



First Robinson R66 in the UK

The race to get the first Robinson R66 airborne in English skies has been won by Heli Air, who launched the much-heralded and long-awaited turbine with all due *sturm und drang* at a party for 500 at Wycombe Air Park on February 19th. Amid scenes bordering on the unseemly a crowd of pilots and owners pressed around the unveiled helicopter opening doors and lifting panels, with cameras and mobile phones held aloft to capture every detail. The pent-up expectation was skilfully harnessed by Heli Air to add lustre to an already-desirable product. If you didn't want one when you arrived, you did when you left.

The R66 was wheeled outside into some very English February weather – you couldn't see across the airfield – and gave a short, very low-level flying display at the hands of Heli Air's managing director Sean Brown. On board were the aircraft's owners Nick and Julia Hawes, long-term

Robinson customers who have the distinction of being the first R66 owners in Europe.

The helicopter – which *General Aviation* was the first magazine in the world to flight test, back in August of 2010 – was launched with a rock-star show of coloured lights and smoke, the culmination of two and a half years of planning at Heli Air, where Sean Brown was determined to have 'first mover' advantage. "It went brilliantly," he said. "I was determined to be the first – if you're the best, there's no point being second. But my constant nightmare was a cardboard cut-out at the launch..."

Even though Frank Robinson originally intended to sell the first R66s only on the West Coast of America in order that they should be close to the factory if any glitches arose, Sean managed to get position number 16 on the production line. "I was up until 3am waiting for RHC to accept orders, and I placed mine in the

first minute," Sean says. "I know others did too, but the difference was that I had already transferred the deposit." Sywell-based Sloane Helicopters got serial number 17, and both aircraft were to be made available for shipment at Torrance, California, on the same day. "We had booked our transport with enough flexibility to ensure we'd get our truck away as soon as it was humanly possible," Sean went on. "And as far as air freight was concerned, we agreed to take delivery at any European airfield, rather than specifying London, in order to ensure there were no delays."

The crates were being unloaded at High Wycombe three and a half days after the helicopter left Torrance, and the build took a day. Then it was run up and registered. Originally intended as Heli Air's demonstrator, it was bought by Nick and Julia Hawes the day before the official launch. Sean says: "We've sold ten R66s



there's nothing on the market that comes even close to it – for about £550,000 you get a brand new turbine helicopter that needs nothing more than 100-hour checks, that has five seats and enormous luggage space, that cruises at 120 knots and has a Vne of 140 knots, and I personally have flown the factory demonstrator out to 158 knots straight and level, with two up and half fuel, and not in still air, either. There is no turbine helicopter that's even in the same league as the R66.”

The R66 has come along at the right time for RHC, too. After years of record-breaking sales – the company made 893 machines in 2008 – last year it produced just 162 helicopters. It sold rather more, but was concentrating on reducing the inventory. RHC reduced its workforce by 300, but this year it expects to produce more than 300 helicopters, of which some 150 will be R66s.

Originally Frank Robinson shied away from turbines because of expense, but

axial compressor, and I don't think we'll see many, if any, failures. It's smoother, it's quieter, the only drawback is that it burns a lot more fuel than a piston.”

The RR300 has a much simplified starting system which greatly reduces the risk of a hot start and has a Preventative Maintenance Interval of 2000 hours (compared with the 1750-hour HMI equivalent on the Allison 250C20B). The alternative is 3000 cycles, which for maximum efficiency gives 40 minutes per start. The conversion onto the R66 is ten hours rather than five, a consideration largely driven by insurance concerns. From April 2012, when EASA takes over licensing, the R22 and R44 will probably also have to have ten-hour conversions. The up-side is that they will no longer be treated separately from the single-engine piston classification group, so pilots won't need two LPCs every year if they fly both. Or so it is said. ■

Pat Malone



Main photo and left: scores of pilots and owners turned out for the UK launch of the R66
Above: Heli Air's John Michalakis wheels out the main attraction for its first flight
Below: owners Nick and Julia Hawes fly with Heli Air's MD Sean Brown

and we have 52 names on the list of people who want the helicopter on the G-register. Obviously EASA has not yet certified the helicopter, but it has been built to FAR Part 27B crashworthiness standards, which match or exceed those of EASA, so we do not envisage having any problems in that regard.”

The R66 launches into a tight market, with everybody being careful with money and the usual doomsayers saying Robinson won't sell any. It's worth noting that they said that when the R22 first came out, and that the R44 was launched at a similar stage in the recession of the 1990s – it was certificated in Europe in September of 1993 – and they said Frank wouldn't sell any then. Sean Brown says: “Trading conditions are not good, with credit tight. The price of an R44 has gone out from £240,000 to £310,000 because of exchange rate fluctuations and a lot of used helicopters in the inventory. But the R66 will sell because

there were several imperatives that changed his mind. For some government contracts, turbine helicopters are still specified despite years of experience with modern piston engines which show that they are more reliable than the small turbines currently in use in most helicopters. And as he explained at the Royal Aeronautical Society last year, the difficulty of getting avgas was the deciding factor. “Already, JetA1 is the only fuel available in large parts of the world,” he said. “We had to switch or we were going to be grounded.”

Finding the right engine was paramount – Frank was never happy with the Allison engines in the B206 and Hughes 369. He started talking to Rolls Royce in the mid-1990s and drove a hard bargain on specification and price. “With the RR300 we have an excellent engine,” he says. “It is considerably more reliable than the 250 Allisons because it eliminated that long

