

MEET THE MEMBERS



This month we talk to Chris Thompson, the LAA Coach and Test Pilot, who's also captain of Popham's Antonov An-2

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

I always had an interest in engineering and, when I was about ten or eleven, I used to be able to service our Austin Seven Ruby in the street outside our house.

Upon leaving school, my Father got me a job at Farnborough, working on high-vacuum liquid fuel tank insulation. It was okay but I soon found out that I wouldn't get anywhere in life without lots of pieces of paper 'after my name'.

I then had several jobs – in the days when you could get one almost anywhere – before joining IBM, with whom I eventually travelled the world as an engineer, ending up at Greenock and taking early retirement at the age of fifty, after thirty years' service.

Subsequent to that, my wife says I've managed to "just play with aeroplanes..."

What started your interest in aviation?

As a child, my Father helped me make balsa wood aircraft. We could never afford engines, Jetex or radio control, so my models were always wind-up, elastic-powered and hand-launched. This frequently resulted in rescuing them from trees on Wandsworth Common, but it did teach me a lot about trim!

(Above) Chris demonstrates and provides passenger flights in the Antonov An-2, HA-MKF, which is on the Hungarian register and operates from Popham with The Antonov An-2 Club Ltd. www.an2club.info

I've always hung around airfields and aeroplanes and, somehow, luckily always managed to be in the right place at the right time to move into something new.

How did you do educationally?

I went to school in London and left with only a couple of 'A' Levels and a poor HNC in Applied Physics – I never did see the point in learning stuff that I thought I was never going to use. Engineering-wise, I've only really been self-taught.

In what, where and when was your first flight?

It was with IBM, I must have been about 23 and had never flown before. I was asked to go to Trinidad for about five weeks to do a computer installation – they had glowing valves in those days – and the flight was on a BOAC Vickers VC10.

Where did you learn to fly?

Working for IBM, I visited Austin, Texas,

many times. Every weekend when I was there, I used to hang around the local airfields.

Several of my American compatriots were PPLs and one was a flying instructor who owned a Piper PA-28RT Arrow and a PA-12 Super Cruiser. He advised me to get a logbook and record the odd flights we made together as they'd all eventually count as total time. I still couldn't afford to actually justify paying for a PPL myself.

As time went on, IBM sent me on assignment to work in Brussels for four years, again with frequent trips to the US. That was followed by a three-year assignment in Austin, where I decided that if I didn't learn to fly then, at American rates, I'd never be able to do it. I started my course at Austin Executive Airpark (K3R3) in a PA-38 Tomahawk and went solo in just under eight hours.

One day, the PA-38 wouldn't start and I switched to a PA-28 and continued with that to the GFT. Neither K3R3 nor the old KAUS exist now, they're all houses, and the new KAUS is now Austin International, on what was the old Bergstrom Air Force Base.

Returning home, I obtained a UK licence and subsequently added an IMC rating. On further US visits I obtained my MEP (multi-engine piston) on what we called 'a loose formation of Piper parts', an aged PA-23 Apache with



(Left) This Auster, G-ARLG, was Chris's second group-share and marked his move onto vintage taildraggers.

(Above) Chris's first venture into ownership was this PA-28, which "four of us 'rescued' and tidied-up when the flying club increased the hire rate on their AAF. How naive we all were!"



Dave Bishop's Mk 26 Spitfire replica, one of Chris' favourite aircraft, which is almost ready to fly again after some undercarriage mods.

two 150hp engines running on mogas in the Florida heat. The only way that aircraft flew on one engine was down!

I also hold a Hungarian licence to fly the Antonov An-2, including a Display Authorisation, a Parachute Pilot licence, and an AGCS (Air/Ground Communication Service) licence. I also do the radio at Popham and other events/shows, if required.

How did you hear about the LAA?

Expanding my flying to as many airfields as possible resulted in attending one of the rallies at Cranfield, where I joined what was then the PFA. The LAA has helped all along, as I've owned quite a few types.

My first group aircraft was a Piper PA-28-140 which was standing – rather sadly – on a farm strip. Four of us purchased it and cleaned it up to save money because our local flight school put their AA5 rental prices up to £25 per hour and we thought that buying the Piper would mean we could fly for less!

I then owned a share in an Auster, G-ARLG, and a Piper Turbo Arrow, G-BNVT. After that, I've solely owned a Cri-Cri, G-SHOG, and a Pietyenpol G-CCKR.

My current 'money drain' is a lovely 1947 Luscombe 8F, G-BRDJ, which I half-share with the captain of a Virgin Airbus A330.

How many types have you flown and how many hours do you have?

If I count all variations of Cessna and Piper, etc, I think it comes out to about 160 types. If you just group all Cessna C172, Piper PA-28, etc, it must still be over 100, including many LAA types. I recently passed the 2,500-hour mark.

What's your favourite and least favourite type?

My favourites are fairly simple to answer, the Mk 26 Spitfire, the Cri-Cri and displaying 'Big Bird', the Antonov An-2. The worst type would probably be the Cassutt Special racer or War Aircraft Replicas' Focke-Wulf 190, as landing either of these always seemed to be more like a semi-controlled crash!

As a coach with the LAA Pilot Coaching Scheme, what do you feel it offers members?

I believe that it offers the opportunity to fly with coaches who have a wealth of experience in GA and LAA types. Differences Training on tailwheel, CS propeller and retractable is available, and many coaches are experienced with farm strip operations, where not everything is always as straightforward as it may initially appear to be.

It's also very cost-effective. Keeping up ratings can be an expensive business, so I try to charge a realistic amount. Bear in mind,

the 'one-hour biennial flight' (BFR) takes about three hours, once you count preparation, the briefing, the actual time in the air and a debrief. I generally charge the LAA rate of £25, plus the £10 that goes to the Association, regardless of how long we spend talking.

On top of that, a great deal of my free time is spent answering emails and discussing problems that LAA members have.

What do you concentrate on with the biennial?

Primarily, I try to address any areas of concern that the pilot may have and tell them to treat the BFR as a fun flight and certainly not a 'test'.

There's also a great deal of emphasis on infringements and the use of tablets while flying these days, so I may just add a small unexpected workload to a flight because that's where things tend to go astray. Can you reset a touchscreen while flying, and maybe change the little magenta line you prepared at home to go somewhere else?

What's been your best aviation moment?

I'm really lucky to have had many. I've shared several long ferry flights with a good friend of mine, including a C172 across the Atlantic, a Beechcraft Duchess on the same route, and a Britten-Norman BN-2 Islander from Bembridge to Yao (Osaka) in Japan.

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(Above) Chris's first sole ownership was this Cri-Cri, G-SHOG, seen here at London City Airport.

(Left) He also owned a Pietenpol Air Camper, G-CCKR, another delightful vintage type.

(Below) The WAR Focke-Wulf 190 at Popham. "Landing always seemed more of a controlled crash," says Chris.



The latter took ten days and there are many stories to tell about that one. Flying my Cri-Cri into London City Air Show many years ago was also interesting.

Being allowed to be an LAA Coach and also doing the LAA Test Pilot course I consider an honour. Overall, there was nothing quite like flight-testing Dave Bishop's Spitfire Mk 26 as it's the closest I'll ever get to fly the real thing. On a summer's evening, cruising along Gosport seafront at 160kt and 1,000ft, and knowing that all the people down there watching from the beach really don't realise that it isn't the real thing – magic!

What's the An-2 like to fly?

The An-2 is a big baby. She weighs in at 5,600kg, which is just below the PPL maximum weight limit, and you obviously need some Differences Training because she's tailwheel (locking), CS propeller and has a supercharged, 1,000hp engine. Because I had all of these 'differences', my check-out was with Laszlo, our Chief Pilot from Hungary, who was at Popham to do our air test.

I'd already had a couple of very short flights, just to see what the An-2 was like, and as he spoke a little English, Laszlo said to me, "You check out on this, you get free flying".

That was too tempting to pass up and, with the wind straight down Popham's R21, I did three 'stop/go' circuits. On the final one, Laszlo said to me, "You okay, you no kill yourself!" – and that was it!

The An-2 is very light in pitch but extremely heavy in roll – a seven-minute display on a hot day takes a lot of effort. We do take up PPLs and let them fly in the right-hand seat – provided that you have a full SEP, you can log the time, as two of us are CRIs. Everyone who's done that comes back down with a huge smile on their face.

How do you operate the An-2 as regards flights and the CAA allowing passengers?

We operate fully Hungarian but under the CAA, allowing us to offer non-profit flights in interesting or historic aircraft. Flights in HA-MKF are private club flights, restricted to the membership and operated by The Antonov An-2 Club Ltd (the Club). That fully complies with the relevant regulations set down by the UK and Hungarian Civil Aviation Authorities.

The Antonov An-2 is registered in Hungary and has a Certificate of Airworthiness for

"We finished upside down and half-buried in the soft ground"

'non-profit flights and parachute jumping', issued by the Hungarian Civil Aviation Administration, in accordance with the Convention of International Civil Aviation, signed at Chicago on 7 December, 1944.

As an historic aircraft, it isn't required to meet the requirements of the European Aviation Safety Agency (EASA).

Do you have any aviation heroes?

No-one special but I take my hat off to any of the world's test pilots who venture 'where no man has gone before'.

How about 'hairy' aviation moments?

A few! I was given a rear-seat ride in a Harvard and the pilot crashed badly on landing at a private strip. We finished upside-down and half buried in the soft ground. I walked away with some very minor scratches but the pilot unfortunately didn't survive.

I've had three separate engine failures and put the aircraft into fields without damage on each occasion, so I guess that I must be on borrowed time! The first was in a Thruster Microlight when the engine just quit at 1,000ft, without any warning. The pilot – I was a passenger – yelled "Can you handle this?" and I replied, "I guess I'll have to!" As Thrusters glide like the proverbial brick, the only option was to land downwind in the field immediately below. We restarted the engine, tested everything and flew out of the field again.

The second was in my PA-28-140, coming back from Guernsey. We were about fifteen miles short of the Needles at 3,000ft, just below the Airway. There was a loud bang and then terrible vibration. A mayday to Southampton resulted in the Sea King being launched from Lee-on-Solent, as my original estimate was that we would be in the sea before the Needles. I limped along, gradually losing height, but made it over the Needles cliffs and landed in a wheat field near Yarmouth.

The Sea King arrived after I had stopped. We were promptly arrested by the Police because Customs had informed them we'd arrived at a non-approved site without a Gen Dec – you couldn't make it up! The problem was that a rocker shaft had let go, causing the engine to run with one cylinder with both valves shut.

The third engine failure was delivering a Piper Cub with a wing tank. I departed 'full', with plenty of fuel for the trip back to Popham. When half-way, I switched to the wing tank, only to find that it wouldn't feed. Watching the 'cork-on-a-wire' gradually go down, I flew from field-to-field and the engine eventually ran out over a large field near Alton.

After an uneventful landing, I was telephoning Popham to say that everything was okay, when I noticed that the cork-on-a-wire float was steadily rising in the main tank. There was obviously some airlock that the landing had sorted! I just started the engine again and flew out of the field, back to base! It turned out that the air vent to the wing tank was fitted backwards and the resultant suction was enough to stop the feed – as soon as there was no airflow it fed beautifully. The main lesson learned from that one was 'never assume'!

What's on your wish list?

Like several other people who have been interviewed for *Meet the Members*, I'd love to fly a dH Rapide and a DC3. The ultimate PFL, in a space shuttle, also appeals to me.

Do you have hobbies or interests outside of aviation?

I still follow football – Crystal Palace – don't laugh, as they were nearest to where we lived in the old days. I also follow Formula 1 and I'm intrigued by the minute technical detail involved to gain thousandths of a second off a lap time.

Would you recommend any aviation books?

I'm not a great book reader, only when I'm on a long-haul commercial flight. Of course, I always read *LA* in detail every month.

Have you any advice for fellow pilots?

Yes. Use your LAA Coaches as they have a wealth of experience on many types and can certainly 'wear the T-shirt', one with the slogan 'Been there and done that!' Your BFR flight is NOT a test and should be a fun flight to explore and learn something. ■

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