

Story behind the photograph – Booker



Yak C.11 G-AYAK prior to receiving its final colour scheme and registration

During our time at University, my twin brother Jim and I decided that our Aeronautical Engineering course was a little too theoretical and did not have enough material obviously related to aircraft design and engineering. Fortunately, we had an Uncle (Robert Burness-Smith) who worked as a loss adjuster in the aviation department of Lloyds Insurance.

As such, he knew many operators, flying clubs, maintenance and repair outfits and the like. In response to our request to him to find us some aircraft work in the University vacations, we worked for the following organisations, whilst studying for our first degrees:

- Southern Sailplanes Ltd, Thruxton (Ralph Jones)
- Personal Plane Services, Booker (Doug Bianchi), twice
- Field Aircraft Services Executive Jet Centre, Heathrow, twice
- Sportavia-Putzer GmbH, Dahlemer-Binz, Germany (via Brian Stevens & Neil Jensen), twice

This story and its associated gallery simply recall a few events during the time that we were working for Doug Bianchi's Personal Plane Services on two occasions during 1970.



The company maintained privately-owned and club aircraft at Booker, but had a rich history that included making the flying replicas for *Those Magnificent Men in Their Flying Machines* plus their own replica First World War Fokker E.III monoplane and Morane Monoplane.

They were also sourcing rare and unusual aircraft and looking after a number of Second World War aircraft, including Mosquito G-ASKB (later sold to Kermit Weeks), a couple of Spitfires. They also maintained The

Hon. Patrick Lindsay's aircraft (he was a notable member of the Vintage Sports Car Club and an auctioneer of fine art at Christies) and a number of other interesting machines (e.g. Bucker Jungmeister, Dewoitine D26, Rapide, Morane 500 (Fieseler Storch), Fiat G.46, etc.)



The Personal Plane Services hangar team with Patrick Lindsay's Morane 230 G-AVEB (left)

We arrived to find the hangar in some disarray. The team were gathered around a shortened wooden propeller with burnt, blackened stumps instead of thin, pristine aerodynamic tips. It appeared that one of the engineers had started a Rollason Condor aircraft behind chocks on the apron.

Unfortunately, the throttle linkage was not properly connected and the throttle sprang open to full power. As the tail rose, the engineer abandoned the aircraft, pulling the mixture to fully lean, as he escaped. The engine ran on for some seconds as the prop hit the concrete. The sorry-looking recovered relic that had been the prop was being painted with the words 'Done by Dino!' before becoming a trophy on the hangar wall.

One of our first jobs was on the Yak C.11 that had been recovered by Doug Bianchi from Cyprus, where it had been abandoned following an engine problem during a delivery flight to Egypt. As well as the thoroughly unpleasant task of paint-stripping the engine cowling, Jim and I had the task of translating the cockpit labels using a Czech-English and a Russian-English dictionary. Among other things, I remember successfully locating the gun-camera controls.

Another task, that would be unfamiliar to most modern aeronautical engineers, was to assist in the rigging of a Stampe SV4 biplane that had been imported from France. The fuselage was carefully levelled and we were then invited to join in the three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle that was involved in connecting the four wings, interplane and centre-section struts, and bracing wires so that all wings had the correct rigging incidence, dihedral, sweep and stagger – with all the streamline wires facing into wind and at the correct tension.



It quickly became apparent that the real trick (understood by the inspector, but not by us), was what to do when any of the above elements was not quite right. One difficulty, which was not down to us, was that one of the wires would not tighten, whatever we did. It had been manufactured with the same thread on each end (rather than opposite-handed), which meant that it would move left or right in the fittings, but not self-tighten as it was rotated.

Looking somewhat forlorn in the hangar opposite the PPS working hangar were the remains of Alex Henshaw's Mew Gull G-AEXF, used in his record-breaking out-and-return flight to Capetown in February 1939. The aircraft was in a very poor condition it was rumoured to have been badly damaged when subsequently removed from Booker for display in a museum.



*Left: G-AEXF
Alex Henshaw's
Mew Gull seen
in 1970 and
flying from Old
Warden in
October 2014.*

It was subsequently restored by Tom Storey and Martin Barraclough later in the 1970s, taking part in the 1976 King's Cup Air Race at Thruxton. In a chequered period of operation, the aircraft was damaged and rebuilt three further times, but is currently fully airworthy and operates from Old Warden

Whilst working at the airfield, we were able to attend a couple of airshows on the field, with access airside throughout. I well remember being photographed next to Adrian Swire's Spitfire Mk.IX G-ASJV.



My 19-year-old self, photographed next to Spitfire IX MH434 / G-ASJV

1970 was the year that the World Aerobatic Championships were held at Hullavington. Booker's summer airshow was graced by the attendance of the full US Aerobatic team, made up of Mary Gaffeny and Bob Herendeen flying Pitts Specials, Charlie Hillard with the Spinks Akromaster and Art Scholl, with his highly modified Super Chipmunk.

Mary Gaffeny was the most successful of the US pilots in the 1970 event, being placed 3rd. The event winner was flying a single seat Yak-18PM, later to be developed into the highly successful Yak-50.



US Aerobatic pilots Charlie Hillard and Art Scholl at Booker in 1970

Whilst at Booker, I was privileged to fly with Alan Chalkley in his Cub G-ASPS to a Vintage Aircraft Club event at Blackbushe, in company with Tony Harold in Tiger Moth G-ANFM and Stuart McKay in his Jodel D.9.

Alan continued to ring our home from time to time with the offer of a flight in the Cub, including the opportunity to fly from a snow-bound Booker one winter. I remember his starting the engine and leaving me, with the door down and the window up to 'keep it warm', whilst he put his flying suit on. Warm, it was not!

After flying he offered me a lift to the station in his Morris Traveller, but not before practising handbrake turns in it on the sheet of ice between the hangars. Happy days!

Ron Smith
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