

WORKING WITH WOOD



This month we talk to Theodore Willford who, with Dave and Rick Bremner, built the superb Bristol Scout replica

Hello Theo, what is your current day job/past career?

I am now retired but for 43 years I worked for the Met Office. I wanted to get into flying originally after school but messed up the interviews for the RAF and BOAC, so I started as a weather observer on the now defunct airfield of Pershore. I was part of the team developing the weather radar network.

After 10 years I transferred into the technical/engineering side of the Met Office. This allowed me to work on airfield met sites, automatic weather sites and for a lot of the time on the offshore and marine weather data gathering sites. I had a great time and career and have seen much of the world and most of the UK.

Why aviation, what started your interest?

Like many others I started by making model aircraft and reading the Biggles books. It is probably true to say that the building of aircraft is still more important to me than flying them.

In what, where and when was your first flight?

It was in a T49 Capstan glider on the Long Mynd. I was really lucky because the conditions were excellent that day and we were up for well over an hour. After that I was hooked. I learnt as part of The Outward Bound Trust, which was a scheme to get youngsters in to flying. This would have been in the early 1970s, I then went onto hang gliding and later still, three-axis microlights.

(Main) Flying the Bristol Scout, for which Theo completed most of the woodwork.

How many types have you flown and what are your total hours?

I have around 20 different types, a mixture of gliders, hang gliders, microlights and light aircraft. However, my total flying time is only around 350 hours, so I am a jack of all trades and a master of none. On the other hand I have spent probably several thousand hours building various types of aeroplanes.

Do you have a favourite and worse type flown?

The favourite would be the Pirat glider. I did my longest flight (6.5hr) and other very enjoyable flights in this machine.

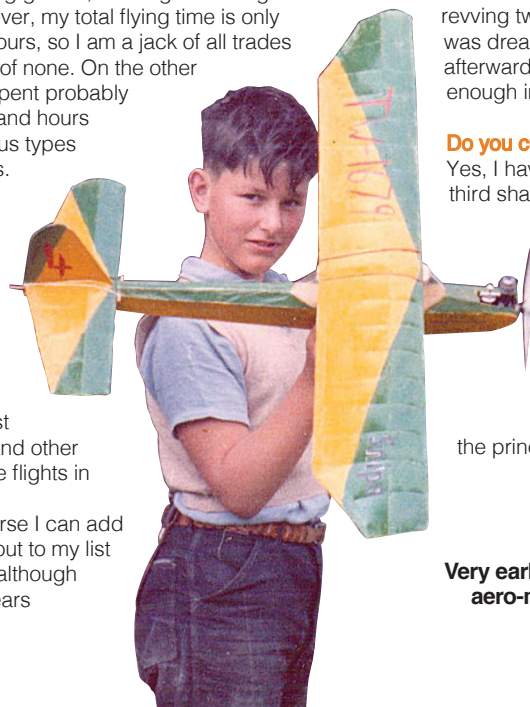
Now of course I can add the Bristol Scout to my list of favourites, although after all the years

working on it, when I had finished my first flight, it was more relief that I had got it down safely. It is real 'seat of your pants flying' as you feel your way with the aeroplane all of the way.

The worst type was the Quicksilver microlight. This was controlled by having the stick connected to the rudder, using the secondary effect to turn it. Also the propeller was direct driven through a high revving two-stroke engine. The noise was dreadful. I was deaf for days afterwards. One flight was more than enough in this awful aircraft.

Do you currently own an aircraft?

Yes, I have a Kitfox Mk3 and a third share in the Bristol Scout with David and Rick Bremner. Funnily enough, all three of us feel that the Scout is not that far removed from the Kitfox when it comes to flying the aeroplane, especially being a taildragger. All the principles are very near the



Very early days: Theo was a keen aero-modeller and Biggles fan.

MEET THE MEMBERS

Theo with his latest project, a Corby Starlet.



(Right:) Hang gliding at Parlick Fell in Lancashire in 1987.



same. The ailerons on the Scout for instance are very effective and controllable, right down to the ground.

What have been your best aviation moment and flight?

My best moments in the air have all been as a passenger. My job at times meant flying by helicopter over the north of Scotland and at times the views were spectacular. Also, when I was posted to the Falkland Islands, I had several flights on the flight deck of a Hercules. One took me down to South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands and though only seen from the air, the views again were unforgettable.

On another trip we had to pretend to be an attacking aircraft during an exercise. So flying up valleys and round hills before attacking the control tower at Mount Pleasant, all at as low a height as the Hercules would go, is something I will never forget.

Seeing Gene DeMarco take-off for the Scout's first flight at Bicester was great, and seeing him perform a fantastic smooth landing was even better! Being part of the team that built the Scout with such a family connection for both David and Rick (it was their grandad who originally flew it in the Great War) made the whole project and flight so much more exciting to be involved with. Even better, to see the aircraft completed and ultimately watch it fly.

How did you get involved in building aircraft?

I originally bought a set of plans for a VP-1, but quickly realised it was all gobbledygook to me. While flying at the Malvern Gliding Club there was a chap there who was a master craftsman in wood. He helped me build a Mitchell Wing and I learnt an awful lot from him. I then got posted away up north.

I met David Bremner because I read in a magazine that he was building a Mitchell Wing as well, and found out that he lived nearby. It was this that helped form our friendship and also really got me interested in woodworking in particular. During ground loading his passed, but mine didn't! On mine a small piece of ply was missed off, and that was all it took for the wing to break. We then built an MW6 together. This was successful but was written off by its new owners on their first flight.

After getting posted back down south, I built a Minimax (which is still flying). I am pretty well self taught in all building techniques, but once you have had a go for a while you gain a lot of confidence. What you must be prepared for is seeing lots of wastage on the workshop floor, but often many of the off-cuts can be used for other parts of the aircraft.

I highly recommend *EAA Aircraft Building Techniques. Wood*, from the *EAA How To* series, edited by Paul Poberezny, which I originally bought at a LAA Rally.

I knew that David and Rick had some original parts (control column, rudder bar

and magneto) from a Bristol Scout, which was an ideal aeroplane to build. For one thing it fitted into my workshop, so I did most of the woodwork and the brothers did the metalwork. I originally wanted to build a Sopwith Camel, but it's a much bigger, heavier and more complex aircraft - in just two years of development in those days things had really moved on. We started the project in 2008 and it flew in 2015.

Are you from a practical and skilled family?

My grandfather was very good with wood, although my father was not. On my mother's side, her family were one of the families that helped set up one of the large cotton mills in Lancashire, so working with tools and making things is in our family genes.

What about the cable splicing you had to do?

I learnt off the internet! It took me about 12 goes to get it correct, but every time you are learning something more and tweaking things here and there. On the *The Vintage Aviator Ltd* (TVAL) website in New Zealand, I found pictures and various plans and diagrams, so printed them off and started from there.

The three of us made a good team. David is a great organiser and has as good an ability to build something as I do - it will work and look good. But Rick has another level of ability that makes the part look like a master craftsman has worked on it.

MEET THE MEMBERS

Do you have other non-aviation hobbies/interests?

I am interested in military history and am fascinated by the small factors which could swing a battle one way or another, very often against the odds. Science fiction and deep space astronomy interest me and I would love to journey out to the stars.

Do you have any aviation heroes?

Louis Strange's life story I find fascinating. I live only a short distance from where he was brought up and can see the field where he and his brother used to land their aeroplanes during WW1 when they visited their parents. He had a most fantastic and interesting life including flying and living through both wars. Put his name in Wikipedia, and it tells his story very well.

Pierre Clostermann's book, *The Big Show*, covering fighter operations in the second half of WW2 also helped to get me interested, both in history and flying.

Have you had any 'hairy' aviation moments?

I have had three very near mid-air collisions, one while thermaling a glider and two while flying a Minimax. The first of the Minimax ones was over Tarrant Rushton when a Jodel that I had seen coming above and towards me suddenly dived across my nose. The second happened in the circuit at Newton Peveril. I was on base leg when another microlight came over the top of me, possibly only 30ft above. After landing I asked the pilot if he had seen me and he turned white. So that was a no then. The lesson has to be never stop looking, especially around airfields and pinch points.

Do you have an aircraft or vehicles wish list?

Yes, I'd love a de Havilland Mosquito. If I ever win the lottery I'll be straight down to New Zealand to get them to build me one.

What are you working on now?

Again a wooden aeroplane as I find wood so interesting to work with. It's my own Corby

Starlet which has kept me busy during the winter. It will probably be another couple of years until it's finished but I can work on it as much as I want as it fits into my workshop at home. I have sourced most of the timber for this project from Stones Marine Timber at Totnes. For the Scout it came from Dudley Pattison when he owned the Swindon Timber company. It is now owned by Tim Wood and I will get my ply from him. As ever with Spruce you go through planks of it and hope that what is inside will be straight and true without knots etc, but it is still a bit heart in mouth until you start cutting it into slices as needed. The service from Swindon has always been good and very helpful.

Any advice for fellow pilots?

Yes, keep current. I have not and over the years have found that the less I fly the more I find it difficult to convince myself that I want to. Also, as mentioned above, keep your eyes open and your neck weaving! ■



Theo with the Kitfox he currently flies.

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