MEET THE CHAIRMAN

Our Meet the Members column this month has something of a twist to it in that the subject is our recently elected new Chairman, Brian Davies. I spent a pleasant couple of hours with Brian at his delightful Sussex home recently, taking a look at his Pioneer 300 project while finding out something about the man and his enthusiasm for flying and the LAA. Here's what he had to say.

I think it's fair to say that most members will consider that you have come to the position of Chairman as something of an unknown quantity, would you agree?

Brian: Yes that's probably true. I still consider myself as something of the new boy and, although I've been an LAA member for about 15 years, I didn't get involved with the board until two years ago. I built a Europa in the early 2000s, it flew in 2007. I then became the Membership Secretary of the Europa Club for about six years and eventually its National Council rep. I wrote to Roger about what I considered were the NC's failings and how I thought it could be improved. As a result I was invited onto the working group that was looking at Strut and Club governance and liability. Long story short, I ended up standing for the board. When Roger stood down, I put myself forward as a contender and here I am!

We know from the announcement in the magazine last month that you come from a successful career in the airline industry. Can you tell us something about your early life and interests in aviation?

Brian: Like many of our members, I was fascinated by aeroplanes as a youngster and built rubber band and control-line models. I also joined the Air Training Corps and fully intended joining the RAF as a pilot. Unfortunately my eyesight wasn't good enough, so instead, being interested in electronics, I looked into the possibility of becoming a radio systems engineer but that too was unlikely to happen within the RAF. I decided to go into civil aviation and managed to get an apprenticeship with BEA at Heathrow. 25 years later I was running its maintenance organisation, 4,000 employees across the globe. I've also worked with BA and British Caledonian, and spent seven very interesting years in Kenya running Kenya Airways. I've also been an independent aviation consultant, but I am now retired and enjoying my involvement with the LAA.

***(Above)* Brian had a few years off following completion of his Europa, but the build bug bit again and he is now well into a Pioneer Hawk**

When did you manage to learn to fly?

Brian: I did a limited amount of glider flying as a Cadet but never soloed. Then, when I started as a sixteen year old with BEA, I had to leave home in Aylesbury and move into digs, so any ideas about learning to fly were completely scuppered. Then I met Donna, my wife, who was born in America and was in the UK for a three-month holiday, having graduated from high school. She never went back! Raising a family alongside a fairly high pressure job meant I didn't get to learn to fly until I was 45; Donna bought me a flying course for my birthday. I learned at Air South in Shoreham in a Cessna 152 and then had some wonderful experiences in their Piper Cub.

Did you consider getting into aircraft ownership at that stage?

Brian: I did but a big job and a big mortgage got in the way. I actually bought my first aircraft, a Rheims Rocket C172, during my period in Kenya. I had been told that it was completely overhauled (how naïve can you get?) and I went down to South Africa to buy it, and then flew it back the 2,000-odd miles to Wilson airport in Nairobi, Kenya without any further checks. The journey was quite eventful but that is another story! Suffice to say, I eventually made it still in one piece.

We had some great flying in the Rheims Rocket. It was a perfect aircraft for bush flying at high density altitudes. The Aero Club of East Africa was very active and regularly ran precision navigation competitions. As you can probably imagine, roads, rivers and railways are in pretty short supply in that part of the world, so you had to rely on contour features. Donna has always been a keen flyer and she would help spot the photographed locations and mark up the chart. It certainly taught me about accurate dead reckoning navigation. This was all pre-GPS, of course.

It seems a little odd now but the first time I discovered that you could build your own aircraft was during my stint in Kenya where I came across a chap building a Europa at Wilson Airport. If you think we have tough rules for homebuilding, can you imagine what he went through with the Kenyan Civil Aviation Authority?

Did the idea of building strike an immediate chord with you?

Brian: Oh yes, absolutely it did. When I was about 20 I got involved with some local lads in Aylesbury who were building and racing karts. In those days you designed and built the things yourself, and that was what interested me, I never actually raced, but I served a 'second apprenticeship' in designing and building racing cars. We moved on from karts to Minis and, all being somewhat impecunious, we continued to design and make our own parts, which included things like having alloy blocks cast and even designing and building a complete engine based around a Hillman Imp head and a Mini gearbox. We were very successful, winning the Special Saloon Car national championship four years in a row.

We eventually moved into a sports car series with our own designed and built car and, believe it or not, we're are still going strong! None of us, including our driver, is under 70 but we are still regular podium finishers. The competition, many 50 years our junior, think we're raving mad because nobody builds their own car these days, but we continue to have a lot of fun developing it and staying competitive.

The idea of being able to build an aircraft was quite natural to me and when I came back home from Kenya, I decided to build a Europa. It was one of the first XS versions and I built it as a Monowheel. I was based at Dunsfold at the time and it was a bit of a beast on hard runways, I knew it was only a matter of time before it would bite me, so after around 20 hours I converted it to tricycle undercarriage. I'm now based at Slinfold, right on the southern edge of the Gatwick zone and only five minutes up the road, so I'm able to go flying whenever the fancy takes me.

After a few years the build bug took hold again and I decided to build the Alpi Pioneer Hawk, my only regret is that I really wanted to do more of the woodwork but it comes with virtually all of it already completed. Don't ask which aircraft I'll keep, I'll cross that bridge when I get to it!

I guess nobody takes on the role of LAA Chairman without some pretty well defined ideas on what they see as the issues that need addressing, and the direction in which the Association needs to be taken.

Brian: Of course. I'm an advocate of transparency; I put my cards on the table from the outset so nobody is in any doubt where we are headed. Our members have every right to know what is going on, they own this Association. Phil has made a great start with his annual report and in his regular visits to the Clubs and Struts. You will see from Graham Newby's NC Chairman 'Chat', on page 5, that we are serious about not only supporting the Struts and Clubs, but enabling every single member to engage with a far more active National Council that can make things happen.

There's no doubting the fact that we are going through a period of quite massive change in the way GA is handled in the UK, and indeed Europe. The gloves are off and we will be facing some real competition in the years ahead, not only from a less rigidly ordered C of A world, but potentially from others who want a piece of the Permit to Fly action. Put simply, we have to up our game.

There's a lot that is right with the LAA and we have some very good people working for us, but in this changing environment we have to be proactive and move with the times. Our members are our customers, and our shareholders, and our job is to give them the level of service they demand; service expectations within today's society are far higher than in the past. We have to enable our members to meet their aspirations; they will not accept unreasonable delays in service delivery and we should not be rationing innovation – we should be encouraging it.

Brian (far right) and his pals have been building and racing cars for 50 years, this is their current 2000cc sports car. Whilst at Brian's home, I noticed the rear wing receiving some repair work on his dining room table – the mark of a dyed-in-the-wool homebuilder!

I mentioned my time at BEA earlier. That company was once in an unassailable position in the short-haul business, it was inconceivable that anybody could pose a threat to its well-being. The industry underwent regulatory change and today EasyJet and Ryanair rule the short haul roost. BEA is no more, it was swallowed up by BA, whose own short-haul operation is but a shadow of that of its main competitors. We fail to learn such lessons at our peril.

And finally I believe as an organisation we have become too risk averse. Aviation by its very nature carries risk but it is our job to manage that risk and allow our members to continue to enjoy their sport. Risk also means taking our opportunities within the business. We spend about half a million pounds on the Engineering side but precious little on the non-aircraft owning members, other than the magazine. There have to be opportunities to expand our offering, we have sufficient reserves to fund new proposals and we should actively do so.

You've pulled no punches there Brian. What timescales have you put on these changes? When will we see a real difference in the way the Association is managed?

Brian: Phil mentions in his column this month that we are planning to change some of the ways we cost Engineering services, mods being one of those areas. If we are going to ask some members to pay more for a service then we must deliver that service in a fast and efficient way. We have a huge backlog of Mod applications and we must clear that first. I am determined that we will do that well within the next six months.

If we are going to achieve a step change in our levels of customer service, we will need to review almost everything we do. Our HQ staff will need help from our members as volunteers and help from the Board in providing the resources and training to achieve that change. Measurable change should be possible over the next 12 months. Phil has the full support of the Board and I will be working closely with him to achieve the changes that we need.

Thank you Brian. Many of us feel we now have what in football they call the 'dream team' with our new CEO and Chairman. There is a tangible vibe that we enter this new period of LAA history in fine shape thanks to Roger Hopkinson's works on governance and representation, and it is now time for better engagement with the grass roots. I wish you the very best in that challenge. ■

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