



A PASSION FOR AUSTERS

Neil Wilson talks to Richard Webber,
former West Country farmer and long time
Auster enthusiast

WHAT IS YOUR CURRENT DAY JOB AND PAST CAREER?

Having farmed with my brother in nearby Eggesford for many years, I'm now retired and spend most of my time restoring and rebuilding aircraft, nearly all Austers, at Eggesford airfield. I very much enjoy it, particularly airframe and fabric work. I am self-taught and used the old *PFA Handbook* and *Ceconite* manual as reference works. (Ed's note: the long out of print *LAA Handbook* is now available on a CD, along with a host of other useful reference material, from the *LAA Shop*, price £10.) Both of these proved invaluable. I have also attended a welding course, which I put to good use at times.

I have also spent some time in the USA, helping a friend rebuild a Beech Staggerwing.

Richard with his dog with Beagle Terrier G-ASZX

This has taken about eight years and this year we finally finished it.

WHAT TRIGGERED YOUR INTEREST IN AVIATION?

Seeing aircraft fly over the farm when young made me think it must be lovely to be up there, so the desire to perhaps one day try it for myself was kindled.

WHEN WAS YOUR FIRST FLIGHT AND WHAT WAS IT IN?

At school I was in the Combined Cadet Force.

My very first flight was in an Avro Anson out of RAF Chivonor, but my second was much more memorable as in 1956 we all went to RAF Kinloss and flew in a Shackleton, sitting on wooden benches. The aeroplane was shaking and rattling and was very noisy; the experience got even more alarming as the trainee pilot had to feather two of the engines and we had to turn back. The Shackleton has been described as 10,000-plus rivets all flying together, well it certainly felt like it on that trip!

My first flying lesson had to wait until 1973 when a friend and I went to Exeter and started to take lessons. That was in a Cessna 150.

WHAT WAS YOUR FIRST AIRCRAFT?

I bought an Auster Alpine J5R, G-ANXC, and a Beagle Terrier, G-ASZX, at about the same



Richard also owns Luton Minor G-BRWU which is powered by a J99 Jap boxer twin. It has unfortunately been out of the air for a couple of years but will hopefully be airborne again before too long.



The Chrislea Skyjeep, G-AKVR, which Richard has owned for the past ten years

time. I still own them now, 29 years later. The latter was the first aircraft I ever restored, as I had a bit of a prang and thought I ought to put it right again.

HOW MANY TYPES HAVE YOU FLOWN?

I have flown about 15 types all told, including various marks of Auster, the Chrislea Skyjeep, Piper Cub, Luton Minor (JAP engine), Taylorcraft and Beech Staggerwing. I have about 4,000 hours of which 3,500 are on Austers.

DO YOU HAVE A FAVOURITE AND A WORSE TYPE FLOWN?

As you might guess, my favourite type is the Auster. I really do think they are so versatile, pretty easy to work on and can get in and out of

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small strips (and fields, if needed). The Alpine has the best feel on the ailerons, the MK.9 is a very good touring aeroplane, while the Auster MK.3 is the best out of all of them for me, as it is both the fastest and also the slowest, and can take-off out of a field at only 30kt. It must have been a real asset to the army when in service. I've not had a worse type really, they all offer something different.

WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR BEST AVIATION MOMENT?

I have been lucky to have had quite a few memorable times. Flying back home from Newcastle near Dublin over the Wicklow mountains one day was very picturesque. I also took an Auster AOP.9 with my friend Al Mathie over Badlands National Park in South Dakota one year. We flew a return

MEET THE MEMBERS

trip from New York State to Idaho for a Beech Staggerwing fly-in, taking 65 hours over three weeks on holiday. A great experience with a very colourful landscape, plus incredible rock formations.

YOU SEEM TO ENJOY TOURING – WHERE HAVE YOU VISITED?

Yes, I have flown over and to most of Europe, including Holland, Denmark, Sweden, France, over to Hungary, Czech Republic, Italy and to Elba. We usually camp as the Auster is good for storage and seeing the landscape at a nice pace.

We have also toured most of the UK, as it has so much to offer. Northumberland and Scotland are great, while landing on Barra beach had to be done one year we were away.

ANY 'HAIRY' AVIATION MOMENTS?

Flying over Verdun, our Auster started making a ticking noise. "Must be a plug," we agreed – it seemed to clear when suddenly there was a big bang and the propeller came off and flew over the windshield! The crankshaft had broken at the keyway so we made a hasty but controlled landing in a cornfield. I knew the aeroplane would turn over (which it did) but we had tied everything down before we had left (know your aeroplane) so not even some eggs that we bought that morning were broken. We had a bit of fun with the French Police – paperwork, being separately interviewed etc, but as French fields generally don't have hedges, we got a digger to lift the aeroplane out and we took it nine miles back to the airfield. We then trailered it home. That's when I re-built Zulu X-ray.

ARE THERE ANY PARTICULAR AIRCRAFT YOU HAVE A HANKERING TO OWN OR HAVE A GO IN?

I would like to fly in a Lockheed C-130 Hercules. They come over the airfield now and again on their way to North Devon to take part in the beach exercises etc, and always look impressive when flying past. I think their size and slow speed make a great sight.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU OFFER FELLOW PILOTS?

Get to know your aeroplane as it may well help if you are in trouble. Get a good feel for it and practice your PFLs. I have had to put down in various fields over the years, because of mechanical faults or weather. You never know when you may need to. ■



Richard enjoys a nap alongside his Auster Alpine G-ANXC at the Henstridge Wings and Wheels event earlier this year

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