



THE SHABBY CHIC PILOT

This month we meet Gerry Holland, who flies a Corben Baby Ace and has built a Europa

Welcome Gerry. Can you tell us something of your career? I'm supposed to be retired but have been asked to help a local company of bakery engineers manage their business. It works well. In fact they ask me why I'm not flying when the sun is shining. They're well trained!

In brief I joined the RAF as a boy entrant at RAF Cosford in the winter of 1962/63. After six years, three at Bristol University Air Squadron, a combination of life events created an opportunity to jump ship.

I had been captured by some gorgeous 18-year-old and also been offered a job working for a US multinational in the early days of data systems. The whole company was ex-service so a very comfortable atmosphere to move to. The gorgeous 18-year-old still survives under the *nom du plume* 'The present Mrs Holland'.

(Above) Gerry with his Corben Baby Ace, "It's shabby chic, with the emphasis on shabby, but it suits me for the moment," he says.

I was involved in hardware and software in military, commercial and security agencies for this US/UK Company as engineer, analyst, consultant and then sales and sales training.

After taking a package in 1997, I joined a small dotcom company in Minnesota and Seattle for four years, developing and selling a neat content management server app. That was sold to Oracle in 2002 and still is a great product. All the original 30 people like myself were sacked in true US style when the company got to 650 people in 2001.

After that I ran my own software company here in UK selling to government and

commerce. Had enough by 2006 and have freelanced since.

As an aside, in 1973 I was about to export myself to the USA to get my CPL/IR and ATP Licences when yet again a Middle East crisis intervened. This time it was the Yom Kippur war and as a punishment for supporting Israel the west received punitive oil price rises of hundreds of percent and an embargo against us by the Arab League. The three-day week ensued and civil aviation worldwide nearly died for a while. My decision had to be to continue working in IT. Aviation took years to recover, and I got older!

What started your interest in aviation?

I have always been mad about aircraft. I was a farmer's son, one of five kids and spent many days out driving the tractor after school or during the school holidays. In the 1950s we only had one! Whilst out chain harrowing, a



very low level Javelin skimmed across the field. That was it. The noise, the speed.

I built balsa models. Some flew, others not so well and at least one, a Short Seamew caught fire from a Jetex engine helping the rubber band. RAF Tangmere, RNAS Ford and Dunsfold were near and at that time we had armed services and many aircraft in the sky. The sonic boom was fashionable then!

In what, where and when was your first flight?

At an RAF Tangmere 'At Home' day in September 1955. It was an Auster of some type and we had 10 minutes in the Chichester overhead for 10 shillings with my dad. Flying after that was in the ATC at summer camps in Chivenor and Leeming and at other times with the Air Experience Flight at Hamble. We travelled there in our Morris 10.

What did you do in the Services?

I trained as an Air Wireless Mechanic. 18 months at Cosford and then to RAF Odiham as SAC. I undertook various jobs as radio people (referred to as *fairies!*) got the butt end of the dirty jobs as we had little to do.

So work was around a full mix of visiting aircraft, Wessex 2s, Whirlwind 10s, Twin Pioneers and Belvederes. Marshalling, refuelling and general cleaning were my order of the day. It was great.

Posted to the UN in Nicosia, being under 18 meant I was not allowed to be posted to an active theatre and was refused embarkation on a noisy Argosy. It was the time of EOKA [Greek Cypriot paramilitary].

A few months later it was back to Cosford for a fitters course, after which I went to the Bristol University Air Squadron at RAF Filton. What a posting! Civvy digs, no uniform and a student

(Above) **Gerry's Junior Ace, which he unfortunately destroyed in a crash in 2012.**

(Right) **One to dream about. Gerry hankers to fly a TravelAir 4D and similar vintage, radial engine machines.**

nightlife. The added bonus was a unit with only 20 people including CO, flight instructors and ground crew, plus 12 Chipmunks. It made for a real family atmosphere and nearly every day I would fly in one of the Chipmunks.

We were also involved in QRA (Quick Reaction Alert) support for Vulcans three or four times a year. In 1967 it was for real due to the Israeli Six Day War and some intense threatening behaviours from the US and USSR. I stayed at BUAS until 1969 and then departed for a civilian job. I thoroughly enjoyed the RAF so I left with mixed feelings.

How did you hear about the LAA?

After retiring for the first time around 50 years of age, I decided to act on a longtime yearning to build an aircraft. I chose a Europa XS Kit in March 1998 so needed LAA membership and an inspector. My inspector was a great 'can do' advocate and my present inspector, Dave Hunter, is of the same mould. He is an ex-RAF rigger and mocks my fairy roots!

The LAA then became a conduit to meet many other completely confused builders, many of whom I still count as friends.

How has the LAA helped you?

Very much, albeit sometimes I probably

moaned about various advice or denials of mad ideas I wanted to incorporate. Francis was less than keen on my Europa winglets, based on Airbus 330 styling but was far happier to work out the maths of airflow through a NACA vent I wanted to use to a plenum chamber. Engineering were kind but firm!

What types and how many hours have you flown?

I've never dwelled on what I've flown but in general terms it's the Cessna range up to 182 which I like and Piper range up to Cherokee Six. My licensed flying over 48 years since PPL has been sporadic – houses to buy and kids to finance has meant sometimes I have let my licence lapse. I think I've revalidated three times! I can account for 600+ hours at this time but in the early days with the Chipmunk trips, quite a few more.

A quick check shows around 25 different types, all single engine except a Cessna 402 in the Caribbean when Island hopping with a lazy Brazilian pilot. All very unofficial.

Is there a favourite and worst type flown?

I like most aircraft. I enjoy flying my hangar friend's RV6; it always feels safe but very spirited. The Chipmunk is special too, as

Meet the MeMbers

a taildragger on the huge runway at Filton it is a surreal memory. I once flew a Letov Sluka microlight. Speed was not its forte but it was a pleasure to fly at dawn or dusk at a maximum speed of 48 knots. The Europa I built was tri-gear. It was nice to fly but plastic! I eventually realised that older aircraft had more character and were closer to the origins of flight.

What aircraft do you currently own?

G-DACE, a Corben Baby Ace, probably the only one left in Europe and a true 1929 design. It's a real stick and rudder aeroplane, 85mph in open cockpit behind a very old A65 and Flottorp prop. Doesn't stall as such, it just mushes down. It's shabby chic with the edge towards shabby but it suits me at the moment.

What has been your best aviation moment?

A difficult one as all flights have some rewards, and some have fear. I think flying my dad and youngest brother in 1970 from Bristol Airport in Cessna 172 was special. Another enjoyable challenge is flying a single-seat aircraft for the first time, especially a taildragger. That moment when you just open the throttle and go for it!

Any aviation heroes? Who and why?

Amelia Earhart / Amy Johnson – Flying in the early 1930s by dead reckoning around the world. That takes supreme confidence and planning. All those adventurers in the 30s were something else, the likes of which we will never see again.

Capt Eric Brown – Types flown, deck landings, and the fact that he was so involved with the post-war crime courts at Nuremburg as a fluent German speaker. Buying a Jaguar sports car in your 90s has to be two fingers up at life!

John Farley – Test pilot of the P.1127 and Harrier. A completely new way to fly a fighter is always a challenge but John seemed so relaxed and personable.

Ironically, some visitors to my strip are very reserved about their past career flying professionally. Two or three have eventually revealed they flew Tornados in RAF service in 80s. Another had flown Hunters, Gnats, Phantoms and the F-18 for the US Navy. It's a pleasure to meet such people and I have great respect for them.

Any hairy aviation moments? Any lessons learnt?

I crashed my Corben Junior in September 2012. Blustery winds, a weak engine and at around 100 feet it faltered in a crosswind gust and the port wing stalled. After turning hard 70 degrees to port it just dived into a ploughed field and cartwheeled to pieces. As Harrison Ford said after his incident in a Ryan 22, "I feel battered." I concur.

The 4130 basic fuselage frame definitely saved me. It was a write-off and these odd old airplanes seem not to get full insurance cover. All was well in the end. Lesson learnt: gusting winds are a very unknown force. Keep a bit

of speed on and climb shallow to keep that speed.

Do you have non-aviation hobbies and interests?

Yes, industrial history. I live in an 1830 cottage that has seen the Somerset Coal Canal, Somerset Tramway and from 1870 until 1966, the Somerset and Dorset Joint Railway. Our cottage had witnessed the Pines Express almost daily in the summers until 1966. We would have been five metres from the track. We got it in 1970 and are still there. The history in this area is fascinating, going back millennia. I have some wonderful photos of our station at Single Hill.

I completed a non-fiction account of my father's life from 1916 until 2000 called *A Dorset Chindit*. Mostly as a farmer in Dorset and Sussex, there's an interlude in WWII where he was in India and Burma in Wingate's 1st Chindit Expedition behind Japanese lines, blowing up airfields and railways. He eventually joined the 15th Indian Parachute Regiment training officers and NCOs on jungle warfare. He was also involved in reconnaissance in the Hindu Kush and Afghanistan, as it was thought the Germans would attack India from the Urals. He returned to England after three and a half years in Burma and India, and went back to farming.

What is on your aviation and vehicle wish list?

Waco UPF, TravelAir 4D, a Monocoupe Racer. All 1930s aircraft are for me and with radials too. For fun... an RV-3 with 120hp and fixed-pitch prop. Perfect for the more aged to have fun without too much risk.

Cars. I'm not that bothered but thoroughly enjoy driving a little Suzuki Swift Sport I have at the moment. Quick, light and very nimble. Turbo version next year... will have to go for it.

Any advice for fellow pilots?

Not really. I'm hardly experienced enough to add much. I think some advice I had was when things started to compound towards a bad day, i.e. forget headset, forget fuel and have an appointment later... Then the best thing to do is NOT to fly that day. I have a very good friend, an ex-BA 747 captain retired, who really does monitor that pre-flight time for gotchas. It works. And never turn back during EFATO! I have had it happen twice and time is not generous before the ground gets close. ■



As a young RAF serviceman Gerry had the time of his life at Bristol University Air Squadron looking after – and flying – Chipmunks.

Aircraft Insurance

Are you paying too much?

- Get an instant quote online
- Spread your premiums for free
- Select the cover you want
- 24-Hour claims hotline service

visicover

Authorised and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority

Visicover is a unique service that lets you buy and manage your aeroplane or helicopter insurance online whenever it suits you.

To find out more go to Visicover.com

