



AERONCA PAUPER

This month we talk to Aeronca enthusiast Alan Crutcher

Welcome Alan. Can you tell us something about your career? I have owned and managed a small software company for the past 25 years. We started by undertaking projects for the European Space Agency but nowadays most of our work is for civil aircraft as a second-tier supplier to Boeing and Gulfstream. I just raise the invoices and generally get in the way, leaving the clever stuff to my colleagues – a bunch of Oxbridge graduates and PhDs.

I'm now in my 60th year and doubt I'll ever retire, I'm still too poor. I'll just fade away and I've made a good start at that! I've previously worked at the European Space Agency in the Netherlands and CERN in Geneva, where I still

have friends. I never went to university but did my studies while working in the Royal Mint as a scientific officer.

What started your interest in aviation?

I've been obsessed with aeroplanes ever since I can remember. I can still recall the fascination I had with DC-3s and Viscounts outside the old terminal on the south side of Cardiff airport in the early 1960s. I also found a line of gleaming white Vulcans at RAF St Athan rather scary, and had dreams about fighter aircraft with spears at the front (pitot tubes?) diving down and killing people.

I remember an RAF officer barking at my uncles, Len and Arthur, who were sitting in something like a Spitfire in an aircraft

graveyard at St Athan. I must have only been about five or six.

I was never into modelling or collecting registrations, or joining the air cadets. My passion was for me and I didn't much share it with friends, perhaps fearing they'd spoil it. It was my 'getaway'. I'd hide myself in books and knew the general characteristics of lots of aircraft. To this day I still recall that Concorde was 203ft 8.75in long! (And I haven't just looked that up!) I don't like to keep on about it but to me the sight of a BAC 1-11 or a light aircraft flying overhead would make my day. The fascination was immense.

In what, where and when was your first flight?

I'm from a typically old working class family.



(Main) Alan Crutcher with his beloved Aeronca Chief, G- BRWR.

(Above) Alan has flown Geoff Graham's Tiger Moth but does not relish the responsibility of flying it solo.

(Right) Alan's project Aeronca, G-BUTF. A busy life means he has yet to get going on its repair and restoration.

(Below) An enthusiastic member of the Aeronca Club, Alan thinks one of the LAA's greatest attributes is the fellowship of its members.



I'm one of six kids. My dad spent 28 years as a coal miner. We rarely had any holidays, let alone 'flyaway' holidays.

I guess I was about 13 when one day I talked my two elder brothers into paying for a trial flight. That day I was aware of two light aircraft incidents, one in West Wales and the other near Swindon. I kept silent about them for fear it would put my brothers off. An airline captain at the flying club suggested we really ought to come back another day as it was too windy but I was having none of it. I ended up sat in the back seat of a Piper Cherokee and can recall the 30-minute flight as if it was yesterday. On final I had a great view of what I now know to be Cardiff's runway 30 – through the port side window, such was the crosswind!

I married young and soon had three kids, so learning to fly was completely out of reach.

My next flight was when I was about 25 and I travelled on a 'Dandare' flight to Schiphol, stopping at Bristol. Thereafter, once I left South Wales, flying became more routine, but was always special. Nowadays I hate flying in airliners.

I learned to fly in 1998 at Three Counties Flying Club at Blackbushe. Laurie Adlington was the CFI. He apparently had something of a reputation as an RAF pilot, and he ran the club like an RAF squadron.

Do you have any non-aviation hobbies?

Aviation has always been my main passion, in some respects I'm pleased never to have

been a career pilot as it is my escape. My wife Lynda deals with the personal finances so I don't know or much care what my flying costs. Business is business and fun is fun!

When I was 17 I had a Triumph 250cc motorcycle and, as a 57-year-old, I literally started dreaming of riding it again. I eventually found an identical bike but was not licensed to ride it; when I was 17 I could ride it on 'L' plates. I've recently had to go through the full direct access course to obtain a licence. I had to pass 'Mod 1' and 'Mod 2' riding tests, and sit theory and hazard perception tests. When you've been driving for 40 years, everything appears as a hazard! I've since bought a Kawasaki 650 but it's not for me, I'm no boy racer, I'm really into classic bikes.

MEET THE MEMBERS

Last year Lynda was delighted at my proposal to have a romantic holiday in Florence and Tuscany. I think she enjoyed the MotoGP experience at Mugello! I've followed motorbike racing for many years.

Over the years I've also done some casual running, and I beat Ken Craigie by a minute in the Great North Run about four years ago. I also go skiing occasionally with my two sons, which I very much enjoy – probably more for the time with them than the skiing though. I have a lot of banter with my kids, who are now aged from 34 to 40.

We have a yellow 1972 Fiat 500, we used it as my daughter's wedding car recently. Everybody loves that car and we take it to classic car shows but don't drive it very much.

I've always had an interest in photography but digital photography has dampened that a bit. As a child, I had good artistic skills but I've never since developed them. This year I started dabbling with painting in acrylics but I need some lessons. I did an appalling portrait of a friend recently, and it went down like a lead balloon. I pretended I had commissioned someone else to paint it!

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

I think I joined the PFA, as it then was, in 1989 and have been a member ever since.

Obviously the LAA has kept me in the air and as an engineering organisation it is indispensable. But for me the LAA is all about the people. I just enjoy the whole LAA scene and most of all the Rally.

In the past, father and son Geoff and Simon Martlew have looked after me well as LAA inspectors. Nowadays Ken Bowen does likewise. Inspectors like Ken give up a great deal of their time and expertise to keep us flying, and do it so generously. The inspectors are the backbone of the LAA.

What aircraft do you currently own?

I've had G-BRWR, my 65hp 1946 Aeronca Chief, for over 16 years and don't feel any desire to own any other aircraft type. I love it. 'WR was imported to the UK in 1990 by Patrick Peal in Norfolk. It had just been rebuilt in Texas, where it had spent most of its life. Patrick bought it as it was the cheapest aircraft he could find in the US, and the old bloke he bought it off would only accept payment in Silver Eagles!

Patrick has since passed on to me various information he had about the aircraft, for which I am most grateful. Henry Labouchere saw me flying into a Moth Rally at RAF Halton a few years ago and chased me down. He assembled it for Patrick and did the initial flight for the Permit to Fly. Since then it had a couple of other owners, who obviously didn't relish it as I do, before I acquired it in 2000.

A couple of years ago Charlie Cassens of Lake Havasu City in Arizona, contacted me to say that 'WR was owned by his father-in-law in Texas in the 1970s, and he had flown in it. That tallied with information Patrick sent me. Charlie very kindly posted me a manual for the aircraft that contains the drawings for the modified wingtips. Should I ever be out that way, he has offered to fly me over the Grand Canyon in his Beech Bonanza. Lake Havasu is well-known for having the old London Bridge, and it holds a London Bridge Half Marathon event that perhaps I will run one year.

I'm drawn to low-powered simple flying

machines and you're more likely to find me admiring a Luton Minor or a Fred than you are more powerful, capable aircraft. The Aeronca is a simple aircraft and I do most of the maintenance myself, under the watchful eye of Ken. Nevertheless, it is still time-consuming and I sometimes envy those in aircraft groups who not only share the load, but have a lot of fun in doing so. Being stuck in a damp, cold hangar all alone for hours on end, day after day, trying to do jobs that could be done five times quicker with a spare pair of hands, is not much fun.

I've also got another Chief, G-BUTF, which I bought accident damaged and which, one day, I hope to restore to flying condition. Having a business to run, a couple of lovely grandkids, 'WR to maintain and various other interests, hasn't allowed me to get properly started on that project yet. But I will.

What are your total hours and number of types flown?

I haven't flown many aircraft types and all but about 150 of my hours have been on my current aircraft. The rest was on the usual club aircraft such as Cessnas and Pipers.

Before having my current aircraft I flew about 10 hours P1 in a 150hp Super Cub. I've also flown with friends in Jodels and other aircraft.

My hangar-mate, Geoff Graham, has invited me to fly his Tiger Moth but it's too valuable for me and I don't want the responsibility. I fly it from the front cockpit occasionally but don't feel the urge that most seem to feel to want to fly it solo.

I've got about 1,400 hours in my logbook.

Do you have a favourite and worst type flown?

If it flies then it can't be bad! My favourite is my own aeroplane.

I guess the best aircraft I have flown in is Phil Lewis' Stolp Starduster Too, if he still has it. I recall it was like a Ferrari of the skies. Years ago, Phil did offer to check me out on it but again I didn't want that responsibility. A long time ago, I used to fly Grumman AA-5s from Popham and they were superb handling aircraft. I trained on Cessnas but didn't realise how bad their ailerons were until landing a 172 at Popham having flown the AA-5s from there for a while.

What are your best aviation moments?

It's rare that I don't find any flight a bit special. When I first qualified, in 1989, I took my dad for a flight from Blackbushe over Portsmouth harbour in a Cessna 150; he was an ordinary seaman in the Royal Navy in the war and always maintained something of an interest in ships. He was my first passenger, and it was magical for both of us.

Lynda doesn't like flying but she did brave it for a weekend in the Scilly Isles a couple of years ago, and I wish we could repeat that experience. We stayed in the Star Castle hotel, and it was a special trip.

My first channel crossing, soon after acquiring 'WR was memorable. My friend Reg McComish and I, both in our Aeroncas, set off from Headcorn one summer's evening for Abbeville. I almost had tears in my eyes crossing the channel at about 1,500ft as it brought home to me what it must have been like to have been a bomber pilot in the war doing that trip. I met no flak, and had a wonderful weekend with Reg. That I thought we were going to be eaten by lions in the town

centre is another story!

My last flight before writing this was a trip down to Auster-flying friend Andy Aish's strip near Taunton. How can I ever forget racing with him in his classic Ferguson tractors down his strip! The LAA has provided the framework for many special moments.

Have you toured in Europe?

We've had a huge amount of fun in the Aeronca Club in past years with many trips to France and Ireland. We've been joined by non-Aeronca aircraft too, such as Martin Ryan in his Stinson and Geoff Dalton in his Jabiru.

I've got a special buzz from non-stop flying from Cardiff to Calais, Le Touquet to Cardiff, Birr in the centre of Ireland to Cardiff, Cardiff to Andreas in the Isle Man etc. These trips may be routine in RVs etc., but they are special to me because they were undertaken in my old, slow, low-powered Aeronca. They always leave me with a great sense of achievement and an overwhelming appreciation of 'WR.

GPS is a great aid that is appreciated by most, but I hate technology and never fly with it. I guess I've worked with technology all my life and if on a weekend I had to stare at a magenta line on a computer screen I'd have to stop flying. I did once depend on a GPS in 'WR and ended up being coaxed into rotten weather on the way back from Maastricht. The cloud and the ground almost joined but the magenta line tempted me on towards home. "Just get through this bit and I'll see Salisbury cathedral," I thought. I didn't see it, then had no way out and had to land in a field. I justified to myself the use of GPS as it was a business trip, not a jolly!

Do you have any aviation heroes?

John Holden for saying in his *Meet the Members* article what I've always thought but didn't dare to say, "I don't do heroes". But I do admire the characteristics of lots of people in aviation in many ways; Reg McComish and Richard Webber, for example. Despite being well into their 70s they are still flying and rebuilding aircraft, and generally pushing at the boundaries.

Any favourite aviation books?

Not quite aviation but I recently read *Carrying the Fire*, written in 1974 by Apollo 11 astronaut (and test pilot) Michael Collins. It is quite simply the best book I've ever read. All astronauts are special but what these Apollo guys achieved is so almost unbelievable I sometimes think I can't blame the conspiracy theorists for claiming it only happened in a Hollywood studio. I often stare at the moon and contemplate that no one will go there again in my lifetime. They went in 1969.

On one French trip, when stopping at Abbeville, a lovely gentleman by the name of Jacques Noetinger introduced himself and his book *French Skies*. It gives a wonderful account of the remarkable history of aviation in France and is well worth a read.

Any 'hairy' moments and lessons learned?

Landing at Andy Aish's strip last weekend a strong crosswind and landing downhill got my heart racing! The Aeronca Chief is a fantastic aircraft in crosswinds and the landing was ultimately uneventful. I wouldn't like to have flown it in some other aircraft though.

Flying towards the peak of Penylan in the Brecon Beacons, into wind, was slow but



Lovely shot of the Brecon Beacons taken from Alan's Aeronca.

fine until I got too close. The sudden violence scared the living daylights out of me, and it went on and on, and the aircraft seemed somewhat out of control. I then found myself involuntarily in an updraft of greater than 1,500fpm (in an Aeronca!) and shot up to near controlled airspace in very little time. I now have more respect for mountains. Apparently experienced glider peoples use this effect to climb high, but it's not for me, and I wouldn't recommend it to anyone!

What aircraft or vehicles are on your wish list?

I would like to fly an Aeronca C3 and



Indulging in his other passion, motorcycle racing. The Aeronca at Andreas on the Isle of Man during TT week.

something simple like a Luton Minor. I'd also like to sample something beefier like an Antonov AN2 or a Stearman.

Any advice for fellow flyers?

Stick within your budget and fly cheaply, not constantly wishing to do the flying you can't realistically afford. Any flying is expensive but you can have a lot of fun stretching a low budget on lower-cost machinery, particularly if part of a group sharing the aircraft and the costs.

I think that is fundamentally what the LAA has always been about. ■

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