

FROM THE STAGE TO THE SKIES

This month we meet Chris Harrison, a theatre acrobat turned RAF and commercial pilot with a lifelong enthusiasm for the lighter end of aviation

Welcome Chris, can you tell us something about your career?
In my early twenties, I went into the family business of theatre and entertainment, learning all its workings, and I eventually became a performer myself – my cousin and I travelled the country, performing an acrobatic comedy act.

Despite getting a little film work in the process, financial uncertainty led us to dissolve the act and I decided to start studying again, towards a more certain future.

A newspaper advert for the RAF, saying that they were looking for pilots, caught my eye and as someone who's always had a fascination for flying, I tried my luck and was signed up for pilot training, of which I enjoyed every moment. Three years later, I resigned my commission and left the military to become a civilian flying instructor and executive charter pilot.

By severe perseverance I then secured a position as a junior first officer on a Dart Herald with British Midland Airways. Five years later I was promoted to captain on a four-engine turboprop Viscount.

In late 1979 I joined a new jet-based holiday operator, Orion Airways, on Boeing 737-200s, and spent six years gaining experience in the inclusive tour industry. That took me all over the world and I thoroughly enjoyed the work, eventually flying the Boeing 767 as a training captain.

I later became interested in aviation psychology, in particular flying phobias, and undertook a two-year diploma course in Clinical Hypnotherapy at the London School of Clinical Hypnotherapy. That led to me starting a facility using Virtual Reality and a Boeing 747 cabin simulator, together with cognitive behavioral therapy, hypnotherapy and aviation information, all of which I successfully combined to help sufferers. In conjunction with that work, my book, *Beat Your Fear of Flying*, is available from Amazon.

In what, where and when was your first flight?

I had quite a long journey to school, with two changes of bus or one bus and a train. If I took the train I could go to the centre of the city and pass a model shop, which had a window full of kits, including the then-new ones from Revel, which had fantastic illustrations on the boxes. These inspired the imagination of a young schoolboy to one day be in one of those machines, and so the seed was sown...

My first flight was at the age of eight, from Birmingham airport on a DH Rapide, which I remember only cost two-shillings



Chris in his Van's RV-8A, circa 2012 (Photo: Ed Hicks)



The Phoenix Falcon, which Chris designed

and sixpence (12½p) – it was actually a great deal of money at that age!

How did your private flying develop?

Although I pursued a career in aviation, I was always fascinated by both light aircraft and warbirds. I became involved with an aircraft museum at East Midlands airport, which had several very interesting machines, such as the North American F-100 Super Sabre.

I flew the Vickers Varsity in from Coventry, though sadly that was to be its last flight as it was then vandalised and the cost of repairs proved prohibitive.

At the same time, I took an interest in the emerging microlight scene and started a training establishment at Long Marston Airfield near Stratford-upon-Avon. I used the very odd Eagle microlight as it was all that was available at the time. It was a single-seater so students got a day of classroom tuition and were then towed without the engine on behind a Land Rover, with walkie-talkies to communicate. Once they'd mastered simple climbing, descending and then gentle turns, the engine was put on and they carried out the manoeuvres under power.

Over the next five years I designed and built a prototype, three-axis, single-seater called the Phoenix Falcon as a proof-of-concept. It had enough strength to add another seat, and thus overcome the training dilemma.

During that period the regulations changed, with the involvement of the CAA and type approval requirements, which meant spending money I didn't have. As I was also very busy flying commercially, I sold my interest in the microlight school and concentrated on my work.

After I'd retired, I bought a share in Plane Sailing's Catalina, which is a wonderful aircraft run by a very professional group. Because there are twenty shareholders, mostly pilots who all want to fly, sharing out the display season meant that to be fair to everyone there were only going to be a few flights each.

Any incidental costs and unforeseen maintenance had to be covered financially by the shareholders, which meant an individual extra £5,000 in the first year I joined, for an engine to be sent to the US for a major overhaul. This was on top of the £20,000 share purchase and annual type rating costs, not to mention the fact that Duxford was four-and-a-half hours' drive away and I had to stay in a hotel each time I visited.

I came to the conclusion that I wasn't made of enough financial mettle. The Catalina itself was a great pleasure to fly and encompassed the handling qualities of early machines, in that stick-and-rudder were the order of the day. The cruise speed was 110kts so it meant some time to get anywhere, which was great, as it was all time in the air. I had the privilege of flying an air display in Koksijde, Belgium.

Sadly, I sold my share as I had other financial pressures to attend to at that time and I wish Plane Sailing and all the great people there the very best of luck for the future. If I ever win the lottery I'd buy a serious warplane and keep it filled up with expensive fuel – maybe I should get a lottery ticket!

How many aircraft have you owned?

I've had a few light aircraft over the years. I had a share in a Rans S4 single-seater,



Chris's RV-8A with an RV-8 for an LA Flight Test, in spring 2012
(Photo: Ed Hicks)



Chris found it "easy to feel vulnerable" in his Colomban Cri-Cri



Having sold on his Van's RV-12, Chris is "in between" aircraft



The Evans VP-1 is "definitely a summer machine," says Chris

MEET THE MEMBERS

which was a lot of fun to fly. However, it had an unreliable engine and my colleagues did experience several incidents which made us come to the conclusion to sell it.

We then bought a Whittaker MW5 two-seat microlight, which didn't perform as well as the little Rans and, again, had a two-stroke engine. Eventually, it too was sold.

A couple of years later, I purchased a half-built Evans VP-1. There's an old saying, 'eighty per cent complete and eighty per cent yet to do', which was certainly true with that machine. I had to completely rebuild the 1600cc VW engine and replaced the magnetos with a Leburg ignition system, which worked beautifully. I rebuilt the rudder, fitted instruments, fabric-covered and painted it, and then took it to Dunkeswell in mid-December.

The Evans having an exposed cockpit, even at 60kts, the chill factor was maybe -20c – it's definitely a summer machine! I also now understand why most VP-1 owners use the bigger VW engine – it's a very draggy aircraft and needs a lot of power to get anywhere!

By that time I'd started building a Van's RV-8A. The nosewheel was a difficult choice but I made it based on aesthetics alone. It took five years to do the quick-build version and the kit was a really good product.

I completed the test flying and then flew over to Crowfield in Essex to see Stan Hodgkins, who'd completed the RV-8 spin trials for the LAA. We did all the required spin trials at different Cs of G up to four turns and recoveries. What a beautiful aerobatic machine it is – I kept it for five years, enjoyed its speed and versatility, and even did some air racing in it.

Just before I sold the RV, I bought a Colombari Cri-Cri project, which was again in the eighty per cent complete and eighty per cent yet to do category. I eventually finished it and completed the test flying. Being a very small aeroplane it's easy to feel vulnerable, especially when conducting stalls, as you're sitting on it rather than in it.

Eventually, I sold the Cri-Cri and bought a Van's RV-12, which was a very nice machine. It had one previous builder/owner who'd done a nice job, and a very sophisticated autopilot. However, after the RV-8A it didn't go fast and after a year or so, Rob Masters, who incidentally had just sold the same RV-8A that I'd flogged to someone else previously,

“It's true that 'there are old pilots and bold pilots but no old and bold pilots' – well, okay, there's maybe the odd one!”

wanted to buy the RV-12 and approached me to see if I'd sell it. So, at this precise moment I'm in between light aircraft!

How has the LAA helped you?

The most important thing about the LAA is the wealth of technical knowledge available, plus its input with the governing bodies in aviation and the negotiations, on all of our behalves, to improve and expand our profile. LAA is a great read and a good source of information too.

Any aviation books you can recommend?

Anything by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry – try *Wind, Sand and Stars*. Also Ernest K Gann's *The High and the Mighty*. For a story with real balls, read *Jet Age: True Tales of the Air Since 1945* by Robert Jackson.

Do you have a favourite and worst type flown?

The best-handling General Aviation machines, without doubt, have to be any Van's aircraft, and the worst the Evans VP-1. The 'Veep' has been a very popular and inexpensive aircraft to build but it's extremely draggy and very cold in the winter!

Of the big machines, the Boeing 767-300ER was a nice machine that had a big cockpit with enough room to hold a small party in! It also had tremendous range – I did a delivery flight from Brunei to Amsterdam direct which took 14.25hr, into the jet streams all the way, but we still had enough fuel remaining to continue on to Shannon if we'd needed. The 737 was a short-to-medium-haul workhorse but it got pretty cold along your arm and shoulder at night, as the metal surrounding the inside

of the windows became covered in ice after a few hours at 37,000ft.

Do you have a best aviation moment or flight?

That's difficult to answer as there have been so many of them, but I guess any one which took me to a new place that I'd never been to before. Back in 1989, there was a pilot strike in Australia and the company that I worked for was seconded to provide a 737 and crew to operate Australian Airlines' routes up and down the east coast. The flight down was interesting – there were a few of us who took it in turns to fly the different sectors, and I did the first and last sectors, Cardiff to Larnaca in Cyprus, and Darwin to Melbourne.

Who are your aviation heroes?

My earliest hero, unbeknown at the time, was Air Vice Marshal Eric Plumtree, who was instrumental in my flying career with the RAF.

Much later in life, a colleague and boss was Captain Patrick Farrell, who was a man of consideration and understanding, and for whom I had the greatest of respect. He was a BA training captain who, after retirement, joined Inter European Airways as Boeing 757 fleet manager. A man of inscrutable principal, he remains a friend who I occasionally call up to have a chat and is now in his eighties.

Do you have non-aviation hobbies?

I'm a builder and developer who gets his hands dirty with cement and bricks – I love to see things being created. As mentioned earlier, I've also authored a book, and plan another, telling my life story.

Any advice for fellow pilots?

You never ever stop learning – each and every flight gives you something new to consider. It's true that 'there are old pilots and bold pilots but no old and bold pilots' – well, okay, there's maybe the odd one!

I've done many biennial re-validations for pilots and one of the things I see regularly is that very few have actually practiced stalling. Once in a while I'd recommend gaining sufficient height to practise stalling in different configurations, you'll then get to know your safe margins. Also, practice more forced landings and never, ever try to stretch a glide. Sadly, I know people who have tried and are no longer with us. ■

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