

THE MUSIC BOX MAN

This month we talk to Steve Kember, the UK representative for Lambert Aircraft and the owner-builder of the first Mission M108 in the country



Welcome, Steve, can you tell us something about your career? My first job, after graduating from Thames Polytechnic, which is now Greenwich University, was as a Production – and then Design – Engineer for Lucas CAV. The company made diesel fuel injection pumps. In those days, diesel fuel injection was very different – the technology originated in the 1950s and pumps were simply updated for more modern applications.

For the last 30 years I have been a dealer and restorer of mechanical antiques, mostly disc and cylinder musical boxes.

I used to deal in any antiques that interested me and would show me a profit – there were also a few losses! I was naturally drawn to mechanical antiques... old things that did something, which had a function. My father had just bought a cylinder musical box, we took it to a restorer but the way he spoke about it didn't make a lot of sense, from an

engineering perspective. I did some research and found out that they were actually quite complicated – not really difficult, in theory, the skill is in the execution. It's a craft, there's a knack to it. That first restoration took 18 months!

Specialising in a specific field means that you have to search them out, but as I've been in the business a long time, these days, the stock often finds me. Restoration is time consuming but very rewarding – every aspect of the machine is checked and deficiencies rectified.

What started your interest in aviation?

What's not to like? Interesting machines, adventures and great people. Being a pilot is like being a member of a special club, a brotherhood. I've been interested in aeroplanes since I was a small boy, making Airfix models and control-line aeromodelling, endlessly fascinating. Although I understand how aircraft fly – Bernoulli's principle, etc – I'm still astonished they actually get off the ground!

In what, where and when was your first flight?

My first flight was in a Boeing airliner, going on holiday with my parents when I was young. Passengers were allowed to visit the flight deck then. I did and was intrigued by all of the dials – it was spellbinding. Flying during that era was still a special thing, an event. I had to wear my suit, as you did in those days!

The first time I flew in a light aircraft was in a Piper PA-28 from Biggin Hill, with a fellow engineering student who had a PPL – it was magical.

How long have you been in the LAA?

Nearly seven years. I had been to several LAA Rallies, having gained my PPL at Biggin Hill and flown club-type aircraft for a few years. Joining the LAA was the inevitable next step, and owning and flying an aircraft in the Permit to Fly category keeps costs to a minimum. It fits in with the sort of flying that I want to do and the type of aircraft that I want to fly.



MEET THE MEMBERS

(Main) Steve Kember with his Rotax 912iS-powered Lambert Mission M108.

(Left) As a wannabe jet jockey – to fly a JP, he says "you have to know someone first, and then give them lots of money"!

(Below) Steve's day job, restoring mechanical antique music boxes, has been a labour of love for 30 years.

Have you flown many types?

Looking through my logbook, I've counted 22 different types, which makes me sound like a show off. A lot of these, however, could best be described as 'flight experiences' – things like a Harvard and Jet Provost.

My wife bought me a flight in the Harvard at Goodwood as a Christmas present. The process is easy, you just give someone lots of money. The JP was a bit different, you have to know someone first, and then give them lots of money. I flew from Lydd, just for 30 minutes. My total time is about 350 hours.

Do you have a 'favourite' or 'worst' type flown?

'Worst' type is a bit unkind – I like anything that flies, some more than others. The aircraft that gives me the most satisfaction and enjoyment is my Lambert Mission M108, G-STPK.

What is your most memorable aviation moment?

There have been many memorable moments but flying my own aircraft for the first time was pretty special – that was at Wevelgem in Belgium. I built the aircraft via the factory build-assist route. Included in the price is familiarisation training/coaching with a flying instructor. I was glad someone was there to hold my hand and make the first flight a special event, rather than something to worry about.

Another special event was being a passenger in the camera-ship that was taking pictures of my aircraft for a flight review. Filip Lambert was flying my aircraft. That allowed me to view my aircraft in its natural environment – I'd never been flown in formation before. It was an unforgettable day. The weather was perfect and we flew from Goodwood.

The airfield was full of all sorts of exotic aircraft. The place just oozed aviation, and my aircraft was part of it!

What are your hobbies or interests outside of aviation?

Nice food, my work and skiing. As to favourite food, if I answer that question today, it would be different tomorrow – today it's rack of lamb, nice and pink, plus a good claret.

I like going skiing with my wife and daughter. The area around Zermatt takes some beating. We rent a small cabin up a mountain, next to a ski run. It has a huge wood-burning stove and we can step straight out onto the slopes in the morning for the ski down to the village.

How about aviation heroes?

Geoffrey Wellum, Bob Doe and all pilots of their ilk. I once asked Bob Doe to sign a copy of his autobiography, along with about 50 other people, when he gave a talk at a flying club at Biggin Hill. I was about to ask him some technical question about flying WW2 aircraft, but when it came to it I was lost for words – I froze, a first for me.

In the modern era, it would have to be Filip and Steven Lambert, the creators of the Mission M108. Their work ethic and commitment to the project is without parallel. They're determined to produce the best aircraft in its category.

Have you had any 'hairy' aviation moments?

A couple of engine failures, I was not P1 in either of these incidents, both of which ended without damage of injury. It just goes to show that I choose the people I fly with well!



Are there any aircraft or vehicles you'd like to fly or own?

Of course. A De Havilland Rapide, any sort of Spitfire and a Lysander... fat chance though!

The Rapide was built in an era when passenger air travel was very exotic – the aircraft exudes art deco style, it's a beautiful machine. I saw a restored example at Sywell once, and I went weak at the knees. I tried to see if there was any prospect of a flight on a cost-sharing basis. No chance, I think the owner thought I was some sort of CAA stooge trying to catch him out.

The idea of owning an exotic car is also appealing. However, the reality is different – too much rust, usually, which leads to expensive pain. I'll stick to my M108, it's easy and safe to fly, has loads of luggage space and good endurance.

Have you any advice for fellow pilots?

I wouldn't presume to advise the able body of aviators that is the LAA on airmanship, I'm far too modest. I would suggest, however, that the purchase of a Mission M108 is a very wise decision! ■

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