

MEET THE MEMBERS

MINDING OUR OWN BEESWAX

We meet Alan Chalkley, alias John Beeswax, who wrote *LA's* popular *Over the Hedge* column for more than thirty years

Having enjoyed a lengthy career as both an RAF and a Commercial pilot, as well as ownership of a Comper Swift and then a Piper Cub for fifty years, Alan Chalkley has certainly led a fascinating life in aviation...

Welcome, Alan, could you please tell us about your career?

Well, these days, I'm the Secretary and Newsletter Editor for the North Wales Strut, but I started out in the RAF in 1951, flying until 1955 with the 2nd Tactical Airforce. I was then in the RAF Reserve until 1959.

From 1955-1982 I was with BOAC, which later joined with BEA to become British Airways. I flew the Boeing B377 Stratocruiser from 1955 until 1959, the Bristol Britannia from then until 1964, after that the Vickers VC10 until 1973 and the B747 Jumbo up to 1982.

After the BOAC/BEA merger, BA were shedding pilots and as I only had a couple of years to go before the mandatory retirement age of fifty, I moved onto doing Boeing overload training for Korean Air and Malaysian Airlines.

What started your interest in aviation?

I remember the Battle of Britain dogfights in 1940, and from then on built Keil Kraft and

(Right) Alan has been an LAA member for sixty years and is as enthusiastic as ever. He's a regular volunteer at our annual Rally, where he helps to set up the LAA Struts and Clubs stands.



(Above) Alan's commercial career with BOAC started during the final few years of the piston engine-powered airliners and the Boeing B377 Stratocruiser was one of the types he flew.

(Above) After initial RAF training on Tiger Moths, Alan was sent to the US to learn on the T-6 Texan (Harvard) before moving on to his first jet, the Lockheed T-33.

A keen glider pilot during his youth, Alan instructed at the Kent Gliding Club on the Slingsby T21. (Photo: Julian Herzog)



“In Arizona, after 10:00 in the morning the ambient temperature was so great that the aircraft wouldn’t take off”

Airfix model aircraft kits. I also built model gliders and diesel-powered boats.

What was your first flight?

It was as a passenger in a Douglas DC-3, flying from Speke, Liverpool, to Douglas on the Isle of Man.

Where did you do your flight training?

I started in the Percival Prentice at Feltwell in May 1952, then went to Moultrie, Georgia, in the US later that month, to fly the USAF T-6 Texan, moving on to San Antonio for a couple of months in January 1953. From February to May of that year I flew the USAF Lockheed T-33 Shooting Star in Austin, Texas, before moving on to the F-84 Thunderjet for operational training in Arizona.

The F-84 had a high stall speed and we landed them very fast onto a 9,000ft runway. After 10:00 in the morning the ambient temperature was so great that the aircraft wouldn’t take off.

Your career as a commercial airline pilot coincided with the change from piston aircraft to jets, how did they compare?

The piston aircraft had 28 cylinders for each engine and, inevitably, suffered problems – overheating and occasionally fires. Propeller and gearbox problems were also not unknown, such as loss of pitch control and over-speeding props.



(Above) Alan rescued his 90hp Piper Cub, G-ASPS, from the US then restored and enjoyed it for 52 years before it was acquired by LAA CEO and Vintage Aircraft Club stalwart Steve Slater, who’s seen here taking off at Bicester.



(Above) The Comper CLA7 Swift, G-ACTF, was in Alan’s charge for 24 years before becoming part of the Shuttleworth Collection.

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(Above) The Vickers VC10, in which Alan made a very interesting flight with BOAC Training Captain and WWII veteran Bob Knights, to learn about the aircraft's deep stall issues.

The early jets suffered from compressor stalling problems but the later Rolls-Royce fan jets were totally reliable.

In those early days of widespread air travel, did you get to see much of the world?

Yes, when there were only one or two services a week, three or four days off somewhere exotic wasn't uncommon. But the other side of the coin was that it did mean many days or even weeks away from home. I did get around though, flying routes to the Middle East, Africa, South America, Asia and Australia.

Did you have a favourite?

I particularly liked North America and the Pacific, the Polar region and the Caribbean.

What types have you flown?

Apart from those mentioned earlier, while in the RAF I flew the F-86E Sabre, Airspeed Oxford, B-25 Mitchell, de Havilland Vampire, Meteor Mk11, and the Kranich sailplane.

The civilian types include various Austers, the Tiger Moth, the Slingsby T21 and T31 as an instructor with Kent Gliding Club, Chipmunk, the Jodel D112, D120 and D150, the Piper Cub and Vagabond, the Skycraft Scout microlight, Aero Designs Pulsar, Avid Speedwing, the Druiue Turbulent and Condor, the dH Heron and the Comper Swift.

Do you have a favourite and a least liked?

Best were the F-86E and the Austers but I didn't particularly dislike any.

What LAA types have you owned?

I had my Piper Cub, G-ASPS, from 1962 until 2014. I brought it in from the US as a rather tired and unloved machine and rebuilt it. And I owned a Comper CLA7 Swift, G-ACTF, from 1972 until 1996 – it now flies with the Shuttleworth Collection.

How long have you been in the LAA and how has it helped you?

I learned of the PFA, as it then was, from Peter Turner during a British Gliding Association meeting at the Kronfield Club in 1957 and joined in November of that

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year – the subs were 7s 6d (37.5p)! The LAA has enabled me to affordably restore and operate my aircraft, plus gain valuable knowledge and skills about airframes and piston engine technology, which culminated in me taking the PFA Inspector course in 1992. The fly-ins and annual Rally have provided the social goodwill that's so vital.

Writing *Over the Hedge* each month must have led to you meeting some interesting people...

My first contributions under the pen name John Beeswax – BOAC were touchy about their pilots writing for magazines – were entitled *Vintage News* and recorded the activities of the Vintage Aircraft Club, its fly-ins and members' restorations of old aircraft.

Later, after my wife Beryl and I had moved to Wales, it evolved into *Over the Hedge*, which featured the details of and stories about the many light aircraft and small airstrips around the UK. Our old 90hp Cub was ideal for getting around to research the stories, with my faithful Leica camera and portable typewriter.

I studiously avoided mentioning accidents and their consequences, leaving that to the authorities. However, I did stress the safety aspects of using small airstrips, especially for the benefit of pilots who had trained on modern nosewheel aircraft at large airfields and on hard runways.

How long have you been involved with the North Wales Strut?

Beryl and I were on holiday in North Wales with our friends, Carl and Joyce Butler, in 1982. Carl had recently formed the Heart of England Strut at Coventry and was invited by a group of pilots based at RAF Mona, on Anglesey, to give a talk about the PFA and the Strut system, which helped and advised potential aircraft homebuilders.

Beryl and I were impressed by the audience's enthusiasm and the North Wales Strut was formed there and then, the Committee being made up of Mona Flying Club members.

We kept in touch with the North Wales Strut's members at events like our annual Rally and, six years later, when we moved to the area, I joined and was elected Membership Secretary.

What's been your favourite aviation moment?

In recreational terms, it was the Vintage Aircraft Club Summer Camps which were held at Long Mountain, near Welshpool, and later at Finmere, during which we'd give enthusiastic youngsters passenger flights in the Cub, before safety concerns put a stop to that.

Do you have any aviation heroes?

As a youngster, during the Battle of Britain, I could watch the air battles overhead from my childhood home in northwest Kent. Many pilots never survived their first combat but one particular hero, Roly Beamont, made it through the war and went on to fly the BAC TSR-2 in 1965. He also became the President of the PFA for a time.

Another was Al Deere from New Zealand, who survived both being shot down on the beach at Dunkirk and the Battle of Britain. He was a Wing Commander when I served with the 2nd Tactical Airforce.

However, my greatest hero is Bob Knights of 617 Squadron. Not only did he survive his dangerous wartime operations in Bomber Command but he was also a superb BOAC Training Captain. Long before BAE realised that their high-tail designs had a deep stall

problem, Bob had discovered it in the Vickers VC10, and his solution was to educate all of the pilots who were undergoing conversion training on the aircraft.

He took us up on a night-flying exercise, with everyone taking a turn in the right-hand seat, to teach us about how to cope with the yaw instability if the yaw damper system failed. From 40,000ft, with yaw damping restored, he put the VC10 into a shallow dive with full power, to its limiting Mach number (0.95-0.96), to explore the feel of the aircraft as it approached the speed of sound. Then, and this was the clever bit, he kept full power on and pulled up into a loop. Bob held a steady +1G as we reached the top of the loop (inverted) at about 45,000ft, then he pulled the nose down to increase the angle of attack – in those days there were no angle of attack indicators fitted.

At a certain point there was a noticeable pitch up! Fortunately, we were pointing vertically downwards so all Bob had to do was recover from a high-speed dive.

Naturally, Bob had communicated his findings to the authorities but it took a fatal accident of a BAC 1-11 test flight the following year before it was realised that these high-tail/ swept-wing designs suffered from a pitch-up moment of forces and entered a stable deep stall from which recovery was impossible.

The types' *Certificates of Airworthiness* were withdrawn until the aircraft were fitted with angle-of-attack vanes and compressed air-driven stick pushers which operated well before the aircraft reached its critical angle of attack.

Thankfully, Bob is still with us – he was recently on TV, describing how he'd been 'coned' by enemy searchlights over Berlin in 1943 and

“Avoid overconfidence, it's the worst companion that you can have in the cockpit”



had escaped by flying an evasive manoeuvre on instruments.

Have you had any hairy moments yourself?

No, none at all, thank goodness! Fortunately, I was warned by my Comper Swift's previous owner, test pilot Ron Clear, not to spin it. During his test pilot days with Airspeed, Ron had fitted a parachute to G-ACTF and carried out 32 spins over a period of months. On 29 occasions he'd had to use the chute to recover. Ron's three successful spin recoveries had all been in what he termed 'very turbulent conditions'.

Do you have any non-aviation hobbies?

I've been a member of the Royal British Legion for many years and served as Branch Secretary in Rhoshirwaun, North Wales, from 1989 until 2015. That involved care work, as a case worker, organising fundraising activities and Remembrance services plus working on the annual Poppy Appeal door-to-door collections. I'm currently Chairman of the North Gwynedd Group of Branches, which liaise with the RBL in Wrexham and London. We meet at our local HQ in Bangor.

Are there any aviation books that you'd recommend?

Aviation history has always fascinated me and I'd recommend *The Battle of Britain: The Greatest Air Battle of World War II* by Richard Hough and Denis Richards – it's a good read.

What advice would you offer to your fellow pilots?

Avoid overconfidence, it's the worst companion that you can have in the cockpit. Before each take-off, rehearse in your mind what action and heading you'd take if you were to suffer a total engine failure or a partial failure. And always keep a good lookout, especially when joining the circuit and particularly on base leg before turning final. ■

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