

# A BETTER APPROACH

PCS Coach Will Greenwood considers some of the many aspects you must take into account when visiting a non-radio private airstrip

**>** Flying to airfields throughout the UK, you come across a great many different circuits and joining procedures, so how do we best fit in without making an exhibition of ourselves? Let's take a look at your typical LAA farm airstrip – well, you just join how you like, nobody cares, right? Wrong! Most definitely wrong. Even if you're the only aircraft based there, it is good airmanship to check the field and the circuit as you may have a visitor arriving or departing, or livestock may have broken down a fence and be enjoying the tasty mown grass on the runway.

Most airstrips have noise sensitive areas, and that's why prior permission (PPR) is often essential. Write down the instructions and follow them; do not upset the locals and you will be welcome to visit again. Most circuits are typically flown at 800 to 1,200ft above the airfield (QFE), so make sure you make a note of the airfield elevation. You can then deal with flying the correct circuit height in a number of ways.

If you are flying from an airfield with radio, you will receive the QNH as part of your taxi instruction; make a note of it and set it on your altimeter. On arrival in the vicinity of your destination, you can either mentally add the elevation of the strip to the circuit height to give an altimeter setting to fly – destination is at 400ft, you are flying on the QNH, circuit height is 1,000ft, so  $1,000 + 400 =$  a reading of 1,400ft on your altimeter that gives you an accurate enough circuit above ground level of 1000ft. I say 'accurate enough' because there may well be a pressure differential between your departure and destination airfields, but this is easily resolved by seeking the local QNH from a radio-equipped airfield in the vicinity of your destination. It's a good idea to listen out to a nearby airfield anyway, as you'll pick up wind information and be able to build a picture of which runway is likely to be in use at your destination.

A better way perhaps is to work out how many millibars the destination is above sea level by dividing the elevation by 30 (1mb=30ft). 400ft is 13mb, so unwinding 13mb off your altimeter setting will give you the QFE when at the destination and you can fly a 1,000ft circuit. Alternatively, you can simply unwind the strip elevation off the altimeter while flying straight-

and-level in the destination area to give you the QFE altimeter reading for your circuit. When departing a strip, simply wind on the elevation so that you have a reasonably accurate QNH; in our example, for instance, you would depart with 400ft showing on the altimeter.

So, back to the arrival. You approach the airstrip, orientating yourself with the area and local features. Make a radio call on SafetyCom (135.475), if no other frequency is used at the strip, announcing your presence and intent to join from overhead (unless you've been advised to avoid overhead joins because of parachuting or some other activity). Each SafetyCom call should be prefaced with the destination strip name; many strips use the frequency and this is the only way pilots can know which strip you are talking about.

Check the windsock, because it's unlikely that the landing direction will be marked by a signal square, or that anybody is on air to tell you (SafetyCom is air-to-air only, so your only chance is another pilot operating from the same strip). Decide which runway the wind favours and then review the PPR briefing to ensure that, in light winds, there isn't a preferred runway option due to a slope or some other operational reason. Having made a decision, make another SafetyCom call announcing that you are about to descend deadside and join the circuit for your selected runway, avoiding any noise sensitive area as outlined in the PPR brief as you do so.

On downwind, make another radio call. Some of the other things you might want to think about are: completing your downwind checks; reviewing the windsock again (was your runway decision the correct one?); how strong is the wind and are there any crosswind implications? How fast is your groundspeed now, does it seem appropriate for a downwind situation? Are you tracking the runway, not being drifted into or out from the desired circuit by a crosswind? And I hope this is so obvious I don't really need to write it – keep a very good lookout for other circuit traffic. Just because nobody is announcing their arrival or departure does not guarantee that they aren't doing so.

## LOOKOUT AND SPEED IMPORTANT

Obtaining a mental picture while downwind of your intended landing will also help, so look at the threshold occasionally and again check your drift – you do not want to end up too



close in, so that your base is shortened and you end up overshooting the extended centreline. Remember, drift that reduces your base leg will be a tailwind component once you make that turn onto base leg, foreshortening it even further. Base leg is one of the most critical aspects for making a good approach and is often overlooked as it's the shortest part of your circuit.

Turning onto base leg and starting your descent, scan particularly the approach to ensure there isn't anybody on a long final, and ahead, in case somebody is heading towards you on an opposite side base because either you or they have made a mistake.

Review the touchdown point and your turn onto final, allowing for crosswinds that may be increasing or decreasing your groundspeed. As a rough guide, you will be 500-600ft agl by the time you turn final, with flaps selected if you have them. Remember to look along the final approach before you turn, and then roll neatly onto final on the extended centreline (unless the brief says otherwise). Make a 'final' radio call.

Speed control here is important. Let's say your approach speed is 60mph – it's vital to accurately control your speed and also achieve the correct vertical profile. The key to this is little and often – regular small changes in pitch and power to accurately control the approach. Your aiming point will typically be about 50m in from the threshold.

At the start of your final approach, assess any crosswind drift and use wing-down or a



**Orientate yourself with the strip and local features before entering the circuit**

crab approach to compensate – your choice. Ensure that the crosswind is within the limits of both the aircraft and your ability. This may sound a strange one to add in, but how many accident reports have we read where the aircraft ground-looped on landing?

If you identify that you are too high, do not point the aircraft at the aiming point or you will accelerate, turning what looks like a saved approach into a long float due to excessive speed. Sideslip off a little height, but if this is a technique you are not familiar or comfortable with, get some tuition because it is a very useful tool to have in your skills box.

Similarly, getting too low and using large amounts of power to get you to the threshold will bring you in flat, and can lead to rapid deceleration once the power is reduced – the likely outcome being a bouncy arrival or a heavy landing... ouch! My top tip here is to simply use regular small adjustments: a little power and small attitude change – you can get your arrivals extremely accurate with a little practice.

So hopefully you have arrived at the correct height and speed over the hedge, and are about to transition into the flare on the centreline of the airstrip. Are your wings level, is the aircraft 20ft up or 4ft from the ground. How do you visualise this? Whether your aircraft is a tailwheel or nosewheel, sitting on the ground, they are all roughly in the landing attitude. Use this as a reference to picture it in your head and memorise.

There does seem to be a culture of 'land it

no matter what' rather than go around because you did not get the approach right. Give me the pilot who recognises that the approach is wrong and has the desire to make it better, rather than the guy who achieves a lucky greaser. There is certainly no shame in going around – and make that decision earlier rather than later. If the approach is wrong the landing almost certainly will be too, so throw it away rather than scuffle around trying to save it.

As an active coach, I fly with a lot of pilots, and each of us has our strengths and weaknesses. Good general handling and knowing your machine go a long way to making someone a good pilot. However, you are really tested when you are taken out of your comfort zone and have to react when things go awry. Practising the occasional glide approach, slow-flying, stalling, a PFL, working out a diversion – or doing a flight to a different airfield, rather

than a familiar run – will all help keep your aviation skills active. Above all, fly for the fun of it, and safely.

These are just a few hints on how to improve your arrivals and circuits at private, non-radio airstrips so that you do not blot your copybook with the locals. But remember, there are many ways to improve your skills. As a young pilot, I was lucky to have a good bunch of pilots nearby who helped me and encouraged me to keep flying. Back then, many of those gentlemen were in the Popular Flying Association. The name may have changed, but the LAA still provides the same kind of flying and tuition. The LAA Pilot Coaching Scheme has evolved; its highly motivated coaches have a desire to train and educate our members to make us all safer, more confident pilots. Check out the wide range of PCS training available at [www.lightaircraftassociation.co.uk/PCS/pcs.html](http://www.lightaircraftassociation.co.uk/PCS/pcs.html) ■



**A Jodel crosses the threshold fence at the perfect height for an early touchdown (Photo: Allan Bourner)**