ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW TO FILE ONLINE

Flight plans are moving inexorably into the computer age with the new AFPEx online filing system. *Steve Copeland* explains how to apply for an account and use the new system

> As previously reported in *LIGHT AVIATION,* the ever-helpful Heathrow Flight Planning unit ceased to accept flight plans (FPL) as of the end of January and the facility for filing has now moved to NATS at Swanwick.

It is still possible to fax an FPL to Swanwick (01489 612793), but this is intended only as an interim measure while people register for the new online system – AFPEx. The fax system will then be regarded as something you use only in an 'emergency'.

The bottom line, then, is that if you usually file your own FPLs (rather than give a completed form to somebody in the tower), you are going to have to open an AFPEx account. Do not be concerned by the word 'account' though, the service is free. It should be noted however, that to open an account you must have a flight licence and reside in the UK.

One view is that this new service brings us a number of significant benefits, such as the ability to file FPLs on line and do things such as delay and cancel them. However, for those of us who are not particularly computer savvy, it can all appear rather daunting, because AFPEx is very much orientated towards the tower and professional flying type environments, with fixed network access onto the internet. The application requires a hefty download each time it is run, so you will need Broadband.

RIGHT, LET'S GET YOU STARTED…

So, how do you get started? First, you need to apply for an AFPEx account. The whole process takes a couple of weeks. You need to go to www.flightplanningonline.co.uk to download the application form, then complete and return it online. You will have to give details such as home airfield and your pilot's licence number, which will be verified with the UK CAA. You will then receive a User Name in the post – typically your surname and initial – followed by a password, which will arrive by email. This password is only temporary and you will be requested to come up with your own password later.

You now have an account, so you can return to the flightplanningonline.co.uk website and log in. Once you have successfully negotiated the system log-in, you arrive at the pending messages page, which is effectively your system mailbox. It contains system messages and will be where your FPL acknowledgements end up.

Across the top is a menu with an array of options **(Fig 1)**. To enter a FPL you need to click on the ATS tab, and from the drop-down menu choose the FPL option. This will launch a window with an electronic version of the familiar FPL form. The first thing to do is to change item 8 (flight rules) from IFR to VFR, as the default setting is for IFR FPLs.
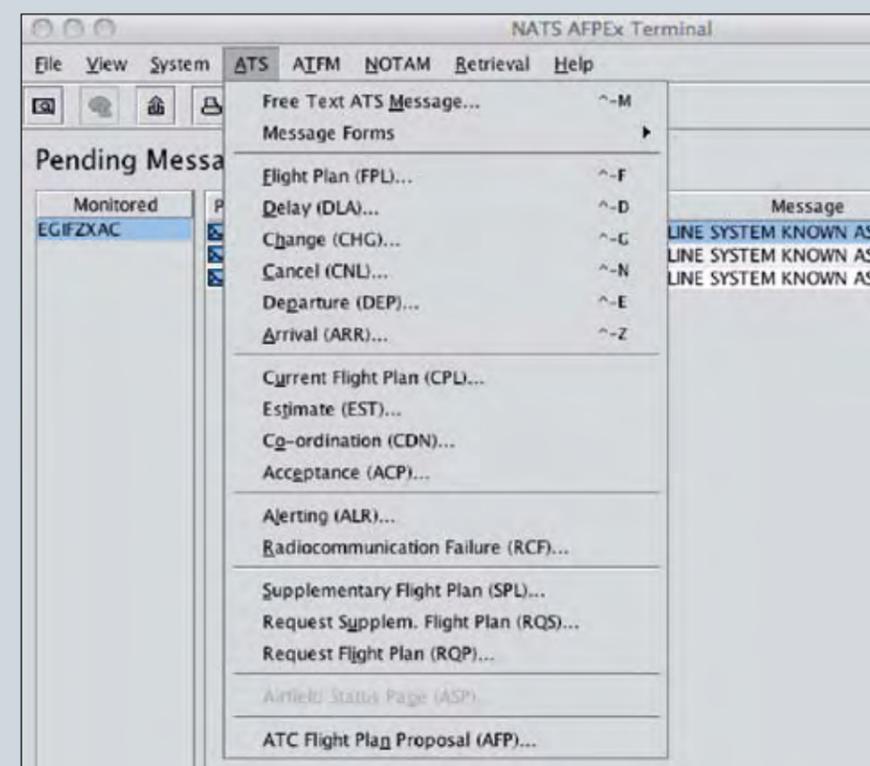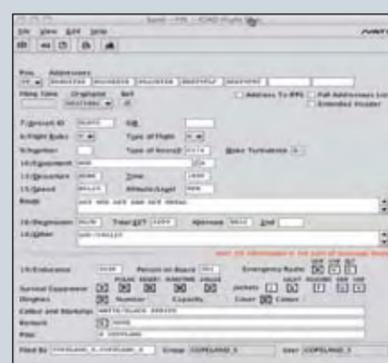
'One view is that this new service brings us a number of significant benefits'

ENTER YOUR FLIGHTPLAN

Entering the FPL is a little trickier than you are probably used to. In the past, it was only necessary to enter information on the standard FPL form with your basic information, which included items such as the aircraft registration and type, equipment, description and route etc. The complex addressing fields on the top of the form were left blank and the kind people down at Heathrow would fill in the missing data after the plan had been filed. The addressing information is effectively the distribution list of people who will get a copy of your FPL along your route. Well, if you are flying VFR, you are now responsible for addressing the FPL (FPLs submitted under IFR in the airways system are much easier to deal with, as the plan has to go through the CFMU computer and is distributed automatically when accepted).

The good news is that the AFTN Address Book is handily available in drop down boxes within AFPEx. So, who do you address the FPL to? The basic list is:
a) the departure aerodrome
b) the destination aerodrome
c) the alternate aerodrome
d) the London FIR – EGZYVFRT
e) all foreign FIRs that the aircraft will fly through or land/depart from

Additionally, for flights to/from France the French authorities require the frontier crossing point to be included in Item 15 (route) of the FPL. This needs to include position and time.

However, as a rule, everything you are likely to require to file your FPL is available on the AFPEx site.

FOLLOW THE EXAMPLE

In the example shown **(Fig 2)**, I have created a VFR FPL from Leicester to Guernsey. To add addressees for the plan we right click on the next empty address box and choose the option to add a VFR addressee.

A drop down box appears that gives us a list of VFR addresses **(Fig 3)**. In the case of our Guernsey FPL, I chose the entry for VFR Channel Islands and this inserts EGZYVFLF into the appropriate box.

We also need to address a copy to the appropriate FIR. In the case of a trip to the CI, we need to address to London FIR – EGZYVFRT.

MAKE A TEMPLATE

The FPL is now complete, and you can save it as a template for future use – worth doing if you fly regular routes but don't forget to change the Date of Flight when you reuse it. Once the plan is saved, you can click on the Send button and this submits it to the system. A pop-up box reminds you that the FPL must contain all of the required addressing. Check, then click on Send once again and the FPL is on its way.

NEED TO CANCEL OR CHANGE?

Should you need to cancel the FPL, choose Cancel from the drop-down box on the ATS menu **(Fig 1)**. This requires you to enter the addressees again, the aircraft ID, departure and destination aerodromes as well as the time.

Other options from the ATS menu allow changes to be made to a filed FPL and notify of departure and arrival. Each of these options allows you to create and save a template and thus build up a library of your regular FPLs.

'Everything you are likely to require to file your FPL is available on the AFPEx site'

In my example, I have created a template for a CNL – FPL cancellation. Loading this template allows me to store the saved addresees list and submit the cancellation with a single click. These templates can be saved for each of the options mentioned previously. This can be a significant time-saver.

ACTIVATE THE FLIGHTPLAN

Once the FPL is in the system, you can activate it in a number of ways. If you're operating from an airfield with a control tower, it will be handled automatically when you get airborne. For AG/AFIS fields, you can ask for activation, as you would have in the past, or contact London Information once airborne and ask for activation.

Alternatively, have someone activate the plan for you via the ATS menu on AFPEx. Choosing Departure from the ATS drop-down menu presents the now familiar template window where you can load a saved template or enter the required data into the boxes. Completing and hitting Send activates your FPL **(Fig 4)**.

If you were returning into a private site and wanted to close your FPL, you can use AFPEx to send an arrival notification, once again chosen from the ATS drop-down menu, completing the template and hitting send. The FPL is then closed.

While not the most intuitive software and offering functionality way beyond the requirements of the private pilot, AFPEx does represent a step forward in the ability to control and manage your own flight planning process. Fortunately, the AFPEx helpdesk is available to answer queries while setting up your system or using it. Tel: 01489 612792 or 0845 6010 483).

I hope my explanation has not put you off – like many computer programs, it is actually easier to use than it is to explain!

FIGURE 1: Once you've logged in, click and hold on the ATS tab at the top, then drag the curser down to FPL.

FIGURE 2: Creating VFR FPL from Leicester…

FIGURE 3: …drop-down box shows VFR addresses.
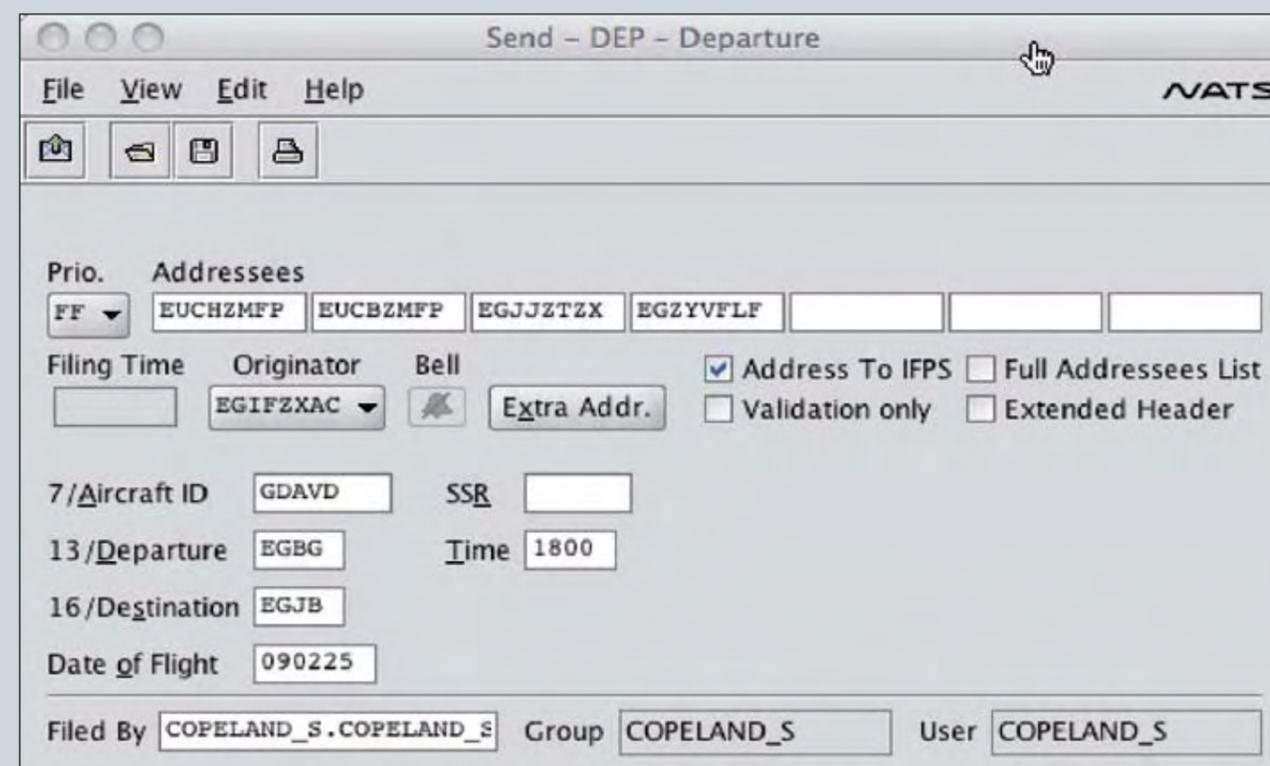
FIGURE 4: You'll see this menu if you chose Departure from the drop-down choices on the ATS menu, which you first saw when entering the system (see fig 1).