



Man on a mission...

This month we talk to **Darren Lewington**, former Operations Director of Gloucester Airport. He's also a pilot, aircraft owner, businessman and holds, what some may consider, controversial views on controlled airspace...

Welcome Darren, can you tell us about your career?

I left school after A-levels expecting to become a commercial pilot but, somewhat by accident, found myself working as a trainee assistant in ATC at Southend Airport. A couple of years later, the company sponsored my initial controller training before making me redundant a few days after I validated my 'Tower' rating because they lost the contract to provide ATC services at the airport. With the ink still wet on my controller's licence, I wrote to every ATC unit in the country and Staverton looked favourably on my application, the boss there being an ex-Southend controller himself. I thought it would be a stepping stone to bigger and better things in the world of ATC but very quickly fell in love with a great part of the country and a thriving hub of general aviation. I completed my ATC training there, eventually becoming the Senior Air Controller, then a number of management roles and finally Operations Director. I left the airport after 24 years in January 2018 to run my own business, Aerotiques.

Main Darren Lewington (left) with business partner Daren Hales at last year's LAA Rally with their Stearman wing table and other Aerotiques productions.

Why aviation, what sparked your interest?

I grew up in Southend-on-Sea, Essex and for as long as I can remember, aircraft played a part in my life. There are old family pictures of me pointing at the sky as a toddler and sitting in a full-size Hawk mock-up cockpit at the seafront carnival as a kid. My dad was an engineer working for Aviation Traders, and our Sunday morning routine was to visit the Historic Aircraft Museum at the airport. The first exhibit in the display hall was a Hawker Sea Fury, I remember its mighty propeller towering above me and the drip tray underneath still collecting the odd drip of oil from the long-seized Centaurus. The museum trips were actually a ruse for dad to meet his workmates for a Sunday lunchtime pint at the airport's 'Flarepath' club, while I stood at the fence watching the Carvairs, Viscounts and Heralds with my packet of crisps and a bottle of pop.

In what, where and when was your first flight?

It was a pleasure trip from Clacton in Cessna 172, G-AWUW, during a family holiday sometime in the late 1970s. We were staying in a holiday home nearby and drove past the sign offering rides at the airfield every day. I pestered my parents until they gave in! I couldn't



“Flying the last surviving Dambuster, George ‘Johnny’ Johnson, in preparation for Project Propeller was such a privilege”

see anything at all out of the front of the aircraft as the coaming was too high, but I vividly remember the fuel gauge looking a bit low and seeing the killer whales in the pool on Clacton Pier.

Where did you do your flight training?

I learned at Gloucester using Archer Flight Training and Cotswold Aero Club aircraft with a kind and generous friend instructing me free of charge. Having been a controller for several years by then, I was massively ahead of the game in knowing all the theory and RT.

I did my first solo on a lunch break and went back to work in the Tower that afternoon with a huge grin on my face. Everyone got straight-in approaches that afternoon!

How many types and hours have you flown?

I bought an RV-8 share last summer, giving me a grand total of 17 different types with 'stick time' in the logbook and a total of 330 hours. They range from Tiger Moth, Stampe, Jet Provost and Spitfire at the vintage and exotic end to all the usual Piper spam cans, including the Tomahawk I first soloed on. There are a couple of hours on R-22's too – rotary is definitely on the bucket

Top Darren flying Dambusters hero Johnny Johnson for a Project Propeller event.

list. This doesn't tell the full story though. I've been exceptionally lucky in my flying career and managed to blag oodles of passenger hours, along with jump seat and 'P2' trips in corporate jets, airliners and some incredible vintage aircraft. Quite unexpectedly this included a ride in the very same Sea Fury from the Southend museum that inspired me years before.

What aircraft do you currently own?

I have shares in a Wag-Aero Cuby and an RV-8. There's close on a 100kt differential in cruising speeds but both are great fun.

Do you have a favourite and worse type?

Everything you hear about flying a Spitfire is true – sublime handling and looking out over that iconic wing shape over the English Channel is something I'll never forget. A few hours on an Avid Flyer that seemed to constantly want to turn itself inside out were very much the other end of the spectrum from a handling perspective, but I can't say I didn't enjoy it.

What has been your best aviation moment?

Flying the last surviving Dambuster, George 'Johnny'

Johnson, in preparation for Project Propeller was such a privilege. Turning final and looking right, knowing the nonagenarian had survived the Nazi onslaught and most dangerous bombing raid in history 'focusses the mind' somewhat. Thankfully, the resultant landing was survivable too.

As for my best flight, it's really, really difficult to choose. Being airborne in 'my' Sea Fury, which played such a key part in my lifelong obsession with aviation, was a highlight, but days out with my daughter in the Cuby when she was little, and air-to-air photoshoots with the Vulcan and other exotica bring back special memories, too.

How did you hear about the LAA?

As a teenage aircraft spotter, I attended the PFA Rallies back in the Cranfield days. I have been a member on and off since 1998, when I first owned a Permit aeroplane share.

How has the LAA helped you?

Permit group ownership provides interesting and very affordable flying. And this year, a highly efficient same day permit renewal enabled me to attend the Brize Families Day in the Cuby – thanks team!

What fundamental changes were there in ATC during your career?

Gloucester remains the UK's busiest GA airfield, but it handles about 15-20,000 fewer movements per year than it did when I started. Despite the apparent perception, there's actually far less controlled airspace around than there was back then too. That said, Leavesden, Hatfield, West Malling, Panshanger, Ipswich, Plymouth, Manston, Hucknall, Woodford and Filton were all still open then, too.

Sadly, I think the standard of airmanship has declined dramatically. RT in particular, has been poorly taught now for a couple of decades and a sizeable proportion of pilots now don't have the confidence or basic ability to get the best from Air Traffic Services around the country. This has, in my opinion, added to the 'us and them' attitude that currently seems to prevail.

I know this won't be a widely held view among the membership, but I despair when I hear the words 'airspace grab' and I strongly and fundamentally

disagree with the GA governing bodies' 'pitchfork mentality' stance of objecting to all and any controlled airspace proposal. In more than 20 years of flying, I've never been refused a zone transit. There isn't some special code word that I use on the radio, I just know how to use the services available and my RT is good enough to communicate in what is just a slightly technical language with aviation professionals, many of whom actually enjoy recreational flying like us.

There are, of course, a handful of you reading this that choose to bumble around in aeroplanes with no radio or electrical system and I appreciate that CAS can impinge on your ability to go in straight lines on rare occasions but, let's face it, you're very much in the minority these days.

The Air Traffic system in the UK is far from perfect. It can be confusing, overly complex and there are some chunks of Class D that are poorly managed from a VFR perspective, but it isn't anywhere near as bad as some would have you believe and is, for the most part, free to use!

Next time you go flying, draw a straight line on your map or electronic gadget, rather than doglegging around everything and talk to people, it's strangely liberating. Add in the much lower cost options now available to install decent avionics and radios and using air traffic services is easier than it has ever been.

Since leaving the airport, I've also been instructing at the ATC college, Global ATS, which is located there. There's a national shortage of controllers and the training is intense. Readers may be interested to know that the final practical assessments in the Tower and Radar rating examinations still feature circuit training traffic and VFR zone transits. Controllers are taught these from the outset and there's no reason they shouldn't put those skills into action when they validate their licences back at their 'home' units.

Gloucester became the UK's favourite airport – how was this achieved?

There's no secret formula to making a GA airfield successful. As in all walks of life, decent facilities at a fair price with great customer service are all you need to encourage your customers to come back. I always took the viewpoint that, if we could make a few pounds from an aircraft that would contribute to the high fixed costs of running and staffing a seven-day, 13 hour a day

Below left Flying with his daughter in the Cuby. Darren also has a share in an RV-8.

Below right Darren in the The Cuby parked at Brize for a Families Day, thanks to a fast Permit renewal turnaround.





airfield, it was worth doing. That said, some of the GA community – and I'd go as far as saying perhaps more so in LAA circles – still have somewhat unrealistic and blinkered expectations. By thinking, 'I won't go there if the landing fee is more than £5/£10/£20!' is a sure-fire way of contributing to the closure of yet another airfield in the long term. I know as genuine, grass roots flyers, looking to enjoy the hobby for the lowest cost, it goes against the grain to spend money but, with so many of our airfields under threat, we have to use them, or lose them like never before. We seriously could end up ruing the day when we need that lit, tarmac runway and full facility airfield when the weather catches us out or the engine starts playing up.

A good café and something interesting to see like the Jet Age Museum also make Gloucester well-worth a visit. It still serves a broad church and I hope that will continue. You can drive in having never seen an aircraft before in your life and leave as a fully qualified recreational or commercial pilot on anything from a three-axis microlight to a turbine helicopter. In 2018, it was the UK's 10th busiest airport, and for a GA-focussed facility, that's really punching above its weight.

As a customer now, I also benefit from the special LAA Member landing fee rates that I introduced.

The Cheltenham Festival must have been fun and character building sometimes!

The Cheltenham Festival always made for a busy week, but that was generally 'quality' over 'quantity', with the aprons full of shiny jets and corporate aircraft. One of the busiest days I recall occurred on a crystal-clear Sunday in February. The early morning radiation fog quickly dispersed and light winds and unlimited visibility meant everyone wanted to go flying. From around 1000 until sunset just after 1600, we handled 567 flights, including a non-radio Dakota diverting in. The runway utilisation peaked at over 90 movements per hour, that's one landing or take off every 40 seconds.

Do you have any aviation heroes?

I've been privileged to spend time with legends such as Eric 'Winkle' Brown, Geoffrey Wellum, Joy Lofthouse, Mary Ellis and Dambuster, Johnny Johnson. Meeting

Above left Darren has been a great supporter of the Jet Age Museum at Gloucester Airport and is seen here with Eric 'Winkle' Brown on the occasion of its opening in a new building.

Above right Darren in the cockpit of 'his' Sea Fury that he admired as a child when it was displayed in the Southend Aircraft Museum.

and flying the Project Propeller veterans is also an honour. Their achievements and exploits are truly humbling, enabling us to enjoy the freedom of the air we have today.

Gloucester has also helped with charity flying I believe.

Yes, we hosted Project Propeller twice at Gloucester during my time there. Logistically it was a challenge but the smiles on the faces of the veterans made it all worthwhile. I am also chair of trustees at aviation charity fly2help (www.fly2help.org). Flying is a privilege and to be able to share it with people who need something uplifting in their lives on our 'Air Smiles' programmes is very special.

Air Smiles Days offer beneficiaries and their families the chance to literally leave their problems on the ground. The days are based around a flight in a light aircraft and other, behind-the-scenes or fun activities, tailored to the circumstances.

From the very young to the very old, our beneficiaries range from those coping with serious and sometimes terminal illnesses, disability, bereavement or social exclusion. Sometimes it's easy for us as pilots to take what we do for granted, yet flying and airports still hold a mystique for those not closely associated with them and the smiles on the faces of our beneficiaries speak volumes. We're always on the lookout for volunteer pilots, so do look us up!

Our Aim High programme also inspires youngsters to consider aviation careers. It's great to see those 'light bulb moments' when our students find something that really captures their imagination.

Our alumni now include helicopter and airline pilots, engineering apprentices, aeronautical engineering graduates and military officers in training.

I was also fairly heavily involved with fundraising and PR activities whilst serving as a trustee for the all-volunteer, registered charity, The Jet Age Museum.

We managed to raise sufficient funds to build a permanent home for the collection at Staverton,

which opened in 2014. It continues to go from strength to strength, its volunteers achieving local and national awards, accolades and accreditation.

Have you had any concerning aviation moments?

I've genuinely tried to use every flight as a learning opportunity. I've made some unintentional *faux pas*, like leaning the mixture instead of applying carb heat in an unfamiliar type, and some stupid mistakes like taxiing to the fuel bay with the tow bar still attached, but I always try to be disciplined, still use checklists and verbally brief every take off and approach. I still draw a line on a proper map for navigation, although I am also a SkyDemon convert too. I suppose having watched – and in some cases, prevented – many of my ATC 'customers' from doing stupid and occasionally very dangerous things, I've gained a lot of indirect experience.

Do you have any non-aviation interests?

I'm a keen, if non-skilful, runner. Whether the overweight, generally stumbling forward I do could be actually legally be defined as running is a matter of debate, but I've completed four marathons to raise money for fly2help. Even my runs sometimes have an aviation theme though; the 'Meteor Mile' at Staverton and the 'Concorde Canter' 10k run along Filton's disused runway feature aircraft-shaped medals.

Any aviation books you recommend?

First Light, *Chickenhawk*, and *Fate is the Hunter* are the benchmarks by which all aviation books should be measured, and I've lost count of the aviation autobiographies I've read.

What is on your aircraft or vehicles wish list?

The lottery win will, eventually, bring 'my' Sea Fury home from the States, where she was rebuilt to airworthiness.

Tell us something about your new business.

Aerotiques came about almost by chance. There'd

been a derelict Beech Duke at Staverton's fire training ground for years and every time I drove past it, I always made a mental note to remove the one remaining propeller spinner, polish it up and put it in the office.

About three years ago, during one of my occasional airside patrols, I noticed that the spinner had gone. I drove back via the fire station but they were none the wiser as to its whereabouts so I headed to the airport's maintenance section where the site manager told me that Daren (his new recruit to the maintenance team) 'wanted to come and see you about that...' A couple of days later, Daren appeared somewhat sheepishly at my office door clutching a beautifully polished spinner. Rather than the ticking off he was expecting, I told him I was delighted he'd done it as I'd been wanting to for years. He said, "I've got lots more ideas" – and Aerotiques was born!

Three years on, we've both now left Gloucestershire Airport and just moved into new premises on the adjoining business park. Having spent 30 years talking to aeroplanes and answering emails, I now make things for a living and it's very rewarding. Daren is exceptionally talented and has a fantastic eye for design and, for me, making cool and beautiful things from parts of aeroplanes hardly feels like working for a living.

Almost by default, anything aeronautical is going to be sleek and aerodynamic and we thoroughly enjoy re-imagining them into items of form or function.

We've built a varied customer base from private individuals to corporations and our unique product range includes turbine blade key rings for just a few pounds to a feature boardroom table made from a Boeing Stearman wing. We're always on the lookout for scrap parts and open to commissions. If you're flying into Gloucester any time, give us a call and we'll put the kettle on.

Any advice for pilots?

Spend a couple of hours learning the mandatory readback items and standard RT words and phrases, it will make your flying much easier and more enjoyable. ■

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