

The Story Behind the Photograph (1)



The late Tony Harold flying the Reading Flying Group Tiger Moth G-ANFM en route Booker to Blackbushe

In 1969, my twin brother Jim and I went to Southampton University to study Aeronautical Engineering. Finding the course somewhat academic, we decided to write to our uncle (Robert Burness-Smith), who was a light aircraft loss adjuster working for Lloyds to see if he could find us some hands-on work with aircraft during our vacations.

This resulted in working with Ralph Jones at Thruxton (Southern Sailplanes Ltd = glider repair and import) and then Personal Plane Services at Booker (twice), Field Aircraft Services Executive Jet Centre, Heathrow (twice) and Sportavia Putzer GmbH, Dahlemer-Binz, Germany (twice).

At Personal Plane Services, we were encouraged by Doug Bianchi to get our hands dirty (literally and metaphorically), our tasks including routine maintenance (under suitable inspection) where we learned the delights of wire locking and oil changes. Other work included: initial work on the newly arrived Yak 11 (later G-AYAK), including paint stripping the cowlings and translating cockpit labels with a Czech-English and a Russian-English dictionary; rigging a Stampe (from its shipping crate) for the Rothmans Aerobatic Team; helping install a Gipsy Major in a Jackaroo and generally admiring the magnificent aircraft around us.

These included the Mew Gull (G-AEXF) in a very poor state, Adrian Swire's Spitfire Mk IX, the DH Mosquito that was subsequently purchased by Kermit Weeks, a Jungmeister in ex-Swiss AF colours, Morane 230 G-AVEF, known as "the big Morane", a dark green Nord Noralpha and several other interesting types.

We were accommodated in an unheated brick ex-RAF hut near the entrance gate in somewhat rugged conditions. We had seen what was then a rare example (in the UK) of a Piper J-3 Cub (G-

ASPS) in a hangar adjacent to Personal Plane Services. One Saturday, I walked round to find the hangar door ajar and its owner preparing to get the Cub out. I asked if, when it was out, I could photograph it, as I was interested in older aircraft. The owner, Alan Chalkley, then quizzed me as to what I was doing on the airfield. On hearing my explanation, he grinned and said “Well, if you are interested in vintage aircraft, you should head over to Blackbushe because there’s a Vintage Aircraft Club fly-in there today”.

I explained that we were students with no car and no money, to which the instant response (for which I am forever grateful) was “Well, I’m heading there and I’ve got a spare seat. Get back here in ten minutes and I’ll take you!”

The upshot was a trip in a mixed formation – Cub G-ASPS flown by Alan, Tiger Moth G-ANFM flown by Tony Harold, and Jodel D9 G-AXKJ. The Tiger Moth was much the fastest aircraft, flying rings around the other two as we gently progressed past Woodley down to Blackbushe.

This was the first ride I had ever been given in a light aircraft and gave me the opportunity to take my first air to air photograph (above) – an opportunity that has presented itself all too rarely since. Tony Harold is flying characteristically with the cockpit door open and also became a good friend.

We joined the circuit behind a silver Moth Minor and Comper Swift G-ABUS ‘Black Magic’. After landing, I photographed the Comper Swift, two Jodel D9s (G-AXKI and G-AXKJ) and Rex Coates’ Miles Monarch G-AFLW. I then promptly ran out of film!

At the time, I never expected to learn to fly, or to solo the Cub, and Tiger Moth and own two Jodels, two Luscombes and a 1938 Topsy B. This experience began a long association with the Vintage Aircraft Club and a lasting friendship with Alan Chalkley, who would periodically invite me over to Booker to fly in G-ASPS.



Rex Coates’ Miles Monarch G-AFLW at Blackbushe