

CRAFTSMANSHIP IN AVIATION IS NEVER LOST



By John Beeswax

IT has been argued that the present day LAA is the 'new' British aviation industry. That may or may not be true, but one thing is certain – a lot of highly skilled craftsmen once employed in the British aircraft industry are now redundant.

Happily, their aptitude and experience is never lost, and a perfect example of a new Van's RV-9A built by Gwynne Grittith proves this point. Beautifully constructed from a basic kit (not a quick-build), this new aircraft represents only 18 months' work by an LAA member who fell in love with aeroplanes when he was a schoolboy in Wales. Following its final assembly, the cream and red Van's was rolled out from the hangar at RAF Mona, Anglesey, for its initial compass correction swing to be greeted with admiration from the LAA members present, who knew the careful work that had gone into building it.

After leaving school at 14, young Gwynne began a hard-won apprenticeship with the Saunders Roe Aviation Company at Beaumaris, Anglesey, in 1958.

After completing his five-year apprenticeship, he continued with the company until the Beaumaris factory was closed down in 1964. While he had been there, he had worked on

Avro Vulcan fuselage sections that required the high standards of workmanship that was the hallmark of all British products in those days.

After the factory closure, Gwynne studied for his Merchant Navy licenses and became an Engineer Officer on the South American run until marriage and a growing family persuaded him to quit the sea. He had acquired a fund of practical engineering and business acumen and started a crane hire business, which flourished with all the civil construction industry projects that abounded in North Wales in those days.

Once established, and now working back in the UK, Gwynne returned to his first love – aviation. He learned to fly in 1976, going solo in just seven hours. Having gained his PPL he lost no time buying his own aircraft, a Beagle Terrier, G-ARLR, which he kept at RAF Mona, Anglesey.

It was at this time that he became aware of the PFA and its tremendous advantages to anyone capable of building or maintaining their own aircraft. Despite limited free time, he began construction of a Rand Robinson KR2 and was one of the founder members of the North Wales Strut in 1982. Lack of time forced him to part with the little Rand, but he completed an Aero Designs Pulsar in 1992-1993. Powered by the then revolutionary new Rotax 912 engine, his Pulsar, G-WYNS, could exceed its VNE in level flight, but once again, his crowded business life and lack of spare time forced him to sell the aircraft.

During the ensuing 15 years before his retirement he started two further projects, both Van's RV-6A kits and revelled in the indulgence of working with sheet metal again. Though both aircraft had to be sold as uncompleted projects due to his continued lack of spare time, they

were completed and are flying with their new owners today. However, Gwynne never stinted in his help for the Strut and gave several hands-on workshop lectures at the renowned RAF Mona 'Nissan Hut' (of fond memory) to pass on his airframe metalwork skills to Strut members.

In early 2008, and after selling his various businesses, Gwynne retired and bought a Van's RV-9A – a basic kit needing all of his airframe riveting experience. He constructed it in his 20ft x 25ft garage workshop at his home at Penmaenmawr, enjoying every loving moment.

His biggest problem was storing the airframe components in the house – left wing on the landing, right wing in the hall etc. He later rented additional workspace to give him more room to carry out the important work forward of the firewall. Eventually the airframe components were finished and, complete with its brand-new Lycoming O-320 engine, it was transported to an aviation paint spray company before being trailered to RAF Mona in September 2009 for final assembly. All the pre-test flight Permit to Fly inspection work is being carried out by LAA's Druid Petrie of Apache Aviation, Caernarfon.

To say Gwynne Griffith's new Van's RV-9A, G-CFMC, is an excellent example of a Van's is an understatement – it is as near perfection as one can be. Built by a master craftsman who learned his trade during the heyday of the British aircraft industry, it is a joy to behold. We wish Gwynne many happy retirement years of flying it.

PIPER'S 'FIRST CLASS' CABIN

We tend to take luxury for granted these days – comfortable seats, heated cockpits and plush trim. Of course, luxury aircraft have always been available, but at a price.

Seventy years ago, the Piper Aircraft Corporation's main production line at its new

A Van's RV9A, lovingly constructed by a man who learnt his trade during the British aircraft industry's heyday, is proof that vital skills will never die

Lock Haven factory was building the low-cost utility tandem-seat Piper J-3 Cubs at £250 each. They were very basic and, in 1937, William Piper authorised his engineering team to design and build a two-seat side-by-side touring version of the Cub that possessed greater comfort and just a hint of the luxury that the American public enjoyed in their automobiles.

The subsequent aircraft was designated the J-4 Cub 'Coupe' and the prototype first flew in May 1938. Limited numbers of the J-4 Coupe were built until America's entry into World War Two in late 1941. They became popular as touring aircraft and later models (J-4E), powered by a 75hp Continental engine, had a large 105lb capacity baggage compartment combined with a range of 460 miles, including reserves.

Today, they are greatly sought after. Of only six on the British Register, just three are airworthy and operational. (My thanks to Piper Historian and the Vintage Piper Aircraft Club's VPAC News editor Roger Peperell for this information.) It is, therefore, a great privilege to be able to see one of these beautiful vintage aircraft flying.

Paul and Josephine Clarke own Piper J-4 Cub Coupe G-BRBV and keep it safely hangared at their farm strip near Lampeter, Ceredigion. Their Cub Coupe is one of the most travelled vintage Piper aircraft in the UK today, and they visit many air shows and fly-ins every year. Paul is an extremely competent pilot; he is instrument rated and has plans to become a missionary pilot working in Africa when family commitments permit. In the meantime, he and his lovely wife Jo use their J-4 to fly to any tiny farm strip destination to keep in precision handling practice. As far as Paul is concerned, the more demanding the terrain, the better it is to hone his piloting skills.

Their Coupe was built at Lock Haven in 1941. Its glossy white and orange colour scheme complements its sturdy construction and ruggedly sprung undercarriage. The Continental A75-9 engine gives the aircraft sparkling take-off performance compared with its 50hp and 65hp predecessors, and a useful cruising speed of 96mph.

Despite the indifferent summer weather last year, Paul and Jo were able to attend the Devon Strut fly-out to Lundy Island, the VPAC Popham event and return home to Ceredigion in the same day!

A closer look at the Coupe's cockpit reveals the comfort factor that makes long flights a pleasure. A wide and comfortably upholstered bench seat runs the entire width of the cockpit. The view over the nose is excellent, allowing the pilot better control of landings and take-offs along narrow, mown runways – a 'first class' cabin for grass-strip pilots.

The instruments are simple and Paul's GPS is on hand to provide back up guidance to the normal map reading routine. Incidentally, in 1941, the Cub Coupe was one of the first Pipers to be fitted with a radio as a factory optional extra. Using short-wave frequencies, the RCA radios were battery powered – no electrical generation system was available.

With its large 36ft wingspan and low (40mph) stalling speed, the Coupe could squeeze into and out of the smallest of usable pastures and achieved growing popularity among many discerning American sports pilot before the impending war put a stop to production.

It set a trend for personal private luxury travel that was to vanish until many years later. We are indebted to Paul and Jo Clarke and their fellow Piper J-4 Cub Coupe owners for restoring and flying these beautiful old aeroplanes.



Gleaming in the midwinter sunshine, the new Van's RV-9A, G-CFMC. Final inspection checks and Permit to Test Fly are to be completed, but Gwynne hopes to fly it soon. Photo: A. Chalkley.



Paul Clarke attends to pre-flight checks of his immaculate vintage 1941 Piper J-4E Cub Coupe after visiting a well-known North Wales' grass airstrip. Photo: A. Chalkley.



Gwynne Griffith attends to some minor details in the cockpit of his newly assembled Van's RV-9A prior to its roll-out from RAF Mona's large and well-equipped hangar. Photo: A. Chalkley.



Paul and Jo Clarke head back to their own airstrip in Ceredigion. The Piper J-4E Coupe has a sparkling take-off capability thanks to its Continental A75 engine. Photo: A. Chalkley.

