



JOHN ROMAIN

ENGINEERING AND FLYING THE WARBLDS

This month Neil Wilson visits LAA member John Romain, head of the Aircraft Restoration Company (ARC), to chat about his career in engineering, restoration and flying

Like many a young lad, John's passion for aviation was ignited while watching the film *Battle of Britain*, with the ME109 really catching his eye. Many years later he owns and flies an ME109, painted in the colours in which it appeared in the film... Who said dreams don't come true!

The route that brought him to be the head of a company restoring, maintaining and operating such wonderful machines kicked off in 1976 with an engineering apprenticeship at Hawker Siddeley Dynamics, working on missiles at Hatfield. Whilst there he received a first class grounding in a wide variety of machining, tooling and maintenance skills on sophisticated machinery.

He had already been working at Duxford as a volunteer when in 1981 he took full-time employment, working as an engineer on G-MKIV, the first Bristol Blenheim MK IV rebuild. He remained on that project until it first flew in May 1987, only to see the aircraft written off in an accident just four weeks later.

Since joining the company, John has climbed through the ranks and is now its Managing Director and owner. He is also its chief pilot and has a vast experience on many historic aircraft – he has flown 120 different types, with about 3,800 hours total hours, including more than 500 hours on Spitfires. As a typical test flight may last no more than 20 minutes, that amounts to a considerable number of take-offs



Maintenance being carried out on the beautiful Hawker Nimrod in a spotless hangar (Photo: Neil Wilson)

and landings. It's also led John to agree with former Hawker Siddeley test pilot, Jon Farley, that currency skills are all important when flying any type of aircraft. "It's better to fly little and often than wait for months, then do 30 hours in a short time and not go near an aeroplane for another six months," he said.

APPRENTICESHIP THUMBS UP

Due to his own engineering background, John is a great supporter of apprenticeship schemes, something he feels has been a badly neglected area by industry and successive governments. ARC initiated its own apprenticeship scheme 15 years ago and John is happy that the government has at last

(Right) John Romain with the Blenheim and (main photo) at the controls of this iconic aeroplane (Photos Jarrod Cotter)

realised the benefit to the nation's future productivity by supporting and encouraging such schemes. ARC has a wide remit which includes sourcing aeroplanes for clients which may then join the 60 or so aircraft that the company currently supports with engineering and maintenance services. With a team of 53 people, they can offer expertise on anything from a Tiger or Leopard Moth to a



Meet the Members



The aircraft that started it all, an ME109 (actually a Spanish-built Buchon variant), finished as per the aircraft used in the film *Battle of Britain*
(Photo: Neil Wilson)



A Spitfire fuselage being assembled in a jig at Historic Flying Limited
(Photo: Neil Wilson)

Meet the Members

classic fighter jet. At the time of my visit, I saw Chipmunks, a Mustang, Spitfire, Fennec, ME-109, a beautiful Hawker Nimrod and a Bronco being worked on.

With such an arsenal of types to look after, sourcing original components is not easy, and even if such parts are discovered they may not be in good condition or are time expired, so ARC often machine parts themselves. John says that if they can, they like to keep as much work in-house as possible, as it gives them greater control over timescales. Their modern machinery and equipment gives them the capability of tackling huge restorations such as a Spitfire MK I. As you can imagine, such projects cost significant time and money to build, but who would have thought ten years ago that we would see no less than three of this Spitfire mark flying in Britain?

The Spitfire side of the business is now handled by a second company, Historic Flying Limited, also owned by John, and they work exclusively on restoring Spitfires. Both companies have a close working relationship with the CAA but of late they are also more involved with the LAA as a number of types, Moths and Chipmunks for instance, now fall within our catchment.

UNDERSTANDING THE ORIGINAL

An interesting aspect of working on such a disparate range of types, which John finds particularly interesting, is that when you come to build and (for example) re-skin an old aircraft, you must try and understand the minds of the original designer. Faireys would, for instance, carry out the job in a totally different way to Hawkers or Supermarine. John's team often needs to reverse-engineer a project or part, adding to the challenge and ultimately the understanding of the aeroplanes of that period.

I asked John if he fancied having a go on a four-engined machine. This turned out to be a bit awkward as he was helping with the filming and flying of *Memphis Belle* some years ago, and was due to fly one of the B-17s. He was sitting on-board as an observer on the one that unfortunately crashed on take-off at Binbrook and was burnt out, luckily with no injuries.

I asked him what it is like to fly a powerful, high-performance warbird and he explained that the first time you do it by yourself you are rather apprehensive but it is a wonderful and



The ARC logo gives a good idea of the variety of aircraft they work with

exhilarating experience. A career highlight for him was the opportunity to take Supermarine test pilot and Mew Gull Cape record pilot Alex Henshaw for a flight in the company's two-seat Spitfire.

Of the aircraft he has flown, the most challenging is that early favourite of his, the Messerschmitt ME109 / Hispano Buchon. This is because of the angle that the aircraft sits on its undercarriage in a three-point attitude. It is especially awkward on the ground, but not as bad when flying; in fact, John feels the visibility, which I presumed would be bad due to the framed cockpit, is actually better than the Hawker Hurricane.

John and his team, some still around from the two earlier Blenheim restorations (after the demise of G-MKIV a second example was sourced in Canada and rebuilt as G-BPIV, it

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too suffering a mishap after ten years on the airshow circuit) have been involved in the most recent rebuild. Many of you may have seen that the aircraft flew again last November after 12 years, with John at the controls. What a great feeling that must have been for him to be flying the aircraft after starting out on his first Blenheim project all those years ago. With the 'new' Mk I nose now on the front, it is a wonderful sight to see; look out for it at shows around the country this season. While touching on airshows, John mentioned that most warbird pilots transit at between 1,800 to 2,300ft VFR, the same height as many recreational pilots, so keep a good lookout.

If he had a 'to fly wish list', John says at the top of it would be an original FW-190; as for wanting to restore an aircraft, it would be a Mosquito. He helped with the latter while at Hatfield, as it is close to the de Havilland Aircraft Museum at East Colney.

I asked John if he has any advice for LAA members about flying and maintaining their aircraft, and John responded that knowing the engineering of your aircraft is vital for many reasons. Understand the engine and if you have a problem while airborne, you will have a better chance of knowing what the problem is and how to deal with it. John has experienced engine failures and has always got down safely, mainly due to being prepared. Understanding what is wrong, knowing the glide ratio of the aircraft, keeping the wings level and maintaining the correct speeds are essential and will help in keeping control. This sound knowledge of your aircraft is paramount, no matter if it be an LAA aircraft, a hired club machine or a warbird. Practice forced landings too, you never know when you will wish you had practiced more of them!

The Aircraft Restoration Company continues to go from strength to strength and is currently expanding further with a new hanger about to be built at Duxford to accommodate the recently won maintenance contract for the BBMF Lancaster. This must be every young boy's dream; it's great to see that it has happened to somebody who has such a passion and love for old aeroplanes.

I would like to thank John and his staff for the time they gave me for this interview, and wish them all the best for keeping the memories and heritage of these great aircraft alive. ■

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