a volunteer and then briefly on a full-time (albeit very low paid!) basis, working on assorted Iron Age and Roman sites in the south of England. This included a little bit of flying in army helicopters (Scout and Gazelle) from Middle Wallop, taking aerial photographs.

To bring my career right up to date, although I no longer work full-time, I do run a small business providing yacht rating and measurement services (commonly known as 'handicapping') for various sailing clubs, mainly along the south coast but also in Ireland, the Mediterranean and Brazil. The system is called VPRS (Velocity Predication Rating System) and is built on a Velocity Prediction Programme (VPP) developed by William and me. I provided the aero-hydrodynamic modelling, Will was the programming wizard. It doesn't

earn a huge amount but the income covers hangarage, insurance and petrol – and it's nice to do something useful for the yachting community. If you're curious just look up www.vprs.org.

Lurking behind this slightly peculiar career path are a BSc in engineering (a daring choice at the time) and an MSc in history. Just think, engineering + archaeology = Science Museum and you'll get an idea of how it hangs together. I didn't plan it, I just lurched from one thing to another!

What inspired your interest in aviation?

Well, it goes way back really, but the current chapter of powered flight starts shortly after I left the BFI. It took me something like six months to fully recover from the stress and hassle of the job and the commute, but I rarely sit around resting for long. I like a new challenge. So, in November 2013, almost on a whim, I drove up to Compton Abbas to investigate the possibility of learning to fly. A week later I was airborne in an Icarus C42 with John Keep.

Was your brother, (Keith Dennison, ex-BAE typhoon Chief Test Pilot) an influence?

Yes, he has been a major influence. He's one of those people who always knew what he wanted to be, and that was to be a fighter pilot. So our house was full of model aeroplanes. He started gliding at Booker when he was a teenager and then went on to get his PPL flying Robins out of Goodwood. I think he had his PPL before he could drive. We went to loads of airshows, Farnborough, Greenham Common, Lee on Solent, Fairford and the V&V at Booker all spring to mind.

Keith won a flying scholarship into the RAF and studied aeronautical engineering at Bath University. He was on the last fast jet course on Hawker Hunters and went operational on Phantoms. Later he flew Tornados before training as a test pilot at Patuxent River with the US Navy. Later again he commanded the fast jet squadron at Boscombe and, several postings later, took over as the RAF's chief test pilot. He ended his RAF career as an Air Commodore and then joined BAE as its Chief Test Pilot.

Latterly, he flew Peter Vacher's Hurricane R4118 and many of the historic aircraft at Shuttleworth. And yet, with all his astonishing achievements, I never once got a ride in anything, other than a Robin in his pre-RAF days! The closest I came to a jet fighter was flying the Hawk simulator at RAF Valley.

In what, where and when was your first flight?

It was at Booker. My mum and dad's friends, Sheila and Doug Walker, lived near High Wycombe, which is why Keith started gliding there. Doug worked at Heathrow, I'm not sure what he did exactly, but I do remember getting a tour round a couple of hangers there, which included walking through a Caravelle and a Trident.

At the weekends Doug flew gliders at Booker, and also took his turn as one of the tug pilots. So, while Keith was busy being launched into the blue yonder, I sometimes managed to blag a ride in one of the two glider tugs – a Super Cub and a Citabria.

I also got a ride in a K13 glider and in a Falke motor glider, in which Doug gave me my first experience of aerobatics. I couldn't tell you the date, exactly, but it might have been around 1973.



Top First foray into ownership was a share in this Dynamic at Old Sarum. Unfortunately, it was destroyed by an arsonist.

Above middle The aeroplane that changed Ruth's life, the Chipmunk introduced her to tailwheel flying and tandem seating.

Above Ruth learned her aerobatics in the Super Decathlon with Bob Cole, at Thruxton.

How many types and hours have you flown?

I have accumulated 190 hours in my logbook and still count myself as something of a beginner. Having started on the Icarus C42, I got my NPPL microlight licence in May 2014. John Keep invited me to join his T600N Thruster syndicate so I had a go in that, but already I had my sights set on getting the SSEA (simple single-engine aircraft) rating. I did this flying the PA28s at Compton Abbas and passed my navigation test and GST in September and October 2014. I'm not a great lover of the PA28 – they're good at what they do – but I decided that the Tiger Moth would be more interesting to fly, and I managed one introductory lesson on G-ADXT before operations closed down for the winter.

To keep my hand in I went back to flying the C42 for a while before the opportunity of a one-third share in a rather nice WT9 Dynamic microlight, based at Old Sarum, came my way. Both of the other syndicate members were called Nigel, and the aircraft reg was G-NGLS, and it all went swimmingly for a while until I managed to bend the aeroplane at Hollym in Yorkshire. Landing in a crosswind, I drifted to the left as I touched down and poked the port wing tip through a fence. A very noisy ground roll ensued as we collided with every single fence post in the row, which chewed off more and more of the wing, culminating in a ground loop round the rather sturdy post at the end.

Meet the Members

Nobody was hurt, thank goodness, just my pride and self-confidence.

While the aeroplane was being repaired, I did a tailwheel conversion in a Chipmunk back at Compton, flying with Andrew Dixon. I thought maybe a bit of taildragging wouldn't do my landing skills any harm. Once I was signed off I hired the aeroplane and took my brother flying – the first time we had flown together since he took me up in the Robin from Goodwood, sometime in the 1970s. I was nervous as hell but Keith appeared to have mellowed somewhat and we had a very enjoyable session together, doing some advanced handling and my first aerobatics since that ride with 'Uncle' Doug in the Falke at Booker.

However, it wasn't too long before the repairs to the Dynamic were finished and I went back to that. Towards the end of 2016 I worked with Ray Proost at Old Sarum to do a five-yearly overhaul on the Rotax, which included replacing all the rubber bits. Then one of the Nigels and I scrubbed and re-proofed the covers and gave the aeroplane a very thorough clean and polish. It looked terrific. Just a few weeks later Nigel called me on a day we were due to fly together and passed on the shocking news that our aeroplane had been destroyed in an arson attack.

We were gutted, of course, but after a month or so it became clear that our insurers would pay up and we started to think about getting a replacement. We came very close to buying a SportCruiser, having test flown a kit-built one with a Jabiru engine, and then a much newer factory-built example with a Rotax. But I found the cockpit uncomfortable and I vetoed it. Truth be told, the Chipmunk had changed my life and I was feeling drawn to something aerobatic and tandem-seated with a tailwheel, none of which was seen as desirable by the Nigels. In the end we split the syndicate; I took my share of the insurance money and started wondering what to do next.

The answer wasn't hard to find – getting my aerobatics rating on the Super Decathlon at Thruxton, flying with former test pilot Bob Cole. And in the process, completing CS prop differences training and converting my NPPL to a LAPL. While all that was underway, I researched possible aeroplanes to buy and arrived fairly quickly at the RV-8. Special thanks are due to Martin Luton who gave me a flight in G-DAZZ, which finally made up my mind.

The rest, as they say, is history. Although, along the way I have enjoyed flights in a few other types including a J3 Cub (Clive Davidson's old aeroplane); two RV-6s (thanks, John Michie and Ian Fraser); another Tiger Moth (with Annabelle Burroughes); Patrick Caruth's Freelance; Adrian Eve's Sonex; Dave White's Jodel and Paul Robichaud's ARV Super 2. In the distant past I also got an hour in a Cessna 150 aerobat with a family friend and a trip to Newquay in a Robin Royale. Leaving aside the passenger flights, I suppose that makes 10 types where I can fairly say that I have properly flown them, including taking off and landing, with solo time in six of them.

Do you have a favourite and not so type flown?

The favourite is easy, a rather nice beastie known as a Van's RV-8, which is handy, because I own one! Why? Because it is an aerobatic taildragger with tandem seating and is very cool with it. Seriously though, it is an



Above Ruth with her Van's RV-8, which is such a versatile and capable aircraft.

amazingly capable aeroplane: 160kt cruise if you want it, but a long-legged 148kt-ish is available at 31 litres per hour; enough useful load for full fuel (160 litres) two adults and around 30kg of baggage, and five hours endurance.

It's also aerobatic and jolly comfortable – one of the reasons I like tandem seating is the elbow room. One day I might even learn how to land the damn thing consistently!

Honourable mentions must go to the Chipmunk and the Super Decathlon, and, to be fair, the Dynamic, which was a very capable and comfortable microlight. We just weren't allowed to turn it upside down.

Worst type? Probably the C42. It's like going flying in a tent, as one of the Nigels remarked. Actually, they're a terrific little aeroplane but I have rather long arms and I find the centre stick uncomfortable – there isn't room for my arm between the stick and the seat back. Too much time in a C42 is a pain in the neck... and shoulder, and back. It was a similar problem with the SportCruiser, an arm rest set in just the wrong place; perfectly calculated to reward every hour's flying with a bill for osteopathy.

Have you ever built or restored an aeroplane?

No. But it's coming. I'm enjoying doing the maintenance on the RV and, after my instrument panel rebuild, two people – let's call them Kevin and Annabelle – started urging me to build something.

I have been flirting with all sorts of ideas, a Currie Wot, an Isaac's Fury? Or maybe get a fixer-upper and, well, fix it up. I have just moved to Shaftesbury and right now my hands are full with plans for refurbishment of my new house. But those plans include a workshop, which will house the various machine tools currently lurking in my hangar. Then we shall see.



What type of flying do you prefer?

Actually, this is a hard question to answer. My flying experience to date has been marked by lots of different types, and lots of training, and I haven't really settled into any kind of groove. When I first started to learn there was no objective other than to see if I could; it was the same with aerobatics. I suppose what interests me most is the mastery of flying, and really understanding how every aspect of it works. Flying as a means of getting about doesn't attract me so much, although I have friends and family spread all over the country and, sooner or later, I may discover the pleasure of blatting off to visit them.

For now, my perfect flight is to cruise around my beautiful local area, interspersed with gentle aerobatics among dazzling puffy clouds, followed by three circuits with perfect landings. It might happen one day!

Have you tried other types of aviation?

I have already said something about three-axis microlighting, although to be honest the difference between those aeroplanes and your average LAA type isn't so very great. But before I took up powered flight, I spent several years paragliding.

William had a suspicion that I would like it and bought me a two-day introductory course for my birthday in 2010. I did enjoy it, very much, and told him I wanted to carry on, at least as far as getting my BHPA Club Pilot licence. "We'll do it together then," he said. So we did, on the Isle of Wight.

Over the next four years I built up about 80 hours in

Above Four years actively flying paragliders preceded Ruth's transition to powered flying.

my log book, and William managed rather more. For William it was the perfect kind of flying – very physical, a bit risky, very free. For me, although I found some of the flying enjoyable, the sweet spot between boredom and terror wasn't easy to find and I became increasingly worried about the risks.

Talking it over with my brother, he remarked that 'stooging about, low and slow in turbulent air really is asking for trouble'. Even really good pilots got into trouble from time to time and there were some nasty accidents.

As of now I haven't quit paragliding in my own mind. I still have my wing and I'm a paid-up member of the BHPA and the Wessex Hang Gliding and Paragliding Club, but I haven't flown for five years. I might revisit it sometime, but right now I'm focused more on the RV. I like being able to decide when and where to take off and land.

What has been your best aviation moment?

I particularly remember a moment in my first qualifying cross-country flight when I looked around the cockpit, and then out at the sky and the passing countryside, and thought 'crikey... I'm flying an aeroplane all on my own'.

Solo in the Chipmunk felt good too. I experienced a similar moment of wonder towards the end of my aerobatics course. We had climbed to our usual 3000ft and then Bob dictated a series of manoeuvres – loop, barrel roll, aileron roll, Cuban 8, stall turn, reverse Cuban, slow roll... and there I was, doing it. I'm still getting used to the idea.



Above Ruth and late partner Will enjoyed 12 years of sailing with their Hustler 35.

Do you have any other hobbies or interests?

Many! William and I owned a yacht for 12 years, a beautiful Hustler 35, and we had a lot of fun with her. We really enjoyed trying to sail fast while appearing rather nonchalant about it. Crossing the Channel using nothing but the wind was very satisfying too, and the food markets in France were a delight.

I have dabbled with music all my life, and once played flute, saxophone and harmonica in a band with work colleagues. My current musical project is focused on the guitar. I'm not very good at it but, as ever, I'm enjoying the challenge. Being able to sing at the same time would be marvellous but may turn out to be a challenge too far. Don't hold your breath!

I'm fond of cooking and I very much enjoy having small groups of friends round for dinner, which is something I want to do more of once my house is sorted out. I have been known to supply cake to the Tiger Moth Training den at Henstridge. I also keep a small flock of chickens. They're fascinating to watch, great characters and supply me with more eggs than I can eat, but that's OK as I like giving them away to friends and neighbours.

Any aviation heroes?

Difficult question, I'm not sure I go in for heroes, exactly. What I really admire is the determination, cool competence and mastery you can see in many pilots – test pilots like my brother; astronauts like the crew of Apollo 11; the WWII German test pilot Melitta von Stauffenberg; innovators like Reginald Mitchell... and everyone who builds, restores, maintains and flies their own aeroplane.

Can you recommend any good aviation books?

Nothing that people won't know very well anyway. I enjoyed Geoff Wellum's *First Light* (although it tails off a bit towards the end) and 'Winkle' Brown's *Wings on my Sleeve* – which left me gasping at the sheer skill and audacity of the man, although in the end the catalogue of types flown becomes a bit exhausting. *The Women Who Flew for Hitler* is an excellent account of two very different personalities. Hannah Reitsch and Melitta von Stauffenburg, but in the course of telling their stories the book presents a fascinating history of the rise and fall of the Third Reich from a fresh perspective.

I'd like to be able to recommend a really good book on the mechanics of flight, but I haven't found one yet (PS since writing this my brother and Dave White have both directed me to the excellent technical books written by Darrol Stinton). In truth my real favourites are up at the poetic and allegorical end of the spectrum: I'm fond of *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, and right now I'm enjoying *The Stonor Eagles*.

Have you had any 'I learned about aviation from that' moments?

Two moments from paragliding stand out, both involving my wing collapsing and fortunately then re-inflating. The first was at Ringstead Bay (near Weymouth), the second at Bell Hill (next door to Bullbarrow). Both resulted from failure to read the terrain or weather conditions properly, exacerbated by peer-pressure – everyone else was flying so I had better fly too – and in the first case by flying when far too tired.

I also had an interesting moment during my first cross-country on the paraglider. Having caught a thermal over Bell Hill I was briefly paralysed by fear at around 2,500ft. Finding myself supported by nothing more than a scrap of nylon and thin bits of string I almost started hyperventilating, but checking my harness and risers helped get the fear under control, and I set off downwind. Rigorous pre-flight checks and having confidence in your kit are vital.

The prang in the Dynamic at Hollym which I have already described, came about from a similar mix of trouble – flying when feeling rather tired and being driven on by peer pressure. I really don't want to make those mistakes again.

The time when I landed with the parking brake on in the RV-8 was another dodgy moment, the problem lay with the parking brake valve, which was less than perfectly installed. I was lucky not to damage the aeroplane on that occasion, I think. The lesson I took away was to not turn a blind eye to a known fault, and hope to get away with it. Aviation can bite.

Do you have an aircraft or vehicle wish list?

Is there anyone who doesn't want to fly a Spitfire? I may have to treat myself to a session in one of the two-seaters sometime.

A ride in a fast jet would be nice, how about an F104? I think it's too late for me to become an astronaut though.

Returning to planet Earth, a nice biplane, or some slow high-wing monoplane would be fun to build or restore, and would provide a nice contrast to the RV. I know... can I have a Fieseler Storch, please?

Any advice for fellow pilots?

It's not for me to give advice to other pilots, I haven't been at it long enough. But maybe I should take this opportunity to mention that my partner William very sadly passed away just over a year ago after a two-year battle with cancer.

We bought the RV together partly because of the urge to get on and make the most of life while we could. Although he wasn't a qualified pilot, the RV was enough to get him started, and he progressed as far as his first solo. In his last year he flew quite a lot with Clive Davidson, with an emphasis on having fun. The Austrian eagle that adorns Victor Bravo's tail is in his honour, as he was half Austrian. So, for me 2020 was a year of grieving as well as moving house and dealing with Covid-19 restrictions. It still surprises me that I managed to keep flying at all – and here's the point – I couldn't have done it without the support of my friends, including many good people at Henstridge and in the Wessex Strut.

In summary I can only say make the most of what you've got and work hard to build and maintain a support network around yourself, you really don't know what's round the corner.

Let me conclude by paraphrasing some more general advice from Tim Minchin (look up *9 Life Lessons* on YouTube): *Learn as much as you can about as much as you can, take pride in whatever you're doing, have compassion, share your ideas, run(!), be enthusiastic. And then there's love, and travel, and wine, and sex, and art, and kids, and giving, and mountain climbing... but you know all that stuff already. It's an incredibly exciting thing, this one life of yours. Good luck.* ■

Below Ruth enjoying some inverted flying in her RV.

